

Yes/No questions in Ikaan: tone, intonation and phonation as question markers



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Ikaan, a Benue-Congo language spoken in southwestern Nigeria, is a language without morphosyntactic markers for Yes/No questions. Ikaan marks Yes/No questions entirely prosodically using intonation and phonation type.

Intonationally, Ikaan marks Yes/No questions with a greater pitch range in which its two tones are realised, and with a higher initial pitch. In terms of phonation type, Ikaan questions are marked with breathy termination on a vowel, whereas statements end abruptly in a glottal stop.

- (1) ð- nɔ́ ð- nɔ́
3S- fall 3s- fall
'He fell.'  'Did he fall?' 

Breathy termination triggers further changes at the phonological level, deleting a consonant or inserting an epenthetic vowel to ensure there is a vowel available for breathy termination.

- (2) ð- ʃédʒ í b- èwí è:dʒ 
3S steal epV LOC goat 3S.POSS
'He stole my goat.'
ð- ʃédʒ í b- èwí è:dʒ ì 
3S steal epV LOC goat 3S.POSS epV
'Did he steal my goat?'

I will give phonological and phonetic evidence to illustrate pitch expansion and breathy termination. Using acoustic phonetic and participant observation evidence, I will further show that on its own, none of the markers is sufficient to encode Yes/No questions. It is the combination of the three markers (and potentially loudness as a fourth marker) which accounts for how Ikaan speakers mark questions as opposed to statements and which makes the grammar robust.

Apart from the descriptive work on Ikaan, which is valuable in its own right, Ikaan Yes/No questions are challenging for typological, theoretical and technological reasons. Typologically, using breathy termination as a question marker is a very rare strategy and has so far only been described for Gur languages by Rialland (2007, 2009). Theoretically, question marking in Ikaan requires a broad definition of prosody and a

thorough understanding of the interactions between segmental, tonal and intonational phonology. For speech technology for spoken languages, the Ikaan is challenging as it requires phonation mode to be included in speech recognisers and speech synthesisers.

References

Rialland, Annie. 2009. The African lax question prosody: Its realisation and geographical distribution. *Lingua* 119, 6, pp. 928-49.

Rialland, Annie. 2007. Question prosody: an African perspective. In *Tones and tunes. Typological studies in word and sentence prosody*, Riad, Tomas and Carlos Gussenhoven (eds.), Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 35-64.