

Speaking of Questions

An Exploration of Dutch Question Intonation

In human communication, questioning performs a major function which, commonly, finds expression in the utterance's intonation. Of old, linguists have taken an interest in features that cause the category question (Q) to be acoustically distinct from other communicative categories, notably statements. It is claimed that, in questions in related and unrelated languages all over the world, pitch is somehow higher (H) than in corresponding statements ('Q=H'). The universal occurrence of Q=H has led to various accounts of its origin. In one of these, the dichotomy high vs. low pitch is taken to reflect a biological, cross-species Frequency Code, which causes birds and mammals to associate low pitch with large body size (and hence with physical dominance), and high pitch with small body size (and hence with subordination). Secondary meanings of low pitch are then independence and self-confidence, whereas high pitch is taken to convey dependence and uncertainty. Under this view, high(er) pitch in questions is just what one would expect, considering that a questioner depends on the listener's goodwill for the required piece of information.

The central aim of this study is to identify systematic acoustic properties of question intonation in Dutch and to determine whether these are in line with (universal) properties found in other languages. The thesis reports the investigation of a production corpus of Dutch statements and their question versions: wh-questions, yes-no questions, and declarative questions. A range of acoustic measurements sheds light on global properties of these three question types, as well as on (semi-) local properties such as boundary tones and accent pattering. Proposals are made as regards the linguistic status of these acoustic properties: are they part of the phonology, or do they arise in the phonetic implementation? In a separate chapter, the results on accentuation are considered in terms of focus structure.

This study is of interest to theoretical linguists and experimental researchers working in the field of intonation, phoneticians as well as phonologists.

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