Rhetorical questions in colloquial Italian

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Rhetorical questions (i.e. questions whose answer is indicated as obvious by the speaker) can be marked through a variety of lexical, (morpho)syntactic and prosodic cues that, directly or indirectly, trigger their rhetorical interpretation. The present article reports two studies investigating which cues can mark rhetorical questions in Italian, involving participants of different regional origins. In an elicited production study, negative-answer rhetorical wh-questions were marked through a variety of lexical and syntactic cues, the majority of which were not direct markers of rhetoricity, but were compatible with a wider range of non-canonical questions, such as negative biased questions or conjectural questions. In a forced-choice comprehension task, participants classified a question as rhetorical or canonical based either on prosody or a combination of prosodic and syntactic cues. Both studies show that, although some regional variation is present, the pattern of comprehension and production of (a sub-type of) rhetorical questions in Italian is consistent across varieties.

KEYWORDS: rhetorical questions, non-canonical questions, Italian, pragmatics, pragmatic markers.

1. Introduction

Rhetorical questions (henceforth RhQs) are defined as interrogatives that carry the presupposition that the answer is already available to all participants in the conversation (Biezma & Rawlins 2017). They belong to the class of non-canonical questions, that is, interrogatives that depart in some way from the default function of regular information-seeking questions (henceforth ISQs) (Farkas 2020). RhQs, and more widely non-canonical questions, are gaining increasing attention in current research from a variety of perspectives, most notably semantics and pragmatics (e.g. Biezma & Rawlins 2017; Caponigro & Sprouse 2007; Farkas 2020) and prosody (see Dehé *et al.* 2022 for a comprehensive overview).

(1) *Who doesn't like a nice cup of hot chocolate?*
    (Obvious answer: Everyone likes a nice cup of hot chocolate)

However, studies on their morphosyntactic and lexical correlates are less systematic, and information usually needs to be retrieved some-

what indirectly from other works. This is true also for Italian, for which a few studies are available on their prosodic (Sorianello 2018, 2019; see Ippolito 2019, 2021 for gestures) and syntactic form (Obenauer & Poletto 2000), or on their pragmatic and communicative aspects (Anzilotti 1982; Fava 1994, 1995; Stati 1982). These studies, though ground-breaking, are often confined to a formal or written register, or they do not specify whether the register they consider is formal or colloquial, nor do they take into consideration regional variation, which is substantial in colloquial varieties of Italian. Furthermore, while single cues may be analyzed individually, no analysis of quantitative patterns of modification is present to date. A lack of comprehensive analyses is also observable for prosody and intonation, which are highly varied throughout Italy (Gili Fivela *et al.* 2015). Although the difference between RhQs and ISQs is sometimes generically referred to as a falling *vs* rising opposition, the truth is not quite as simple. In fact, there appears to be no one-to-one mapping between prosody and function (i.e. a univocal prosodic form dedicated to RhQs as opposed to ISQs), as shown for Italian (Sorianello 2018) and other languages (Dehé *et al.* 2022).

The goal of this paper is to investigate the linguistic forms that RhQs can take in colloquial Italian, observing the frequency of occurrence of certain cues when RhQs are elicited in a given context, and factoring in the potential role of regional variation. Two exploratory experiments were conducted. In an elicited production experiment, RhQs with an intended negative answer were elicited and coded for any lexical and morphosyntactic cues. Each cue was then evaluated, determining (a) the semantic and/or pragmatic function of each, and (b) which are direct markers of rhetoricity, and which are only indirect correlates. In a second experiment, a forced-choice comprehension task, I investigated the role of two syntactic cues and of prosody (and possibly their interplay) in the discrimination of RhQs from ISQs. In both studies, the role of variation was taken into account. The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the current literature on RhQs, with a focus on Italian. Section 3 summarizes the elicited production experiment, discussing the role of each cue. In Section 4, I present the forced-choice comprehension task. In Section 5, I discuss the findings from the two experiments to suggest that RhQs in colloquial Italian are commonly marked not through unambiguously rhetorical cues, but through indirect cues that convey the rhetorical interpretation in combination with the context of utterance. Finally, Section 6 outlines a conclusion and future directions.

2. Rhetorical questions

2.1. The semantics and pragmatics of rhetorical questions

RhQs are commonly defined as questions that do not require an answer, because the answer is already known to or inferable by the participants to the speech act (cf. e.g. Biezma & Rawlins 2017; Caponigro & Sprouse 2007; Fava 1994, 1995; Han 2002). Therefore, RhQs have the (superficial) syntactic form of a question, but do not seek for information. The semantic nature of RhQs is debated. Han (2002) claims that, on a semantic level, RhQs are not questions but assertions, with the wh-element functioning as a negative operator. In Han's analysis, the intended answer to a RhQ has the opposite polarity to the question itself, that is, a positive question entails a negative answer, and vice versa. Examples are provided in (2) and (3):

(2) *Who likes paying taxes?*   (positive)
     Assertion: No one likes paying taxes.   (negative)

(3) *Who doesn't like a nice cup of hot chocolate?*   (negative)
     Assertion: Everyone likes a nice cup of hot chocolate.   (positive)

Caponigro & Sprouse (2007) contend that RhQs, although not requiring it, allow for an answer, and not always a negative one (or one with a reversed polarity), but they also allow for a positive answer (4). They propose a pragmatic account instead, in which RhQs are syntactically and semantically equivalent to ISQs but their answer is taken to belong to the Common Ground (CG), i.e. the set of assumptions that are shared by the Speaker and the Addressee.

(4) You should stop saying that Luca didn't like the party last night. *After all, who was the only one that was still dancing at 3am?*   (Caponigro & Sprouse 2007: 4)
     Answer: Luca (still dancing at 3am)

Biezma & Rawlins (2017) further restrict this definition, stating that RhQs are questions that convey a special attitude on the part of the Speaker, namely that they take the answer to be presupposed in the CG. In Biezma and Rawlins' view, the function of RhQs is to extract commitments from the Addressee on the content of the utterance. Biezma & Rawlins (2017) further claim that an RhQ requires a conventional trigger for the presupposition, that is, the rhetoricity of a question is always signaled through a cue, be it prosody, a discourse particle, or the form of the question itself.

2.2. Syntax and prosody of RhQs

At the syntactic and lexical level, there are several correlates to RhQs. For example, negative polarity items (NPIs) are expressions that can only be licensed in specific semantic contexts, such as in the presence of negation. ISQs cannot license inherently emphatic NPIs, also called minimizers (e.g. lift a finger), but RhQs can (Jeong & Roelofsen 2023). Thus, the sentence in (5) is only grammatical under a rhetorical reading (or at least a biased one, according to Guerzoni 2004).

(5) *Who will lift a finger to help Mary?*

Some languages, like German, use discourse particles, such as *denn* 'I wonder' and *schon* 'against expectations'. While *schon* forces a rhetorical interpretation (Bayer & Obenauer 2011; Biezma & Rawlins 2017), *denn* is also compatible with non-rhetorical uses. Its presence merely provides a cue that a rhetorical reading is more probable. The two particles can also be combined, strengthening the rhetorical reading even further (6).

(6) *Wer   isst   denn   schon   Rosinen.*
     who   eats   PRT   PRT   rasins
     'Who eats raisins?!'

It is often claimed that RhQs are marked by a dedicated intonational contour, i.e. a falling contour (Han 2002; Obenauer & Poletto 2000). Recent studies have shown that, as for syntactic cues, there is no univocal mapping between prosody and function. There are, however, some typical contours and phonetic correlates that mark RhQs (Braun *et al.* 2019; Dehé *et al.* 2022; Wochner *et al.* 2015). Interrogative type (polar *vs* wh-question) plays an important role in the contour of a question; it has been shown that there is more variability in the prosody of ISQs *vs* RhQs in polar questions than there is in wh-questions (i.e. it is easier to identify a dedicated contour for RhQs in wh- questions; see e.g. Wochner *et al.* 2015 for German and Sorianello 2018 for Italian). Phonetic correlates of RhQs include duration (which, in many languages, is longer for RhQs), voice quality (e.g. RhQs in German can be produced with breathy voice) and pitch excursion (usually, RhQs have a smaller pitch range, i.e. a flatter contour).

It is still a matter of debate how each of the syntactic and prosodic cues mentioned above contributes to signaling the rhetoricity of the question. Even those cues that 'force' a rhetorical reading do not appear to contribute 'rhetoricity' as a piece of meaning, but rather to derive a

rhetorical interpretation through the combination of their meaning with the meaning of the question. Which cues are direct marks of semantic or pragmatic meaning? Which are correlates of the attitude associated with the uttering of the RhQ (e.g. speaker attitude, sarcasm, criticism)? In this paper, I will provide an initial answer for RhQs in Italian.

2.3. Rhetorical questions in Italian

The relatively scarce literature on RhQs in Italian focuses mostly on pragmatic aspects (Anzilotti 1982; Crisari 1975; Fava 1994, 1995; Stati 1982). Some authors describe also some grammatical markers (Stati 1982), others provide indirect evidence by means of giving examples. As observed in Section 1, many RhQs appear to be ambiguous with ISQs at a surface level, although some force a rhetorical interpretation either through their content or through syntactic and lexical means (Stati 1982).

