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INTONATIONAL PATTERNS IN QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS IN ENGLISH
CONVERSATION

Aim

The aim is to give a prosodic and paralinguistic description of questions and answers as they occur in English face-to-face conversation, especially concerning

- whether there is agreement with rules and generalizations given in handbooks on English intonation
- what other meanings divergent patterns convey

But since question form does not necessarily imply question function and vice versa, the first step was to decide what utterances acted as question and question/answer units, which was possible only by close consideration of contextual and situational features as well.

Method

Three auditiely analysed and orthographically transcribed texts of conversational English were examined (The London-Lund Corpus of Spoken English). In order to get a general view of all features characteristic of the questions and answers in the conversations I used specially designed 'feature slips' where all markings of syntax, prosody, and paralanguage were registered, together with appropriate characteristics of context and situation. Furthermore, I was able to check the meaning of certain doubtful utterances by listening to the actual tape-recordings.

Results

As was expected, a great number (20 %) of the total amount of formal questions did not function as questions but as assumptions, expressions of opinion, etc. On the other hand, a certain number of declarative statements, most of which had falling tone, functioned as questions. Approximately 25 % of the utterances with question form were not followed by a reply, ie they were not parts of units.

False starts, reformulations, cut-off questions, complex, and compound questions were common. In several cases question/answer units were interwoven with other questions and answers.

'Normal' intonational patterns were predominant, especially as far as Wh-questions were concerned, but divergent patterns were frequent. What happened when the patterns of intonation did not agree with established rules will be further discussed in the paper.