

THE INTONATIONAL PATTERNS USED IN SPANISH YES-NO QUESTIONS OF HUNGARIAN SPEAKERS

Kata Baditzné Pálvölgyi

Department of Spanish Language and Linguistics, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest

bpkat79@gmail.com

Abstract:

The present paper offers an overview of our investigations concerning the intonation of Spanish yes-no questions by Hungarian learners of Spanish. We now focus on linguistic aspects of intonation: which melodic patterns are used by Hungarian learners of Spanish in three subcategories of yes-no interrogatives: neutral yes-no questions, incredulous echo yes-no questions and yes-no questions followed by a vocative. We analyse these subtypes as their intonation in Spanish and in Hungarian is radically different. The Spanish intonation is characterised by final rises in all these three areas, whereas in Hungarian, we can rather detect the presence of a rising-falling melody. Rise-falls are not excluded from the inventory of Spanish interrogative patterns, but their presence is relatively low, and they usually accompany marked yes-no questions. Our aim is to find out on which areas should a language teacher lay more emphasis as far as the correct intonation is concerned.

Keywords: Yes-no interrogatives, Melodic patterns, Rise, Rise-fall, Negative transfer

Resum:

Aquest treball ofereix un resum de les nostres investigacions sobre l'entonació de les interrogatives absolutes del castellà, produïdes per estudiants hongaresos. Actualment ens centrem en els aspectes lingüístics de l'entonació: quins patrons melòdics són usats pels estudiants hongaresos en tres subcategories de les interrogatives absolutes: interrogatives absolutes neutres, interrogatives echo incrèdules, i les interrogatives absolutes seguides per un vocatiu. Analitzem aquests subtipus perquè la seva entonació és radicalment diferent en castellà i en hongarès. L'entonació castellana es caracteritza per un ascens final en aquestes tres àrees, mentre que en hongarès podem detectar la presència d'una melodia ascendent-descendent. L'ascens-descens no és del tot inexistent en l'inventari dels patrons interrogatius del castellà, però la seva presència és relativament baixa, i normalment acompanya interrogatives absolutes marcades. El nostre propòsit és trobar les àrees on el professor de llengua hauria de posar més èmfasi pel que fa a l'entonació correcta.

Paraules clau: *Interrogatives absolutes, Patrons melòdics, Ascens, Ascens-descens, Transferència negativa*

Resumen:

Este trabajo ofrece un resumen de nuestras investigaciones sobre la entonación de las interrogativas absolutas del castellano, producidas por estudiantes húngaros. Actualmente nos centramos en los aspectos lingüísticos de la entonación: qué patrones melódicos son utilizados por los estudiantes húngaros en tres subcategorías de las interrogativas absolutas: interrogativas absolutas neutras, interrogativas echo incrédulas y las interrogativas absolutas seguidas por un vocativo. Analizamos estos subtipos precisamente porque su entonación es radicalmente diferente en castellano y en húngaro. La entonación castellana se caracteriza por un ascenso final en estas tres áreas, mientras que en húngaro podemos detectar la presencia de una melodía ascendente-descendente. El ascenso-descenso no es completamente inexistente en el inventario de los patrones interrogativos del castellano, pero su presencia es relativamente baja y suele estar asociado normalmente a las interrogativas absolutas marcadas. Nuestro propósito es encontrar las áreas donde el profesor de lengua tendría que poner más énfasis por lo que se refiere a la entonación correcta.

Palabras clave: *Interrogativas absolutas, Patrones melódicos, Ascenso, Ascenso-descenso, Transferencia negativa*

1. INTRODUCTION

Since 2006 we have been comparing the Spanish utterances of Hungarian learners to both Spanish and Hungarian standard utterances from an intonational point of view. In Baditzné (2012) an empirical and experimental-based methodology has been used, focusing on the assumptions of the Melodic Analysis of Speech (MAS) theory, expounded in detail in Cantero (2002), Font-Rotchés (2007), Cantero & Font-Rotchés (2009).

According to our investigations, Hungarian students presented some difficulties in the linguistic aspects of intonation, that is, they had problems in conveying the intended meaning with their intonation, due to the incorrect realization of final tonal movements. In this paper we offer a short review of the main points of our investigations, as well as our future aims.

2. OBJECTIVES

Our purposes are to investigate to what extent Hungarian learners of Spanish transfer their native Hungarian intonational patterns into Spanish yes-no questions.

