This paper will present the findings of an experimental investigation into the intonational phonology of Trevigiano, a hitherto unexplored Italo-Romance dialect belonging to the Venetan group of dialects spoken in northeast Italy. Although empirical studies in an autosegmental-metrical framework have been conducted for several southern varieties of Italian (e.g. Grice, 1995, for Palermo Italian; Grice and Savino, 1995, for Bari Italian; d’Imperio, 1997, 2003, for Neapolitan Italian) and for Standard and Tuscan Italian (Avesani, 1990, 1995; Avesani and Vayra, 2000), little, if any, work has been carried out on northern varieties. Furthermore, the intonation of Italo-Romance dialects has been subject only to impressionistic analysis (Canepari, 1980). The intonation of Venetan speakers, both when speaking dialect and when speaking Italian, is quite distinct from other dialects and varieties of Italian, and is often reported as being ‘sing-songy’. Indications that the intonational patterns may be more underlyingly distinct come from anecdotal reports (Canepari, 1980) that other Italians may mistakenly believe Venetans are asking questions.

The investigation is based on both spontaneous dialogue and controlled material elicited through a variety of methods (e.g. map tasks). In stark contrast with Italian (at least as spoken in central and southern regions), the analysis reveals frequent use of rising (L*+H), or fall-rising (H+ L*…H) pitch accents in both polar questions and certain types of statement, some which are broad focus. Furthermore, the presence of a low boundary tone (L%) produces (to use Cruttenden’s term, 1986, 1994) a “rise-plateau-slump” reminiscent of some northern British varieties of English (see Example 1). Falling and rise-falling pitch accents are found, instead, on certain types of narrow focus/emphatic statements and WH-interrogatives. Some transcription issues are discussed, including the possible interpretation of fall-rises and rise-falls as tritonal pitch accents, departing from convention (Pierrehumbert, 1980) but following Grice (1995).

The paper also presents a cross-linguistic comparison between Trevigiano and other Italo-Romance varieties of the functional trade-off between intonational and other grammatical devices for signalling sentence type. Like some other northern dialects, Trevigiano marks questions morphosyntactically by inverting the verb and the (clitic) subject pronoun, e.g. ga-tu capio? – have you understood?, a device that is not available in other varieties of Italo-Romance, since these lack clitic subjects. If intonation is ‘freed up’ by the existence of other cues then its role in differentiating sentence type becomes less critical, and this may explain the ‘tolerance’ of rising pitch accents – ‘normally’ associated with interrogativity – in Trevigiano statements. As well as giving insight into functionality across different linguistic domains, such comparison between different but very closely related linguistic systems can also pose fresh challenges for claims of universal meaning in intonation (cf Bolinger, 1989; Gussenhoven, 2004) by providing evidence to suggest that the form-meaning relationship in intonation evolves in a particularistic manner and is not based on, or at least tied to, any natural (i.e. non-linguistic) associations.
Example 1: pitch contour in broad focus statement *poi va ‘vanti* - “and then it goes on”

References