QUESTION INTONATION CONTOURS AS DYNAMIC AND GRADIENT EPISTEMIC OPERATORS
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Even though intonation has been traditionally claimed to be a strong indicator of the epistemic commitments of the participants in a discourse, very few empirical investigations have addressed specific semantic hypotheses related to the precise epistemic contribution of question intonation to utterance interpretation. The main aim of this paper is to test the claim that intonation in Catalan plays an important role in the specification of dynamic epistemic commitments in two complementary directions, e.g., speaker commitments to the speaker’s own proposition and speaker agreement with the addressee’s propositions. Following Krifka (in press), we will test the claim that question intonation in Catalan encodes different levels of ASSERT (commitment) and REJECT ((dis)agreement) epistemic operators.

A total 119 Catalan listeners participated in an acceptability judgment task and were asked to rate the perceived degree of acceptability between a set of interrogative utterances (variously produced with one of four intonational contours) and their immediate discourse context (which was controlled for epistemic bias). After listening to each prompt, participants were asked to rate its contextual appropriateness by clicking at some point on a horizontal bar representing a 0-100 scale (0 = totally inappropriate; 100 = totally appropriate). A total of 5,712 responses were obtained (119 participants $\times$ 12 contexts $\times$ 4 intonational contours). We found that participants preferred some question intonation contours over others in the six types of epistemic contexts (e.g., three degrees of speaker commitment and three degrees of speaker agreement). That is, results show that question intonation encodes fine-grained information about the epistemic stance of the speaker, not only in relation to the speaker’s own propositions but also in relation to the addressee’s propositions or to contextual information. From a crosslinguistic point of view, we will argue that intonation closely parallels the function of sentence particles in their encoding of speaker commitment and speaker agreement operators.
References