Spanish yes-no questions are mainly characterized by a final rise, contrarily to what happens in Hungarian, in which the tendency is to have a final rise-fall in yes-no questions. Thus, we will examine the intonation of Spanish interrogatives uttered by Hungarian learners from an intonational point of view: whether Hungarians follow the Spanish intonation in three types of yes-no questions: neutral yes-no questions, incredulous echo yes-no questions and yes-no questions followed by a vocative. These three subtypes are analysed as they present discrepancies in the intonation in Spanish and Hungarian.

This research is important as Spanish interrogatives without their characteristic intonation are not easily decoded as interrogatives by Spanish. It can be seen what sort of problems can be connected to inappropriate intonation by other languages as well, not only Hungarian, cf. for example about the intonation of Italian (Devís, 2011), Brazilian (Fonseca & Cantero, 2011), Swedish (Martorell, 2011) or Chinese (Liu, 2005) learners of Spanish.

3. METHODOLOGY AND CORPUS

First we compare Spanish and Hungarian yes-no questions from an intonational point of view. The three yes-no questions types which we analysed are the following:

- neutral yes-no questions
- incredulous echo yes-no questions
- yes-no questions followed by a vocative.

The theoretical framework of the data analysis follows the *Melodic Analysis of Speech (MAS)* theory, proposed by Cantero (2002), whose protocol is explained in detail in Font-Rotchés & Cantero (2009). The structure of the intonation unit is represented as in Cantero (2002), where the two characteristic accents in the utterance are the *First Peak* (the first lexical stress) and the *Nucleus* (usually the last lexical stress, the starting point of the most relevant melodic movement, the *Final Inflection*, abbreviated as *FI*). The melodies in the diagrams are represented by their absolute F_0 values, as well as by their standardized values (the standardized values are values relative to each other, in terms of percentages). For an example, cf. Figure 2. below.

The analysed data were taken from various sources:

- the description of Spanish intonational contours was based on, apart from already existing literature, our own corpus containing 76 read and spontaneous Spanish yes-no questions produced by 20 informants altogether;
- the description of Hungarian intonational contours was based on, partly already existing literature, partly our own corpus containing 69 read and spontaneous Hungarian yes-no questions realized by 24 speakers altogether;
- the description of the intonation of Hungarian learners of Spanish was based on our own corpus containing 175 read and spontaneous Spanish yes-no questions produced by 51 Hungarian speakers altogether.

3.1 The intonation of neutral yes-no questions

Genuine yes-no interrogative patterns, which are typical of yes-no questions that are neutral in their context in both languages are characterised by a rise that happens at one point of the sentence. In our corpus, in the half of the cases, neutral Spanish yes-no interrogatives are accompanied by a rising FI, with over 40% of rise.

This is not so in Hungarian: unmarked interrogative patterns carried by more than two syllables end in a fall between the penultimate syllable and the last one, whereas in mono- and disyllabic realisations the final fall is lost or almost lost. The fall always follows an initial rise, thus Hungarian literature considers this pattern a rise-fall.

Figure 1. shows the predominant neutral yes-no interrogative patterns in both languages; by predominant we understand the most frequent realization found in our corpus. The Spanish pattern is the reproduction of pattern II in Cantero *et al.* (2002) and Cantero & Font-Rochés (2007); the representation of the Hungarian pattern is based on our own investigations in Baditzné (2012).

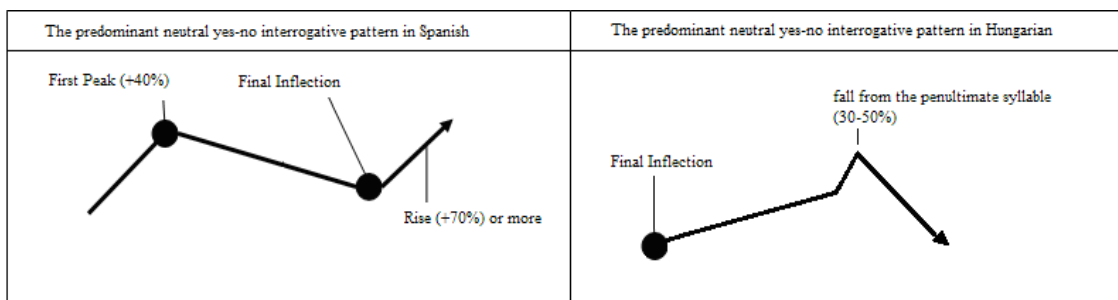


Figure 1. Predominant neutral yes-no interrogative patterns in Spanish and Hungarian.

