



A case for a unified analysis of question constructions in English, Sinhala and Tamil

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ABSTRACT

Questions, that play a vital role in communication, are classified in every language, as content questions (Wh-questions) and polar questions (Yes/No questions), depending on the nature of the information they elicit. The common and deviant phonological, morphological, and syntactic properties used in the construction of these two question types in the three languages used in Sri Lanka - English, Sinhala and Tamil – provide a fascinating topic for an investigation. While all three languages are equally represented in the present investigation, the morphological and syntactic properties used in the construction of questions in all three languages are studied with reference to written data gathered from writings and, in addition, the phonological properties, with reference to vocal recordings. Further, both written and spoken data are analysed to identify the identical and non-identical elements in the phonological, morphological, and syntactic properties, that are peculiar to the languages concerned. With respect to morpho-syntactic characteristics, the Wh-words in content questions in both Sinhala and Tamil remain in-situ as opposed to those in English that undergo movement. Regarding Yes/No questions, Sinhala employs the particle –da, while English employs the strategy of –do- insertion or auxiliary movement, but Tamil realizes a Yes/No question with phonological prominence in the clause final position. It was found that there are very significant prosodic properties common in the three languages despite their surface morpho-syntactic differences. With respect to phonological characteristics in all three languages: the Wh-words in content questions receive phonological stress; the clause final position in Yes/No questions receives prominence; and the clause final word receives prominence in echo-questions.

KEYWORDS: *questions, phonology, morphology, syntax*

1 INTRODUCTION

Sinhala and English, and Tamil belong to two different language families (English and Sinhala: Indo-European (Sinhala, particularly Indo Aryan) and Tamil: Dravidian). Hence, there are robust differences in the surface structures of the three languages. However, according to the current approaches to Universal Grammar (UG), Bio-linguistics and typological studies as presented in Chomsky (1995, 2001, 2005), Greenberg (1963), Chomsky & Cedric (2011), and Cedric (2014) many of the grammatical properties of languages can be analysed in terms of universal properties of language. Thus, one of the goals of modern linguistics (beginning from Chomsky (1981) to date is to identify the universal principles (properties common to all languages in the world) and parameters (properties different among languages in the world) associated with language as components of UG. Accordingly, this research investigates:

1. What kind of properties (despite the surface differences) are to be found in common in the question constructions in the three languages: English, Sinhala and Tamil?
2. How can these properties be captured under a unified analysis?

Thus, this research investigated the morphological, syntactic and phonological properties of the question constructions in the three languages. It was found that there are significant morphological and syntactic differences among the question constructions of the

three languages. However, it was also found that all three languages use common prosodic/phonological strategies in the realization of all three types of questions: wh-questions, Yes/No questions and echo questions. Accordingly, this paper argues for a unified prosodic analysis of the question constructions of the three languages, English, Sinhala and Tamil in keeping with the notion of universal properties of languages.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses the background to the study. Section 3 discusses the methodology and method used in the study. Section 4 analyzes the morphological, syntactic and phonological data and findings. Section 5 presents the conclusions.

1.1 Background

Ability to ask questions in any language is at the forefront of the competence and performance of a speaker of that language. Questions in languages are mainly classified as Wh-questions (content/constituent questions); Yes/No Questions and Alternative Questions. Speakers employ different strategies in asking different types of questions: (1) question word/particle movement strategies (i.e., English; Japanese, a. m. o.); (2) Particle insertion strategies (i.e., Sinhala, a. m. o.) and (3) intonation variation strategies (any language).

When it comes to the genealogy of languages, Sinhala and English belong to the Endo-European language family while Tamil belongs to the Dravidian language family. Even within the Endo-European

language family, English belongs to the Germanic languages branch while Sinhala is in the Indo-Aryan branch. Accordingly, there are also very robust differences in the surface structures of the question constructions in the two languages. For instance, as discussed in detail below, Sinhala employs the particle *-də* in all YES/NO, alternative and wh-questions, while questions in Tamil or English do not make use of such particles. As also discussed below, wh-words in questions in English are said to ‘move’ while those in Sinhala and Tamil do not move. Owing to these differences, one might argue that there is nothing much in common between the two languages. At the same time, despite the fact that the two languages: Sinhala and Tamil have been in close contact over the past two thousand years or so, it is commonly believed that Sinhala-Tamil bilingualism is not gaining much ground in Sri Lanka mainly as a result of the difficulty of learning these languages. This apparent difficulty of learning these languages is mainly due to very remarkable differences in the surface structures of the two languages as pointed out above and discussed in detail below.

However, building on many of the current approaches to linguistic analysis as in Chomsky (1995, 2001, 2005), Chomsky & Cedric (2011), Richards (2012), and Cedric (2014), in this research, we argue that despite the overt differences observed in the question formation strategies of the three languages, there are properties that can be captured under a uniform analysis.

Within the framework of Generative Grammar, the wh-phrase in a wh-question in languages like English, German and Spanish is argued to undergo overt movement from its argument position to a sentence-initial canonical position identified as Spec-CP. In languages like Chinese and Japanese, the wh-words remain in the argument position, thus in situ. For example, Japanese, an SOV language, has its wh-word remaining in its argument position. In languages like French, the movement of wh-phrases is optional. In other words, the wh-word could either remain in its argument position or move to the sentence initial position.

Accounting for the surface differences, since Chomsky (1965, 1977, 1981) and Ross (1967), the reasons for movement of wh-phrases in wh-movement languages such as English have been well defined and gained currency in the literature based on both theoretical and empirical grounds. For example, since Bresnan (1970), a wh-question is assumed to have a [wh] feature in Comp and since Chomsky (1981) a [+wh] feature has been assumed to be in Comp/C which drives the movement of the wh-phrase to the Spec-CP position c-commanding the sentence.

However, linguists have for a long time been debating over what licenses the wh-in situ phrases in wh-in situ languages such as Chinese or Japanese, some of the best studied among them. For example, whether wh-in situ phrases undergo covert movement to the Spec-CP position as discussed by Huang, (1982), whether a Q particle in C allows a wh-phrase to

remain in situ as argued in Bruening (2007), whether feature strength correlates with allowing wh-in situ phrases as in Chomsky (1995), or whether a wh-parameter is external to narrow syntax as discussed by Weerasooriya (2013), have all been interesting questions discussed and argued over the last three decades or so.

Sinhala also has a particular suffixal morpheme, a particle *-də* surfacing in a wh-construction. In the literature on wh-questions in Sinhala for a long time, the particle *-də* has been labeled as a Q particle in the sense that it is this particle *-də* that licenses the wh-in situ phrases in Sinhala as discussed in Gair (1998), Kariyakarawana (1998), Hagstrom (1998), Kishimoto (2005), Cable (2010), and Slade (2011).

Chomsky (1995), beginning with the minimalist program, came up with an influential proposal relating wh-in situ to feature strength. For example, Chomsky's (1995) solution to the wh-parameter was that in wh-movement languages like English, the [+wh] feature on C is strong, and the strength of the feature on the C-probe drives the movement of the wh-word to the Spec-CP position in a wh-question construction. On the other hand, in a wh-in situ language, the [+wh] feature on C is weak, so it cannot drive the movement of the wh-word to Spec-CP. All these proposals have been quite influential, at least at the times they were introduced.

As Jayaseelan (2004) argues wh-phrases in Tamil can (optionally) move to a

sentence canonical position in the surface structure. Savio (1991) also gives examples that show that wh-phrases in Tamil

can (optionally) move to a focus position. However, Thampoe (2016) has more recently argued that the instances of "optional movement" are not really movement of wh-phrases as in English, but instances of scrambling as discussed below.

Consequently, linguists have attempted to look elsewhere to find solutions. For example, Richards (2010) has attempted to account for the parameter in terms of prosodic (intonation) properties of different languages.¹ Richards' (2010) account was novel and unique in his analysis that general properties of prosody can predict whether a language can leave wh-phrases in situ or move them.

Weerasooriya (2013) argues that wh-in situ languages like Sinhala licenses the wh-in situ phrases by way of prosodic re/phrasing and insertion of boundary tones. He shows that pitch accents and tone variations are an important aspect of question formation strategies. For example, he argues that Sinhala realizes its focus via demarcative prosodic re/phrasing by marking the edges of the focused phrases with low and high tones respectively. He also claims that wh-in situ phrases are also licensed prosodically

¹ See for example Beck (2006) for another approach where wh-phrases are compared with focus phrases that reduce the properties associated with movement of wh-phrases to those of focused phrases.

independent of syntax or morpho-syntax.

Féry (2009) argues that the Dravidian languages such as Tamil and Malayalam show common intonational properties. She shows that they belong to a group of languages which she calls ‘phrase languages’ (i.e., prosodic phrases), which have no lexical stress and also no pitch accent.

Richard’s analysis proposes that there is a correlation between prosodic boundary marking in DPs and the place of the complementizer, and suggests that the wh-words in a language such as English move if the complementizer and the prosodic boundary of DPs are on the same side (complementizers are at the left edge of the sentence and prosodic boundaries of DPs are at their left edge, or vice versa) and wh-in situ languages are languages that have the complementizer and the prosodic boundary of DPs on the opposite sides (complementizers are at the left edge of the sentence and prosodic boundaries of DPs are at their right edge, or vice versa).

More recently, Thampoe (2016) has presented a comparative analysis of the morphosyntactic features of modern spoken Sinhala and Tamil. Thampoe particularly argues that the similarity in scrambling options and cleft constructions in Sinhala and Tamil is a result of contact-induced restructuring.

As observable from the above discussion, all the existing studies have focused on question formation strategies of the three languages (Sinhala, Tamil, English) in isolation (on an individual basis), the only

exception being Thampoe (2016). However, Thampoe’s (2016) account only compares Sinhala and Tamil from a morphosyntactic perspective and prosodic properties are not taken into account. Thus, as far as we are aware, this is the first ever study done comparing the structures of question constructions in the three languages including a phonological experimental study.

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2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1 Sampling Procedure

Language data from the native speakers of the three languages Sinhala, Tamil and English were collected. About 15 speakers from each language were taken as language consultants/informants to represent the 3 languages. The language consultants/informants were selected mainly from among the university students and speakers of Sri Lankan English living in the Colombo area.

The consultants speaking Tamil represented Jaffna Tamil and Sinhala speakers were selected from Colombo and areas such as Gampaha, Homagama, etc, close to the commercial capital of Colombo in order to avoid the geographical variation in Data.

2.2 Data Collection

The language samples from the consultants/informants were collected at the Language Laboratory of the Department of English and Linguistics, University of Sri Jayewardenepura. Since the focus is on the colloquial variety of the three languages, spoken forms of questions from the speakers of the three languages were recorded. The same questions recorded were also taken down in written form with the script in the original language, gloss and English translation. Tamil speakers were provided with questions in Sinhala or English translations and were instructed to translate the specific questions to Tamil. Then the Tamil questions were recorded and taken down in written form. The question patterns of Sinhala and Tamil speakers were also recorded in the audio and written form.

2.3 Analysis of Data

The samples were taken down in both written and spoken form in order to analyse the structures and patterns. The written forms in comparison with spoken forms were examined to analyse the movement/ particle insertion/intonation variation strategies. The responses of the English speakers, Sinhala speakers and Tamil speakers were analysed utilizing the same process. For brevity purposes of this paper, phonological data samples of

five speakers were selected to analyze and discuss. At the same time, as the phonological variation in intonation among the three languages was individual-sensitive, absolute prominence was considered more important than relative prominence in the analysis of phonological prominence (See also Section 4 for more details).

3 RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The analysis was carried out with respect to the morpho-syntax and phonological processes of the question constructions of the three languages. This is elaborated in the following sections.

3.1 Morpho-syntactic analysis

On the surface, the three languages significantly differ with respect to the morphology and syntax of the question constructions. However, the question constructions in the three languages show a common character with respect to scope marking of wh-words. Following is an analysis of the morpho-syntax of the question constructions in the three languages.

3.1.1 Wh-questions

Wh-words in wh-questions in English undergo overt movement from its argument position to a sentence-initial canonical position identified as Spec-CP as shown in (1).

- (1) a. What did John buy?
b. [CP Wh_iti [C did] [TP [DP John] [VP [V buy] [DP ti]]] ?

As opposed to English, wh-words in wh-questions in Sinhala do not undergo movement but stay in-situ as seen in (2). The example in (2i) is one with the wh-

word remaining in situ in the object position while the example in (2ii) is one with the wh-word remaining in situ in the subject argument position.

- (2) i. a. malli nangi-tə mokak-də dunn-e?
 brother sister-Dat what-də gave-E
 “What did brother give to sister?”

