

The Intonation of Interrogatives:

To rise or not to rise?

That is the question!

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Objetivos

1. Conseguir que el traductor/intérprete desarrolle su sensibilidad para estar atento a los vicios más frecuentes en el manejo del idioma inglés oral que resultan como consecuencia de las transferencias negativas del castellano al inglés.
2. Lograr desarrollar un sentido autocrítico en el uso oral del idioma inglés.
3. Promover la autoevaluación y autocorrección de los errores y dificultades que pudieran entorpecer el óptimo desempeño profesional en la comunicación oral.

Temas a desarrollar

Análisis de la función de la entonación en el discurso, y su aplicación a interrogaciones.

Análisis de la entonación inglesa en interrogaciones del tipo "yes-no questions" y la comparación de la misma con nuestro uso.

Este tema se desarrollará utilizando como base el material propuesto en las páginas siguientes.

Tareas propuestas

Revisar conceptos y usos básicos de la entonación inglesa con respecto a determinados aspectos de la expresión oral de este idioma, por medio de un proceso interactivo con los participantes.

Proponer mecanismos que faciliten la autocorrección de los errores más frecuentes.

Introducción

The main concern of this work will be to analyse the intonational contours of just one type of interrogatives out of the varied taxonomy of question types. Yes-no questions will be the object of this paper, focusing on a contrastive analysis between RP variety of English and the educated River Plate variety of Spanish, known as "Porteño".

Before dealing with this subject, it may be worthwhile to state briefly that in any language the notion of interrogation can be accomplished in many ways other than questions. Let us take for instance a statement like

1- You've got the keys.

The use of a rising tune will turn this statement into a declarative mood question, thus

2- / r you've GOT the KEYS /

Apart from tentatively establishing an area of common ground between speaker and addressee, this interrogative is requesting confirmation of the speaker's assessment. Yet, this statement can be uttered with falling intonation

3- / p you've GOT the KEYS /

where the speaker seeks confirmation or greater precision from the addressee, as for example "Yes, in my pocket".

This simple example demonstrates what Schegloff stated in 1978: "...ques-

tioning can be accomplished by linguistic forms other than questions" (: 86, quoted in Couper-Kuhlen 1986: 169). For this reason the modern literature refers to the term "elicitations", which was introduced by Sinclair and Coulthard in 1975, to refer to an act whose function is to prospect an obligatory verbal response or a non-verbal surrogate, such as a nod of the head. Therefore, any utterance fulfilling these requirements will be characterized as an elicitation irrespective of its syntactic form, since what will be analysed is its function in discourse.

Yes-No Questions

In this analysis of yes-no questions we will refer to genuine yes-no elicitation, understanding by them those utterances that prospect a verbal response commencing with either a positive or negative polarity word, i.e. 'yes' or 'no'. To clarify this point further, let us briefly consider the following case: 'Can you shut the door?'. If this utterance is intended to be a genuine interrogative, the expected responses could be: 'Of course'; 'Sure'. Whereas if the response received is: Yes, I can, there is evidence of a clear misinterpretation of the stated utterance, which happens to be a question in form, but a directive in function. What results evident is a lack of information about the given situation.

Traditionally yes-no questions have been expressed with rising intonation patterns. O'Connor and Arnold have enlarged upon this in their book "Intonation of Colloquial English" (1961, 1976), where yes-no questions are intoned with different tone groups bearing rising and falling nuclei, plus an analysis of their attitudinal interpretations. Yet this work will mainly focus on the discursal theory and the communicative value of elicitation uttered on either a proclaiming or referring tone.

Let us concentrate on this example proposed by Brazil in 1985:

4- // p DO you prefer THAT one / (ibid: 162)

The communicative value of a p tone is roughly interpreted as something like: 'I don't know if you prefer that one or not; please tell me'. However, if an r+ tone is used

5- // r+ DO you prefer THAT one // (ibid)

the speaker means something like: 'Am I right in assuming you do?'. It is suggested that while guesses are presented with proclaiming tones, deductions or hunches are presented with referring tones. This view can be further exemplified in Speaker's B contribution in:

6- Speaker A: I wish I could remember his name!

