This study deals with English variable tag questions (henceforth TQ), i.e. utterances with a variable interrogative tag, e.g. ‘It’s very peculiar writing, isn’t it.’. The aim of the presentation is to highlight the role of prosody in the signalling of the semantic-pragmatic meanings of TQs. The meanings will be explained following the typology developed by Kimps (in press), which is novel in three ways.

Firstly, a new functional framework is proposed. The study identifies a basic problem with existing typologies, which are single-layered classifications, which elevate the most striking meanings of TQs into types that are supposed to cover the whole usage continuum. Instead, this study advocates categorizing their functions into two parallel layers of interpersonal meaning, namely a speech function and a stance layer. On the one hand, TQs indicate which interactional position the speaker assumes in the dialogue and which response s/he expects from the hearer (McGregor 1997:245). They code the speech function, i.e. whether the TQ functions as a question, statement, request, etc. (see Figure 1). On the other hand, TQs signal the speaker’s stance towards the proposition, the co-participant and presuppositions. These stances are conceived of in terms of speakers negotiating the evolving common ground between them, i.e. their shared knowledge, beliefs and suppositions (Clark 1996, Pittner 2007). Examples of stance meanings are: challenging the co-participant, expressing doubt, etc. (See Figure 2). Both layers are at play in every TQ and they influence each other. There are, however, no one-to-one mappings between the categories of the two layers.

Secondly, in the last four decades previous research has contributed to insight into several aspects of TQs, but no functional analysis incorporating grammatical, conversational and prosodic properties had been attempted so far. Regarding grammatical properties, this study takes into account the mood, polarity and modality of anchor and tag. Conversational properties that are essential to TQ functions include the position of the TQ in the turn, whether or not it elicits a response, and if it does, what the response is. Many studies have stressed the importance of prosody to interpret the functions of TQs, but this study is the first to systematically map the intonation patterns of TQs onto their functions based on audio files of authentic dialogues. Prosodic phrasing (following Dehé & Braun (2013) criteria), pitch contours, and presence and position of pauses are identified by means of an instrumental and impressionistic acoustic analysis in Praat (Boersma & Weenink 2015) combining aspects of the ToBI annotation system (Beckman et al. 2005) and the British school of intonation analysis (e.g. Figure 3).

Thirdly, the analysis is based on 1163 cases from authentic conversations, allowing a qualitative and quantitative analysis. TQs are inherently associated with dialogue and most richly exploited in informal British English. Therefore, the TQs have been extracted from the spoken British component of the International Corpus of English, and the London-Lund Corpus of Spoken English. Quantification of the properties draws up the profile of the prototypical TQ and distinguishes the default properties from the marked ones, e.g. rising tags are less frequent (22%). In addition, the corpus findings show that certain properties are likely to co-occur, especially in relation to certain functions. Each functional category within each layer is shown to favour specific values within the three types of properties, which can be recognized as statistically significant tendencies. For instance, TQs requesting information are shown to correlate with positive constant polarity, rising tags and turn-final positions.

The presentation will pay special attention to the role of prosody for distinguishing TQ meanings by focussing on two subtypes, namely TQs requesting information, and acknowledging TQs. These subtypes, with two distinct meanings, display different prosodic patterns. However, the analysis will show that prosody alone is not the only distinguishing factor. The grammatical and conversational properties should be taken into account as well.

References
Dehé, N., Braun, B. 2013. The prosody of question tags in English. English Language and Linguistics 17(01), 129-156.
Figure 1: Typology of speech functions (Kimps, in press)

Figure 2: Typology of TQ stance types negotiating common ground (Kimps, in press)

Figure 3: Prosodic phrasing and tone analysis in Praat