

Bettina Braun (U Konstanz)

The role of prosody in signaling and perceiving rhetorical questions

In contrast to information-seeking questions (ISQs), rhetorical questions (RQs) do not require or expect answers from the addressee (Banuazizi & Cresswell, 1999; Biezma & Rawlins, 2017; Han, 2002). Instead they are used when the answer is already known or at least inferable to all interlocutors (Caponigro & Sprouse, 2007; Sadock, 1971, 1974). RQs can be marked lexically (e.g., by strong negative polarity items or particles, e.g., *Who lifted a finger to help you?*) but also by means of prosody. RQs have not been studied in terms of prosody yet. One view in the semantic literature is that polar RQs are typically falling, in line with their assertive force (Han 2002). Part 1 presents data from a controlled production study in German that shows how German ISQs differ from RQs, both in terms of boundary tones and pitch accent types (typically considered part of intonational phonology) and other parameters, such as duration and voice quality (often termed phonetic). In part 2, I will the results of automatic classifiers trained on these parameters and their usefulness for automatic classification. Part 3 tests the roles of pitch accent type, duration and voice quality for the human classification of a question as rhetorical or information-seeking. Time permitting, I will also present data on English and discuss cross-linguistic differences and similarities.

References

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