

## Intonational meaning in Spanish conversation: low-rising vs. circumflex questions

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Descriptions of Spanish intonation refer to a variety of contours both in terms of form and meaning. Although intonational form in Spanish has been the object of numerous experimental studies, few empirical studies have attempted to characterize intonational meaning in this language. The present study examines the function of the two most frequent contours found in Spanish questions: the low-rising contour (L\* H%), and the circumflex contour (L<sub>i</sub>H\* L%).

The low-rising contour has traditionally been considered as the canonical intonation for information-seeking yes-no questions. It is generally assumed that this contour is pragmatically unmarked and compatible with numerous possible interpretations arising from the discourse. On the other hand, the circumflex contour has been broadly characterized as being conversational and affective (Fernández Ramírez, 1957-59), and, more restrictedly in Escandell-Vidal (1998), as marking questions as being “attributed to the hearer’s thought” (e.g. as in echo questions).

To verify and refine these proposals, we have extensively examined the Nijmegen Corpus of Casual Spanish (Torreira & Ernestus, 2012), a corpus of conversations between student friends from Madrid. All yes-no questions exhibiting low-rising and circumflex contours in this corpus were selected for analysis on the basis of auditory inspection and acoustic analysis, yielding a dataset of 139 low-rising and 884 circumflex questions. A subset (n = 200) of these questions was coded in terms of several factors including conversational sequential position, epistemic context, and other variables relevant for this study (e.g., attribution to the hearer's thought).

The circumflex contour appears to indicate that the question is to be interpreted in continuity with the prior talk. This is evidenced by the fact that it never occurred in sequence-initial contexts, and that 90% of its occurrences involved anaphora, elided referents, or a connector (e.g., y ‘and’). In disagreement with Escandell-Vidal (1998), we found that circumflex contours are not used exclusively in questions attributed to the hearer's thought. For instance, speakers often use this contour when telling a story in order to check if the hearer knows a referent that will become relevant later (e.g., *¿Sabes quién es X?* ‘Do you know who X is?’).

The low-rising contour occurred both in sequence-initial and sequence-medial positions. In initial position, low-rises were used in questions that initiate a new topic, and were often preceded by a summons (e.g. Oye Pedro... ‘Listen Pedro...’), or a period of silence. In sequence-medial position, low-rises were found in questions that marked a clear departure from the topic under discussion, and also in non-information-seeking questions (e.g. complaints, jokes).

These findings indicate that, in sequence-medial position, there is a fundamental contrast between circumflex and low-rising questions: while circumflex questions involve requests of information that maintain the ongoing course of action (e.g. a simple clarification during the telling of a story, a check that the listener is following a story), low-rising contours disrupt it by deviating the topic or introducing an unexpected element such as a joke or a complaint. More generally, our findings indicate that the conversational sequential context is relevant for characterizing the meaning of intonation contours.

### References

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