- b. [CP [C [TP [DP malli][VP [DP nangi-tə] [DP mokak-də] [V dunn-e]]]]]?²

- ii. a. kau-də nangi-tə poth-ak dunn-e?
 who sister-Dat book-INDF gave-E
 “Who gave sister a book?”

- b. [CP [C [TP [DP kau-də]][VP [DP nangi-tə] [DP pothak] [V dunn-e]]]]]?²

As seen in (2), different from English, Sinhala also makes use of the particle –də attached to the wh-word. This is a morphological strategy to mark the question form of the wh-question. The clause final morpheme –e glossed as –E is also used as a morphological strategy to mark focus in questions, as also discussed in Ananda (2013).

word remaining in situ in the subject argument position in Tamil. The example in (3ii) also compares the wh-words remaining in situ in the subject position in both Sinhala and Tamil.

As it is the case in Sinhala, wh-words in wh-questions in Tamil also do not undergo movement but stay in-situ as shown in (3). The example in (3i) is one with the wh-word remaining in situ in the object argument position in Tamil while the example in (3ii) is one with the wh-

² Some theories of wh-in situ assume covert movement of wh-phrases. As this is not the main objective of this paper and is beyond the scope of this paper, this is not taken into account. See, for example, Kishimoto (2005) for details.

- (3) i. a. nee enna kuttikiray?
you what drink
‘‘What do you drink?’’
- b. [CP [C [TP [DP nee][VP [DP enna] [V kuttikiray]]]]]?
- ii. a. yaar nettu mala-(u)kku antha puthakath-ai kudu-th-athu
Who yesterday Mala-DAT that book give.PST-NMLZ
kau d  iyyee mala-t  ee poth  dunn-e
Who Q yesterday Mala-DAT that book give.PST-NMLZ
(Thampoe, 2016, P. 229)
- b. [CP [C [TP [DP yaar][VP [AdvP nettu] [DP mala-(u)kku] [DP antha
puthakath-ai] [V kudu-th-athu]]]]]]]?

At the same time, the wh-phrases in Sinhala and Tamil can occur clause initially or clause finally as a result of the scrambling option available in the two languages. When the wh-words are

scrambled, the questions may receive a cleft interpretation as shown in (4). The example in (4) is one with the subject wh-word scrambled to the clause final position in both Sinhala and Tamil.

- (4) T. nettu mala-(u)kku antha puthakath-ai kudu-th-athu yaar
yesterday Mala-DAT that book-ACC give-PST-NMLZ who
S. iyyee mala-t  ee poth  dunn-e kau d 
yesterday Mala-DAT that book give.PST-NMLZ who Q
‘Who is it that gave the book to Mala yesterday?’
Also ‘Who gave that book to Mala yesterday?’ (Thampoe, 2016, P. 229)

However, it is observed that the wh-words in Sinhala and Tamil receive prominence by placing accentual prominence on these morphemes as discussed in Section 4.2. This strategy is used in common to mark the scope of the wh-words in the three languages.

3.1.2 Yes/No questions

The auxiliary words in Yes/No questions in English undergo movement to the C position as in (5).

- (5) a. Does Ashan like the movie?
- b. [CP [C Doesi [TP [DP Ashan] [T ti] like the movie?]]

As opposed to English, Sinhala uses clause final particle –d  in asking Yes/No questions as in (6).

- (6) a. Ashan gedərə-tə kemathi-də?
 brother house-DAT like-də
 “Does Ashan like the house?”

- b. [CP [C [TP [DP Ashan] [VP [DP gedərə-tə] [V kemathi]]]-də]?

Unlike English or Sinhala, Tamil does not make use of any morphological strategy, but uses increased intonation clause

finally to mark a Yes/No question as shown in (7). This is discussed in Section 4.3.

- (7) a. unakku padam pidikkuma
 you movie like
 “Do you like the movie?”

- b. [CP [C [TP [DP unakku] [VP [DP padam] [V pidikkuma]]]?

However, as Thampoe (2016) notes when a constituent receives focus in a Yes/No cleft construction, the particular constituent is marked with -aa that

Thampoe (2016) calls a clitic as shown in (8). In this sense, a cleft Yes/No question in Tamil is similar to a cleft Yes/No question in Sinhala.

- (8) T. A. mala padi-th-athu vingnaanam-aa
 Mala study-PST-NMLZ science-Q
 S. B. mala igenəgathth-e vidyaavə də
 Mala study.PST-NMLZ science Q
 ‘Is it science that Mala studied?’

(Thampoe, 2016, P. 199)

Thus, it is observed that other than in the case of cleft-constructions involving scrambling, the three languages use different strategies morpho-syntactically in the realization of wh-questions and Yes/No questions. It is however seen that there is some kind of ‘marking’ of Yes/No questions in all three languages. For instance, as discussed above, the auxiliary word do/does/did, etc. in English undergoes movement to mark/realize a Yes/No question. Sinhala employs the Q-particle -də in marking/realizing a Yes/No question and Tamil employs a high tonal contour.

3.1.3 Echo questions

Questions with intonation make use of the same morpho-syntax of declarative sentences in all three languages. All three languages make use of clause final high intonation to mark the question. This will be discussed in detail in Section 4.2.3.

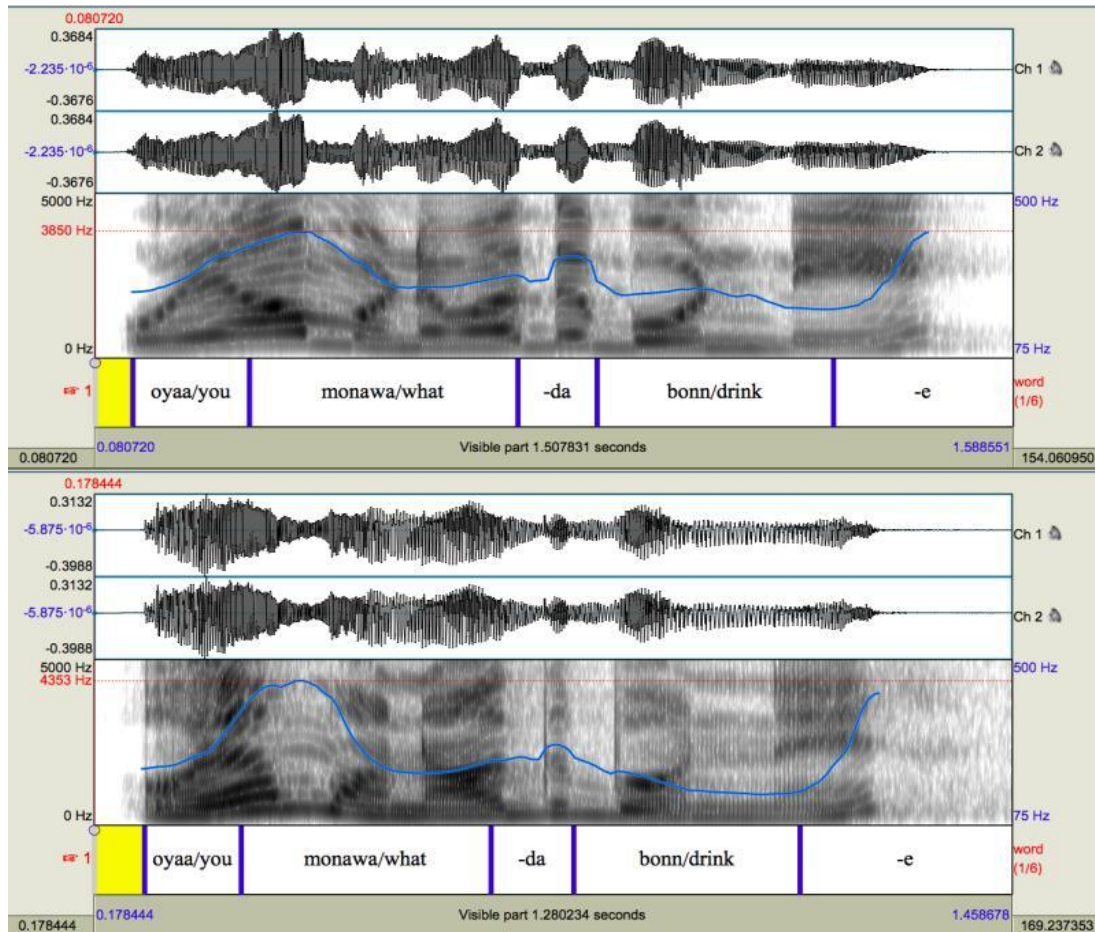
3.2 Phonological Analysis

Phonological analysis was carried out under three components: wh-questions; Yes/No questions and echo questions.

3.2.1 Wh-questions

The results showed that the wh-words in wh-questions in all three languages receive phonological prominence. As seen in Figure 1, wh-words receive phonological prominence (stress) than any other word in Sinhala with the values of

4353 Hz, 3850 Hz, 3649 Hz, 4378 Hz, 4026 Hz in the randomly selected data sample of five speakers. The clause final morpheme –e in Sinhala wh-questions also receives stress. However, it is seen the wh-words receive more prominence than the clause final morpheme –e in Sinhala.



