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Be careful what you wish for... - Bouletic bias in German questions: Evidence from production and perception

In everyday life we use subtle ways to communicate desires, often without explicitly saying so. One way to indirectly utter desires is by asking questions with a *bouletic bias*.

I will present data from studies investigating a) the prosodic realization of positive polar questions (e.g., “Are you making pasta for dinner?”) with positive bouletic bias (desiring “yes” as an answer) and negative bouletic bias (desiring “no” as an answer) compared to neutral information seeking questions and b) the effect of these different prosodic realizations of questions on listener’s perception, using *semantic differentials*.

Results showed that in the absence of lexical markers, speakers use prosody to mark bouletic bias: positive bias is frequently produced with a rise-fall-rise ($L+H^* L-H^0\%$), negative bias with slow speech rate and a final high plateau ($H^* H^0\%$) and neutral polar questions with a high final rise ($L^* H^{\wedge}H^0\%$). Results of the perception experiment show that nuclear tunes associated with neutral questions ($L^* H^{\wedge}H^0\%$) are judged as more open than tunes associated with biased questions ($L^*L-H^0\%$ or $H^* H^0\%$), prosodical cues for a negative bouletic bias (slow speech rate and a final high plateau) lead to more responses towards “speaker expects *no* as an answer”, while questions with a rise-fall-rise contour ($L+H^* L-H^0\%$, associated with positive bias), lead to more “speaker expects *yes* as answer”-responses. Questions that end in a high plateau ($H^* H^0\%$, associated with negative bias) are judged as less polite than questions with a final rise.

I thus argue that speakers use prosody to mark bouletic bias and that listeners are aware of these prosodic cues and interpret question-meanings accordingly