Intonational and gestural meaning contributions to the interpretation of denial
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It is well-known that prosody and gesture patterns across languages, among other functions, convey information about the epistemic stance of the speaker, not only in relation to the speaker’s own propositions but also in relation to the addressee’s propositions. In the first part of this talk I will present evidence from two recent experiments on the role of prosody and gesture in the expression and assessment of the epistemic stance of the speaker (Roseano et al 2014, Borràs-Comes and Prieto 2014). In one of our experiments on biased questions and intonation, results showed that different tune patterns in Catalan were used to encode (a) different degrees of speaker knowledge on the content of the speakers’ own proposition; and (b) different degrees of speaker acceptance of the content of the proposition of the addressee (Borràs-Comes and Prieto 2014).

The second part of the talk will be devoted to show the results from a joint project with M.T. Espinal and S. Tubau (UAB) and two members of our team (J. Borràs-Comes and S. González, UPF) on the role of prosody and gesture in the interpretation of denial in Catalan. Two specific cases will be analyzed, namely double negation and yes-answers to negative yes-no questions (Espinal & Prieto 2011, Tubau et al. in press). These two cases constitute a challenge for semantics and pragmatics because double negative and yes-responses to negative questions are ambiguous in that they can constitute either a negative answer to the proposition expressed or a denial to a presupposition (e.g., What isn’t working? Nothing ‘Everything is working’; Isn’t John coming (either)? Yes). Our research supports the conclusion that specific intonation contours (in particular, the so-called contradiction contour, L+H*L!H%) and gestures associated with n-words do constrain meaning in ways that allow listeners to obtain the double negation and/or the contradiction interpretation in the two types of structures. It is our claim that in both cases prosody and gesture act as linguistic and conventionalized encoders of presupposition denial (see also Espinal et al. to appear, Prieto et al. 2013). Support for the linguistic view comes from languages classified as truth-based languages (e.g. Chinese, Japanese [Jones 1999: 8ff.]), which contradict negative questions by answering no yes (Don’t you drink coffee? No yes (meaning ‘you are not right, I drink coffee’)), while some languages with a polarity-based system contradict the truth of the negative proposition by answering Yes and a specific prosody (i.e. the answer ‘disagrees’ with the whole content of the negative sentence).

Following Krifka’s proposal on the interpretation of speech acts as "spaces of commitments", we propose that intonation and gesture patterns associated both to biased questions and to n-words and particles can be interpreted as epistemic operators encoding REJECT, ASSERT and REQUEST operations (see also Portes et al. 2014 for a related proposal). For example, the contradicting answer to a negative question yes is composed of REJECT (encoded by prosody and gesture) plus ASSERT(φ) (encoded through the positive word, where φ is the propositional discourse referent). All in all, these results are challenging for the design that has been traditionally assumed in the theory of grammar, since they suggest that prosody and gesture constrain meaning representations. In particular, the inferencing of denial.
References

Borràs-Comes, Joan and Pilar Prieto (2014). Intonational meaning and the pragmatics of yes-no questions in Central Catalan, Presented at Laboratory Approaches to Romance Phonology, Aix-en-Provence, Sept 3-5.