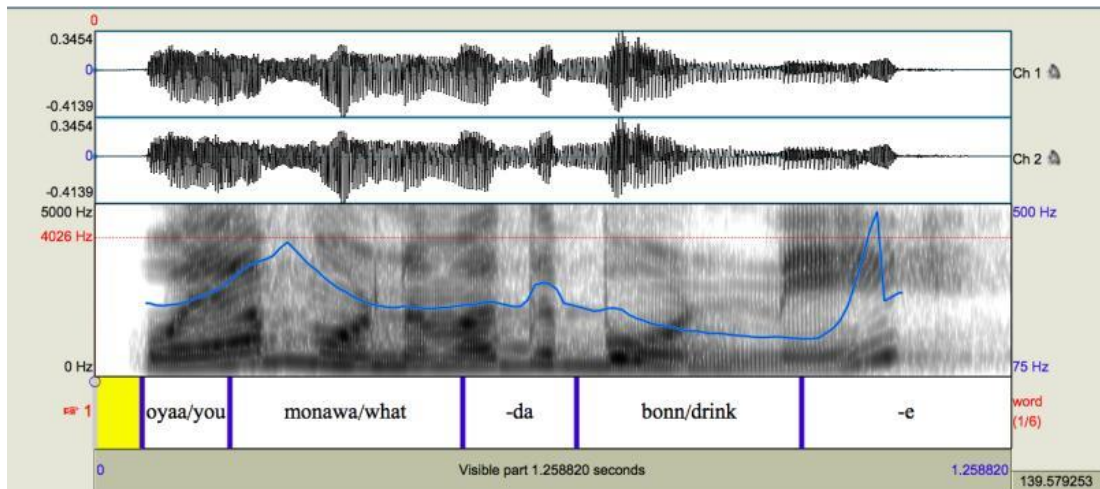
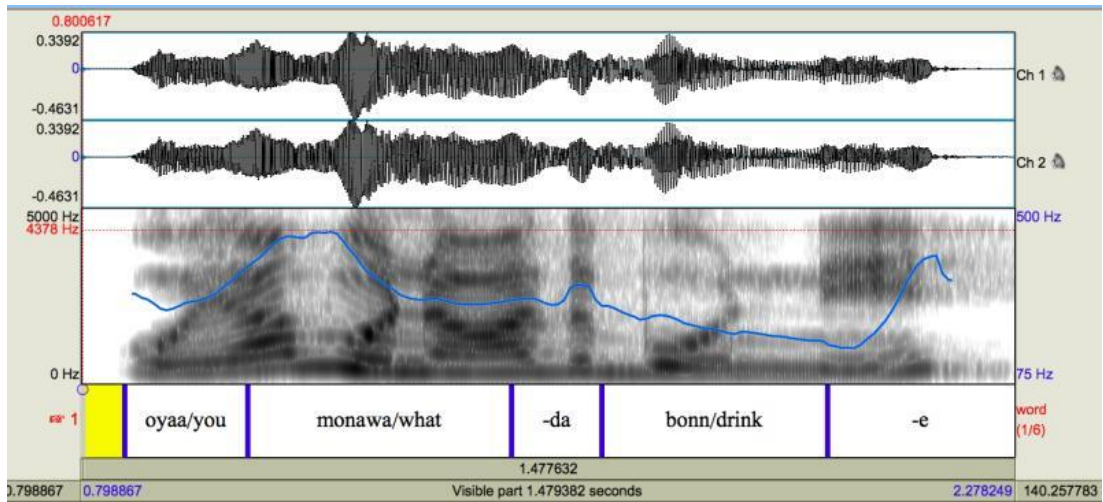
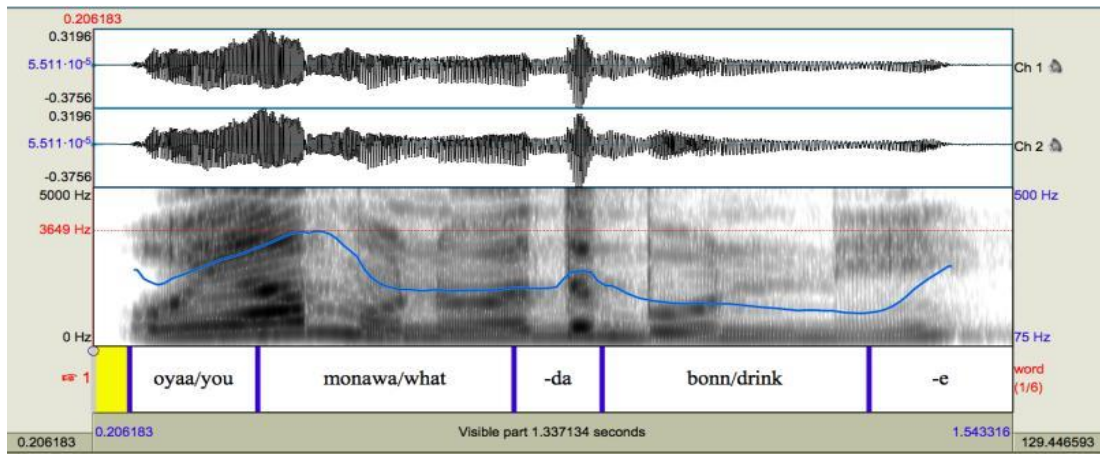
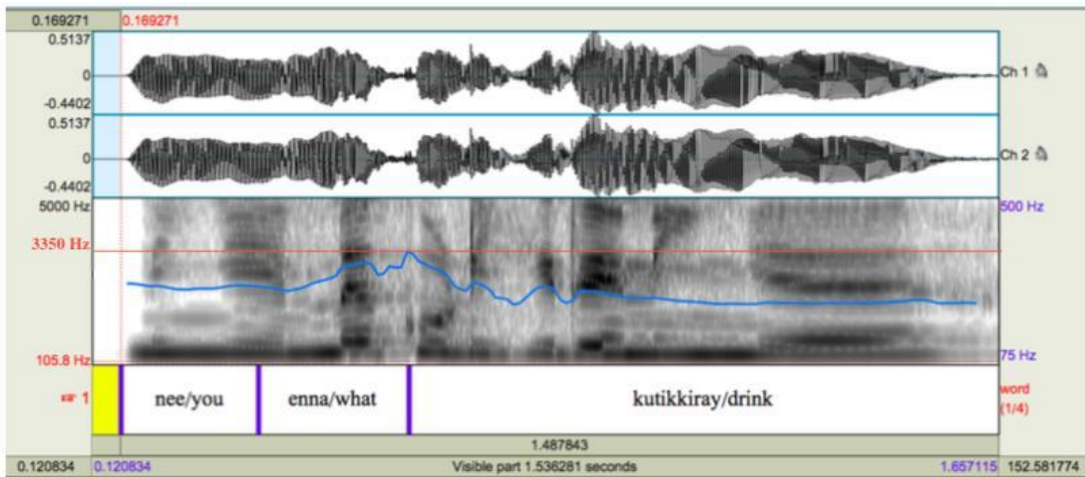
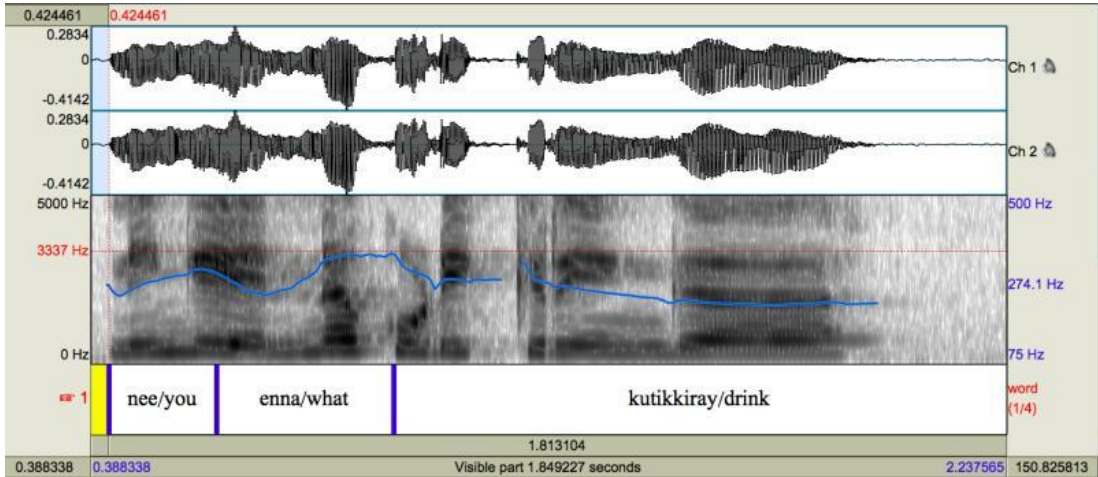


Figure 01: Wh-questions in Sinhala

Overall, it is seen that the wh-words receive more prominence than any other word in Sinhala. As seen in Figure 2, wh-words in Tamil receive phonological

prominence (stress) with the values of 3337 Hz, 3350 Hz, 3209 Hz, 3850 Hz, 4010 Hz in the randomly selected data sample of five speakers.



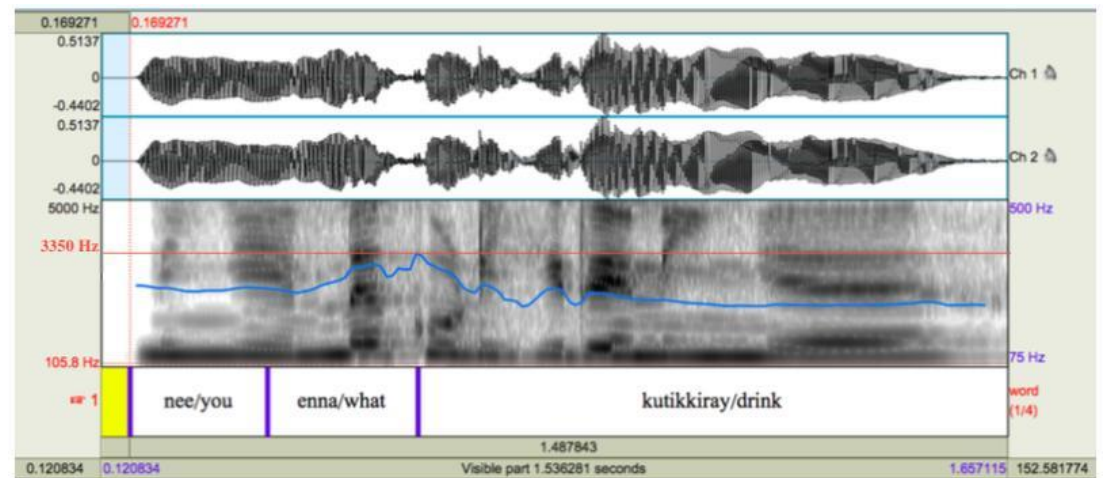
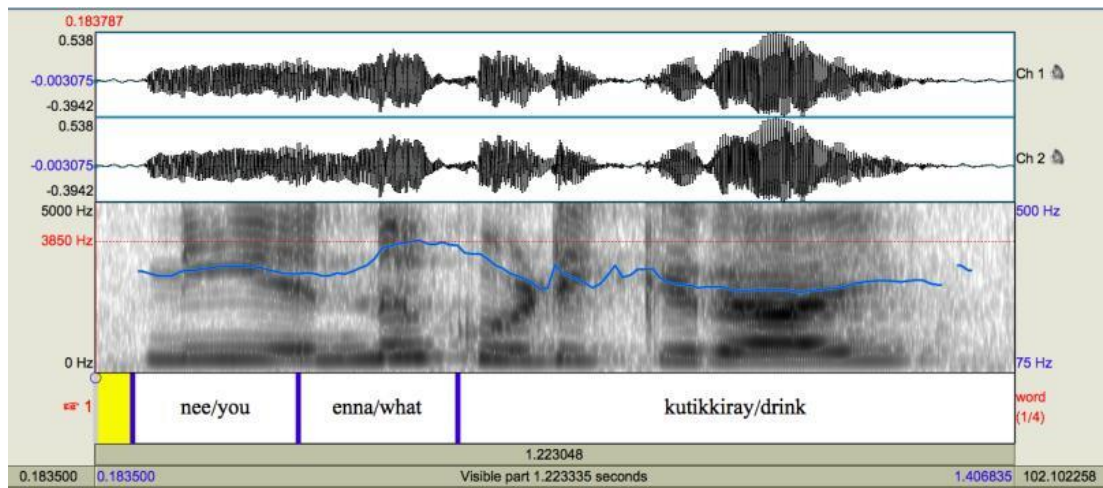
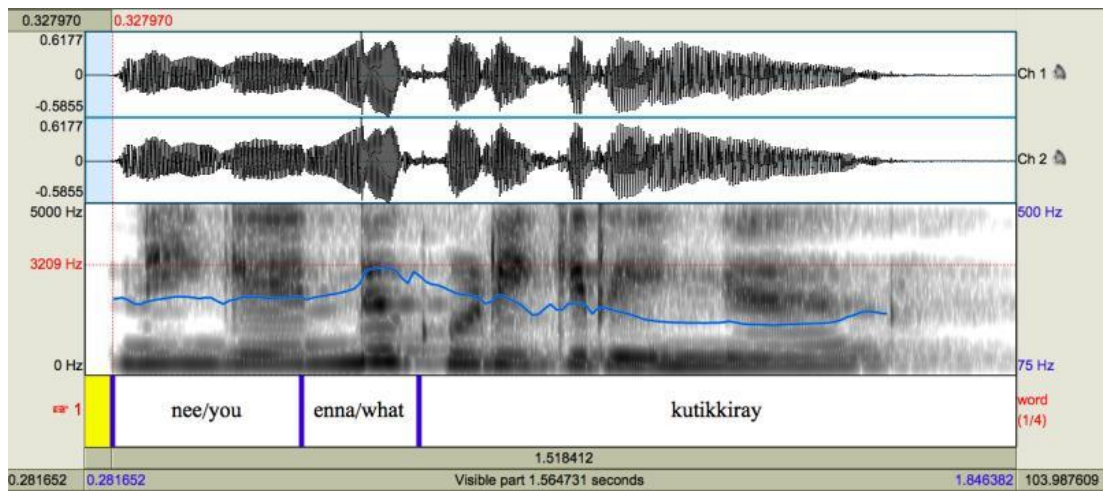
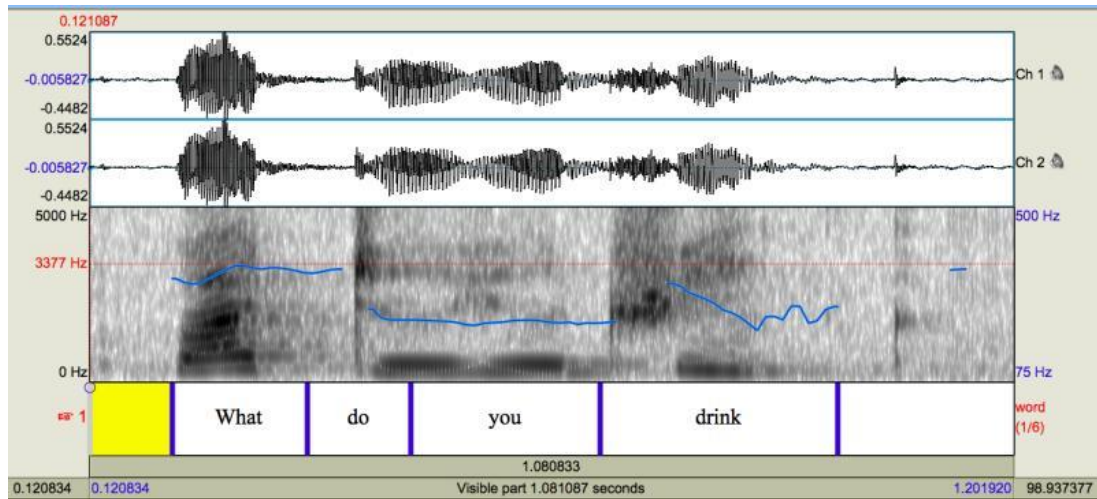
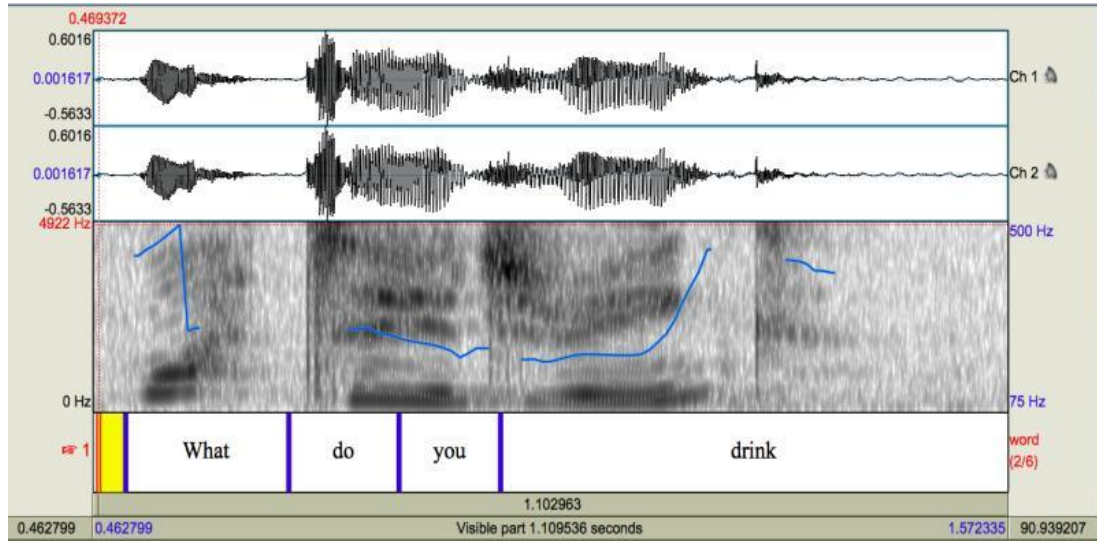


