

Prosody and Focus in Alternative Questions
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Alternative questions (AltQs) differ prosodically from identically-worded *yes-no* questions (YnQs). An AltQ is canonically pronounced as in (1), with a rise (L*H-H%) before *or* and a fall (H*L-L%) on the final disjunct, while the corresponding YnQ is as in (2), with no intonational break before *or* and a rise at the end. Recent work on AltQs claims the primary disambiguating prosodic feature to be the presence of Focus-reflex pitch accents on the disjuncts of AltQs and corresponding lack thereof in YnQs (Beck & Kim 2006, Han & Romero 2004, a.o.). These authors appeal to Focus semantics to account for the unique meaning of AltQs, predicting such questions will be interpreted as AltQs if and only if they are uttered with pitch accents on both disjuncts. An alternative hypothesis is that AltQs are best analyzed as disjunctive lists, with no construction-specific Focus requirements (Rooth 1992) and an alternative semantics for *or* (Alonso-Ovalle 2006). Under this account, the final fall, which signals that the list of alternatives is exhaustive (Zimmermann 2000), is what is required for an AltQ interpretation. A perception study was conducted to evaluate these two theories.

Paraphrase choices, corresponding to an AltQ and a YnQ, were elicited from 37 participants in response to an auditory presentation of 24 disjunctive questions with four prosodic contours: the originals in (1) and (2), and two digitally modified contours, shown in (3) and (4). (3) was created by removing the final word from an AltQ pronunciation and substituting the final word from its YnQ counterpart, while (4) was created similarly by the reverse process. Contour (3) had pitch accents on both disjuncts and a final rise (L*H-H%), while (4) lacked a pitch accent on the initial disjunct and ended with a fall (H*L-L%). Thus, while the theories agree on how (1) and (2) should be interpreted, their predictions for (3) and (4) diverge.

Results show that the original contours (1) and (2) are interpreted as both theories predict, while for the modified contours (3) and (4) the final pitch movement was the critical factor in participants' paraphrase choices, as measured by a binary logistic regression. Although the presence of L*H-H% on the first disjunct modestly increased the likelihood of an AltQ paraphrase, $\text{Exp}(\beta)=2.75$, $p=0.001$, a final pitch fall had the greatest effect on this likelihood, $\text{Exp}(\beta)=67.39$, $p<0.001$.

These findings support the view that the final fall in AltQs is the prosodic feature *sine qua non*, while Focus on each disjunct is neither necessary for an AltQ interpretation (based on (4)) nor sufficient to force this reading (based on (3)). The results are consistent with an account that extends to AltQs Zimmermann's (2000) claim that a final fall signals list "closure." The fall is not optional in AltQs because conveying exhaustivity is what triggers the presupposition that at least one of the choices is true or appropriate, and without this presupposition an AltQ is simply not an AltQ. More generally, the finding that Focus is not what sets AltQs apart from YnQs should revive interest in this question type and lead to novel explanations for its peculiarities.

(1)	Does Sally sing ^{L*H-H%} or dance ^{H*L-L%} ?	92% AltQ paraphrases
(2)	Does Sally sing or dance ^{L*H-H%} ?	11%
(3)	Does Sally sing ^{L*H-H%} or dance ^{L*H-H%} ?	16%
(4)	Does Sally sing or dance ^{H*L-L%} ?	82%

References

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