This paper investigates the prosodic cues used by Brazilian Portuguese, Castilian, Argentinean and Uruguayan Spanish speakers to distinguish information-seeking from polite-request yes-no questions. Is this a gradient or a categorical contrast?

This work aims to describe the phonetic and phonological realization of total interrogative statements with two different communicative functions (Hirschberg, 2002): information seeking questions and polite requests. These two types of requests are equivalent to directors and illocutionary acts correspond to "the speaker’s attempts to make the listener do something", the speaker will be benefit by the action (Searle, 1995). It is an action verb in the first case and a nonverbal action in the second (Orozco, 2010). Since the information seeking questions and action requests present the same sentence structure both in Spanish and in Portuguese, the intonation would be the last resource capable of eliminating ambiguities and of permitting the recognition of the two communicative functions (Moraes & Colamarco, 2007).

According to Moraes et alii (2010), the concept of prosodic attitude generally refers to the expression of social affects, voluntarity controlled by the speaker. As any social expression, whose acoustic manifestations are linked to the culture and the language of the speaker, and differ on that point from basic emotional expressions, which may be seen as more spontaneous and universal expressions. Inside this set of attitudinal expressions, two cognitively different categories of attitudes can be distinguished: on one hand propositional attitudes, whose expressions participate in the propositional content of the sentence presented to the interlocutor (e.g. with irony, incredulity, obviousness…); on the other hand social attitudes to refer social interpersonal
relationships established by a speaker addressing his/her interlocutor, owing to these attitudes (e.g. he speaks with politeness or arrogance).

According to Moraes (2008), in Brazilian Portuguese, total interrogative statements are varieties of the same intonation pattern in these two communicative functions. Both present a so-called ‘circumflex’ nuclear configuration, a contour characterized by a particular rising–falling movement: L+H*L%. For Castilian Spanish, Estevas & Prieto (2008) propose two different patterns for the question, or information seeking: the nuclear accent shows a F0 dip L* and the final rising movement is described as HH%. For the polite requests, those authors suggest a falling H+L* L% pattern. Finally, for Argentinean and Uruguayan Spanish we have found for both communicative functions a pitch accent L+H* HL%.

Each attitudinal label was performed by two Brazilian Portuguese, Castilian Spanish, Argentinean Spanish and Uruguayan Spanish speakers (1 female and 1 male).

For social attitude of politeness in yes-no questions the contrast may be gradient rather than categorical in nature for Brazilian Portuguese and Argentinean or Uruguayan Spanish speaker. However it is rather categorical than gradient in Castilian Spanish.