

## Italian Wh-Questions at the Crossroads: Semantics, Syntax, and Prosody

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In Italian, main wh-questions with a bare wh-phrase show an exceptional prosodic pattern: *the Nuclear Pitch Accent* (NPA) is typically assigned to the lexical verb, but this is not associated with a focus interpretation (see Calabrese 1982, Ladd 1996, Marotta 2001, Bocci, Bianchi & Cruschina 2021).

- (1) Che cosa hai regalato <che cosa> a tua madre per Natale?  
what have.2SG given to your mother for Christmas  
'What did you give to your mother for Christmas?'

Crosslinguistically, this prosodic pattern is unexpected because it does not follow either of the two main prosodic strategies to mark wh-questions identified in the typological literature: (i) in languages like English and Spanish, the NPA is assigned by default to the stressed syllable of the last constituent of the sentence —similarly to what happens in declarative clauses; (ii) in other languages such as Romanian, Hungarian, and Greek it is instead the wh-word that is the most prominent in the unmarked sentence stress pattern (see Ladd 1996).

What does the special prosody of Italian wh-questions tell us about the interfaces between prosody, syntax, and semantics? This is the question that we will address in this seminar.

First of all, this pattern provides direct evidence for the syntactic role of focus in guiding the prosodic realization and the interpretation of a wh-question (cf. Rizzi 1997). Indeed, Bocci, Bianchi & Cruschina (2021) show that NPA placement is sensitive to the syntactic derivation of the wh-phrase. In structures with a complement clause (cf. (2)), in particular, when the wh-phrase is extracted from the embedded clause (as the complement argument of the embedded verb in (2a)), the NPA can be alternatively realized on the matrix or the embedded verb, but when wh-phrase is extracted from the matrix clause (as the subject of the matrix verb in (2b)), the NPA always falls on the matrix verb. This sensitivity characterizes both the production and the comprehension of wh-questions by Italian speakers (Bocci, Bianchi & Cruschina 2024).

- (2) a. Chi pensi [che dovrei presentare <chi> al direttore]?  
who think.2SG that should.1SG introduce to-the director  
'Who do you think that I should introduce to the director?'
- b. Chi <chi> pensa [che ti dovrei presentare al direttore]?  
who thinks that you.CL should.1SG introduce to-the director  
'Who thinks that I should introduce you to the director?'

Secondly, the Italian prosodic pattern also shows a certain degree of sensitivity to the lexical and semantic properties of the wh-elements. Bare wh-elements such as *che cosa* 'what', *chi* 'who', *dove* 'where', *quando* 'when' and *come* 'how' contrast with the

wh-word *perché* 'why', which is predominantly assigned the NPA in wh-questions, as well as with the so-called D-linked wh-phrases, which show a great deal of variation with respect to the association with the NPA (Bianchi, Bocci & Cruschina 2017, Bocci, Cruschina & Rizzi 2021). These data show that, in addition to the syntactic derivation, the nature of the wh-phrase is also relevant in determining NPA assignment. The most natural hypothesis to account for this variation is to postulate that the presence of a descriptive term within the wh-phrase is required for NPA assignment: this excludes purely functional, non-descriptive elements like interrogative pronouns, which tend to lack prosodic independence. By contrast, when the wh-phrase includes a descriptive term (e.g. [*Which book*] *did you buy?*) the distribution of the NPA shows sensitivity to specific semantic and pragmatic factors, which still need to be properly understood and investigated but which seem to suggest that in addition to the phonological component, syntax needs to interface with the interpretative component.

## References

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