

# Modal particle meets prosody: Speech act modification in declarative questions (?)

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## Illocution and prosody

### Declarative questions: Syntactic Form and Function

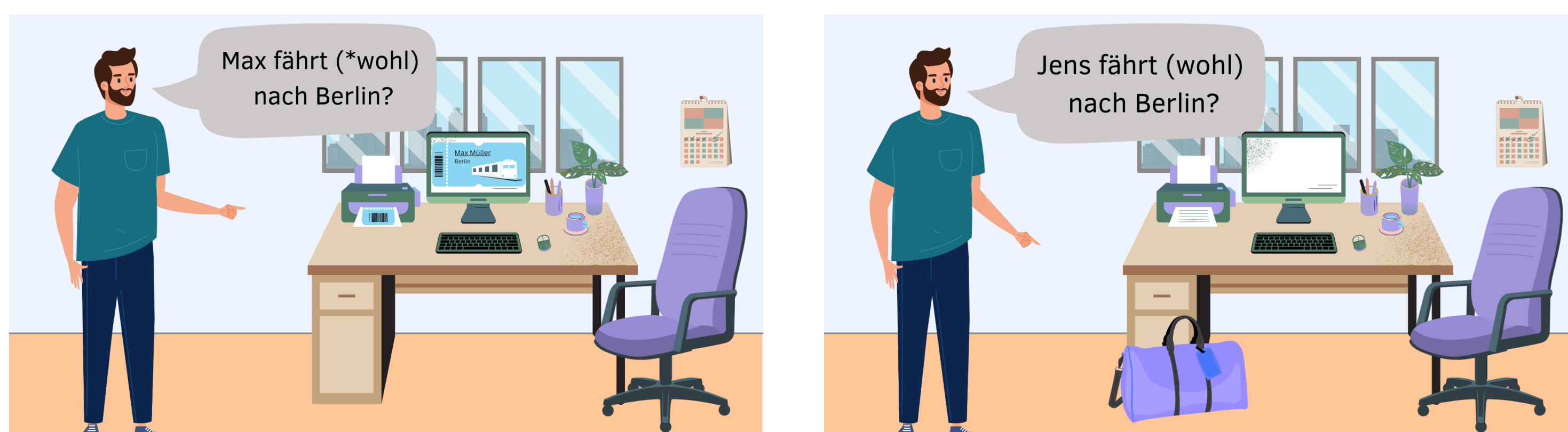
- German DQs: Verb-second (= assertion syntax)
- DQs double-check contextual evidence
- DQs do not necessarily convey a previous speaker bias

### Declarative questions in German: Prosody

- Tendency for high boundary tones [4–6], but low boundary tones also occur [4, 5, 7]
- Pre-nuclear differences between DQs and assertions: earlier high pitch and shallower falls in pre-nuclear accents in questions [7]

## The German modal particle *wohl*

- *wohl* ≈ ‘presumably’, ‘reportedly’
- **Commitment analysis** [9]
  - ▶ *wohl(p)* signals weakened commitment to *p* – argued to be inadequate by [3]
  - ▶ intuition-based claim in [9]: *wohl* cannot occur in declaratives with rising intonation – doubted by [8]
- **Evidential analysis** [3]: *wohl(p)* signals that *p* is inferred from witnessed facts (evidence must be indirect)



## Research question

Are there prosodic correlates of the evidentiality (*wohl*)?

## Production study

- 2x2 design: **speech act** (Ass vs. DQ) and **modal particle** (none vs. *wohl*)
- 24 native speakers, 12 items
- 1103 analyzed utterances

### Sample item:

S1: You know Susi, right? The antiquarian on Miller Street? She went on a mad shopping spree last week. She told you all, didn't she?

