

The prosody of interrogatives: evidence from spoken Arabic dialects

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Despite claims of linguistic universals involving high pitch (Bolinger 1978), the prosodic realisation of interrogatives varies cross-linguistically (Rialland 2007). This paper contributes to the task of establishing the extent of cross-linguistic variation in the prosodic realisation of questions, by presenting the results of prosodic analysis of read speech interrogatives in a range of syntactically related spoken Arabic dialects. We then offer a case study of the presence vs. absence of focus marking of *wh*-words in different Arabic dialects, in the context of theoretical debate regarding the prosodic spell out of semantic and/or syntactic features in interrogative contexts (Truckenbrodt 2013).

The Intonational Variation in Arabic (IVAr) corpus [www.york.ac.uk/res/ivar] comprises recordings from up to 12 speakers (6M/6F) each in a range of geographically dispersed colloquial Arabic dialects: Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Yemen. Data were collected in fieldwork locations in the Middle East, and comprise a range of speech styles: read speech, read and retold narratives, a map task and spontaneous conversation. We present here the results of prosodic annotation of read speech interrogatives elicited by means of a scripted dialogue task (Author1 & Author2, in preparation). This task yields lab speech realisations of different utterance types including up to six lexically distinct tokens per speaker of: broad focus declaratives (dec), *wh*-questions (whq), yes-no-questions (ynq) and coordinated questions (coo).

The utterances are elicited within an extended dialogue, with questions produced in context and yielding (scripted) answers. The information structure context in which the question was produced is thus known, and we can, for example, observe variation in the prosodic realisation of questions of a single type (e.g. ynq) depending on whether the following scripted answer is positive or negative. The position of the accented syllable in the last lexical item of each utterance is systematically varied (final, penult, antepenult) to facilitate phonological analysis of the nuclear accent contour. The last lexical item in each utterance is segmentally parallel across all dialects, permitting cross-dialectal comparison of nuclear contours in different utterance types. Prosodic annotation was performed by two transcribers for each dialect, using annotation labels based on the Tones and Break Indices (ToBI) annotation system (Beckman et al 2005; Prieto & Frota 2014), using a train-test annotation protocol (inter-transcriber agreement reported).

Results indicate that the means of prosodic marking of questions in Arabic is diverse. In many dialects a ynq is typically indicated by choice of nuclear pitch accent category (e.g. Yemen: use of nuclear L+H* instead of H*), rather than by choice of final boundary tone (H% instead of L%). There is evidence of distinct patterns in the slope of the overall pitch register, in different question types, e.g. in Egyptian Arabic (cf. Dalton & Chasaide 2003). Our main case study explores interaction of syntactic and prosodic variation in placement of main prominence: an obligatorily fronted *wh*-word typically displays obligatory focus prosody (increased *f*₀ excursion), whereas there appears to be variation in the prosodic realisation of *wh*-phrases realised in-situ. We compare the predictions of parameter-based vs. contact-induced explanations of these findings.

References

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