On prosodic phrasing of tag questions (“¿/¿/no?”): Brazilian Portuguese, Argentine Spanish, and Mexican Spanish

INTRODUCTION

Although there is no isomorphism between prosodic structure and any other grammatical structure (Nesper & Vogel, 1986/2007, i.a.), it is long known that the location of prosodic boundaries is somehow related to the location of syntactic boundaries. Many researchers have also provided evidences that phrase weight/size affects prosodic phrasing (Seikelk, 2000; Guir, 1993; Frota et al., 2007; Serra, 2009). Under the traditional prosodic hierarchy perspective, tag questions “¿/¿/no?” should be phrased separately, as far as they are generated outside root sentence. The formation of IP, however, is also affected by prosodic length conditions: long phrases (in number of syllables and of prosodic words) tend to be divided, as well as small phrases tend to form one single IP with the adjacent IP, which leads to the formation of balanced length phrases (Nesper & Vogel 1986/2007, Ladd 1996, Frota 2000).

The Intonational Phrase algorithm

Intonational Phrase (IP) construction % strings not structuredly attached to the sentence tree, as well as any remaining sequence of adjacent IP strings in a root sentence are mapped onto IPs (Frota 2000). According to Seikelk’s (2005), Commare Phrase. In Brazilian Portuguese (BP), IPs are characterized by the presence of a nuclear contour (a nuclear accent and a final boundary tone) and a pause (Tenani 2002, Serra 2009). In Argentinian Spanish (AS) and Mexican Spanish (MS), a nuclear contour and a potential pause insertion are also attested (Gabriel et all 2010. De-La Mota et al 2010). The presence of a initial tone associated to the right-edge of the first prosodic constituent is optional in all three varieties.

THEME AND GOALS

This paper focuses on prosodic phrasing of tag questions (“¿/¿/no?” isn’t it?) in Brazilian Portuguese (BP), Argentinian Spanish (AS) and Mexican Spanish (MS), in order to observe:

(i) whether tag questions are produced as one single Intonational Phrase (IP), together with the precedent IP, or are produced in different IPs;

(ii) which is its intonational characteristics (PIERETTI 1980, Ladd 1996, Sosa 1999), both of the IP which contain the tag question and of the precedent IP; and

(iii) the relation between production and perception of these tag questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Regarding the realization of tags in BP, the results show that only two IP-¿/¿/no of 37 data (5.4%) constitute one single IP (H+L+L% and L+HFLH%) and all other data present two separate IPs. The analysis indicates that BP presents a wider variety of intonational contours, which include the configuration H+L+L% + H+L+L% (32%) (Figure 1), and also (11%) the configurations H+L% + L% (Figure 2), H+L% + H%, L+H% + L% (%“degenerated” IPs – Ladd, 1996), which are characterized by the occurrence of a boundary tone, without pitch accent, in the tag itself.

In BP, 32% of data present the neutral declative pattern, not only in the IP which composes the expression “¿” but also in the precedent IP.

In spontaneous BP, the occurrence of a (L%) boundary in the tag question prevailing, which can represent an evidence of the loss of interrogative mark in this item.

METHODOLOGY

Corpus: 12 extracts of spontaneous speech, around 30 minutes each.

Speakers: BP (1) Production - 5 female speakers. (2) Perception - 11 listeners. University students, born in Rio de Janeiro, from 22 to 36 years old. AS and MS – (1) Production - 14 speakers (male and female). University students, born in Buenos Aires and Mexico City, from 20 to 35 years old.

Procedure:

(1) Production – BP - Interviews in a noiseless room at UFRJ’s Phonetics Lab. AS and MS - The Spanish data were extracted from seven colloquial long distance telephone calls (with male and female speakers) from USA to Buenos Aires or to Mexico City. Utterances fully annotated for phonological and intonational phrasing (for Portuguese, Frota 2000, Tenani 2002, Fernandez 2007, Serra 2009: for Spanish, Sosa 1999), to define the placement of predicted prosodic breaks.

The Intonational analysis aims to determine the tonal shape of the nuclear contours, under the Intonational Phonology approach (e.g. Beckman & Prikhemuet, 1986, Ladd, 1996, Frota, 2002), using PRAAT (Version 4.3.12).

(2) Perception - Listeners had to signal the prosodic breaks they perceived in each utterance. Breaks should be written down on a piece of paper with the orthographic transcription of each extract, without any kind of punctuation marks. To check consistency, listener had repeated the task in 2 sessions (for each session the items were grouped in a random way).

The perception experiment was preceded by a training period in which the listeners have received instructions to signal any kind of break.

In Spanish data, both from Buenos Aires and Mexico varieties, there is a tendency to the realization of IP-no as two IPs, with both IPs presenting a nuclear contour. We verify that in 47/52 data (90%) the boundary tone of the first IP is low (L%) and in 51/52 data the tag IPs (¿/¿/no) display raising configurations (H%), also containing a pitch accent L+H%, L+H+H% or L% (Figure 3 and 4).

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Differently from BP, in AS and MS, a high (H%) boundary is predominant (98%); in another words, the expression ¿/¿/no maintains its interrogative characteristics. Regarding perception, our hypothesis is that there is a preference for marking the break after IP-no, due to the fact that there are only one example (4%) from AS and two examples (7%) from MS which present a pause between the IP and the tag question.

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FINAL REMARKS

- small phrases tend to constitute a compound domain with adjacent IP, although there is a strong tendency to realize as separate forms the tag question and the precedent IP.

- this research represents a contribution to the cross-linguistic knowledge about the placement and shape of prosodic boundaries, and to the understanding of how prosodic boundaries are realized and perceived.

REFERENCES


Figure 1: Example of Brazilian Portuguese [max también tire cursos mucho fracaso]([¿/¿/no?]PI)
[But I also had very weak lesson)](¿/¿/no?)PI

Figure 2: Example of Brazilian Portuguese [você não vai fazer uma boa coisa]([¿/¿/no?]PI
[you are not going to have a good thing)](¿/¿/no?)PI

Figure 3: Example of Argentinian Spanish [Tito Carloss está]([¿/¿/no?]PI
[Uncle Tito is home)](¿/¿/no?)PI

Figure 4: Example of Mexican Spanish ([¿/¿/no?]PI
[We are going to sleep in the train)](¿/¿/no?)PI

Figure 5: Example of Brazilian Portuguese [¿/¿/no?]PI
[we are going to sleep in the train]