Figure 02: Wh-questions in Tamil

Overall, it is seen the wh-words receive more prominence than any other item in a wh-question in Tamil.

As seen in Figure 3, wh-words in English also receive phonological prominence

with the values of 4922 Hz, 3377 Hz, 4380 Hz, 1672 Hz, 3208 Hz in the randomly selected data sample of five speakers.



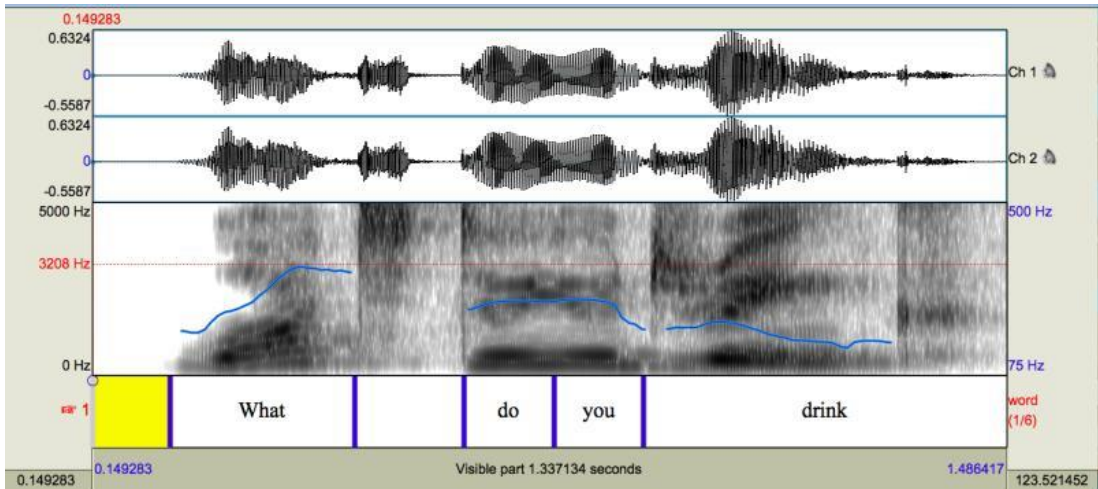
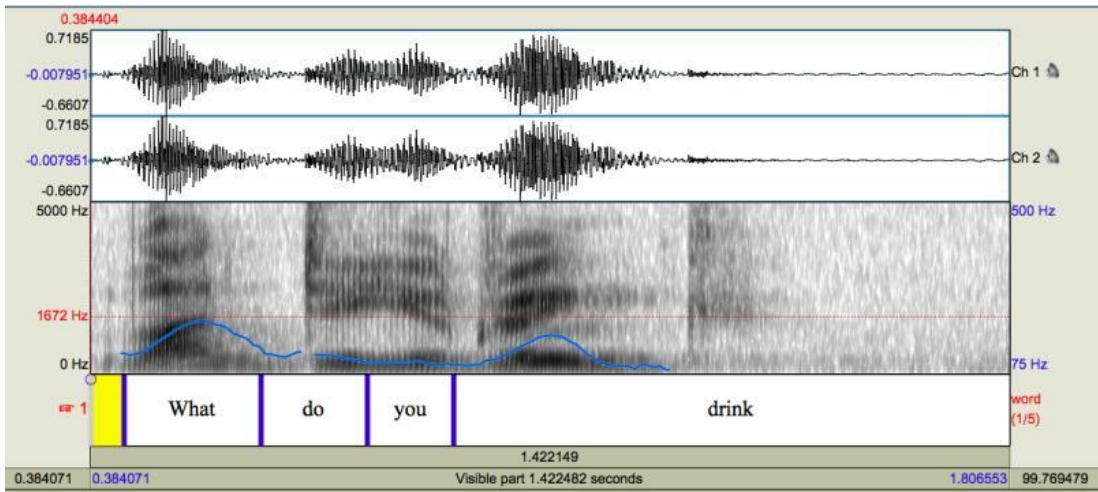
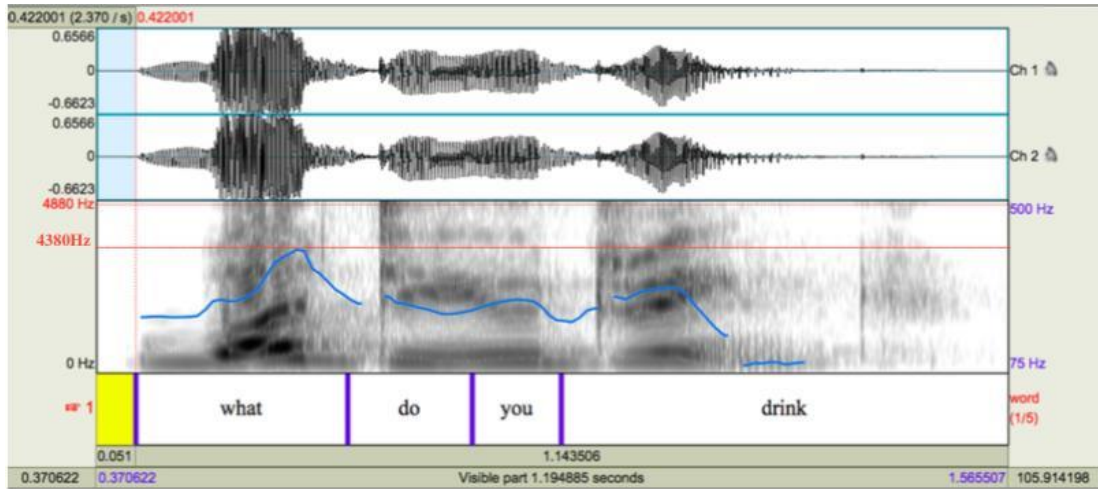


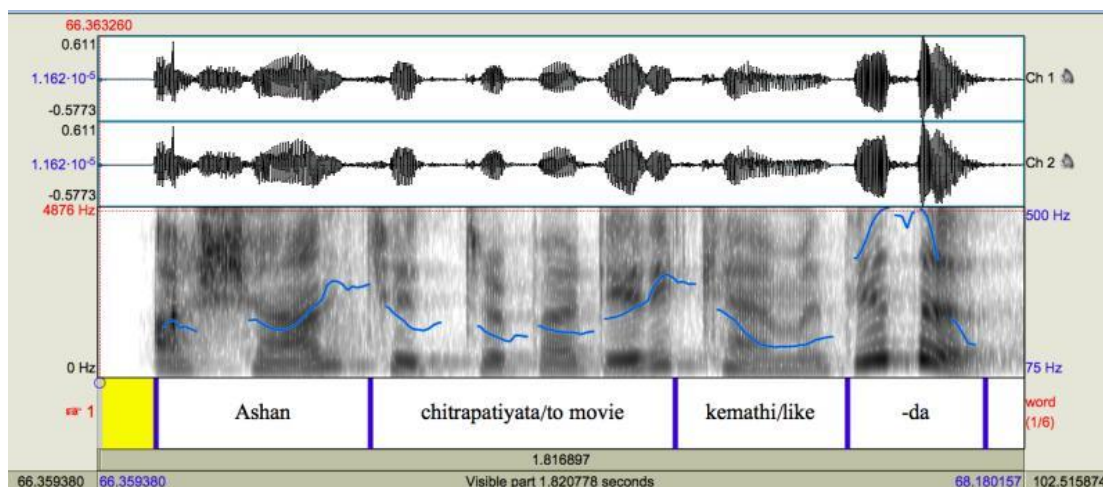
Figure 03: Wh-questions in English

It is seen the wh-words receive more prominence than any other item in a wh-question in English.

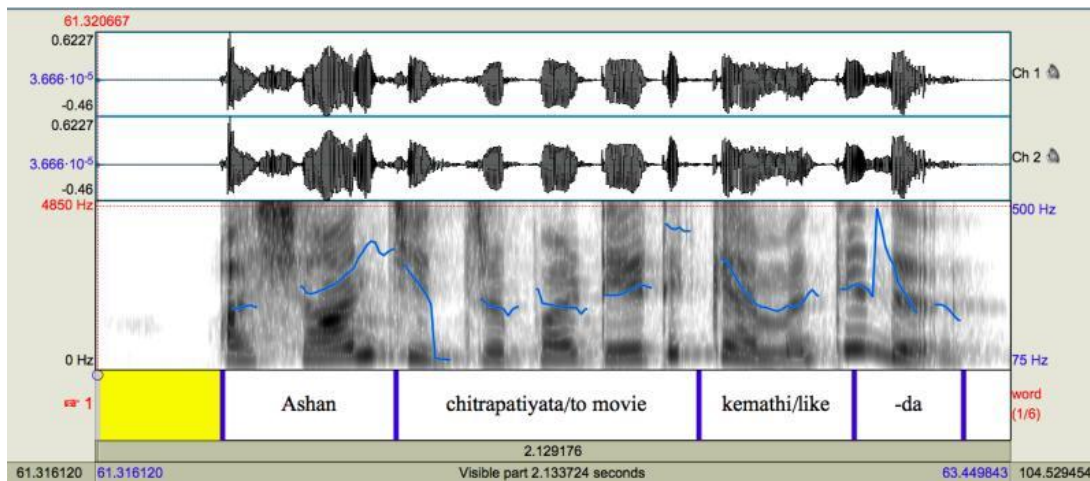
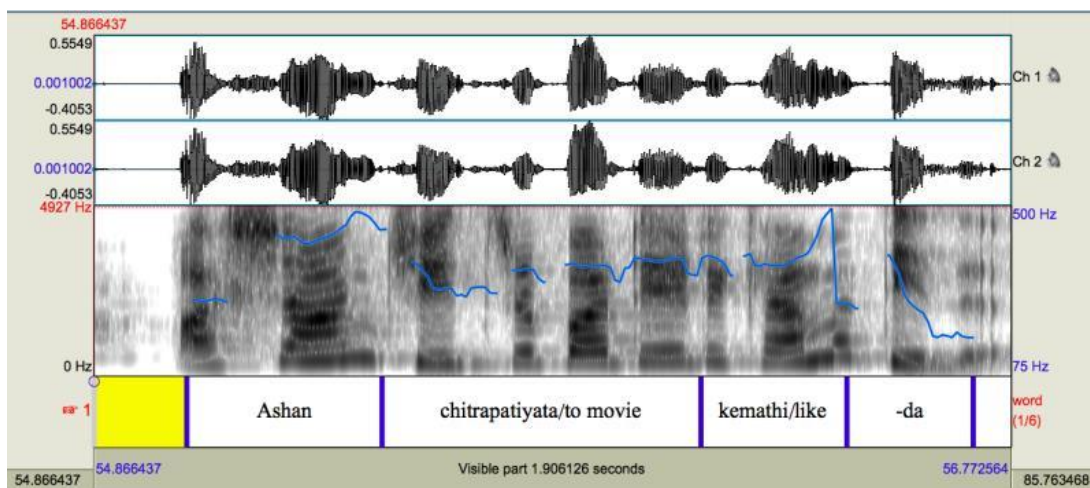
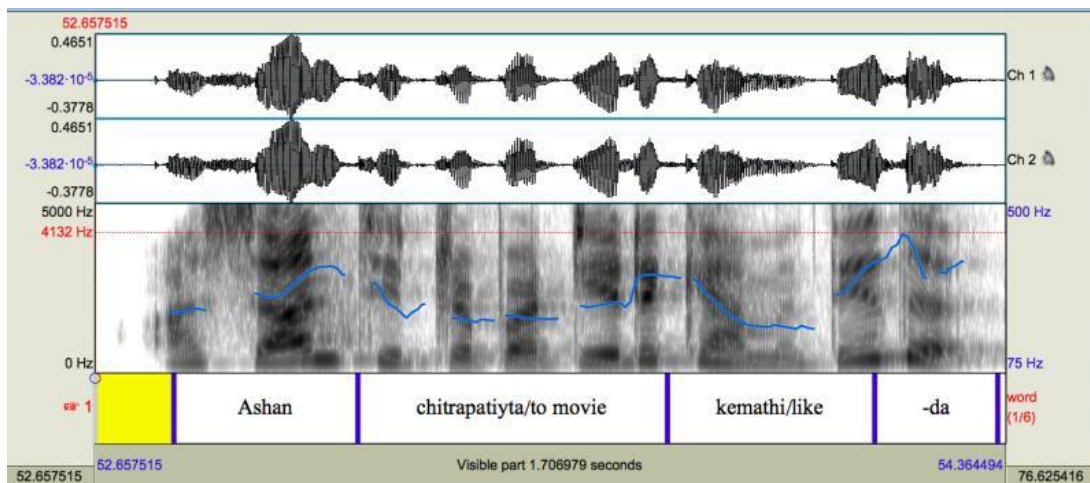
Thus, it is claimed that the wh-words in wh-questions in all three languages receive more prominence than any other word in a wh-question. This is a common property identified in all three languages despite the surface differences in the morpho-syntactic phenomena.³

