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Prosodic Features Carry Information About a Questions Intent

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Abstract

Research has shown that pragmatic, social, and prosodic cues are used to infer the communicative intent of a speaker, including pedagogical intentions (Bohn & Frank, 2020; Cristia, 2013; Csibra & Gergely, 2009). However, little is known about whether prosodic features can signal pedagogical intent in syntactically equivalent utterances. We asked whether prosodic features can carry information about the intent of a question (i.e., whether it is a pedagogical or an information seeking question), both within child- and adult-directed speech. Eighty naive participants were asked to classify questions generated by five different speakers. We found that participants could reliably discriminate between questions intended to be pedagogical from those that were intended to be information seeking, both within child- and adult-directed speech, although pedagogical questions were detected more successfully when spoken with child-directed speech. These findings indicate that prosody may convey pedagogical intent, which in turn may facilitate learning.