As possible grammatical cues to RhQs, Fava (1994, 1995) reports the use of a different verbal mood from a canonical question (infinitive instead of indicative) and a different positioning of the wh-phrase (i.e. wh-in-situ, *vs* the normal wh-fronting in Italian), both exemplified in (7).[1] Several authors stress the presence of a negative component, either for the presence of NPIs (8) or for the inversion of polarity in the question (Anzilotti 1982; Fava 1994; Sorianello 2018).

(7) *Andare   dove?*
   go.INF   where
   'To go where?'

(8) *Chi   ha   alzato   un   dito   per   aiutare   Maria?*
   who   has   lifted   a   finger   to   help.INF   Maria
   'Who lifted a finger to help Mary?'

(Sorianello 2018: 41)

The features in (7), however, are strongly associated with a written and formal style. Some examples reported by Stati (1982) and Obenauer & Poletto (2000) are closer to a colloquial register. In (9-11) we find the initial adversative particles *ma* 'but' and *e* 'and' and the periphrastic expression *volete che* 'do you want that' (which is more common in the second person singular: *vuoi che*, see §3.3.5).

(9) *Ma   chi   ha   più   visto   Giorgio   da   quando   si   è   sposato!*
   but   who   has   anymore   seen   Giorgio   since   when   REFL   is   married
   '(But) who ever saw Giorgio again since he got married!'

(Stati 1982: 198)

5

(10) *E cosa avrebbe potuto fare in un frangente simile?*
    and what have.COND could done in a situation similar
    'And what could she have done in a situation like that?'

<div align="right">(Obenauer & Poletto 2000: 139)</div>

(11) *Come volete che possa ricordare?*
    how want.2PL that can.SBJV.SG remember.INF
    'How do you think he can (lit. do you want him to) remember?'

<div align="right">(Stati 1982: 202)</div>

The examples reviewed above show several forms that a RhQ can take in Italian, but they appear to be neither exhaustive nor well explained in their function: what is the role of initial *e* and *ma* and how are they related to rhetoricity? Which structures belong to a formal and which to an informal register? Is there regional variation in the use of informal cues? These questions remain open, and motivated the development of the elicited production experiment (Section 3).

Obenauer & Poletto (2000) analyzed the syntactic structure of RhQs, focusing of wh-questions with an inversion of polarity, and taking the particle *mai* 'ever' as a marker of rhetoricity when it forms a constituent with the wh-phrase; see (12) ((7a) in Obenauer & Poletto 2000: 124). The authors analyze the behavior of wh-phrases with respect to subject inversion and the interaction with other left-peripheral elements (e.g. left dislocations and hanging topics) and conclude that the wh-element in RhQs raises higher in the syntactic structure than it normally does in ISQs (see also Benincà 2001). *Mai*, however, is only compatible with an RhQ whose intended answer is negative, and not with a positive-answer RhQ.

(12) *Cosa mai avrei potuto dire?*
    what ever have.COND.1SG could say.INF
    'What could I have ever said?'

Turning to the prosody of RhQs, some authors generically claim that RhQs and ISQs differ in their final contour, with RhQs obligatorily having a falling contour (e.g. Obenauer & Poletto 2000, fn. 3). Other authors state that in RhQs a different constituent bears emphasis than in ISQs (Fava 1994), or that they (may) have a strong prosodic break after the wh-word (Benincà 2001). However, such claims have not been backed up by any experimental evidence so far.

An exception is provided by two studies by Sorianello (2018, 2019), who investigated the phonological and phonetic correlates of RhQs and ISQs, which were elicited through the reading of a context including the target sentence. Sorianello investigated both polar and

wh-questions and found differences between the two. As this paper is concerned with wh-questions, I will focus on the corresponding results in Sorianello's papers. More than 55% of wh-RhQs were characterized by a low final contour (L%), but the rest had a high or rising one.[2] ISQs, conversely, were more frequently high (H%, more than 70%) or rising (LH%, around 20%). The picture is even more uncertain for pitch accents. The falling tone H+L* occurred between 40% and 50% of the times in both question types; the low tone L* occurred only in RhQs (around 30%) and the rising tone L+H* in both, but more frequently in ISQs. It is evident from these results that, although some trends do differentiate the two question types, there seems to be no tonal configuration that univocally characterizes RhQs in opposition to ISQs. An analysis of some phonetic correlates revealed that, for wh-RhQs at least, there was a smaller pitch excursion in RhQs than ISQs, and that RhQs were characterized by a longer duration of the tonic vowel that bears a pitch accent. The work by Sorianello sets an important foundation for research on the prosody of RhQs, but it is limited to the variety of Bari (Southern Italian). It is not clear whether her findings can be extended to other varieties, especially given the high regional variability that is found in Italian intonation (Gili Fivela *et al.* 2015). Furthermore, Sorianello's examples suggest that her definition of RhQs may be broader than the one considered in the present study. Therefore, further investigation is required.

Adding another dimension, Ippolito (2019) analyzed the use of gestures as markers of prosody in Italian RhQs. She found that RhQs can be marked through the gestures *mano a tulipano* ('tulip hand') or *mani giunte* ('hands joined'), performed with a slow tempo (i.e. slow upwards and downwards movement). These gestures co-occur with the wh-element and are interpreted by Ippolito as wh-elements with a semantic marker of bias.

To conclude, although there are some indications in the literature as to which cues can mark a RhQ, it is not clear: (a) which lexical-syntactic cues are most common in colloquial speech; (b) what their semantic and pragmatic contribution to the question is; (c) whether regional variation plays a role. To address the aforementioned gaps in the literature, I developed two experiments, exploratory in nature. The first, an ELICITED PRODUCTION TASK, aimed at identifying which syntactic cues are used for RhQs in a colloquial register. A second experiment, a COMPREHENSION TASK, had the goal of determining on which cues, syntactic and prosodic, speakers relied on when discriminating between RhQs and ISQs.

3. Experiment 1: Elicited production

The first experiment consisted in an elicited production design, with the aim of eliciting the cues that are used for RhQs in different varieties and compare them to ISQs and other types on non-canonical questions.

3.1. Method

The experiment was set up online, using the platform SoSci Survey (Leiner 2019). It was composed of two tasks: a written translation part and an oral elicitation part. The contexts of elicitation were either adapted from or inspired by the ones used in Neitsch (2019) and Braun *et al.* (2019).

In the first part of the experiment, participants were explicitly instructed on the difference between ISQs ('normal questions', described as really asking for information), and RhQs ('rhetorical questions'). The latter were described as not requesting information, but as commenting on a situation, and their answer was explicitly stated to be obvious for both Speaker and Addressee. To make the question type more prominent, the target sentence was associated with an emoticon expressing the requested attitude, as exemplified in Figure 1. Then, participants completed the written translation task.[3] They were presented with eight contexts in English, followed by the target question. Three contexts elicited wh-RhQs and three wh-ISQs; two contexts eliciting polar questions (one of each type) were added as fillers (see Appendix B for contexts). The participant's task was to translate the target sentence into Italian, and they were allowed to add words or partially modify the structure of the sentence. An example is given in Figure 1. They were specifically instructed to be as natural as possible in their answer.

| You are the leader of a youth group, and your group is visiting Rome. You would like to know whether the teenagers want to go to a museum or not. You say to them: *Who wants to go to the museum?* | Your aunt offers limes to her guests. However, it is known that this fruit is too sour to be eaten alone. You say to your cousin: *Who eats limes?!* |

Figure 1. Example items in the written translation task. The example on the left presents an ISQ, the example on the right presents a RhQ.

In the oral elicitation task, participants read similar contexts, this time in Italian. The target sentence was not provided; instead, one or two words were given as cues (see (13-14)), and participants had to record a sentence containing the given words. In the target items, the first given word was either *chi* 'who' (wh-question) or *qualcuno*, 'someone' (polar question), and the second was the object noun. Thus, the freedom to use any structural and/or lexical cues was guaranteed, while ensuring that the sentence be a wh- or polar question, as required. Five contexts elicited wh-questions, four negative-answer RhQs and one ISQ.[4] Two examples are provided in (13) and (14). Contexts were formulated in an informal style to prevent participants from resorting to formal language. The same goal informed the decision to elicit the sentences orally and not just in written form.

(13) RhQ context
Matteo sta preparando una cena per la vostra compagnia e vuoi aiutarlo. Ti dice
che di secondo vuole fare il fegato… Ovviamente, tu sai che non lo mangerà
nessuno. Gli dici:
'Matteo is preparing a dinner for your friends, and you want to help him.
He says that he wants to prepare liver as the main course… of course,
you know that nobody will eat it. You tell him:'
Cue
… chi … fegato …?!
'… who … liver …?!'

(14) ISQ context
Stai organizzando una cena per il compleanno di una tua amica e vuoi sapere se
gli invitati mangiano la pasta al ragù o no. Chiedi:
'You're organizing a birthday dinner for your friend, and you would like
to know if the guests eat Bolognese. You ask:'
Cue
… chi … ragù …?
'… who … Bolognese …?'

Three additional contexts were designed to target other types of non-canonical questions: an RhQ with an intended positive answer, a surprise-disapproval question, and a conjectural question expressing concern, to investigate whether some cues may be shared by RhQs with other types of non-canonical questions. Four contexts were added as fillers. All contexts are reported in Appendix B. Finally, participants completed a language background questionnaire, including detailed questions about the place(s) where the person was born, grew up and had resided, their variety of Italian and use of dialect(s), their parents' origin and spoken varieties, and knowledge of other languages. The data of participants who completed the two tasks but abandoned the survey

before completing the questionnaire was discarded. The sentences were transcribed and annotated for lexical and syntactic cues. Sentences that did not have the target form (e.g. an exclamation instead of a wh-interrogative, or an echo question instead of a RhQ) were excluded from analysis.