3.2.2 Yes/No Questions

It was found out that clause final position of Yes/No questions in all three languages receives phonological prominence. In Sinhala, the clause final particle *-da* receives phonological prominence than any other word as seen in the graphs in figure 4 with the values of 4876 Hz, 4132 Hz, 4927 Hz, 4850 Hz, 4824 Hz in the randomly selected data sample of five speakers.



³ As the phonological variation in intonation among the three languages was individual-sensitive, absolute prominence was considered more important than relative prominence. See also Section 3.3 for more details.



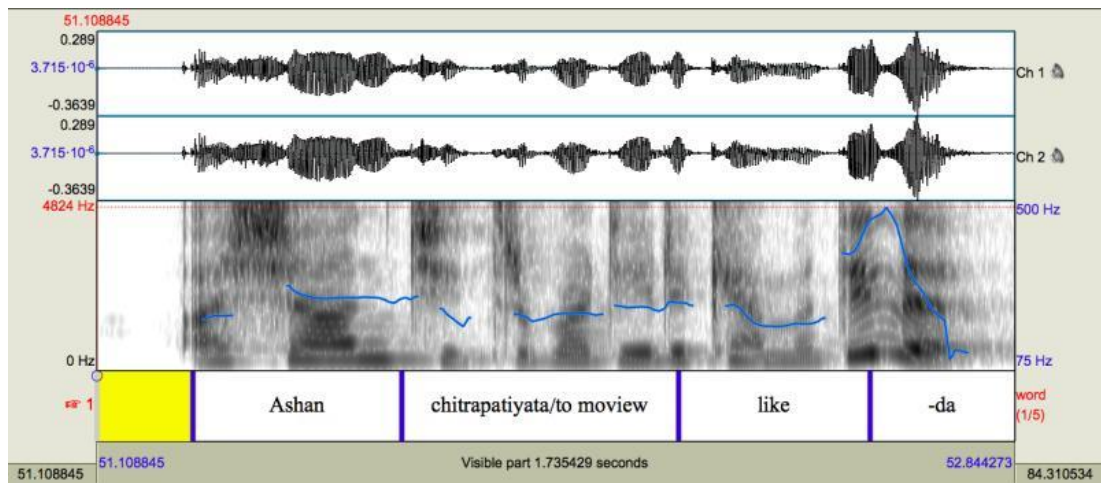
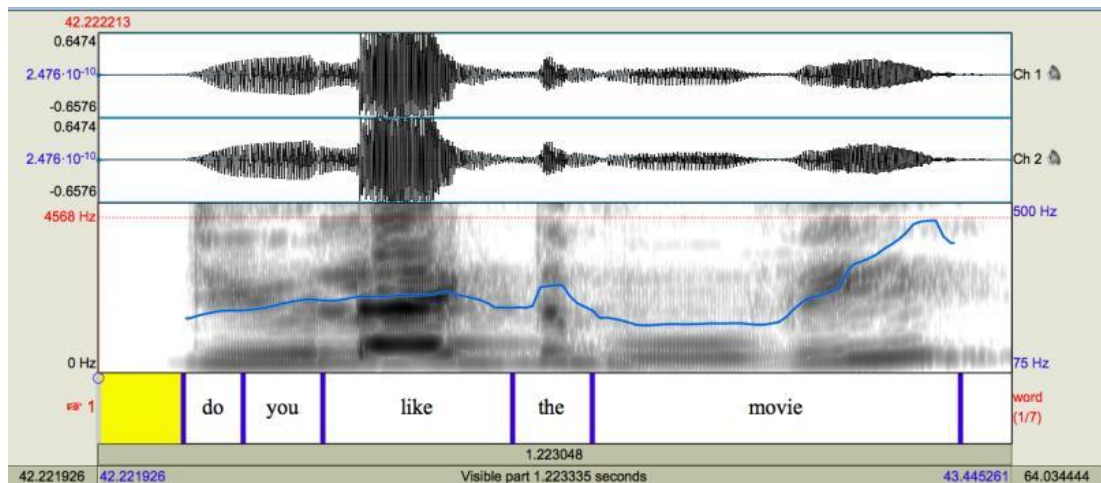
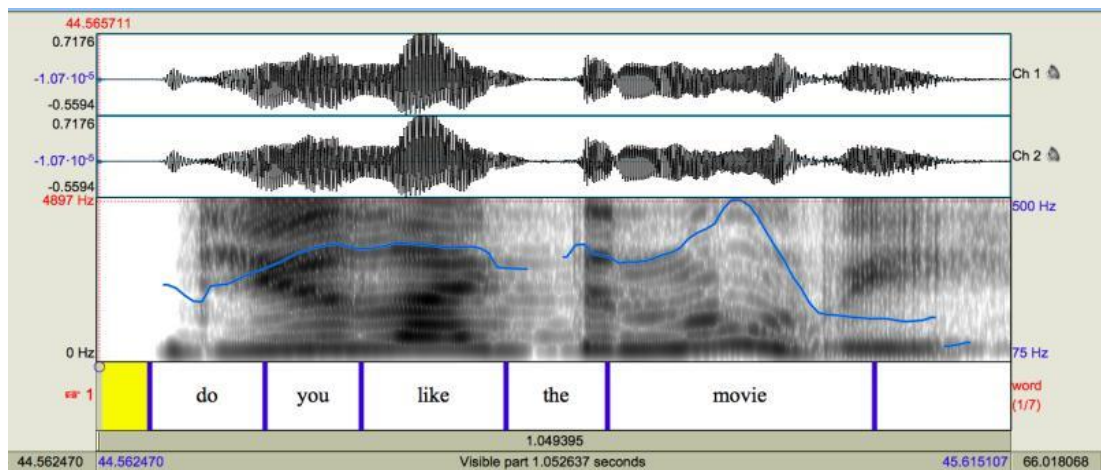


Figure 04: Yes/No questions in Sinhala

As seen in the graphs in figure 5, the boundary position of the clause final word of a Yes/No question in English receives phonological prominence than any other

word with the values of 4897 Hz, 4568 Hz, 4337 Hz, 4412 Hz, 4250 Hz in the randomly selected data sample of five speakers.



