

Wh-questions and attitude: the effect of context

Anne Wichmann and Richard Cauldwell
University of Central Lancashire and University of Birmingham

One of the most commonly cited functions of intonation is its 'attitudinal' function, and yet this remains its most elusive aspect. The profusion of meanings frequently ascribed to one and the same contour serves to show that the contour itself means none of them. However, we know intuitively that such meanings are generated, and recently there have been some attempts to investigate what these meanings are and how they arise.

A persistent problem in the investigation of prosodically generated 'attitudes' is the tendency by many to conflate many different kinds of affective meanings, in particular emotion and attitude. There have been some attempts to identify and categorise different affective states (see Wichmann 2000, Scherer forthcoming). These studies have been motivated mainly by an upsurge in interest in the direct effects of emotion on the voice, and, for this reason, the indirect, context dependent affective meanings which can be observed in interaction have so far been neglected.

Cauldwell (2000) observed that the attitudinal meaning conveyed by an utterance (a WH-question) in isolation was absent when the utterance was heard in its original conversational context. In this paper I also focus on WH-questions, extracted from the ICE GB corpus, and observe the various affective (or neutral) meanings both in isolation and in context.

These perceived meanings include those which reflect the emotional state of speaker, the affectively coloured beliefs or predispositions of the speaker to a person or proposition, or an interpersonal stance (an affective stance taken toward another person in a specific interaction) (after Scherer forthcoming).

I attempt to explain the contribution of intonation to the presence or absence of perceived affective colouring on the basis of auditory prosodic analysis.

References

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