

The prosody of verb-first constructions in German: A comparison

Daniela Wochner, Bettina Braun & Nicole Dehé

Syntactic form does not fully predict pragmatic function. For instance, German verb-first (V1) sentences may either express neutral information-seeking questions (ISQ), rhetorical questions (RQ) or exclamatives (EX).

(1) “Kann die Lene malen” (*Can Lene paint*)

In a production study we examined how speakers use phonological and phonetic cues to differentiate between string-identical non-negated V1 ISQs, RQs and EXs. The results suggest two scales for the prosodic classification of the pragmatic function of V1 sentences: 1) an interrogativity scale (Michalsky 2014, 2015, 2017) ranging from high interrogativity (ISQs) to low/no interrogativity (EXs). This scale is phonologically and phonetically manifested in the pitch excursion of the offset of the utterances and in the choice of the type of boundary tone: Both RQs and EXs may be produced with a falling (L-%) or rising intonation contour (H-^H% or H-%), however, RQs were produced more often with a final rise, which is also larger in expansion than in EXs (RQ: 10.6st, EX: 4.8st). ISQs are mainly rising and have the largest pitch offset (12.9st).

The second scale constitutes a range from highly expressive/emphatic (EXs) to neutral/non-emphatic (ISQ) and is visible in the durational values of the verb and the pitch range in the prenuclear field: RQs and EXs show more prenuclear pitch accents (H* and L+H*, RQ: 84%, EX: 98%, ISQ: 48%), which also have a higher pitch range than ISQs (EX: 3.7st, RQ: 2.2st, ISQ: 1.8st). The duration of the verb in V1 is shortest in ISQs, followed by RQs and EXs (ISQ: 134ms, RQ: 145ms, EX: 152ms), but only the comparisons involving ISQs become significant.

In both scales RQs are placed between the two extremes (ISQs, EXs), which we interpret as being due to the mismatch between form (question) and function (non-question), which has been reported for RQs (c.f., Han 2002 & Rohde 2006). Note that while ISQs are clearly interrogatives syntactically, non-negated V1-EXs have been argued to be declaratives syntactically (Rosengren 1992).

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