

THE INTONATION OF QUESTIONS IN ENGLISH
AND GERMAN: A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS

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INTRODUCTION

Statement of problem and purpose of study

The ever increasing popularity of the audio-lingual approach to foreign language teaching brought with it the need for detailed analyses of the structure of both the native language and the language to be acquired by the student. Over the years contrastive analyses, centering around phonology, morphology, and syntax, and pairing English with the most commonly taught foreign languages were prepared, and have aided in the construction of effective teaching materials.

Though contrastive analysis has thus reduced considerably some of the difficulties of language learning, there seems to be one aspect of language structure, intonation, that has not received the attention one would expect, considering its eminent role in language. Typically, intonation is briefly treated under the heading of phonology along with such features as rhythm and stress, and the investigation is generally limited to the enumeration of a few basic contours. Its role in language, however, is comparable to that of the sum of all segmental features which to date have been the prime object of linguistic investigation. Indeed, it is only through the combination of both systems, segmental and suprasegmental, that any utterance in language can be realized. Hockett takes note of this apparent neglect of intonation in linguistic studies, by stating:

"Until recently, intonation was more or less tacitly ignored by most linguistic scholars on the assumption that

it did not vary significantly from language to language, or that anything so "natural" hardly warranted serious consideration. It is perhaps true that certain features of speech melody are to be found in all languages (e.g., rise of pitch and volume under the stimulus of pain or anger), but such universal features, if they exist, are not part of intonation as we now use that term. Recent research suggests that every language has a system of basic speech melodies which is as unique to the language as is its set of vowel and consonant phonemes."¹

Perhaps it is the large number of programs in foreign language teaching at various institutions that has brought about a significant increase, during the last few years, in studies dealing with the nature and function of intonation. For it is in teaching a foreign language, where the aim is the most efficient acquisition by the student of native or near-native speech habits, that one becomes most directly aware of the importance of intonation and acquires first-hand insights into the differences and difficulties that are connected with it.

The purpose of this paper is to gather information from both English and German studies available to me at the time of writing, dealing with only one area within the overall systems of English and German intonation, that of the intonation of questions. In its restricted frame it attempts to make a contribution to more efficient teaching of German to speakers of English by noting the intonation contours employed for questions in the two languages and investigating identical, similar, or obviously different features as they are found. No attempts

¹Charles F. Hockett, A Course in Modern Linguistics. (New York: Macmillan, 1958), p. 34.