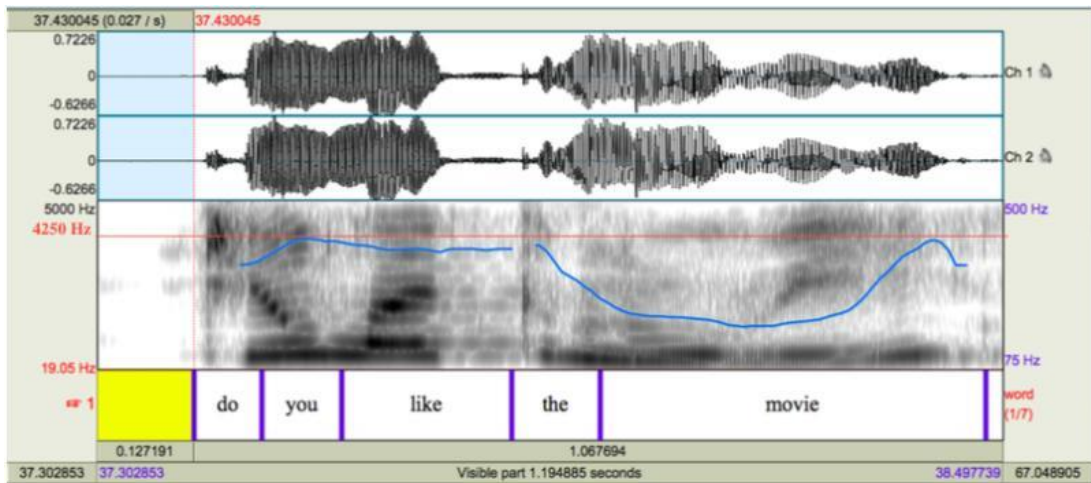
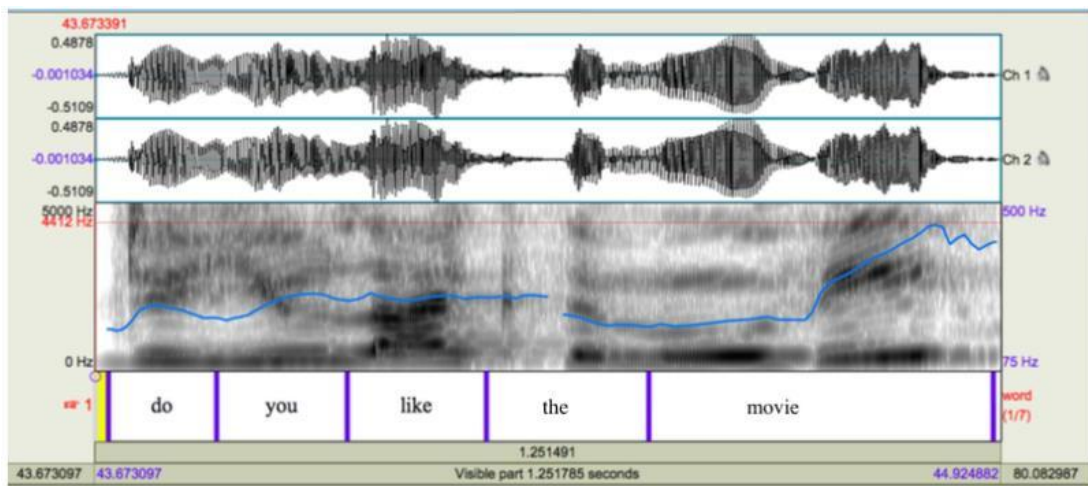
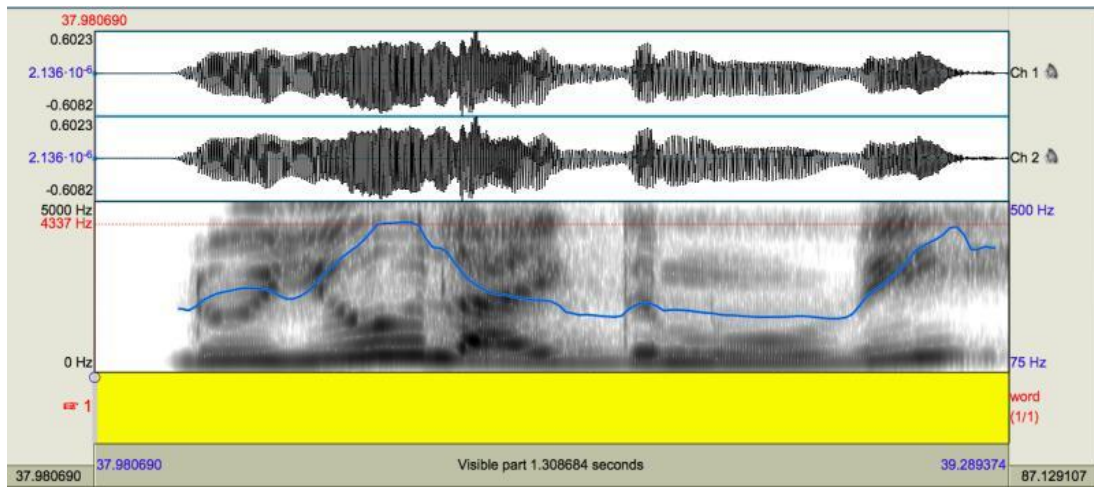
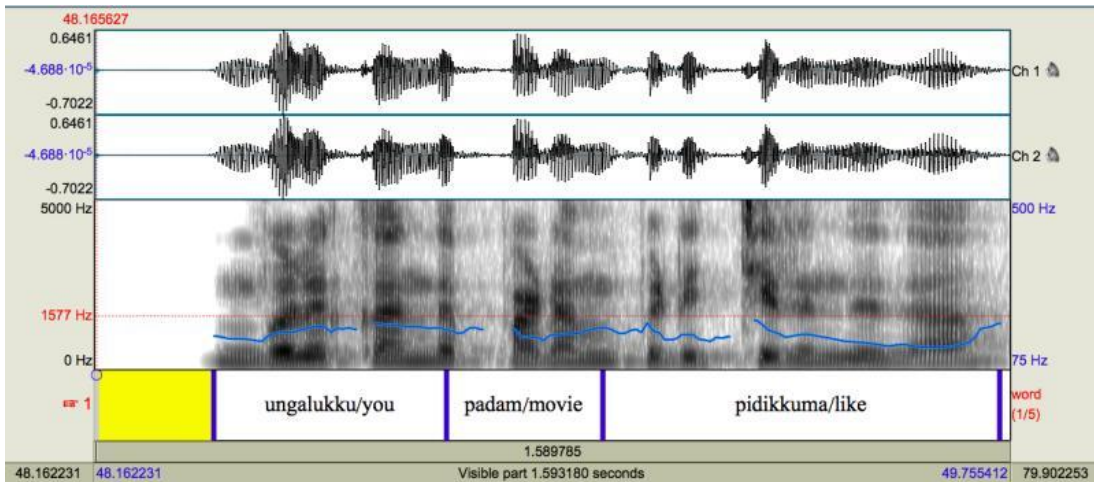
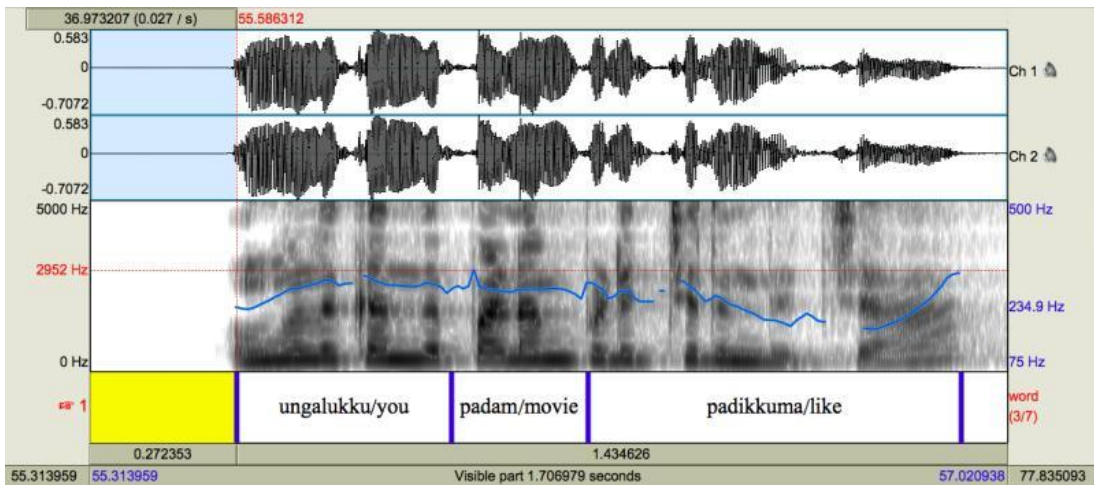
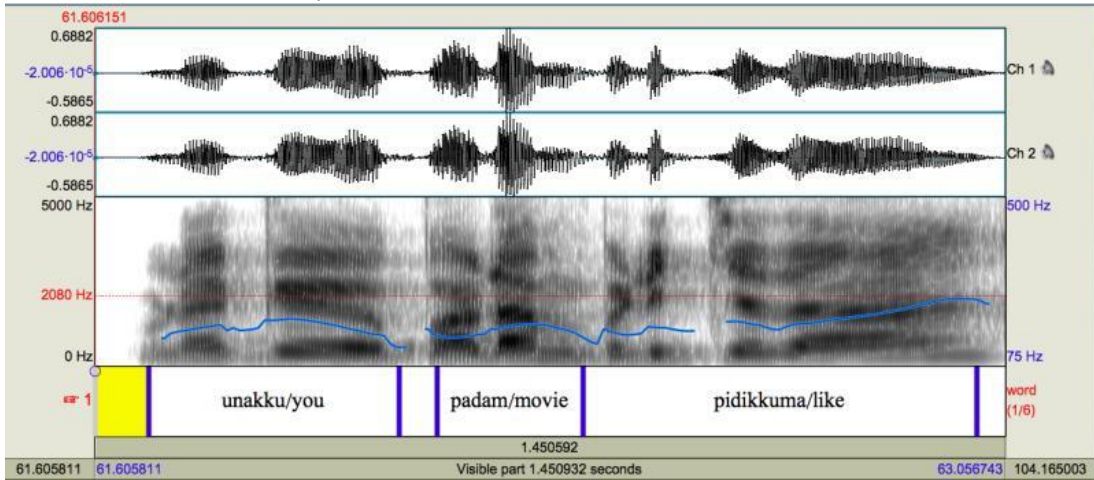


Figure 05: Yes/No questions in English

In most cases, the boundary position of the clause final word of a Yes/No question in Tamil receives phonological prominence as seen in the graphs in figure 6 with the values of 2080 Hz, 2952 Hz, 1577 Hz in the randomly selected data

sample of five speakers. However, in some cases, the middle word in a Yes/No question was accentuated with the values of 2777 Hz, 3978 Hz in the randomly selected data sample of five speakers.



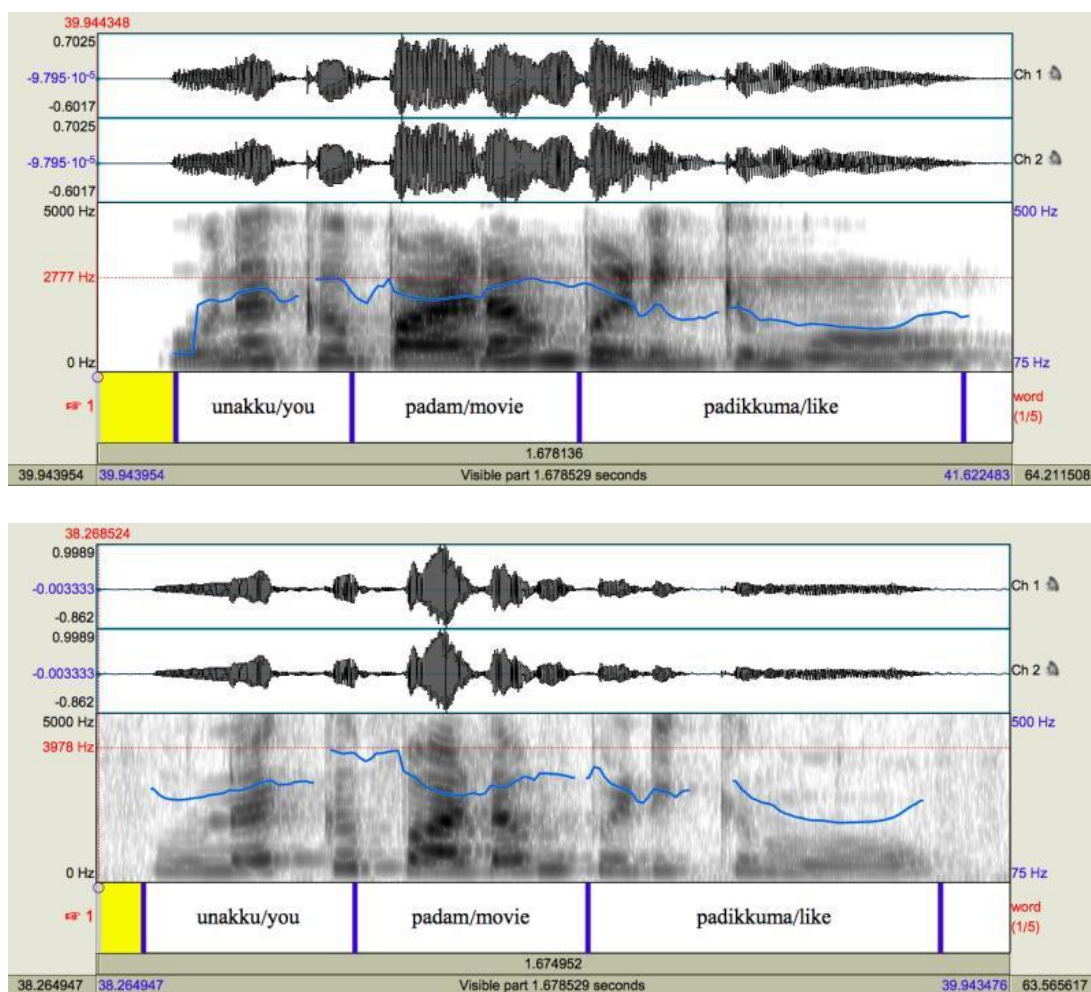
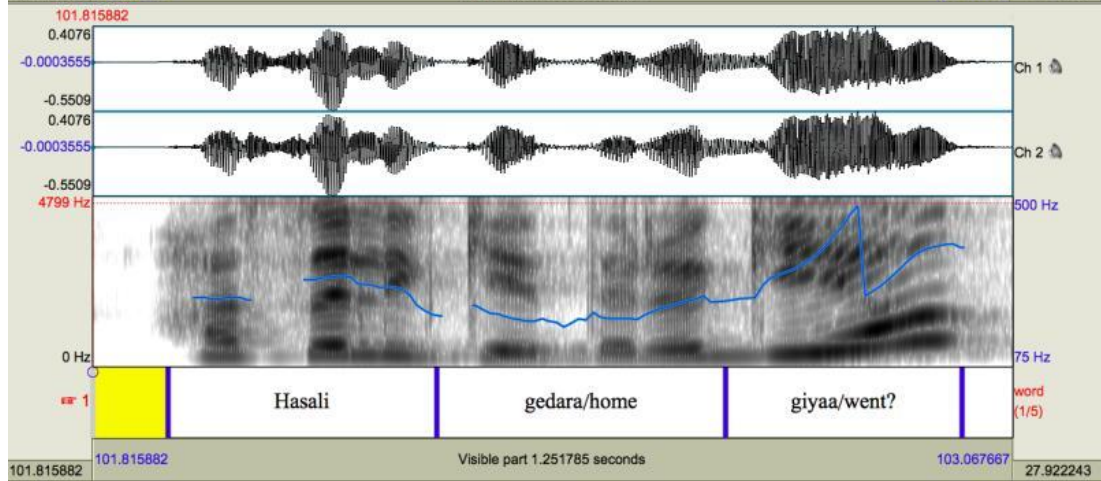
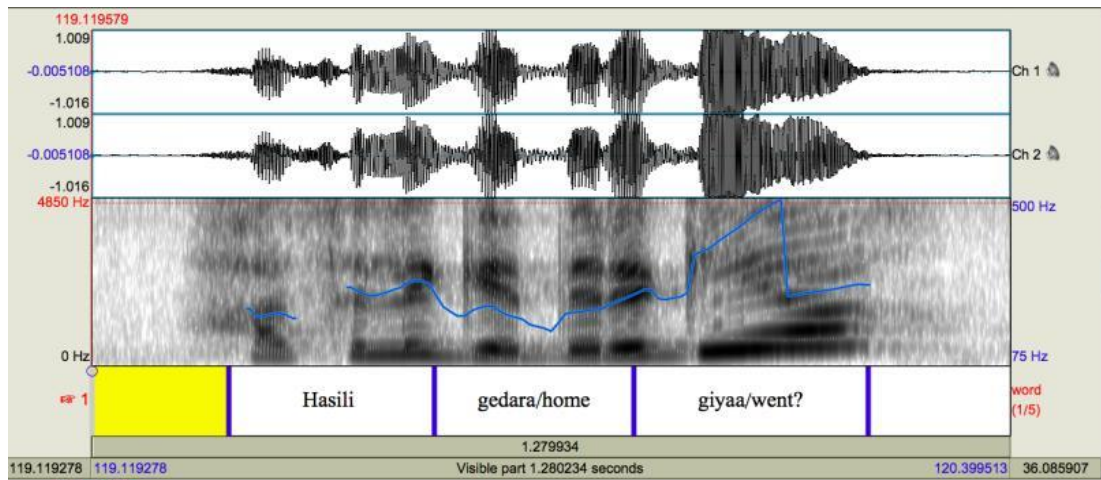
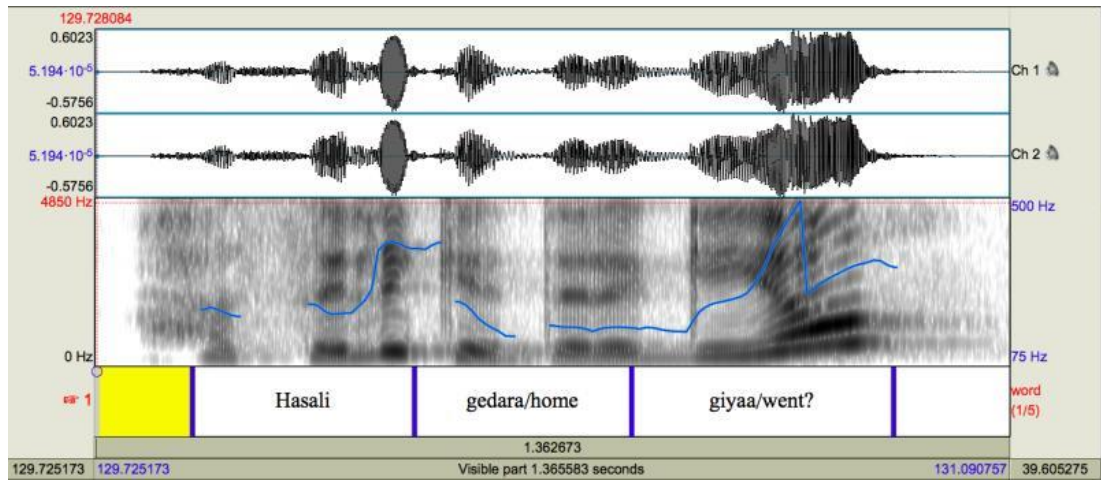