3.2. Participants

Ninety-three participants completed the survey. Of these, four were excluded because they were early bilinguals with languages other than Italo-Romance vernaculars.[5] For some participants, the oral data is not available, either because the quality of the recordings was poor, or because they did not record any sentences. These participants were not excluded from analysis, but only the translation part was analyzed. Thus, data from a total of 89 participants entered the final dataset, which included only translation data for 25 participants, and both translation and oral data for 64 participants. Participants had a mean age of 28.8 (range: 20-58, SD: 7.6). 25 identified as male, 63 as female and 1 as diverse. All participants were native speakers of Italian. At least basic knowledge of English (i.e. the ability to comprehend a simple written text) was required during recruitment; all participants self-reported knowledge of English, from basic to native-like. Participants were categorized based on their province of origin. Each province was assigned to a group based on the dialect spoken in the same area,[6] and grouped into three macro-areas: Northern (33 participants), Tuscan (4 participants) and Southern (52 participants) varieties. Table 2 in Appendix A provides an overview.

3.3. Results

Figure 2 reports which cues were present in wh-RhQs in the two tasks, showing the proportion of questions that were modified by each cue. A sentence could be modified by more than one cue. The plot shows that, although the sentences in the translation task were modified less frequently than sentences in the oral elicitation task, the pattern of use is similar in both tasks. The sentence-initial particle *ma* 'but' is by far the most frequent cue (70% of wh-RhQs in the oral elicitation task and 34% in the translation task). It is followed by cleft structures and by right dislocation (RD) with clitic resumption. RhQs may also present a verb with a future tense, a conditional mood, or a reflexive form; they may include the particles *e* 'and' and *mai* 'ever' or an aggressive expression; they may be embedded by a verb such as *pensare, credere, volere* in the second person; they may be preceded by

an interjection indicating the speaker's attitude or an interaction with the addressee. Finally, they may include an overt lexicalization of the contextual information that makes the intended answer obvious. Each cue will be examined in detail in the next sections. Throughout, the percentage of use in the translation and oral elicitation task will be conflated.
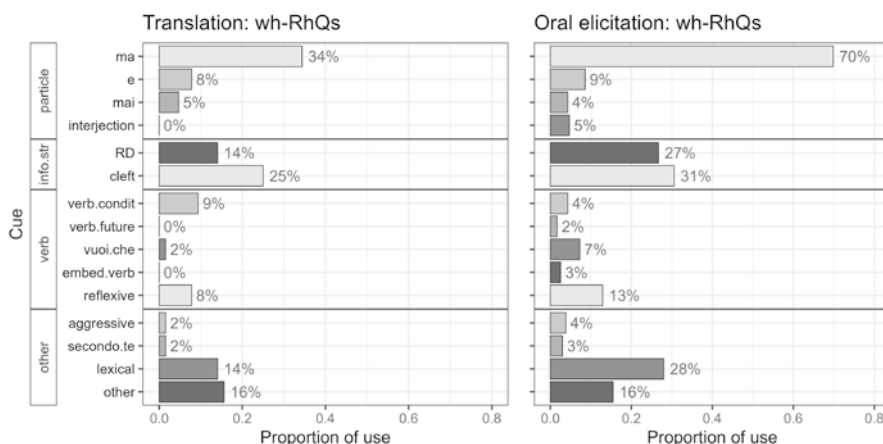
Figure 2. Proportion of RhQs in which lexical-syntactic cues are used in the translation task and the oral elicitation task. RD = clitic right dislocation; embed.verb = embedding verb; info.str = information structure.

3.3.1. Particles

Ma 'but' is a sentence-initial adversative particle (15) and was present in 62% of wh-RhQs. When used in a non-canonical question, it takes a counter-expectational value; as such, it is not limited to RhQs, but it can be used in a wider range of non-canonical questions (see Giorgi 2018 for use in biased questions; Giorgi & Dal Farra 2019; Ippolito 2019).[7] In the dataset, *ma* was also present in the additional contexts, especially in the surprise-disapproval context (65%) (16) and the conjectural one (57%), but also in the positive-answer RhQ (25%). The results for the additional contexts and for wh-ISQs (conflating oral and elicitation tasks) are reported in Figure 3.

(15) *Ma   chi   è   che   mangia   il   lime?!*
    but   who   is   that   eats   the   lime
   'Who eats lime?!'

(16) [Context: The speaker picks up the addressee's bag, but it is much
heavier than normal]
Ma cos' hai qui dentro?!
but what have.2SG here inside
'(But) what have you got in here?!'

Thus, *ma*'s contribution to the meaning of the question is an overt lexicalization of the contextual conflict in which the RhQ was uttered. Notice that, although RhQs are felicitous in this type of context (i.e. where a conflict is present), they are not restricted to it. An RhQ may also be uttered to strengthen a previous point. In (17) (translated from Caponigro & Sprouse 2007: 4), the use of *ma* would not be felicitous.

(17) *Smettila di dire che a Luca non è piaciuta la festa ieri. Dopotutto, (*ma)*
chi ha ballato fino alle tre del mattino?
'Stop saying that Luca did not have fun at the party yesterday.
After all, (*but) who danced until three in the morning?'
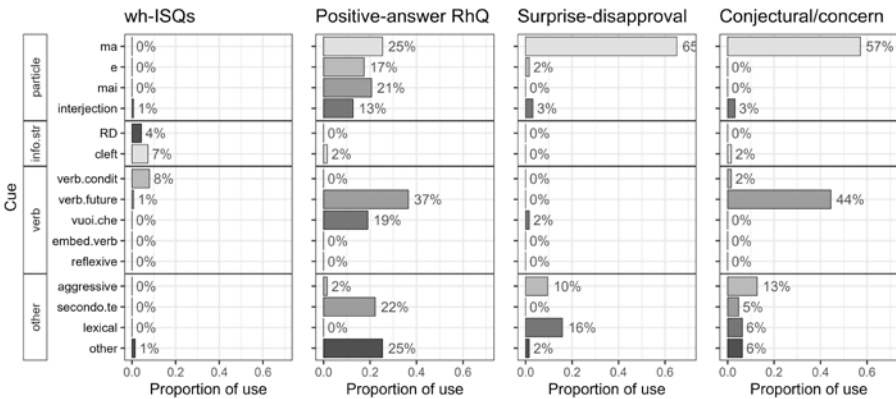
Figure 3. Proportion of use of each cue in ISQs (results from the oral elicitation and the written translation task are conflated), RhQs with a positive answer, surprise-disapproval questions and conjectural questions expressing concern.

The particle *e* 'and' is equal to *ma* for distribution, being also sentence-initial (18), but is much less frequent in the corpus (8%). Similar to *ma*, *e* is anaphoric to the preceding context and felicitous when the propositional content of the RhQ refers to a previous element in the discourse. According to Scorretti (1995), *e* has the function of signaling that the utterance is a continuation or completion of a previous utterance. However, in the case of non-canonical questions, *e* seems to (at

least partially) share *ma*'s function of making a counterpoint, and like *ma*, it is incompatible with a RhQ that is used to strengthen a previous point (substituting *ma* with *e* in (17) above would still be infelicitous). The specific role of *e* in this use and its difference from *ma* are left open for future investigation; notice, however, that it is not present in surprise-disapproval and conjectural contexts.

(18) *E   chi   è   che   legge   romanzi?!*
    and   who   is   that   reads   novels
    '(And) who reads novels?!'

In any case, *e*, like *ma*, is not exclusive to RhQs, as it can appear even in ISQs. Therefore, both particles do not force rhetoricity, but they contribute to a rhetorical interpretation if the context allows it.

The particle *mai* 'ever' is also present in the data, but it is infrequent (4%), meaning that only a few speakers use it. *Mai* is a modal particle with the function of "signalling the rhetoricity of a question or the total incapacity on the speaker's side to give an answer to it" (Coniglio 2008: 108). It occurs in two positions: either after the whelement (19a,b) or after the verb (19c) (see also Obenauer & Poletto 2000). In the latter case, the verb is never in the present indicative, but it is always modified either by a conditional mood or a future tense. When *mai* modifies the wh-element, instead, the verb can also be in the present indicative (see (19b)).

(19) a. *Chi   mai mangerebbe dei   limoni?!*
      who   ever eat.COND   INDF   lemons
      'Who would ever eat lemons?!'
    b. *Ma   chi   mai   impara   poesie?!*
      but   who   ever   learn.3SG poems
      'Who would ever learn poems by heart?!'
    c. *Ma   chi   andrebbe   mai   al   museo?!*
      but   who   go.COND   ever   to.the museum
      'Who would ever go to the museum?!'

Obenauer & Poletto (2000) argue that, when *mai* is adjacent to the wh-element, it can form a constituent with it, in which case *mai* has narrow scope over the wh-element. When this happens, the question can only be interpreted as rhetorical. They further argue that *mai* as a modifier of the wh-element is incompatible with an aggressive expression like *diavolo* 'the hell', which would also form a constituent with the wh-word. This is confirmed by our data: *mai* and aggressive expressions never co-occur (aggressive expressions are examined in §3.3.4 below). Instead, when the particle is disjoint from the verb, it can scope over the

whole sentence and have a 'cannot-find-the-value-of-x' interpretation (Obenauer 2004). Sentence (19c) above, in the absence of context and other cues, is ambiguous between the two readings.