Speaker B: // IS it ARthur // (ibid: 165)

By using a proclaiming tone, Speaker B will probably be heard as suggesting the first name that crossed his mind; whereas, by using a referring tone, he will have sufficient ground for believing that Arthur is a name worth considering as the forgotten one, since Speaker B will project the assumption that Speaker A will recognise the information as having been already negotiated once it is proposed to him.

It can be concluded that the p/ r tone opposition in relation to yes-no elicitation operates as follows. Those cases in which a proclaiming tone is used will show that the speaker asks for the removal of uncertainty with respect to one of a number of existentially possible options: he projects a context in which the response is so far un-negotiated and, trying out one of the options, offers it for the hearer to concur or reject, a fact that will alter the speaker's world view. On the other hand, with a referring tone, the speaker tentatively projects a context in which the response has been negotiated: all he asks of the respondent is that he confirm (or deny) that the assumption he is making about the common ground is the proper one. We may say that he modifies his world view in advance and submits the modification for his hearer's approval (*ibid.*).

Let us now analyse how some of the previously quoted examples are interpreted by Porteño students, first in English (examples 'a'), and then in their mother tongue (examples 'b'):

- 4a- // (Do you pre (fer (that one ? //
4b- // ¿ Prefe (rís (ese ? //
6a- Speaker A: I wish I could remember his name!
Speaker B: // (Is it (Arthur ? //
6b- Señor A: ¡Ojalá me pudiera acordar su nombre!
Señor B: // ¿ (Es (Ar (turo ? //

According to these recorded versions, it will be generally agreed, following the discourse principles, that the speaker in (4a) as well as Speaker B in (6a) will be marking the information presented in these questions as being 'doubly new' (Brazil et al 1981: 56). Furthermore, by using a p+ tone, they will be asserting their dominant role in the situation. Within the area of local meanings, the use of the Jackknife will make the speakers sound greatly awed or even challenging.

Within discourse, Brazil (*ibid.*: pp.166-7) marks some situations where it is hard to imagine yes-no elicitation said with a proclaiming tone and bearing the kind of interpretation proposed earlier. In the following setting at a dental surgery this exchange might take place:

- 7- Patient: I have an appointment for two o'clock.
Receptionist: // r are YOU mister ROBinson //

The receptionist is simply checking her assumption that the identity of the man who is addressing her is the same as the one who is in her appointments book; this same enquiry with a proclaiming tone might show the receptionist in a rather unfavourable light: she might be suggesting that her book was in such a mess that she did not know what patient to expect next.

The recorded versions that follow now represent example (7) both in English (a) and Spanish (b):

- 7a- Patient: I have an appointment for two o'clock.
Receptionist: // (Are you Mister (Robinson ? //

7b- Paciente: Tengo turno a las dos.

Secretaria: // ¿ Us (ted es el señor Cam (basso ? //

According to the recorded version of (7a), it will be generally agreed, following the discourse principles, that the receptionist can neither remember what patient is appointed for two o'clock, nor recognise the person addressing her as Mr. Robinson. Some extra abstract meaning is provided by the use of a p+ tone, which will mark the information presented in this question as 'doubly new' (Brazil et al 1981: 56), as well as being a means of asserting the speaker's dominant role.

We could even imagine the receptionist adding some extended phrases like 'That's a surprise!' or 'I can't believe it!' which would bring out the common meaning of 'That alters my world view!' (ibid). Within the area of local meanings, the use of the Jäckknife could show that the receptionist bears a grudge against Mr. Robinson and therefore has grounds for showing an antagonistic or a challenging attitude.