We must also note here that it is not exclusively this rising pattern used for asking yes-no questions in Spanish. In earlier works the typical yes-no intonation contour is described as the one ultimately ending in a rise, cf. e. g. Alcoba & Murillo (1998:160), Congosto *et al.* (2008:9), Face (2007:194), Fernández & Martínez Celdrán (2003:191, 197), Henriksen (2010), Jiménez Gómez (2010:296-297), Martínez Celdrán (2003:72, 74), Quilis (1995:429-431), Sosa (1999:30). However, Font-Rotchés & Mateo (2011, 2013) have found four interrogative patterns in Spanish spontaneous yes-no questions, three of which are rising, and one is a rising-falling melody. Still we must bear in mind that a language learner, in our view, should first be familiarised with non-marked yes-no question intonation, which is decoded as interrogative by listeners independently of context. And only rising melodies are interpreted as Spanish interrogatives without any context.

3.2 The intonation of incredulous echo yes-no questions

Echo yes-no questions are so-called because they *echo* (repeat) some part of the discourse. A characteristic type of these can be called *incredulous/repetitive yes-no questions*. With these the speaker sums up an unexpected experience or statement in the form of a yes-no question, with the aim of making the listener confirm or repeat it. These questions can be looked upon as subordinate clauses after an unsaid matrix sentence “Am I right in supposing that...?”.

According to our investigations, in Spanish, these questions do not differ radically in intonation from the ordinary ones, they are predominantly characterized by a final rise (see Figure 2., where | stands for phonic group boundaries, ' before the syllable signals the nucleus (the lexical stress carrying the most relevant *Final Inflection* in the phonic group). In the diagrams, *Hz* stands for pitch values in *Hertz*, *Perc.* means *percentages*, and *St. C.*, *Standardized curve values*.

|¿Vic'toria?|
Context: the speaker has heard that name and wants his/her partner to repeat the name.

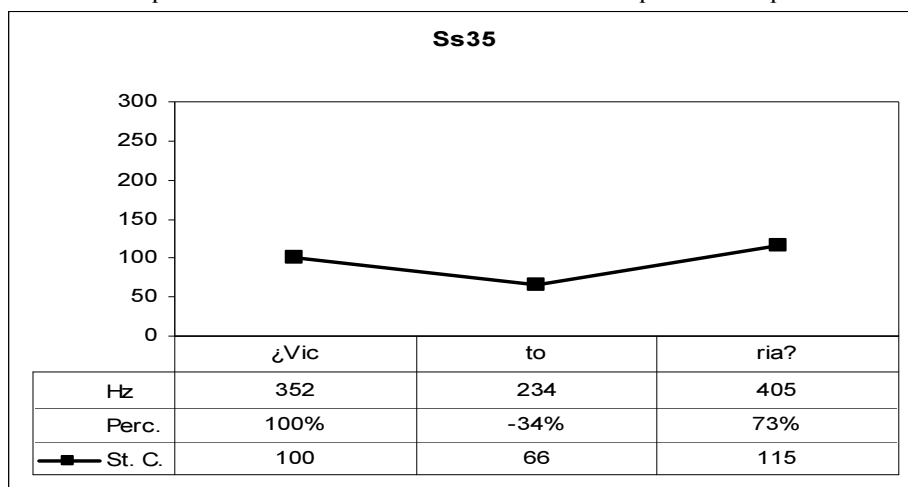


Figure 2. A typical incredulous echo question pattern in Spanish.

In Hungarian, incredulous echo yes-no questions carry a characteristic melody: the neutral Hungarian yes-no interrogative intonation is used, but the rise-falls are repeated throughout the utterance:

| Te 'megadtad | 'Marinak a | 'számomat???
you-sg gave-2sg Mary-to the number-my-acc
'Have you given my number to Mary?' (Am I right in assuming this?)