3.3.2. Verb morphology

As mentioned in the previous section, the verb can be modified morphosyntactically: either with conditional mood, future tense, or a reflexive form.

The conditional (6%) appears either in combination with *mai* (18a,c), *ma* (20) and other cues, or as the only (non-prosodic) cue. In relation to aggressively non-D-linked expressions like *What the hell*, Dikken & Giannakidou (2002) observe that a combination of such an expression with a modal verb (equivalent to morphological mood in Italian) produces a non-ambiguous rhetorical reading, where the two structures on their own do not. An in-depth examination of the semantic contribution of the conditional to the rhetoricity of the sentence is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is interesting to notice that, although the conditional is *per se* perfectly compatible with an ISQ, when combined with other cues it can enhance or modify their meaning to produce an RhQ.

(20) *Ma   chi   mangerebbe   un   lime?!*
    but   who   eat.COND.3SG   a   lime
    '(But) who would ever eat lime?'

Italian's simple future tense can have, besides its temporal meaning, an inferential evidential function (Frana & Menéndez-Benito 2019). In other words, it can be used to signal that the speaker has at best indirect evidence for the proposition. In wh-questions, the source of evidence shifts to the addressee, a common trait for evidentials across languages ('interrogative flip', Frana & Menéndez-Benito 2019), and the evidential future marks the fact that the speaker expects at best a conjectural answer (conjectural questions) from the addressee. In the present data, a future verb is present in few negative-answer RhQs (1%) (21), but it is very frequent in two additional contexts: the positive answer RhQ (36%) (22) and the conjectural question (44%) (23). The latter is in line with Frana & Menéndez-Benito (2019). The case of RhQs is less straightforward, because it involves a meaning shift from a conjectural question to one whose answer is taken to be obvious. It is worth noticing that the future mostly co-occurs with *mai*, and it was observed that *mai*, especially when it forms a constituent with the wh-word, can enforce the rhetorical reading (see §3.3.1). Speculatively, the future may be used in RhQs when the speaker considers the answer to be obvious and is inviting the addressee

to draw the same conclusion based on the contextual evidence, that is however only indirect (as in (22), see Appendix B for the full context). Another possibility is that the inferential future in combination with *mai* may be used ironically: the speaker's literally express the impossibility of finding an answer to the question, applying an ironic reversal that signals that the answer is actually positive and obvious.

(21) [Context: It is obvious that no one wants to go to the museum]
    Chi   *vorrà*   *mai* *andare* *al*   *museo?*
    who want.FUT ever go.INF to.the   museum
    'Who will ever want to go to the museum?'

(22) [Context: Someone broke the chair, and it was obviously the speaker's sister]
    E   *chi*   *(mai)* *sarà*   *stato!*
    and who ever be.FUT.3SG been
    'Who could have ever done it?!'

(23) [Context: The speaker is very concerned because her son is not home yet]
    Ma *dove*   *sarà!*
    but where be.FUT.3SG
    'Where could he be?!'

Finally, RhQs may present a verb with a reflexive form (12%), specifically with the reflexive clitic *si*. In Italian, reflexive *si* is used in true reflexive contexts or with verbs that are inherently reflexive; sometimes, however, it occurs even though it is not required by the verb or the context. The reflexive, in this case, is used with affective value, as an intensifier of the verb (Cordin 1995), as is the case for our RhQs. Thus, it can be grouped together with cues to the speaker's attitude towards the answer, that are discussed in §3.3.4.

(24) *Ma*   *chi* *si*   *mangia*   *i*   *lime?!*
    but who REFL eats   the lime
    '(But) who eats lime?!'

3.3.3. Information structure

Information structure is the way in which the information expressed by the utterance is packaged to be optimally communicated (Krifka 2008). In Italian, cleft sentences and clitic right dislocation are two information structure devices, marking a contrastive focus and a familiar topic respectively (Benincà *et al.* 1995). In the cleft questions in the sample (25) (29%), the clefted element is always the wh-phrase *chi* 'who'. With right dislocation (26) (24%), a phrase is dislocated to the right edge of the sentence and, when possible, resumed by a clitic

pronoun within the sentence itself. In our case, the dislocated element is always the object DP, which is resumed by an object clitic.

(25) *E   chi   è   che   legge   romanzi?!*
    and   who   is   that   reads   novels
    '(And) who reads novels?!'

(26) *Chi   li   legge,   i   romanzi?!*
    who   CL   read   the   novels
    'Who reads novels?!'

These cues are by no means restricted to rhetorical contexts, as they are compatible with ISQ readings as well. For example, if novels are the topic of discussion and thus already familiar in the context of utterance, (26) is compatible with a genuine request for information. However, the data show a relatively high frequency of the two structures in RhQs, and comparatively higher than for ISQs. This raises the question how they are related. As for RD, I suggest that there is an indirect link based on the relation to the CG. By their nature, RhQs suggest that the answer to the question is already present or inferable from the CG; in (26), the speaker, by uttering the question 'Who reads novels?!' conveys the presupposition that the answer 'No one reads novels' is entailed in the CG and already accessible to all participants (Biezma & Rawlins 2017). As a result, the link to the CG that licenses the RD is established by default. If this is the case, RD, though frequently present in RhQs, is only an indirect by-product of their pragmatic structure.

Cleft constructions are commonly associated with a contrastive/corrective focus and are presuppositional in nature (see Belletti 2012 for Italian clefts). In particular, the clefted constituent is focalized and the subordinate clause is presupposed. Constructions like (25), where the clefted constituent is the wh-element (cleft interrogatives), are attested in Italian ISQs. The occurrence of this construction in RhQs may be in some way connected with a special interaction between the wh-element in RhQs and focus, in analogy with the strong prosodic accentuation mentioned in the literature. An analysis of this kind in complicated by the observation that cleft questions are preferred, or are even the obligatory strategy, to form a subject question in some northern Italian varieties (Poletto & Vanelli 1995). One may predict that clefted RhQs are only present in regional varieties of Italian to which this dialectal property has been transferred. However, cleft sentences are produced at comparable rates across varieties, as shown in Figure 4 below, and are not restricted to Northern ones. Thus, a deeper investigation of the interaction between focus and RhQs is in order.

3.3.4. Speaker attitude

Several cues relate to the speaker's attitude (in addition to those mentioned in this section, the reflexive with affective use mentioned in §3.3.2). First, we find aggressive expressions (3%) in three forms: *cazzo* ('vulg. male organ') (27), *cavolo* (lit. 'cabbage', an attenuation of the former) (28) and *diavolo* (lit. 'devil', equivalent to 'the hell'). They modify the wh-phrase, a configuration known as 'aggressively non-D-linked wh-phrases' (Dikken & Giannakidou 2002). In their reading, the aggressive contributes a negative attitude towards the propositional content of the question. Note that the 'negative attitude' does not equal a negative bias, as we find also one instance in the positive answer context (29). Dikken & Giannakidou (2002) observe that the combination of an aggressively non-D-linked expression with a modal would forces a rhetorical reading. However, in our data, there is no co-occurrence of such an expression with a conditional verb (the counterpart of *would*).

(27) *Ma [chi cazzo] legge i romanzi?!*
but who AGGR reads the novels
'Who the hell reads novels?!'

(28) *[Chi cavolo] si mangia il lime?!*
who cabbage REFL eats the lime
'Who the hell eats lime?!'

(29) *E chi cazzo vuoi che sia stato?!*
and who AGGR want that be.SUBJ.SG been
'And who do you think it was?!'

A second instance of attitude-expressing cues are interjections (or extra-clausal constituents, see Kaltenböck *et al.* 2016) that could be generically translated in English with 'come on': *dai, ma dai, oh, eh, ma no, scusa, ma scusa*. These elements all encode a disagreement of the speaker with the interlocutor or with the previous context. Note that some of these elements are introduced by *ma*. This, however, is different than the one examined in section 3.3.1 (or at least in a different position), because the two can co-occur, as in (30).

(30) *Ma dai, ma chi legge i romanzi?!*
but PRT but who reads the novels
'Come on, who reads novels?!'

3.3.5. Call on the Addressee

Several RhQs present elements or structures that, in different ways, express a call to the addressee. The first is *secondo te* 'according to

you', 'in your opinion' (31) (3%). In an ISQ, this expression obviously enquires about the speaker's opinion. In RhQs, however, this function cannot be preserved, as the function of the question is the opposite. Similarly, the propositional content of the RhQ (i.e. the portion of meaning that is indicated as obvious), can be embedded under a verb such as *pensare* 'think' or *credere* 'believe' (2%), literally expressing a request for what the hearer thinks or believes, although this request is made void by the rhetoricity of the question (32) and may rather be interpreted as a challenge to the interlocutor.

(31) *Ma secondo   te,   chi   ha   tempo   di   leggere?!*
but according_to you who has time   to   read
'Who has time to read?!'

(32) *Ma   chi   pensi   che   mangerà   mai   il   fegato?!*
but who think.2SG that eat.FUT.3SG ever the liver
'Who do you think will ever eat liver?!'

