

The prosody of rhetorical questions

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Genuine, information-seeking questions (ISQs) perform the directive speech act of requesting information. Rhetorical questions (RQs), on the other hand, are formally interrogatives, but differ from ISQs in discourse function. Biezma & Rawlins (SALT 2017), based on much previous literature, summarize their characteristics as follows: (i) RQs do not expect an answer, (ii) RQs have the feel of an assertion, and (iii) RQs do not have to but can optionally be answered.

There is general agreement in the literature that prosody disambiguates between the possible meanings, but while the prosody of ISQs has been extensively studied in many languages, the exact prosodic parameters related to RQs have yet to be systematically investigated and have been said to be "hard to pin down" (Biezma & Rawlins SALT 2017). Existing assumptions on the prosody of RQs focus on English, and are often based on introspective data (e.g. "fictive" examples in Bartels 1999) rather than empirical/experimental prosodic research, and/or on semantic lines of argumentation. For example, Han (2002) assumes that due to their assertive function, RQs have "an intonational contour of an assertion", i.e. falling towards the end of the utterance (L-L%).

In this talk I will report on (ongoing) work whose aim it is to identify the prosodic characteristics of RQs and systematically compare them with ISQs. This includes both phonological characteristics such as boundary tone, nuclear accent, prenuclear accents and whole tonal contour, as well as phonetic parameters such as duration and voice quality. I will present production results from three related languages: English, German and Icelandic. The aim is to identify language-specific and cross-linguistics properties and to relate these properties to meaning.