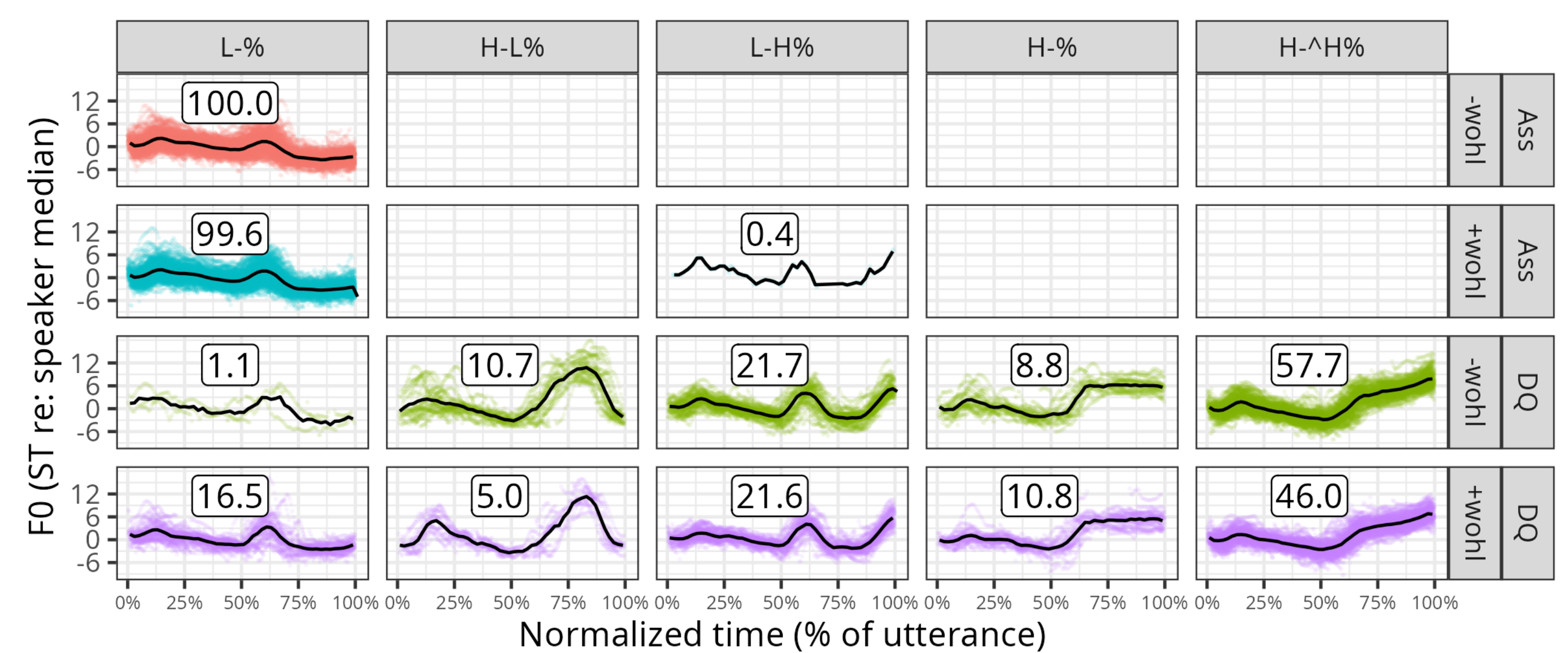
S2: Yes, her shop is far too small for all that stuff. She is thinking about renting a garage behind the ring road but she is worried about the transport. Alex, Susi talked with you about this, didn't she? ...

...She also wants to store her China there, right? Ass<sub>∅</sub>/wohl  
...I think she wants to store her China there. DQ<sub>∅</sub>/wohl

Alex: Susi will da dann Vasen lagern./? Ass<sub>∅</sub> / DQ<sub>∅</sub>  
Susi will da wohl Vasen lagern./? Ass<sub>wohl</sub> / DQ<sub>wohl</sub>  
Susi wants there then/wohl vases store  
'Susi wants to store vases there then./?'

Alex: Ass<sub>∅</sub>: That's what she told me yesterday, yes.  
Ass<sub>wohl</sub>: Her colleague told me that.  
DQ<sub>∅</sub>: That would be quite good.  
DQ<sub>wohl</sub>: She bought loads of those, after all.