Another embedding construction is formed with the verb *volere* 'want' (33) (6%), also addressed to the hearer. This construction is not as close to the literal meaning of the verb as the one with *pensare* and *credere*, but it is rather lexicalized and assumes a formulaic rhetorical meaning. In this case, unless the context specifically requires a literal interpretation of the verb 'to want', the sentence is unambiguously rhetorical. The same periphrasis is also possible with RhQs with a positive answer, as shown in (29) above.

(33) *Ma   chi   vuoi   che   beva   la   tisana?!*
but who want.2SG that drink.SUBJ.SG the herbal_tea
'Who (do you think) drinks herbal tea?!'

3.3.6. Lexicalization of context

To conclude this overview, it is relatively common (25%) to find lexical expressions within the question that signal its rhetoricity by lexicalizing some contextual elements that point to the intended answer, making the reason why it is obvious explicit. For example, in (34), by adding the phrase *al giorno d'oggi* 'nowadays', the speaker points to the presumed shared knowledge that learning poems is not something that belongs to the present (and therefore no one does it).

(34) *Ma   chi   le   impara   al giorno d'oggi,   le   poesie?!*
but who CL learns   nowadays   the poems
'But who learns poems by heart nowadays?!'

3.4. Interim discussion

The previous section presented the main linguistic features present in elicited RhQs, and explored the contribution of each cue to the semantics and/or pragmatics of the question. Each cue relates to a sub-part of the semantic/pragmatic features of the RhQ, and some are felicitous only under specific conditions.

The sentence-initial particles *ma* and *e* convey a conflict with the context of utterance; thus, they are only felicitous in an RhQ if it is used to address such a conflict. The target contexts of elicitation were compatible with this reading in presenting a situation that the protagonist found absurd and to which they replied with an RhQ akin to a sarcastic comment. Cleft structures and RD too result from the interaction with the context, from the point of view of information structure. The particle *mai* can convey either rhetoricity or radical ignorance, but its interpretation is influenced by syntactic position (wh- *vs* sentence-level modification) and co-occurrence with other cues, such as modal and temporal markers. These are connected to the epistemic state of the speaker towards the answer. Other cues express the speaker's emotive attitude (the affective reflexive, aggressive expressions, and interjections) or their interaction with the addressee (*secondo te*, embedded constructions, possibly future tense). Cues also vary relative to the type of allowed answer. *Mai* and conditional combined and a conditional by itself only allow a negative answer ('Who X?!' = 'No one X!'), while future tense seems to strongly favor a positive answer ('Who Y?!' = 'Obviously, Luca Y!'). The other cues are compatible with both.

In light of the considerations outlined here, it is evident that not all cues are sufficient to mark a question as unambiguously rhetorical. In fact, most cues are not restricted to RhQs, but can also be found in ISQs or other kinds of non-canonical questions, and the boundaries between an RhQ and a biased question, an RhQ and a surprise question, are not always easy to define. Some exceptions seem to be the periphrastic 'want'-embedding and the combination of the particle *mai* with a conditional verb, which were, however, relatively infrequent. Further, amongst the ambiguous cues, some are stronger than others: for example, the use of an aggressive expression would be more effective than RD or a reflexive to prompt the interpretation of a question as rhetorical. Questions often present an accumulation of cues: if one cue is not sufficiently strong to signal a rhetorical interpretation, a combination strengthens it. In example (35), *ma* is combined with a contextual lexical expression, a cleft structure and the *vuoi che* periphrasis.

(35) *Ma con una giornata così, chi è che vuoi che vada al museo?!*
    but with a day so who is that want.2SG that go.SBJV.SG to.the museum
    '(But) with a day like this, who do you think will go to the museum?!'

A final remark concerns the interaction with prosody. So far, I have investigated the morphosyntactic and lexical forms of RhQs. However, non-canonical questions in general and RhQs in particular can also be marked by some intonational and prosodic cues that set them apart from ISQs. Prosodic cues range from phonological intonational configurations to phonetic correlates such as pitch range, duration and voice quality. These cues have varied functions and can mark the same aspects examined above: speaker's attitude and emotion, information structure, interaction with the addressee. A thorough analysis of RhQ prosody is beyond the scope of this paper. However, Section 4 reports a preliminary experiment targeting the interplay of syntactic and prosodic cues in the interpretation of RhQs.

3.5. Diatopic variation

The goal of this study was to establish which lexical and morphosyntactic correlates are present in RhQs in Italian colloquial speech. An essential dimension thereof is diatopic variation (Berruto 2018). Figure 4 shows the results of the oral elicitation task by regional area (Northern, Tuscan, Southern varieties). The overall pattern is similar for the three areas: *ma* is the most frequent cue, followed by cleft sentences and RD (plus lexical expressions). Nevertheless, some differences can be found for specific cues. In the South, cleft sentences are more frequent than RD, while the pattern is reversed in Tuscan. The periphrasis with *vuoi che* is most frequent in northern varieties and absent in the South. Affective reflexives seem to be marginal in the North but are more frequent in the South and especially in Tuscany. The particle *e* is used most frequently in Tuscan varieties. Overall, in spite of certain regional characterizations, the use of cues appears to be consistent across varieties. Crucially, although with some differences in frequency, all cues that were produced by some Northern speakers were used by at least some Southern speakers as well, and vice versa. The absence of some of the low-frequency cues in the Tuscan group may be imputed to the small number of participants (n = 4).[8]
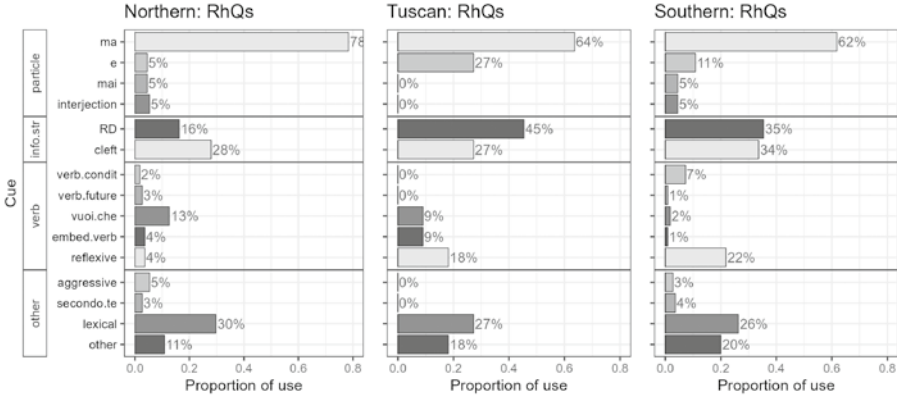
Figure 4. Proportion of sentences in which lexical-syntactic cues are used for RhQs in the oral elicitation task, divided by geographical area.

4. Experiment 2: Comprehension

In this section, I present the results of a comprehension experiment on the interplay between prosodic and syntactic cues in the interpretation of RhQs. I addressed the following research questions:

1. What is the role of syntactic and prosodic cues in the comprehension of non-canonical (rhetorical) questions?
2. Is there an interplay between cues of different nature (prosody and syntax)?

The results of the elicited production task revealed that the most frequent cues in Italian RhQs in colloquial speech across regions are the adversative particle *ma* 'but', cleft structures, and RD. Therefore, the following syntactic cues were chosen: the particle *ma* and RD. The analysis outlined in section 3.3.1 predicts that *ma* should provide a strong cue to a question being, if not outright rhetorical, at least non-canonical in expressing a negative bias or extreme ignorance, thus directly opposing it to a canonical question. Information structure devices such as cleft sentences and RD, instead, were predicted to be an indirect correlate of RhQs, perfectly acceptable in ISQs as well. Thus, their relative higher frequency in RhQs may not necessarily have a direct counterpart in comprehension, and sentences modified by them are neutral in terms of syntactic form. Although cleft sentences were overall more frequent in production, the choice for this ambiguous cue fell on RD, following a prosodic consideration. In Italian, the nuclear pitch accent of a wh-question

with a bare wh-element, like *chi* 'who', is placed on the verb (Bocci *et al.* 2021). The prosodic structure of a question with a RD object is comparable to that of the bare question (compare (36a) and (36b), where the syllable bearing the pitch accent is capitalized), with the nuclear pitch accent falling on the lexical verb in both. In a cleft sentence, instead, the main verb is not the lexical verb but the copula (36c), making the two prosodic structures less comparable.

(36) a. *Chi MANgia le banane?!*
    who eats   the bananas
   b. *Chi le MANgia, le banane?!*
    who CL eats   the bananas
   c. *Chi È che mangia le banane?*
    who is   that eats   the bananas

   The choice of the prosodic form of the questions was limited by the lack of data valid across varieties. Thus, the experimental items were recorded spontaneously by the author, a female native speaker. While the sentences were recorded in Italian, the presence of some regional traits (in this case, from a Venetan variety of Italian) could not be controlled for. Thus, dialectal area was included as a potential predictor in the analysis, to check whether the chosen form of rhetorical prosody would be accepted by speakers of different varieties.

4.1. Method

   In this task, participants listened to a sentence and had to decide whether it was an RhQ, an ISQ or some other kind of question. Prior to the task, participants were explicitly instructed on the difference between RhQs and ISQs, and each question type was associated with an emoticon expressing the relevant attitude (as in Experiment 1, see Figure 1 above). The questions, in their base form, were composed of the wh-word *chi* 'who', the main verb and the object DP. All verbs were bisyllabic and paroxytone; all nouns were trisyllabic and paroxytone (see Appendix C for a list of experimental items).

