

On the intonation of tag questions in Italian: samples from central varieties

Rosa Giordano

University of Calabria, Italy

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Abstract

The paper presents the phonetic description of the prosodic form of tag-questions in Rome and Perugia Italian. The analysis is based on a sample of confirmation-seeking questions in check dialogic moves in semi-spontaneous speech selected from the CLIPS Corpus of Italian. The phonetic-acoustic analysis shows that rising or high boundaries (L)H, preceded by a HL accent configuration, frequently occur. This shape is similar to the prosodic pattern of confirmation-seeking questions in the same varieties, identified in previous studies; therefore, data support the hypothesis of a homogeneous prosodic form for the class of confirmation-seeking questions.

Keywords: intonation, Italian, tag questions, prosody, spontaneous speech

Introduction

Syntax and pragmatics represent the main areas of intersection between the intonational tier of prosodic structure and language structure or use. Italian is a Romance language relevant to the study of pragmatics-prosody relations (Rossi 1998, Gili Fivela et al. 2015, Frota 2007), because, in several cases, speech act distinction and the related distinction of typologically correspondent sentence types exclusively rely on intonation. In particular, the opposition between declarative and interrogative sentences is conveyed by intonation; only *wh*-questions present morphosyntactic markers of sentence type.

Phonological and phonetic studies on Italian deal with regional varieties, also focussing on different kinds of questions in many varieties (Rossi 1998, Grice et al. 2005, De Dominicis 2002, Giordano 2006, Gili Fivela et al. 2015).

The present study aims at the investigation of one class of questions in central varieties of Italian, basing on semi-spontaneous speech. The analysis is limited to *tag-questions* occurring as confirmation-seeking questions in *check* pragmatic moves in task-oriented dialogues (e.g. Siemund 2001). In Italian, it is expected that A) question tags are isolated in a specific tone group on mid or high levels of f_0 , ending with rising or high boundary; on the other hand, B) differences among regional varieties of Italian may occur, with divergence in the phonetic/phonological realizations between Rome and Perugia Italian. The broad phonetic transcription is provided and discussed, avoiding to directly address a phonological interpretation.

Corpus and methodology

The CLIPS Corpus of Italian is composed of read and semi-spontaneous speech representing different regional varieties of Italian, based on a sample of speakers homogeneous as for sociolinguistic criteria¹. 62 items have been selected from the samples of speech of Rome and Perugia. They occur in 12 task-oriented dialogues, 6 map-task and 6 spot the difference dialogues, performed by 12 speakers. All the items are confirmation-seeking questions, positively oriented, composed by a statement followed by a polar question (Fava 2001a: 123ff.); on the syntactic level, they correspond with a declarative clause followed by an interrogative alternative clause, in relation of juxtaposition (Fava 2001a: 123) (Fava 2001v: 43), like in ex. (1) (DGmtB01O_p2G#180).

- (1) Ex..... poi ci dovrebbe essere un cuore giallo <sp> *ce l'hai, sì?*
 ... then there should be a yellow heart <sp> *you have it, don't you?*

The latter element, defined *tag-question* or *parenthetical question*, conveys the pragmatic value of confirmation of the truth of the statement it refers to (Fava 2001a: 123-124). In Italian, it can occur at the end or in internal position with respect to the sentence it refers to (Fava 2001a: 125) and is supposed to be separated from the statement sentence on the prosodic tier (Fava 2001a: 125).

The whole sample analysed in this study consists of tag-questions in final position. Tag-words are monosyllables (*no* [no], *sì* [yes]), equivalent for the English *isn't it?* or, rarely, disyllables (about 20%) (*vero* [true], *giusto* [right]).

The phonetic analysis of prosody depends on three parameters: prosodic phrasing; intonational features; metrical structure. Prosodic phrasing detection is based on phonetic-acoustic criteria generally marking prosodic cohesion: final lengthening and global trends of f0 and energy, like baseline, slope continuity or presence of resetting. Acoustic analysis is also always matched with uditive parsing.

The intonational shape of prosodic phrases identifies pitch accents and boundary configurations functional to communicative matters; to the aim of this work, their tonal sequence is intended to be the phonetic realization of the f0 target points within the syllable, either different in values from preceding ones, then configuring rising or falling stretches, or similar, then configuring a *plateaux*. F0 values are analysed in order to evaluate the target points within the speaker's range and broad phonetic transcription is made using the symbols H (High), M (Mid) and L (Low); synchronization with the syllabic tier is reported.

