The role of semantic cues in prosodic disambiguation of wh-phrases in Korean

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In Korean, sentences with wh-words can be ambiguous between wh-questions and yes-no questions as a wh-word (e.g., /mwə/) can be used either as a wh-pronoun ("what") or an indefinite pronoun ("something"; e.g., "what are you going to talk about?" vs. "Are you going to talk about anything?"). Prosodic cues such as accentual phrasing have been found to play a role in disambiguating these types of sentences (Jun & Oh, 1996; Yun, 2012). However, it remains unclear how this ambiguity is resolved in more natural contexts in which there are other lexical and semantic cues available. The aim of the present study was to investigate how prosodic disambiguation of wh-phrases in production is modulated by lexical and semantic cues in the sentence (i.e., experiential and attitudinal modals).

Native speakers of Korean were recorded reading sentences which had different types of adverbs before the ambiguous wh-phrase. No other information was given regarding which type of reading was appropriate. The results of the prosodic analysis showed that the target wh-phrase was produced with two Accentual Phrases and a High boundary tone (H%; i.e., yes-no question reading) more frequently when it was preceded by an experiential or attitudinal/softening adverb (e.g., *hanbun* "once, sometime"*, chom* "please"), while the wh-question reading was more common overall (i.e., default reading). In addition, the prosodic characteristics of yes-no questions were found more often with certain types of phrases – those that are more likely to occur in suggestions (e.g., "go for lunch"). Our findings suggest that prosodic disambiguation of wh-phrases in Korean is sensitive to lexical and semantic information available in the sentence.

References

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