

How to ask without a question and to reply without an answer -- Prosodic meaning dimensions in German dialogues

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Abstract

We can learn a lot from questions -- speakers by asking them, and linguists by analyzing them. If the purpose of speaking is to interact with each other and share and exchange each other's opinions, feelings, and information, then what gets closer to the heart of speech communication than a question? This is a rhetorical question, which is the only major type of question that I will leave out in my plenary talk. The aim of the talk is twofold. First, it is supposed to summarize, in a cross-linguistic perspective but with a focus on German, the prosodic degrees-of-freedom that play a role in y/n-questions, wh-questions, and morpho-syntactically unmarked questions. Second, it is to outline how these variables contribute to communicative meaning either by signaling the act of questioning itself or by shaping the speaker-interlocutor relationship on the basis of which the question is put forward. Both aims will involve empirical evidence from phonetic production and perception experiments that is presented against the background of the historical descriptive works of von Essen, Klinghardt and others as well as statements in modern textbooks for second-language learners of German.

The main message will be that meaningful prosodic variables and differences within and between questions go far beyond the direction of the phrase-final intonation movement and even beyond the syntagmatic boundaries of the questions themselves. While it does of course play a role whether a question ends in a rising or a falling intonation (although this might not have the meaning that, e.g., L2 learners of German think it has), the shape of this final movement as well as holistic aspects or patterns of speaking rate, F0 declination, voice quality, acoustic energy, and characteristics and occurrences of prenuclear accents and pauses all play a role as well. On this basis, the claim is put up for discussion that questions must be understood in terms of both a syntactic construction and a prosodic construction.