   There were three levels of syntactic manipulation. In the n e u t r a l condition, the question was presented without any addition or modification. In the a m b i g u o u s condition, the object DP was right-dislocated. In the r h e t o r i c a l condition, the object was right-dislocated and the sentence started with *ma* 'but'. Further, there were two levels of prosodic manipulation, RhQ *vs* ISQ. As mentioned above, the prosodic form of the stimuli was produced spontaneously by the author. Each sentence was recorded multiple times; one iteration was selected for each sen-

tence. A post-hoc analysis of the stimuli revealed that the ISQ stimuli were characterized by a rising final contour (LH%) while RhQs had a low boundary tone (L%), and RhQs had a longer duration than ISQs. Both prosodic cues are compatible with Sorianello's (2018) findings for Bari Italian; longer duration is also a cue for RhQs in many languages (Dehé *et al.* 2022).

Thus, there were six experimental conditions, with six items per condition (see Table 1). Note that there is a 'mismatch' condition, that is, the condition in which the rhetorical cue and ISQ prosody are crossed. To ensure that participants understood the task, two control conditions were added. The stimuli were constructed to be either strongly information-seeking (37) or strongly rhetorical (38). Each condition was presented only with the matching prosody (i.e. rising for ISQs and falling for RhQs). Each control condition had six items.

(37) *Qualcuno   di   voi   vuole   le   zucchine?!*
     someone   of   you   want.3SG   the   zucchini
     'Would any of you like zucchini?'

(38) *Ma   chi   metterebbe   mai   gli   stivali?!*
     but   who   wear.COND.3SG   ever   the   boots
     '(But) who would ever wear boots?!'

The total number of items, including experimental and control conditions, was 48. A list is included in Appendix C. Participants completed a first block of questions with experimental items only, and then a second block with the control items. Finally, participants filled out a questionnaire with information on their linguistic background.

|		Prosody: ISQ	Prosody: RhQ
First block	Syntax: neutral	6	6
	Syntax: ambiguous (RD)	6	6
	Syntax: rhetorical (RD + *ma*)	6	6
Second block	Syntax: strong ISQ	6	
	Syntax: strong RhQ		6

Table 1. Conditions in the comprehension experiment.

4.2. Participants

The experiment was carried out online through the SoSci Survey platform (Leiner 2019). Participants were recruited through word of mouth and social media. Participants who did not complete the questionnaire, did not give consent to using the data, or completed the questionnaire too fast, as recorded by completion metrics in SoSci, were excluded from analysis. Additionally, participants were excluded if early bilinguals (except for Italo-Romance varieties). 119 participants entered the final dataset (mean age: 29.8, SD: 8.95; 89 female, 30 male). 69 were classified as Northern, 43 as Southern and 7 as Tuscan. I considered the possibility that not only the participant's own variety, but also a higher exposure to many varieties in their lifespan may influence their acceptance of specific (prosodic) cues. Thus, based on information from the questionnaire, I attributed a score from 1 to 7 to each participant, where 1 indicates a very high coherence (the person was born, grew up and has always lived in the same region, the parents are also from the same region) and 7 a high diversity (the person lived in several diverse places in Italy for a long period of time; parents may also be of a different origin). This exposure diversity score was agreed upon by two scorers.

4.3. Results

Overall results are summarized in Figure 5. Accuracy in the two control conditions is almost at ceiling (95% 'ISQ' responses for the control ISQ condition, 98% 'RhQ' responses for the control RhQ condition), indicating that the task had been understood by participants. In what follows, the control conditions will not be considered any longer.
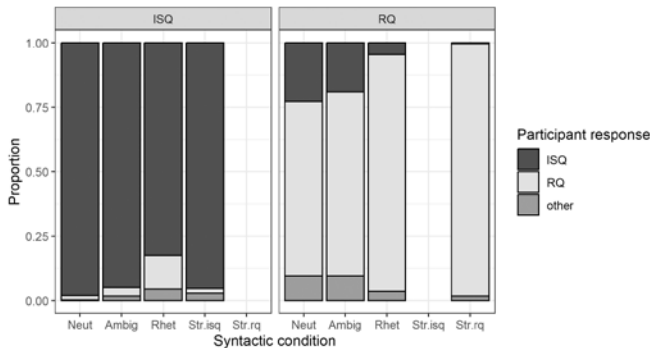
Figure 5. Results of the comprehension experiment. Proportion of responses divided by prosodic cue (ISQ *vs* RhQ) and syntactic condition (target conditions: Neutral *vs* Ambiguous *vs* Rhetorical, control conditions: Strong ISQ, Strong RhQ).

When the sentence had ISQ prosody, it was identified as 'ISQ' with very high accuracy, albeit with differences across syntactic conditions. In the neutral condition accuracy was at ceiling (98%), in the ambiguous condition it was 95%. In the rhetorical condition (i.e. the syntax/prosody mismatch condition), there were 82% 'ISQ', 13% 'RhQ' and 5% 'other' hits. In the RhQ prosody condition, accuracy was lower when participants had to rely on prosody, that is, in the neutral (68% 'RhQ', 23% 'ISQ', 10% 'other' responses) and ambiguous conditions (71% 'RhQ', 19% 'ISQ', 10% 'other' responses), but still above chance. When a rhetorical prosody combined with the rhetorical condition (i.e. *ma* and RD), accuracy was at 92%.

A logistic mixed-effect regression model was fitted with the R package *lme4* (Bates *et al.* 2015); pairwise comparisons with Tukey correction were obtained with *emmeans* (Lenth 2020). The dependent variable was Accuracy (1 = target response, i.e. participant's response matched the prosody, 0 = non-target response or 'other'). Prosody (2 levels: 'RhQ' *vs* 'ISQ'), Syntax (3 levels: 'neutral', 'ambiguous', 'rhetorical'), Exposure diversity (1 to 7) and Variety (2 levels: 'Northern', 'Southern/ Tuscan') were specified as fixed factors. Southern and Tuscan speakers were grouped together because the number of Tuscan speakers was too small. Participant and Item were added as random effects, and Prosody as random slope to Participant.

There was a significant main effect of Prosody (χ^2 = 105.27, $p <$ .0001) and Syntax (χ^2 = 114.21, $p <$ .0001) and a significant interaction between the two (χ^2 = 256.43, $p <$ .0001). RhQs were overall less accurate than ISQs (β = 1.91, SE = 0.28, z = 6.8, $p <$ .0001). Within the ISQ condition, the difference between the three syntactic conditions was significant (neutral *vs* ambiguous: β = 1.11, SE = 0.34, z = 3.26, p = 0.003; ambiguous *vs* rhetorical: β = 1.79, SE = 0.23, z = 7.82, p = 0; neutral *vs* rhetorical: β = 2.9, SE = 0.32, z = 9.11, $p <$ .0001). In the RQ condition, instead, there was no significant difference between neutral and ambiguous (neutral *vs* ambiguous: β = -0.27, SE = 0.14, z = -1.9, p = 0.14) and a significant difference of the rhetorical condition from both (neutral *vs* rhetorical: β = -2.29, SE = 0.19, z = -12.09, $p <$ .0001; ambiguous *vs* rhetorical: β = -2.02, SE = 0.19, z = -10.72, $p <$ .0001). There was no significant difference between areas (χ^2 = 0.01, p = 0.94), nor an effect of exposure diversity (χ^2 = 0.01, p = 0.91).[9]

4.4. Interim discussion

Overall, the results show that the prosodic form successfully differentiated ISQs and RhQs, and that the presence of *ma* boosted the partici-

pants' ability to recognize an RhQ. In the 'mismatch' condition, with ISQ prosody and rhetorical cue, although the presence of *ma* favored more 'RhQ' responses, these were still comparably low. Thus, it appears that, at least in this case, prosody had a higher impact in cueing question type than *ma*. The role of RD was rather restricted. It had no facilitating effect with RhQ prosody, where the neutral and ambiguous conditions were treated in the same way and participants relied only on prosody. However, the presence of RD had an effect in the ISQ condition, where it slightly lowered accuracy. These results confirm the expectation that, while *ma* is a stronger cue to the non-canonical status of the question (at least in combination with prosody), RD is at best an indirect correlate.

Given the high variation in intonation across varieties of Italian (Gili Fivela *et al.* 2015), I tested whether the same cues were equally recognized by speakers of different varieties. As is shown in Figure 6, this is the case. Very similar response patterns are found across varieties, and no significant difference was found between Northern and Central-Southern speakers. This does not imply that there exists no difference in the comprehension or production of prosody in connection with RhQs, but it does signify that the specific prosodic form that was used in the task could successfully discriminate question types for speakers of different origins. Thus, either the prosodic cues that were employed are not variety-specific, or participants of all origins are able to rely on variety-specific cues.
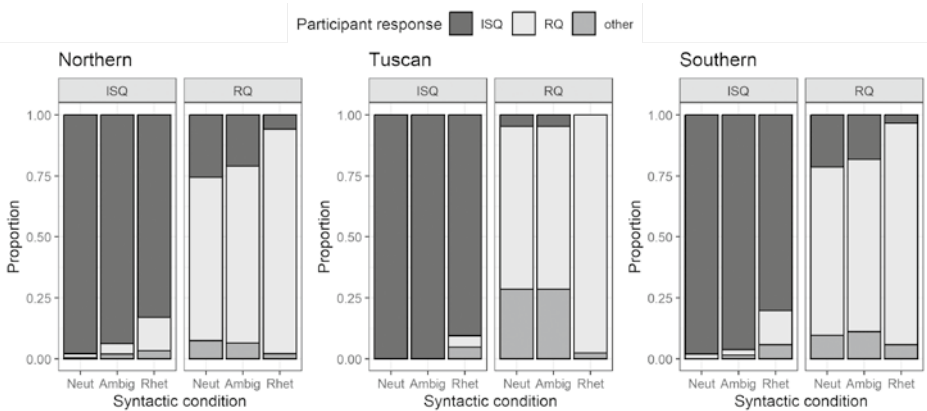
Figure 6. Results of the comprehension experiment (experimental conditions only) divided by dialectal area (Northern, Tuscan, Southern varieties).