Metrical structure is analysed following the general phonological interpretation accepted for Italian, in which metric feet are mono-, di- or trisyllabic and left-headed, while prosodic words are right-headed.

Results and discussion

The scheme of this specific type of confirmation-seeking questions consists of two prosodic groups, the former corresponding to the statement and the latter to the tag-question. They can be separated, on the temporal axis, by a pause, although it is not frequent neither necessary in order to obtain the auditive effect of distinct prosodic units. Example (2) (turn DGmtA02R_p2F#62) and figure 1 presents the case of the presence of pause between the two groups.

(2) Ex. cioè, io son passato intorno alla macchina rossa <lp> *no?*

... well, I turned around the red car, <lp> *isn't it?*

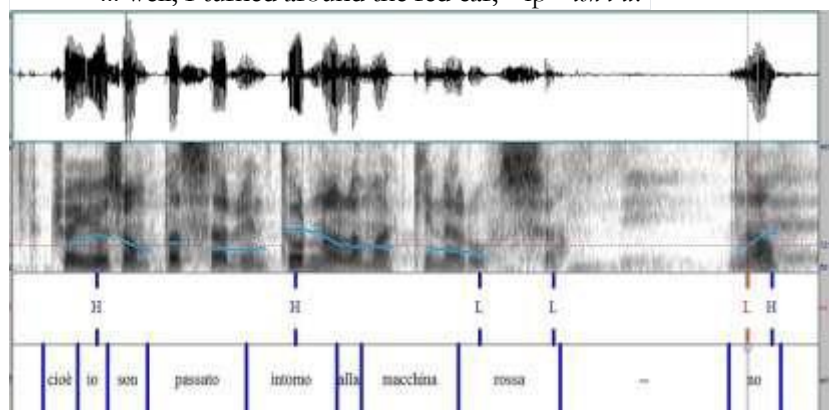


Figure 1. Ending part of the turn DGmtA02R_p2F#62 (Rome).

Tier 1: phonetic labels for target points; tier 2: orthographic transcription.

Prosodic groups corresponding to the statement always present the complete intonational pattern of a broad or a narrow focus statement in Italian, as in example (2) and figure 1 shown above; sometimes continuation boundaries can occur at the right edge. In most cases, the final accent conveys the pragmatic function of statement; its configuration is a sequence of M and L targets, both aligned within the last strong syllable at the word level on the metrical grid; in the current debate this accent is represented as H+L* in most varieties. Prenuclear accents usually identify new topic or highlight the activated part of knowledge; their configuration is a peak on high levels of the speaker's range, synchronized with strong syllables at the word level, usually transcribed in ToBI as H* (Grice *et al.* 2005, Gili Fivela *et al.* 2015).

The phonetic pattern of the second prosodic phrase, corresponding with the tag-question, can vary depending on the underlying metrical grid.

Monosyllabic words (*no*, *si*) almost always (about 90%) present a rising configuration from mid to high levels of the speaker's range, although the target point H never reaches the topline. The phonetic stylization is LH (Ex. 2).

Disyllabic words beginning with the strong syllable (i.e. *vero*, *giusto*), on the contrary, present three main tonal patterns. The first one consists of monotonic stretches in which both strong and weak syllables are associated with plateaux at mid-high level of the range, whose stylization would be H – H; the second pattern shows a sequence L - LH, in which mid-level accent configuration is followed by slightly rising edge contour; the third one is the most articulated pattern, a falling-rising contour on mid-high level, consisting of a falling accent and a rising edge contour, whose stylization is HL – LH.

Although these are just few cases, they consistently provide evidence of the variability of realization of the intonational forms for this group of questions. The last case is particularly interesting, because it matches the general pattern found for confirmation-seeking questions in these varieties in previous works.

Notes

¹URL: <https://www.clips.unina.it>

File format: .wav; sampling rate: 22050; quantization: 16 bit. Dialogue labels: DGmtA01R, DGtdA01R, DGmtA02R, DGtdA02R, DGmtB04R, DGtdB04R, DGmtB01O, DGtdB01O, DGmtB03O, DGtdB03O, DGmtA04O, DGtdA04O. Phonetic analysis: Praat (Boersma P., Weenink D. © 1992-2011, PRAAT. Doing Phonetics by Computer, <http://www.praat.org>)

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