However, the rising-falling intonation heard in (7b) is the normal way of asking yes-no questions in Porteño, without attaching to them any of the above-mentioned meanings or attitudes. This same phenomenon is perceived in (4b) and (6b) of the recorded data.

Yet the difference found in the production of the rising-falling tone in RP and in Porteño is that Porteños do not tend to reach the low level of the pitch range in the final movement of this tone. As we have previously mentioned, this tone will generally finish at mid level or between the mid and low levels of the range. Exceptions can be found, especially in the case of men, but the general tendency for Porteños is to exploit the area comprised between the mid and high levels of the pitch range. It will have been perceived in the recording that some renderings could be classified as exploiting an extra high pitch level in the realisation of the nuclei, as is the case in (6b), and the RP versions (4a), and (6a).

Finally, the following extract from an informal conversation between friends gives us a clear exponent of the operating transfer previously discussed. In this situation one of the girls, Ethel (E), has been awarded a scholarship to take a course in England and her friends are interested about different aspects of her stay there:

8- ...

E: I think there are ... there are interesting places to visit.

B: // D'you want (me to go with (you ? //

E: Of course, I'd love to !

C: // D'you know (something about the ... the (family that's (going to ... to be with (you ?) //

E: Well, I know that ... the girl who's staying ... I'm staying with studies for the diploma, and [...]

The resulting analysis of these case studies shows that the rising-falling intonation pattern seems to be establishing itself as the norm within *Porteños* when they wish to pose a friendly question, bearing none of the light and casual or echoing local meanings discussed by O'Connor and Arnold or the exclamatory note discussed by Brazil as a possible 'popular usage' of the p+ tone (1985: 149). The quoted examples point out the negative transfer that operates between the speakers' mother tongue and the target language.

Conclusions

One important issue of this work is that intonation plays a distinctive role in the act of asking a question. There are instances when intonation helps to disambiguate meaning that is not clarified by other linguistic means – in this respect intonation performs an undeniable essential function in defining a speaker's intentions, his bond with the addressee and the common environment that surrounds them. Yet, the investigation carried out has revealed that the classical interpretation of the intonation of interrogatives is based on the expectation that a yes-no question will have rising intonation. The partial truth of this assertion has proved 'to be no more than a tendency', as the discursal school attempts to demonstrate. Moreover, we should not disregard the fact that 'asking is frequently accomplished with items that do not look like questions at all' (Brazil, 1994: 59).

Activities

1- Aural Identification — Role-playing (recording / attendants' participation)

- Harriet: Hello, David. I'll take your coat.
David: Thanks, Harriet. Whew!
Harriet: Are you tired?
David: Mnn... a bit. Ooh! That soup smells good!
Harriet: Are you hungry?
David: I'm absolutely starving!
Harriet: Did everithing go well?
David: Pretty well. Coool! Baked potatoes!...

2- Discover the Mystery (group work — interactive activity)

Directives: A small group of attendants will think out a possible solution to each of these stories. The rest of the people will pose questions (no more than 5 or 6) so as to unveil the mystery. The attendants will receive this information:

Story A:

A black-skinned man, dressed completely in black, is walking down an unlit country road. Just as he is crossing the road, a large black car with no headlights comes rushing along. The driver manages to avoid him.

Some possible questions for this situation could be (including intonation practice):

- a- Is the (driver short- (sighted?
- b- Is the (black man (smiling?
- c- Is the (black man carrying a white (bag?
- d- Does this (happen at (night?
- e- Is it (daytime?

Story B:

A man walked into a bar in Texas. He asked for a glass of water. The barman pointed his gun at him. The man said, "Thank you!" and walked out..

Some possible questions for this situation could be (including intonation practice):

- a- Was the (man a dangerous (murderer?
- b- Did the (barman take the man for a (debtor?
- c- Was the (barman (crazy?
- d- Was the (man (really thirsty?
- e- Did the (man have a bad attack of (hiccups?

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Miscellaneous Material

Sound Recordings.

Sound recordings of students at a Public Translator's School.