## Results



### Boundary tones

- **Assertions**: no variation
- **DQ<sub>∅</sub>**
  - ▶ Many H-^H% boundary tones, some L-H%
  - ▶ Very few L-% boundary tones
  - ▶ Three speakers (Rhineland, Baden): common use of H-L%
- **DQ<sub>wohl</sub>**
  - ▶ Fewer occurrences of H-^H%, more H-% high plateaus
  - ▶ Quite common L-% boundary tones
  - ▶ Only one H-L% speaker used the H-L% contour in DQ<sub>wohl</sub>

→ **Fewer question-typical contours in DQ<sub>wohl</sub>**, but claim from [9] about *wohl*'s incompatibility with question prosody is not tenable

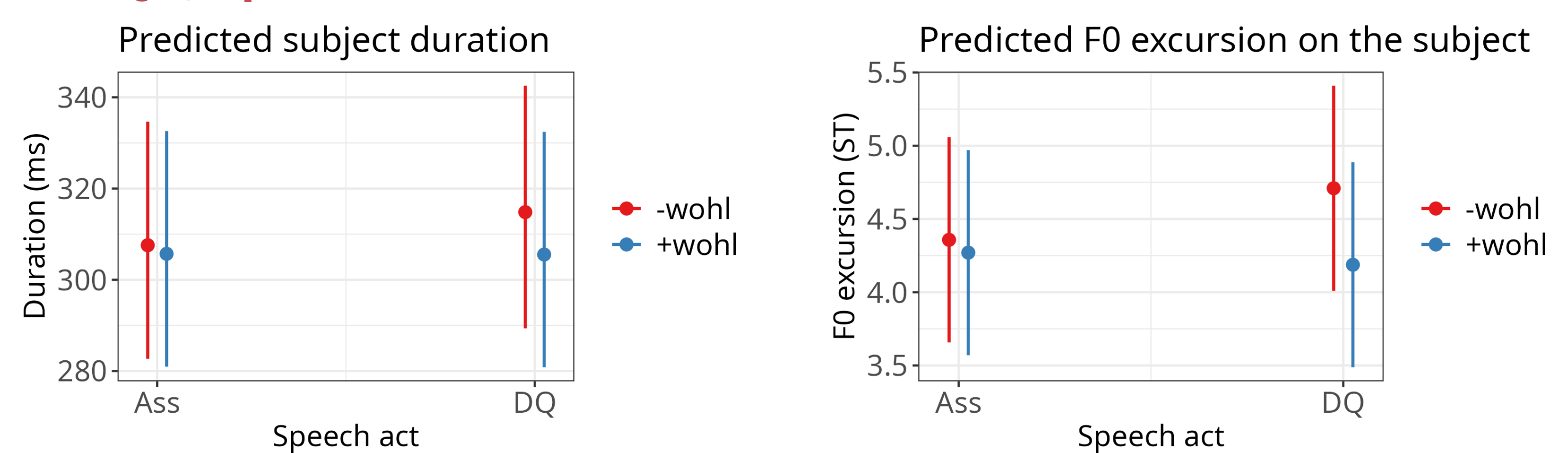
### Post-nuclear differences

- DQ<sub>wohl</sub> had lower mean F0 in the final 2 syllables of H-% and H-^H% contours than DQ<sub>∅</sub> → **again, DQ<sub>wohl</sub> less question-like**

### Pre-nuclear differences

- **Accented subjects** (97% of utterances)
  - ▶ Longer duration in DQ<sub>∅</sub> (no global speech rate differences)
  - ▶ Greater excursion in DQ<sub>∅</sub>

→ **DQ<sub>wohl</sub> pattern with assertions in both**



## Discussion

### Prosodic effects of *wohl* in DQs

- Cues to interrogativity are fewer and less strong in DQ<sub>wohl</sub>
- Speaker is more biased towards one answer because they have inference-based evidence for it

### Comparison with other non-canonical questions

- Results align with findings about other question types and other languages, e.g. German rhetorical questions [2] and Estonian surprise questions [1]

## References

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