

Question Prosody in Bàsàa

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It is a widely held view in linguistics literature that one of the most uncontroversial functions of intonation is that of conveying different illocutionary aspects, or modes (Di Cristo & Hirst, 1998). In this respect, the formulation of questions is believed to display, among other modes such as imperatives, vocatives, hortatives or optatives, an abundant intonational activity throughout the languages of the world. Though most African languages and especially Bantu languages still lack comprehensive descriptions with regard to prosody, there seems to prevail a universalist view about the prosody of questions and statements that high or rising pitch signals the former [question] whereas low or falling pitch signals the latter [statement], (Ohala 1983, Bolinger, 1978b). Whether this is true of most Bantu languages is still a controversial issue which needs to be investigated and documented through quantitative and accurate analysis. Recent works on question prosody with a cross-linguistic perspective show that this universalist or near universalist high-pitched characteristic of interrogatives is questionable (Rialland, 2004, 2007, 2008), and that question prosodies without any type of high-pitched correlates are not just exceptions; they are widespread in Africa. The goal of this paper is to show that in Bàsàa, a Bantu language (A43) spoken in Cameroon, the prosody of questions is not structured as is the case in many languages, where there exist a binary prosodic pattern for assertive utterances in one hand, and for questions in the other hand. We will demonstrate that the question intonation in Basaa, that is the final pitch of an interrogative utterance, is a local and dynamic phenomenon which is conditioned by syntactic, semantic, pragmatic as well as prosodic factors (Makasso, 2008).