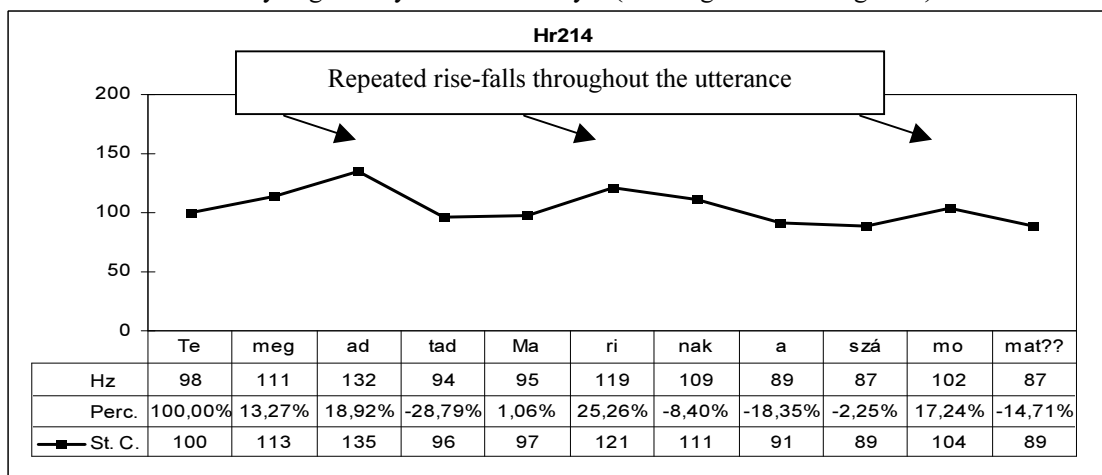


Figure 3. A typical incredulous echo question pattern in Hungarian.

3.3 The intonation of Spanish yes-no questions followed by a vocative

A salient difference as for the position of the FI in the two languages is connected to how far a Phonic Group can spread in yes-no question plus utterance-final vocative sequences.

In Spanish, the final vocative receives the typical rising yes-no question intonation pattern or a rising pattern with a moderate rise, and the preceding part — the yes-no question — receives a moderately rising or an almost falling contour, see Figure 4.

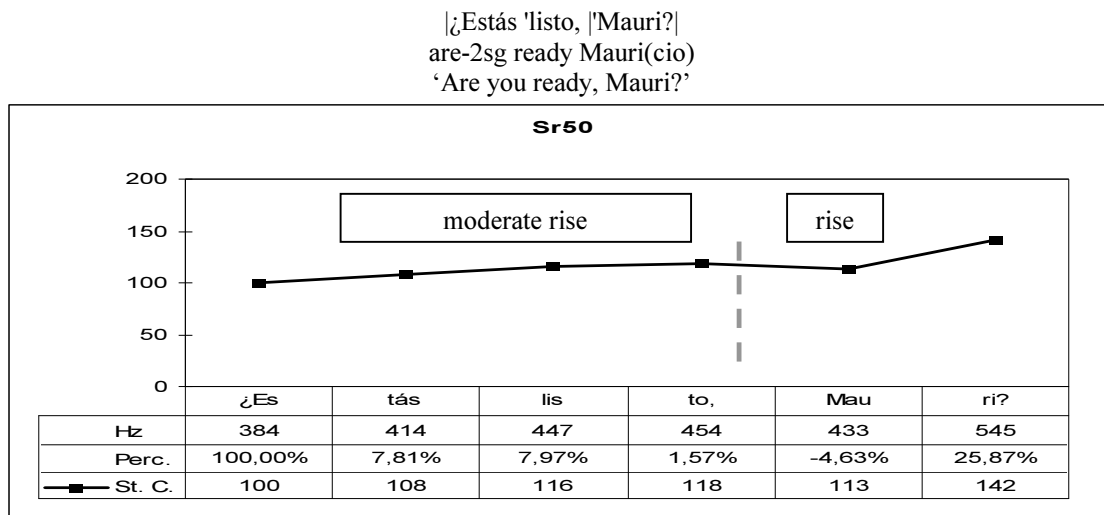


Figure 4. The intonation of yes-no question + vocative sequences in Spanish.

In Hungarian, however, the final vocative receives a falling pattern, and the yes-no question intonational pattern, the rise-fall characterizes the yes-no question preceding the vocative.

