

Focus-Prosody interactions in phrase languages

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Languages differ a great deal in the way they express information structure, especially focus and givenness. Even though the emphasis of research has been put on languages using prominence, a number of other languages have been described in the last decades that do not use any prosodic prominence for information structure (see for instance Lambrecht 1994, Zerbian 2006, Fiedler et al. 2010). In Féry (2013), I proposed that focus is preferably aligned with the right or left edge of a prosodic constituent, a prosodic phrase or an intonation phrase, and that in situ prominence as found in the Germanic languages are rather exceptional from a typological perspective. Many languages prefer to form prosodic phrases around information structural roles and use syntax-prosody interface to guarantee the best alignment. French, for instance, uses cleft constructions on subjects to obtain alignment and thus information packaging (Chafe 1976).

In my talk, I will show in more detail the prosody of the so-called phrase languages while expressing information structure, especially in French, Turkish and Hindi, three languages with only few if any pitch accents on lexically stressed syllables. Phrase languages make up a new category of languages (Féry, to appear) that differs from other categories like intonation languages, pitch accent languages and tone languages in the following way: Tonal contours arise compositionally through the concatenation of phrase tones and boundary tones that are aligned with phrasal domains. These tones do not necessarily associate with prominent syllables, but rather with edges of prosodic domains defined in relation with syntax and information structure. In this way, information structure acts not only on syntactic structure, but also on tonal contours. The result is that changes due to information structure arise in the phrasal intonation rather than in the pitch accents.

If time allows, I will address more properties of phrase languages, as for instance the way meaning of tones and contours arise in these languages. As shown by Pierrehumbert & Hirschberg (1990) among others, the meaning of tonal contours is determined by the concatenation of individual tones that are assigned individual meanings. In a language like French, this also happens, but additionally, changes in register, duration and range are also relevant. Moreover, individual tones entering complex meanings are associated with initial, penultimate or antepenultimate syllables rather than with lexically stressed syllables.

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