

Language contact and the intonation of yes/no-questions in Catalan and Spanish: The effects of gender and language dominance

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This paper examines the intonation contours of pragmatically neutral, i.e. information-seeking *yes/no*-questions used in Catalan and Spanish by Catalan-Spanish bilinguals. Although some north-western varieties may also show falling patterns (e.g., [1], [2], [3]), this question type clearly tends to have a final rising intonation in non-contact varieties of Peninsular Spanish of Spanish (cf. the overview in [4]). Catalan dialects, on the other hand, display a rich variety of intonation contours, often allowing for both final rising and falling patterns [5]. In Central Catalan, *yes/no*-questions headed by the sentence-initial interrogative particle *que* generally show a final falling intonation pattern, whereas questions without this particle resemble their Spanish counterparts in presenting a final rise. It has been suggested that the use of the particle depends mostly on proximity relations in discourse ([6], [7]), but in Northern Central Catalan (as spoken e.g. in Girona), *que*-questions are said to be interpreted as anti-expectational ([6]), while neutral questions necessarily display a rising contour [5].

These differences between Spanish and Catalan can potentially lead to cross-linguistic influence (CLI). Many previous studies have demonstrated that language contact can have an effect on intonation (e.g., [8], [9], [10], [11]). However, the precise outcome and the direction of CLI may differ from one bilingual community to another, as well as between members of a single community, i.e. depending on a variety of social factors.

This study thus addresses the following research questions: (1) What intonation contours are used by bilinguals in Catalan and Spanish neutral *yes-no* questions with and without the interrogative particle *que*?, (2) Do bilinguals use similar or different intonation contours in their two languages?, and (3) What are the effects of gender and language dominance on the intonation of Spanish and Catalan *yes/no*-questions? The data come from both a Catalan and a Spanish discourse completion task (DCT; adapted from [12], [13]) as well as from a short reading task containing a series of Spanish questions headed by *que*. The participants were 31 Catalan-Spanish bilinguals (18 females, 13 males) from Girona (Catalonia), aged 18–23 (mean: 19.6). Based on an adapted version of the BLP ([14]), 20 were classified Catalan-dominant (CD) and 11 Spanish-dominant (SD). The data were annotated in *Praat* ([15]) using the respective Spanish and Catalan ToBI conventions ([4], [5], [16]). A total of 367 *yes/no*-questions were analysed (Spanish DCT: 154; Catalan DCT: 151; reading task: 62). The analysis focused on the nuclear pitch accent and the final boundary tone.

The DCT results revealed that both rising and falling nuclear contours can be found in neutral *yes/no*-questions produced by bilinguals from Girona, although the former are much more frequent (Sp. 95%, Cat. 77%). Falling patterns usually co-occur with the particle *que* (90%), which heads 5% of the Spanish (cf. Fig. 1) and 30% of the Catalan neutral *yes-no* questions (counter [4, 5]). In Spanish, all but one *que*-question stemmed from CD bilinguals; in Catalan, both dominance-groups produced similar amounts of *que*-questions. Interestingly, some Catalan *que*-questions were pronounced with the final rising intonation contour (to an extent of 53% among SDs and 14% among CDs). In the reading task, too, SD speakers produced *que*-questions more frequently with final rising contours than the CD group. Gender, finally, does not seem to play a role.

In sum, the findings show a fair deal of CLI in both directions, which can be explained at least partly by the language dominance of the bilinguals. The study thus contributes to the limited research on the intonation of *yes/no*-questions in bilingual Catalan and Spanish and the effects of social factors on intonation in situations of language contact.

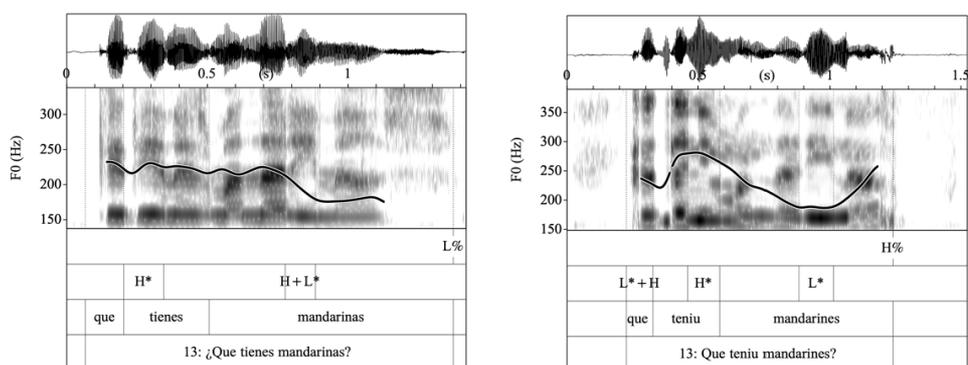


Figure 1. *Neutral yes-no question headed by que with falling intonation (Girona Spanish, leftpanel) and rising intonation (Girona Catalan, right panel).*

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