The intonation of Yes/No questions in Bilbao Spanish

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Previous research on Spanish intonation, a language with lexical stress, has paid attention to the different pragmatic meanings that different pitch contours have when producing utterances. In fact, very frequently, the only difference between a statement and a question is intonation. Many Spanish dialects show an anticadence (i.e. a rising pattern-H%) to indicate that the utterance is a yes/no question. However, Caribbean varieties and some Peninsular ones like Galician present falling patterns (L%). My intention is to study and present another variety that has a falling pattern which has never been studied before, namely Bilbao Spanish.

The study had two parts; A production part and a perception part. In the production part 6 Spanish speakers (1 from Madrid, 1 from Puerto Rico and 4 from Bilbao) were requested to play a game where they had to ask yes/no questions. The collected data showed the expected rising pattern (L*H%) for Madrid Spanish (MS) and the circumflex pattern (H+H* L%) for Puerto Rican Spanish (PRS). Bilbao Spanish (BS) also had a circumflex pattern (L*+H L%), but it was slightly differed from PRS. After analyzing 180 sentences, it was concluded that BS speakers systematically showed a final falling pattern (circumflex) encountering a pitch rise in the stressed syllable but finding a delayed peak in the post-nuclear syllable. The height of the boundary tone was always at least as low as the height of the pitch in the pre-nuclear syllable.

In the section dealing with perception, I wanted to test whether the observations made for the production section could be confirmed. Considering production results, it was expected that BS speakers would recognize peaks in the post-nuclear syllable as natural and peaks with a different alignment as less natural. Besides, lower boundary tones should be considered more natural than higher tones. In order to test these hypotheses, 9 BS speakers were presented 144 sentences which, after manipulation, combined 9 different peak positions and 4 different boundary heights. Their task was to grade these utterances as natural or unnatural in a 1 to 9 scale. Results showed, corroborating the production section, that there is a clear preference for utterance with peaks in the post-nuclear syllable and lower boundary tones.