5. General discussion

The goal of this paper was to explore the form of RhQs in colloquial Italian, focusing on the elicitation of lexical and morphosyntactic markers (experiment 1) and on the comprehension of prosodic and syntactic cues marking RhQs (experiment 2). The results of the elicited production experiment offered a complex picture. There does not seem to be one specific reliable cue to mark rhetoricity across conditions in Italian. On the one hand, strong(er) cues such as *mai* + conditional and periphrastic 'want'-embedding were not used frequently and, in the case of the latter, they do not seem to be equally present in all varieties. On the other hand, some cues occurred frequently, but they are not rhetorical markers *per se*, being compatible with other types of non-canonical questions, or even with canonical questions.

This does not imply that such cues should be disregarded when studying the form of rhetorical questions in Italian. In the most recent approaches to rhetorical questions, rhetoricity is not treated as a grammatical category, but as a concept that arises through pragmatic means (Biezma & Rawlins 2017; Caponigro & Sprouse 2007; Farkas 2020). Biezma & Rawlins (2017), in particular, show that the presupposition that the answer is common ground can be derived in two ways. One possibility is that the presupposition arises from the signal alone, when the form of the utterance itself is sufficient to trigger it. This is the case for the German discourse particle *schon,* whose presence is sufficient (but not necessary) to signal that the question is rhetorical. Importantly, this does not amount to saying that *schon* is a marker of rhetoricity *per se* (i.e. directly signaling that the speaker believes the answer to be common ground), but that the rhetorical meaning is achieved through a composition of the meaning of *schon* with the semantics of the question (see Bayer & Obenauer 2011 for an account). Another possibility is that the presupposition arises via a combination of the signal and the context of utterance, when cues and context are not sufficient on their own. It appears that, in colloquial Italian, the latter case is far more frequent. Therefore, it is important to factor in such non-inherently rhetorical cues as well, because even if they do not directly derive rhetoricity, in marking the question as non-canonical or expressing the attitude of the speaker they give the addressee an indication leading to the rhetorical interpretation.

The overview of cues presented in this paper is not exhaustive, and future research should further investigate some points that are left open. In particular, the presence of a cue depends on several factors that should be disentangled: the relation to the context of utterance, the role

of speaker/addressee interaction, the type of answer (negative *vs* positive) and the communicative function of the answer. In addition, the fact that most cues are not directly rhetorical and the contiguity of RhQs with other types of non-canonical questions can make it difficult to tell apart one from the other: in particular, an overlap with negative biased questions, surprise questions, extreme ignorance questions and conjectural questions was explored, but other overlaps are possible. This is not surprising, as it happens for many cues in other languages, such as *wh-the-hell* expressions and NPIs in English.

This perspective should also be taken into account in future research on the prosody of rhetorical questions in Italian, to determine whether certain intonational events and phonetic correlates relate to certain parts of meaning and/or contextual relation, which derive the rhetorical inference when combined with context and with other cues. In the comprehension experiment, it was shown that, even though prosody on its own could successfully contrast ISQs and RQs is a majority of cases, when combined with *ma* the percentage of 'RQ' responses significantly increased. This result is in line with the discussion outlined here. The particle *ma,* on its own, is a marker of bias, and is not incompatible with an ISQ, but its cooccurrence with a potential rhetorical prosody strengthened the rhetorical reading by (minimally) signaling that the question should be regarded as expressing an attitude on the speaker's part.

Finally, the role of variation across different varieties of colloquial Italian was considered, on a broad scale. In the production task, some cues showed different patterns in different areas, while others were widespread, proving the importance of accounting for such variability in colloquial phenomena. In the comprehension task, no difference was found between areas, showing that, even in case of different strategies to mark RhQs prosodically (a possibility that still needs to be investigated) there are at least some prosodic forms that can successfully discriminate between question types across varieties.

6. Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have proposed that RhQs in colloquial Italian are marked by a variety of cues, some of which are stronger cues to the rhetoricity of the question, while others are indirect signals of the speaker's attitude or of the relation to the context of utterance, and can give rise to the rhetorical interpretation (that the answer is or should be already available to both speaker and addressee) in combination with the context of utterance or with other cues. Overall, RhQs were confirmed as an inher-

ently pragmatic phenomenon, and that their linguistic form is heavily determined by the context. It was also shown that, in the absence of context, participants could interpret questions as rhetorical more easily when provided with a combination of cues (prosody, clitic right dislocation and the sentence-initial particle *ma*), while none was decisive on its own. A number of issues remain open. Future research should address the specific contribution of each cue to the meaning of the RhQ. Additionally, other types of RhQs, elicited in different contexts (e.g. RhQs used to strengthen a previous point rather than to challenge), should be considered. Finally, building on the foundations laid by Sorianello (2018, 2019), the prosody of Italian RhQs should be investigated, accounting for the role of context, speaker attitude, communicative function, and syntactic structure.

Abbreviations
1, 2, 3 = first, second, third person; AGGR = aggressive expression; CG = common ground; CL = clitic; COND = conditional; FUT = future; INDF = indefinite; INF = infinitive; ISQ = information-seeking question; M = masculine; NPI = negative polarity item; PL = plural; PRT = particle; PST = past tense; RD = right dislocation; REFL = reflexive; RhQ = rhetorical question; SBJV = subjunctive; SD = standard deviation; SG = singular.

Notes

[1]   As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, the same cues may apply to an echo question in Italian. Echo questions are marked primarily by a special intonation (Gili Fivela *et al.* 2015) and will not be taken into account in this chapter.
[2]   Precise proportions for each condition are not provided in the paper; this information was extracted from Figure 5 in Sorianello (2018: 57). In her paper, DS (*domande sincere*) = ISQs, and DR (*domande retoriche*) = RhQs.
[3]   The translation of a sentence from another language is not a common methodological choice. Originally, only the oral elicitation task had been planned. However, it was observed during the piloting phase that participants had some difficulties understanding the type of sentence that they should produce only based on the two given words. The introduction of the translation task allowed to present the type of sentence that we meant to elicit (i.e. a wh-RhQ in connection with a certain context) and trained participants to use wh-RhQs also in the oral task. Results show that par-

ticipants behaved similarly in the two tasks.

[4]   The number of contexts for each condition was unbalanced; given the exploratory nature of this work and the limitations imposed by the testing conditions, the choice was to elicit a greater number of wh-RhQs, the main point of interest for the study.

[5]   Italo-Romance vernaculars (see Loporcaro 2013 for an overview) were not considered in the classification of speakers as bilinguals. Thus, a speaker of Italian and e.g. Venetan or Neapolitan would be included in the analysis.

[6]   Regional varieties of Italian are different from Italo-Romance vernaculars, also known as Italo-romance dialects, but they are influenced by them. Since there is, to my knowledge, no classification of regional Italian disjointly from the contact with vernaculars, the classification was carried out based on dialectal areas, adopting Pellegrini's (1977) classification as described in Loporcaro (2013).

[7]   In the references mentioned here, *ma* is used in questions that are termed counter-expectational polar questions (i), i.e. negative biased questions, and surprise-disapproval questions (ii). In their analysis, *ma* is a discourse head which encodes a conflict with some salient information in the previous context (see also Ippolito 2021) and is anaphoric to the context itself (i.e. the propositional content of the question needs to be linked to some proposition in the context of utterance).

(i) *Ma   non   era   rosso?*   (Giorgi 2018: 70)
      but   not   was.3SG red
      '(But) wasn't it red?!'

(ii) *Ma   cosa   leggi?*   (Giorgi & Dal Farra 2019: 337)
       but   what   read.2SG
       'What are you reading?!'

[8]   A reviewer raised the issue whether such differences may be imputed to differences in register or formal instruction. The level of instruction was similar for the groups: all four Tuscan participants had a university degree; the same was true for 89% Southern participants and 74% Northern participants.

[9]   An alternative way of controlling for variety is to check whether speakers of Venetan Italian (the variety of the stimuli) would be more successful than all others. The comparison between Venetan and non-Venetan speakers was attempted but still yielded a null result.

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Appendix A. Participants

Area		Group	
Northern	33	gallo-italici	16
		veneti	15
		friulani	2
Tuscan	4	toscani	4
Southern	52	alto-meridionali	21
		meridionali estremi	17
		centro-meridionali	14

Table 2. Origin of participants in the elicited production experiment.

Area		Group	
Northern	69	veneti	43
		gallo-italici	25
		friulani	1
Tuscan	7	toscani	7
Southern	43	alto-meridionali	12
		meridionali estremi	20
		centro-meridionali	10
		sardi	1

Table 3. Origin of participants in the comprehension experiment.

