Intonational encoding of epistemic operations across speech acts: Commitment

and Agreements operators

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Even though intonation has been traditionally claimed to be an  indicator of the epistemic commitments of the participants in a discourse, very few empirical investigations have addressed specific semantic hypotheses related to the precise semantic dynamic contribution of question and statement intonation to utterance interpretation. In this talk, I will provide a set of empirical arguments showing that different types of statement and question intonation contours across languages encode different levels of ASSERT (commitment) and REJECT ((dis)agreement) epistemic operators. First, I will show crosslinguistic data from typologically diverse languages as supporting evidence that sentence-final discourse particles across languages (a) encode similar meanings to those intonation encodes; and (b) encode the specification of dynamic epistemic commitments in two complementary directions, i.e., speaker commitments to the speaker’s own proposition and speaker agreement with the addressee’s propositions (e.g., different degrees of the ASSERT and REJECT operators). Second, the results of two empirical studies will be presented that further support this view. The first study will show results from a recent perception experiment showing that different types of biased QUESTION intonation  in Catalan encode 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. A total of 119 Central 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 previous discourse context (which was controlled for epistemic bias). 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), revealing an epistemic specialization of intonation contours in this language. The second study will show the results of a recent production experiment comparing two languages within the Romance group (Catalan and Friulian) which have been reported to use intonation and sentence particles to different extents to mark epistemic meanings. A total of 15 speakers per language were asked to participate in a Discourse Completion Task designed to elicit statements with two degrees of speaker commitment and agreement properties. The results showed that (a) Catalan encodes speaker commitment and speaker agrement in STATEMENTS through a different set of intonation contours; and (b) Catalan and Friulian display an asymmetry in the marking of epistemically-biased statements: while Catalan uses a greater variety of stance-marking intonation contours, Friulian uses a more varied set of stance modal particles and a more restricted set of intonation contours. Overall, I will claim that (a) intonation across languages encode commitment and agreement operators across two different speech acts, namely questions and statements; and (b) that dynamic semantic models enable us to integrate the study of intonational meaning with other parts of the grammar into a unified approach.