Figure 06: Yes/No questions in Tamil

3.2.3 Echo questions

It was identified that clause final word of a question with intonation in all three languages receives phonological prominence. In Sinhala, the clause final

word receives phonological prominence as seen in the graphs in figure 7 with the values of 4850 Hz, 4850 Hz, 4799 Hz, 4927 Hz, 4414 Hz in the randomly selected data sample of five speakers.



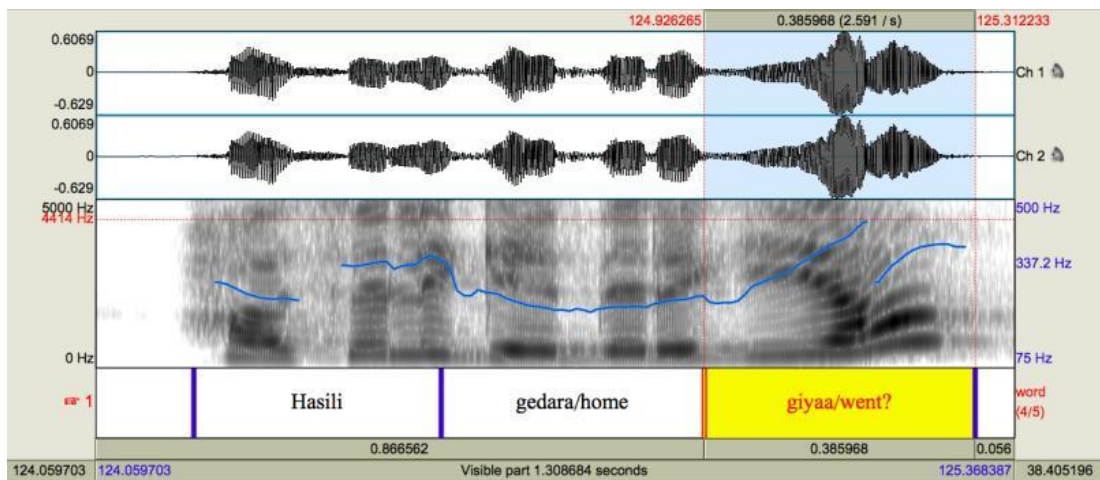
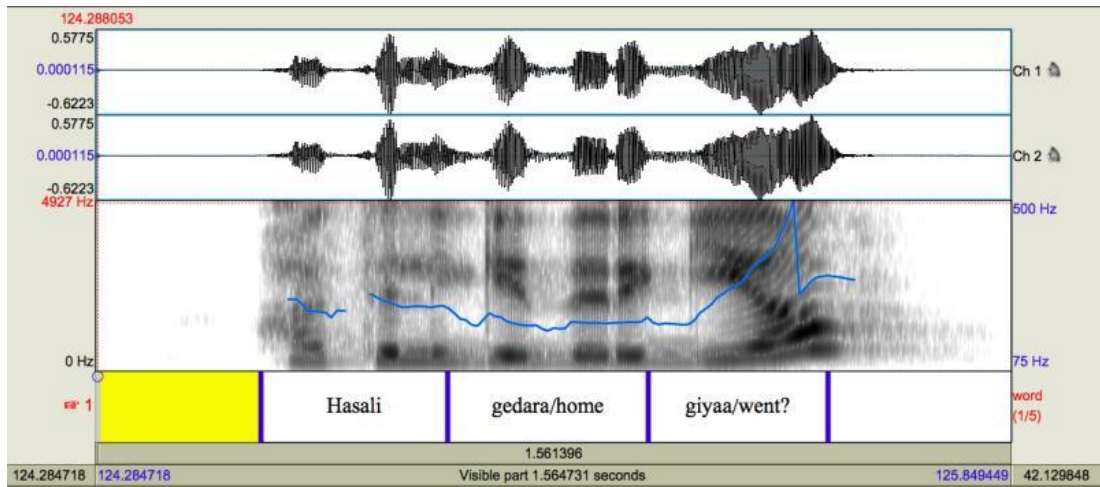
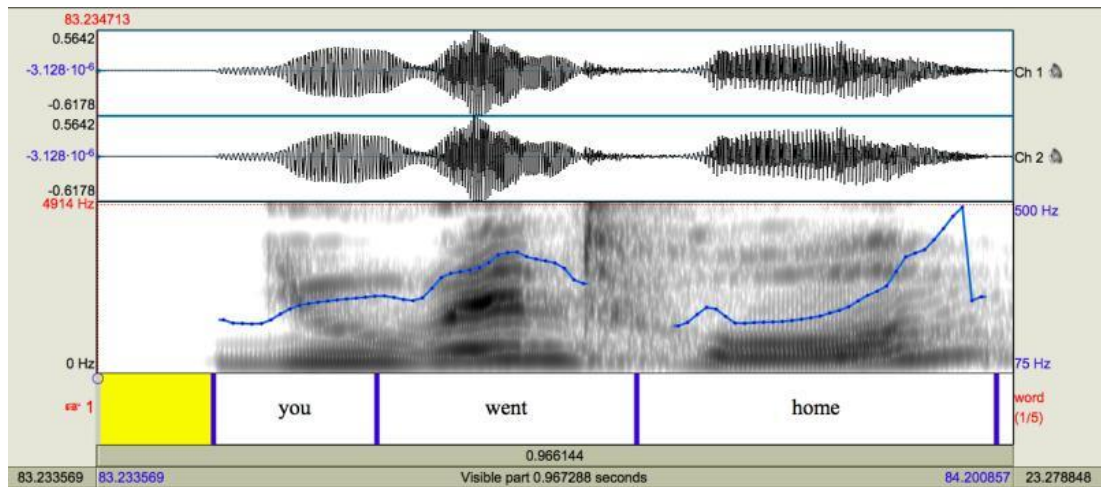
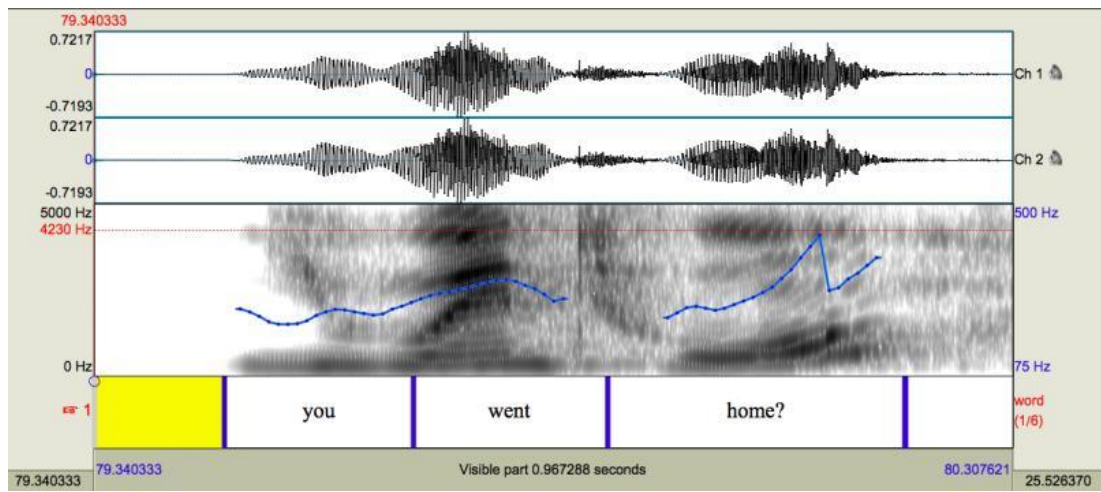
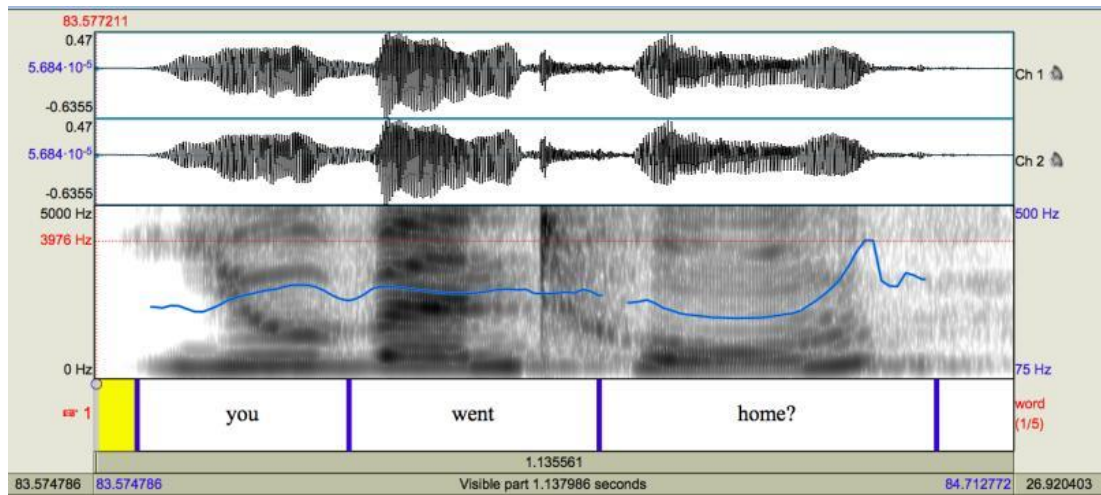


Figure 07: Questions with intonation in Sinhala

As in Sinhala, the clause final word in echo questions in English receives phonological prominence as seen in the

graphs in figure 8 with the values of 3976 Hz, 4230 Hz, 4914 Hz, 4787 Hz, 3850 Hz in the randomly selected data sample of five speakers.