Appendix B. Elicited production experiment: contexts of elicitation

B.1. Written translation task

Context and target sentence	Condition	Question type
You are the leader of a youth group and your group is visiting Rome. You would like to know whether the teenagers in the group want to go to a museum or not. You say to them: *Who wants to go to the museum?*	ISQ	wh
You would like to offer your guests different kinds of tea, including camomile. You want to know which of them like this tea. You say to your guests: *Who drinks camomile?*	ISQ	wh
You would like to treat your friends and give them roses. You want to know who would like some. You say to your friends: *Who would like roses?*	ISQ	wh
You want to learn how to dance Lambada and want to know whether one of your friends can teach you or not. You say to your friends: *Does anyone dance Lambada?*	ISQ	polar
Your aunt offers limes to her guests. However, everybody knows that this fruit is too sour to eat by itself. You say to your cousin: *Who eats limes?!*	RQ	wh
Your friend wants to found a reading circle in which you discuss novels on a weekly basis. However, it is obvious that everyone is too busy for this. You say to your friend: *Who reads novels?!*	RQ	wh
A neighbour falsely thinks that you study algebra. However, everybody knows that Maths was always too difficult and complicated for you. You say to your neighbour: *Who studies algebra?!*	RQ	wh
On movie night your cousin serves your friends fries and asks whether they would like some mayonnaise. However, everybody knows that none of your friends like this stuff. You say to your cousin: *Does anyone like mayonnaise?!*	RQ	polar

Table 4. Contexts for translation task.

B.2. Oral elicitation task

RhQ, wh	
Siete in gita con la classe e il prof propone di andare al museo archeologico. Ovviamente tutti la trovano un'idea tremenda, è una bella giornata e volete stare all'aperto. Tu dici al tuo amico: … *chi … museo?!*	'You are on a school trip and the teacher suggests going to a museum. Obviously, everybody finds it the most boring idea in the world, it's a nice day and you want to be outside. You tell your friend: … who … museum?!'
Sei uno studente nel 2019. La prof ha l'idea di farvi imparare una poesia di Pascoli… ma imparare le poesie a memoria è roba da anni Novanta. Sottovoce dici al tuo compagno di banco: … *chi … poesie …?!*	'You're a pupil in 2019. The teacher wants to make you memorize a poem by Pascoli… but learning poetry by heart is stuff from the '90s. You whisper to your deskmate: … who … poetry …?!'
Matteo sta preparando una cena per la vostra compagnia e vuoi aiutarlo. Ti dice che di secondo vuole fare il fegato… ovviamente, tu sai che non lo mangerà nessuno. Gli dici: … *chi … fegato …?!*	'Matteo is preparing a dinner for your friends, and you want to help him. He says that he wants to prepare liver as the main course… of course, you know that nobody will eat it. You tell him: … who … liver …?!'
Siete a cena da tuo fratello. Dopo cena pensi che sia il momento di tirare fuori i liquori, e invece lui domanda: Qualcuno vuole una tisana? Gli rispondi: … *chi … tisana …?!*	'You're having dinner at your brother's house. After dinner you think it's time for some spirits, but he asks instead: Who wants a herbal tea? You answer to him: … who … herbal tea …?!'
RhQ, polar	
Sei all'inaugurazione di una mostra molto importante con il tuo ragazzo. Il tavolo del buffet vi attira, ma quando vi avvicinate vedete che tutti gli antipasti sono al caviale. Disgustata dici al tuo ragazzo: … *qualcuno … caviale?!*	'You are at the vernissage of a very important exposition with your boyfriend. The buffet looks interesting, but when you draw near you notice that all the starters are made with caviar. Disgusted, you tell your boyfriend: … someone … caviar?!'

State chiacchierando fra amici. Giulia non fa che parlare della sua nuova verdura preferita, la pastinàca. I tuoi amici sono perplessi; è chiaro che nessuno sa cos'è. Dici a Giulia: … *qualcuno … pastinàca?!*	'You're having a chat with your friends. Giulia keeps talking about her new favourite vegetable, parsnip. Your friends are puzzled; it's clear to you that nobody knows what that is. You tell Giulia: … someone … parsnip?!'
ISQ, wh	
Stai organizzando una cena per il compleanno di una tua amica e vuoi sapere se gli invitati mangiano la pasta al ragù o no. Chiedi: … *chi … ragù?*	'You're organizing a birthday dinner for your friend, and you would like to know if the guests eat Bolognese. You ask: … who … Bolognese?'
ISQ, polar	
Quest'anno hai raccolto dall'orto di tuo nonno un sacco di broccoli, e devi trovare qualcuno a cui darli. Domandi ai tuoi cugini: … *qualcuno … broccoli?*	'This year you have harvested a lot of broccolis from your grandad's garden, and you need to find someone to give them to. You ask your cousins: … anyone … broccoli?'
Vuoi organizzare una gita con i tuoi amici, e vuoi andare in un posto dove non è mai stato nessuno. Chiedi loro: … *qualcuno … Mantova?*	'You want to organize a trip with your friends, and you want to go somewhere no one has been to. You ask them: … anyone … Mantova?'
Surprise-disapproval, wh	
Oggi il tuo compagno di banco è venuto a scuola con tre borse. Per dargli una mano prendi il suo zaino, ma senti che pesa un quintale. Gli dici: … *hai … dentro?!*	'Today your classmate came to school with three bags. To help him, you take his schoolbag, but it weighs a ton. You tell him: … have … inside?!'
Conjectural/concern, wh	
Sono le dieci di sera. Tuo figlio doveva tornare alle sette ma non è ancora a casa. Preoccupata dici a tuo marito: … *dove …?*	'It's ten in the evening. Your son should have come home at seven, but he isn't home yet. Concerned, you tell your husband: … where …?'

Positive answer RhQ, wh	
Qualcuno ha rotto una sedia della cucina. Il papà si arrabbia tantissimo e vuole sapere chi è stato. Tu sai che l'unica persona in casa oggi era tua sorella, e che le piace dondolarsi sulle sedie. Con sarcasmo dici: *… chi … stato …?*	'Someone has broken a kitchen chair. Dad is really angry and wants to know who did it. You know that the only person at home today was your sister, and that she likes to rock on chairs. You say sarcastically: *… who … been …?*'
Filler	
Stai leggendo il giornale. Alla fine di un articolo molto interessante vuoi sapere chi è l'autore. Ti chiedi: *… scritto …?*	'You're reading the newspaper. At the end of a very interesting article, you want to know who the author is. You ask yourself: *… written …?*'
Sei ad un negozio dell'usato con Giorgia. Su un manichino vedete un completo ridicolo: è zebrato e leopardato con cintura rosa. Giorgia si mette a ridere e ti dice: Hai visto quello? Tu rispondi: Non ci credo! *… chi … roba …?!*	'You're at a flea market with Giorgia. You see a leopard-skin and zebra-striped dress with a pink belt and a feather boa on a mannequin. Giorgia starts laughing and tells you: Did you see that? You say: *… who … stuff …?!*'
Practice	
Stai tornando a casa da scuola con tuo fratello. All'improvviso lui allunga la gamba e ti fa lo sgambetto; tu cadi e ti fai male alle ginocchia. Arrabbiato, gli dici: *… scemo …?!*	'You're coming home from school with your brother. Suddenly, he sticks out his leg and trips you; you fall and hurt your knees. Furious, you tell him: *… idiot …?*'
Dopo tanti anni ritrovi un vecchio compagno di classe. Vi baciate e abbracciate e cominciate a chiacchierare. Lui ti dice: Non ne posso più del lavoro, sono troppo stressato. Tu gli chiedi: *… lavoro …?*	'After many years you meet an old schoolmate. You kiss and hug and start chatting. He says: I can't take it anymore at work, I'm too stressed. You say: *… job …?*'

Appendix C. Comprehension experiment: experimental items

	Test items	
	(Ma) chi (lo) suona il violino?	'(But) who (CL) plays the violin?'
	(Ma) chi (lo) suona il tamburo?	'(But) who (CL) plays the drum?'
	(Ma) chi (le) mangia le ciliegie?	'(But) who (CL) eats cherries?'
	(Ma) chi (la) mangia la banana?	'(But) who (CL) eats bananas?'
	(Ma) chi (lo) legge il giornale?	'(But) who (CL) reads the newspaper?'
	(Ma) chi (li) legge i romanzi?	'(But) who (CL) reads the novels?'
	Control items	
RhQ	Ma chi vorrebbe mai le zucchine?	'Who would ever want zucchini?'
	Ma chi vorrebbe mai il budino?	'Who would ever want pudding?'
	Ma chi metterebbe mai le ciabatte?	'Who would ever wear slippers?'
	Ma chi metterebbe mai gli stivali?	'Who would ever wear boots?'
	Ma chi mangerebbe mai il melone?	'Who would ever eat melon?'
	Ma chi mangerebbe mai i piselli?	'Who would ever eat peas?'
ISQ	Qualcuno di voi vuole le zucchine?	'Does any of you want zucchini?'
	Qualcuno di voi vuole il budino?	'Does any of you want pudding?'
	Qualcuno di voi mette le ciabatte?	'Does any of you wear slippers?'
	Qualcuno di voi mette gli stivali?	'Does any of you wear boots?'
	Qualcuno di voi mangia il melone?	'Does any of you eat melon?'
	Qualcuno di voi mangia i piselli?	'Does any of you eat peas?'