

Prosody meets pragmatics: a comparison of rhetorical questions, exclamatives and assertions

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Rhetorical questions (RQs) in German have been found to differ prosodically from information-seeking questions (ISQs) in terms of pitch accent ((L+H)* pitch accent), boundary tone (plateau contour), duration (longer)/ speaking rate (slower) and voice quality (breathiness, Braun et al 2019, Braun et al. 2020). The presentation addresses the question whether those prosodic features are constitutive for a RQ prosody or whether they can also be found elsewhere and whether prosody is a sufficient means to distinguish between utterance types that signal non-neutral speaker attitudes. To this end, I compare RQs with exclamatives, which in previous comparisons to string-identical ISQs showed longer durations (Repp 2019, Repp & Seeliger 2020) and, as emphatic utterances, a potential for breathiness (c.f., Niebuhr 2010, Kohler & Niebuhr 2007). I will also compare RQs to assertions, which differ with regard to sentence type but are similar in pragmatic meaning. The results show that there is no direct mapping of prosodic form to pragmatic function. Especially the (L+H)* pitch accent, longer durations and the occurrence of breathy voice quality not only occur in RQs but also in exclamatives and assertions, suggesting that these particular features are general means of prosodic emphasis, marking utterances that are non-neutral or show a strong attitudinal load. Prosody alone may thus not be sufficient for a clear distinction between different non-neutral utterance types.

References

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