

A prosodic study of rhetorical questions in Italian
Patrizia Sorianello
University of Bari (Italy)

The present research investigates the prosodic realization of Italian questions having both literal and rhetorical meaning. The rhetorical questions (henceforth RQs) are particular utterances whose syntactic structure, that of an interrogative, does not match their pragmatic meaning, that of an emphatic assertion. Unlike information-seeking questions (henceforth ISQs), RQs do not require an explicit answer because the addressee already knows it. They are indirect speech acts which transmit an obvious and presupposed meaning that goes beyond their literal interpretation [1], [2], [3], [4], [5].

In many languages, including Italian, RQs may have the same syntactic structure of a genuine question; in these cases, the contextual information, together with an adequate intonation contour, contribute to disambiguate them. This seems to suggest that the prosodic organization of RQs is to some extent different from that of ISQs [4]. Studies conducted in this direction show conflicting results [6], [7]. In general, RQs are more often characterized by a falling contour and a longer duration than ISQs [8], [9].

In Italian language the intonation of RQs did not receive sufficient attention so far: the observations are few and mostly obtained from impressionistic evaluations [10], [11]; [12].

This study aimed to analyze the intonational contour of rhetorical questions as compared to information-seeking questions. To this order, a corpus of 20 identical utterances (wh- and yes\no questions) was included in short dialogical scenarios and realized in their double pragmatic interpretation: as rhetorical and as literally meaning; for example, the following question *can you drive?* may have a literal interpretation, or changing the contextual frame, a rhetorical one. Ten native speakers of Bari Italian, aged 22-30 (5 males and 5 females) participated in this production experiment. They were asked to read the dialogical scenarios adopting a spontaneous intonation. Questions produced with particular emphasis, surprise or disappointment were considered separately.

The target sentences, (400 utterances: 200 RQs and 200 ISQs) were phonetically and phonologically analyzed using Praat. The following parameters were considered: f0 (average, maximum and minimum) pitch range, overall duration, nuclear vowel duration, speech rate, intensity. The intonation contour of each question was annotated by means of ToBI. We focused on the distribution of both nuclear pitch accent and boundary tone patterns. Our primary goal was to see whether f0 and duration contribute to the differentiation between RQs and ISQs. We hypothesize that the specific pragmatic functions of RQs are somehow reflected in their prosodic structure. We also predict longer duration in RQs than RQs.

The results of this analysis show that between RQs and ISQs there are prosodic differences, specially for wh- questions, the only ones to present the PA L* (29%), a wider pitch range and a longer nuclear vowel. RQs From the phonological perspective, boundary tones and nuclear pitch accents seem to have a different weight in the characterization of the RQs: in polar interrogatives the nuclear PA fails to distinguish between the two types of questions, being L+H* the most frequent nuclear PA in both RQs (93%) and ISQs (89%). A different behaviour concerns the realization of the boundary tones: in the most cases RQs are produced with low boundary tone L% (70%).

Besides intonation, duration plays a significant role: in RQs the stressed vowel that carries the nuclear pitch accent is always longer with respect to that of ISQs.

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