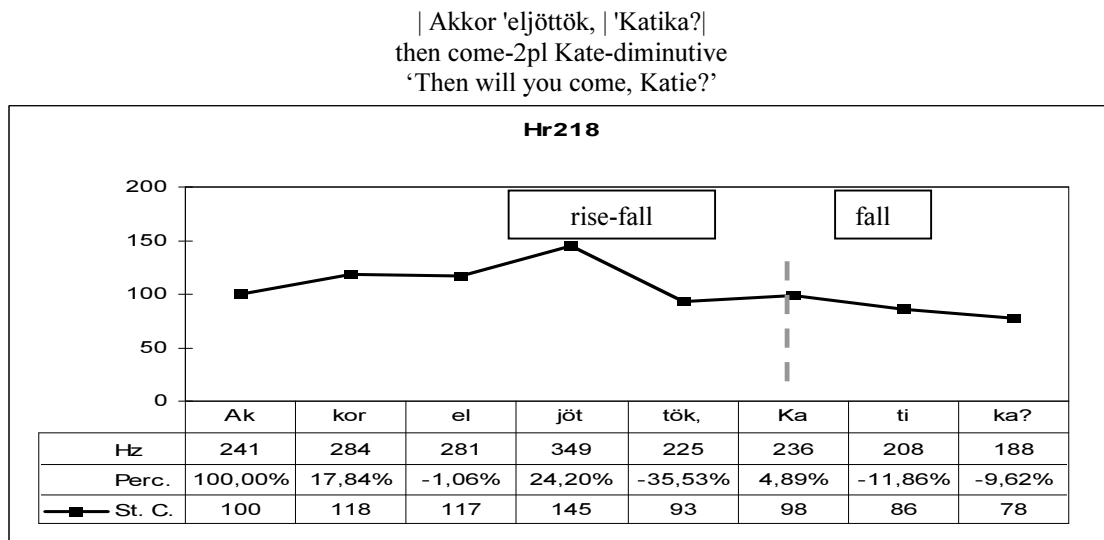


Figure 5. The intonation of yes-no question + vocative sequences in Hungarian.

4. RESULTS

The following points will focus on what we found in the yes-no questions of Hungarian learners of Spanish.

Though in Spanish the most typical intonational patterns accompanying neutral yes-no questions are characterized by a final rise, the presence of these is scarce in our corpus. The predominant pattern used is a falling one, which is almost non-existent in standard neutral Spanish yes-no interrogatives.

In neutral yes-no questions, the Hungarian rise-fall was used relatively rarely, in less than the 20% of our corpus. But we can see that in the case of echo yes-no questions,

Hungarian students use their native repeated rise-fall pattern overwhelmingly. It is interesting to note that even speakers who realize a rising FI in their neutral yes-no questions, use repeated rise-falls when producing emphatic sentences. This suggests that when there is a stronger emotion or emphasis on the part of the speaker, it is more likely that (s)he will transfer his/her own native intonational traits to the target language product. Therefore, language teachers should make a strong effort to reduce the effect of this negative transfer.

We can see that, contrary to our predictions, negative transfer does not play an important role in the realization of Spanish yes-no question + vocative sequences by Hungarian learners.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE INVESTIGATIONS

We have investigated the transfer of Hungarian patterns in three yes-no question types: neutral yes-no questions, incredulous echo yes-no questions, and yes-no question + vocative sequences.

In neutral yes-no questions it was expected that Hungarian students would transfer their normative yes-no question pattern, a rise-fall, to Spanish interrogatives as well. The presence of the rise-fall in our corpus was not very high, less than 20%. In incredulous echo yes-no questions, however, Hungarian students transferred their native *repeated rise-fall sequences* to their Spanish utterances in a very high proportion. Since in Spanish there are no multiple FIs in echo yes-no interrogatives, this constitutes a common Hungarian mistake, and needs special pedagogical attention. In yes-no question + vocative sequences, Hungarians use a rise-fall for the interrogative and a fall for the vocative, while in Spanish both patterns tend to rise, the second one more remarkably. Thus, negative transfer could be predicted in these sequences, resulting in anomalous intonational solutions. However, Hungarian students did not realize the sequence with their native intonation, but rather in the Spanish way. This means that this area needs no special attention on the part of a language teacher.

There are various issues that could not be handled in future work in relation with Spanish intonation of Hungarian learners. As Hungarian and Spanish stress-placing rules are radically different, most topics could be in connection with the prelinguistic aspects of intonation, namely, the position of the First Peak and the starting point of the FI.

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