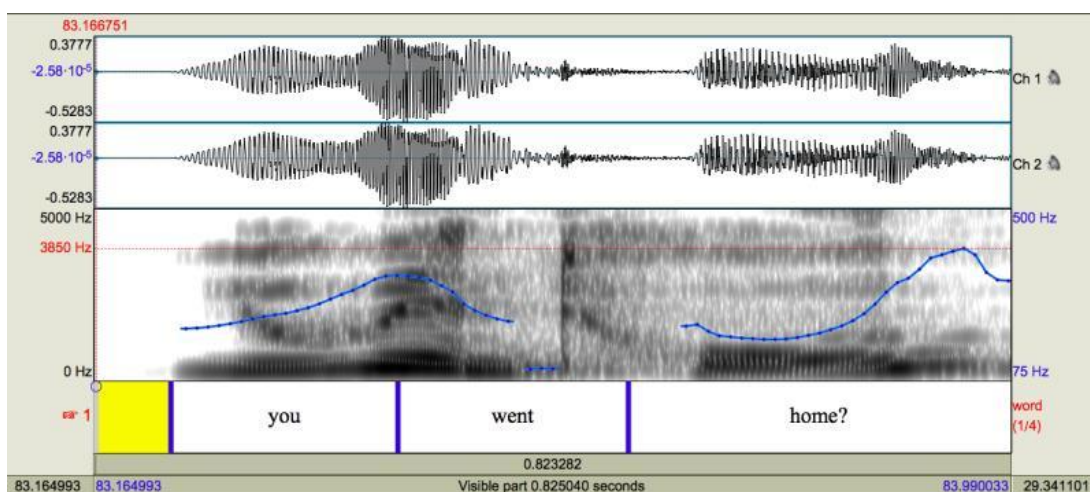
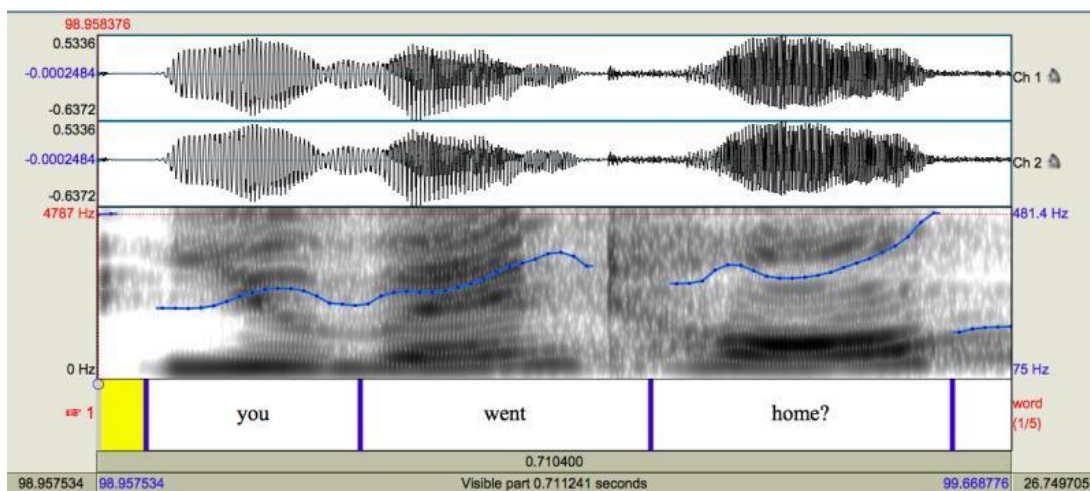
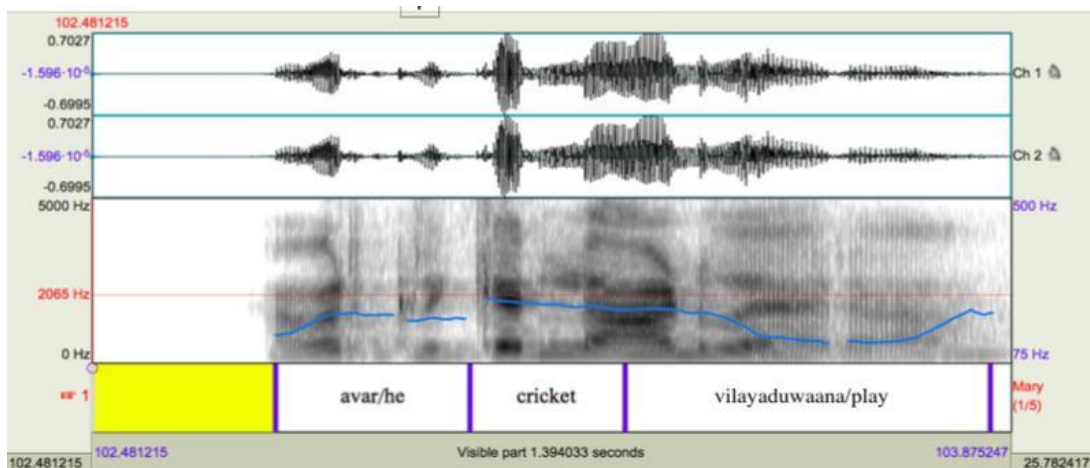


Figure 08: Questions with intonation in English

As in Sinhala and English, the clause final word in echo questions in Tamil receives phonological prominence with the values

of 2065 Hz, 1690 Hz, 4000 Hz, 4488 Hz in the randomly selected data sample of speakers as seen in the graphs in figure 9



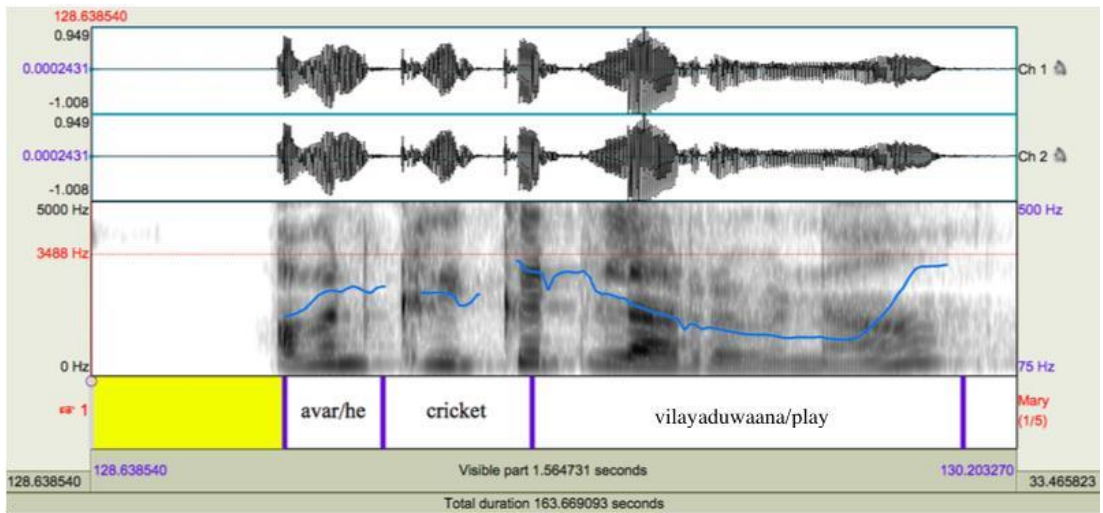
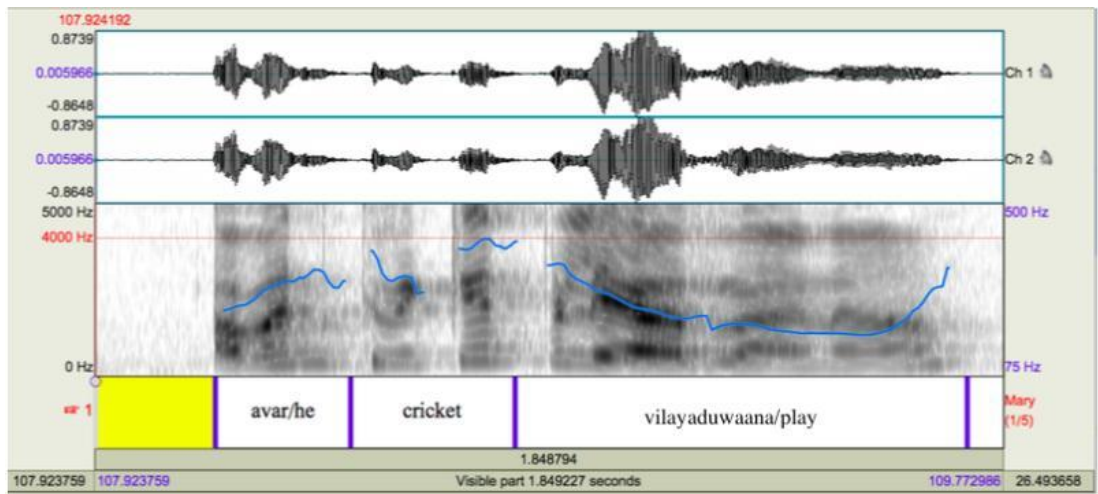
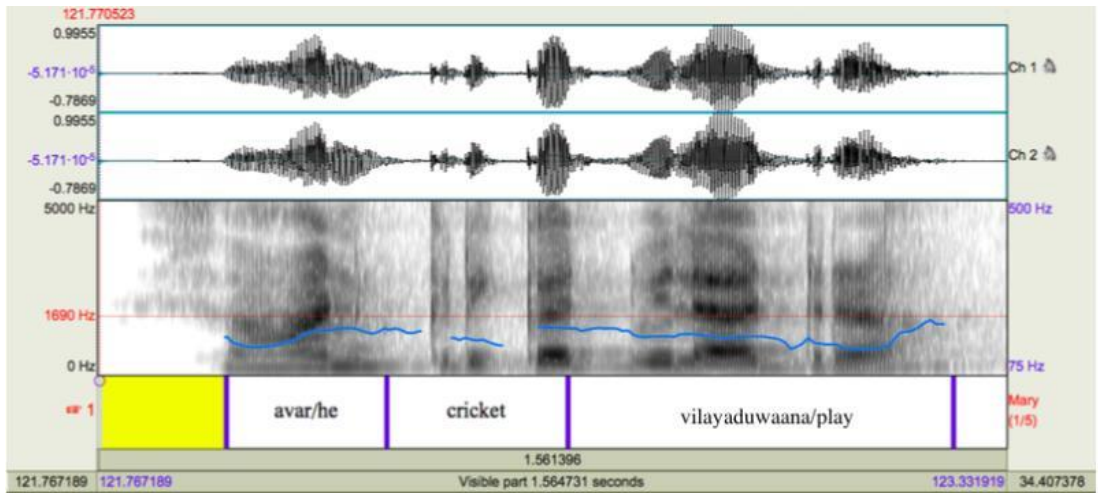


Figure 09: Questions with intonation in Tamil

Thus, it is seen that in all three languages, English, Sinhala and Tamil, wh-words are stressed to mark prominence in wh-questions. In Yes/No questions prominence is marked at the clause boundary in all the three languages. The clause final word is stressed in echo questions in all three languages.

It was also seen that other than in the case of cleft-constructions involving scrambling in Sinhala and Tamil, the three languages use different strategies morpho-syntactically in the realization of wh-questions and Yes/No questions. Thus, despite the surface morpho-syntactic differences, all three languages exhibit common/uniform properties as far as prosodic prominence at the level of phonology is concerned.

As it was discussed in Section 2 as the theoretical background to the study, the findings of the current study shed light on the fact that phonological prominence should be considered a universal property with respect to question constructions in all three languages.

4 CONCLUSIONS

In light of the contemporary universal grammar approach to language analysis, the morphological, syntactic and phonological grammatical properties of the question constructions of Sinhala, Tamil and English were investigated to identify common and deviant properties.

Morphologically, it was observed that Sinhala makes use of the particle –da in asking wh- and Yes/No questions. English and Tamil do not make use of this particle insertion strategy.

Syntactically, it was seen that wh-words in Sinhala and Tamil remain in their argument position while they move to the clause initial position in English.

Phonologically, it was found out that wh-words in all three languages receive accentual prominence while in Yes/No questions, the clause final position is marked with prominence in all three languages. In asking echo questions using intonation, the final word is accentuated in all three languages. Thus, identical behavior in prosodic prominence in all three types of question in all three languages was identified as a uniform property in the three languages.

Thus, this paper makes an empirical and theoretical contribution to the existing literature and linguistic theory by bringing in evidence of uniform prosodic properties that understudied languages such as Tamil and Sinhala share in common with English. At the same time, this paper makes a contribution to the current and live search for principles and parameters of language/languages that aims to identify the nature of language in general as a cognitive property of humans.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We gratefully acknowledge the support from the grant from the Research Council, University of Sri Jayewardenepura for this research project. Grant number: ASP/01/RE/HSS/2017/46. Principal investigator: Dr. W. A. T. Weerasooriya. Co-investigator: Dr. M.G. Lalith Ananda.

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