



Rachel Fournier

Perception of the tone contrast in East Limburgian dialects

East Limburgian dialects are typological goldmines. On the one hand, they resemble tone languages like Chinese, in that they can express word-level semantic contrasts by means of pitch only. On the other hand, they use pitch to distinguish sentence-level meanings such as the statement/question opposition, just like non-tone languages do. For instance, if a Roermond speaker says *haas* with a steep fall in its melody, one can infer that this word means 'hare' and is pronounced as a statement. If, however, *haas* is realized with a low flat contour followed by a steep rise, it means 'glove' and forms a yes/no question. The number of melodic contours that results from all possible combinations of tones (conveying lexical meanings) and intonations (conveying discourse meanings) is further boosted by two structural factors of variation, the focus condition and position of a word within the sentence. Given all these dimensions, one may indeed wonder how native speakers manage to find their way in the sentences they hear.

The present thesis examines the perception of East Limburgian lexical tones as a function of the parameters mentioned above, using the dialects of Roermond and Venlo. Our results are mainly based on behavioral studies which consisted in identifying or discriminating words in different contexts, but we also explored the brain reactions of native and non-native listeners when they were exposed to tonal and intonational contrasts.

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ISBN 978-90-78328-70-4

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