Focus as Prosodic Alignment
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It has been claimed in the literature that there is a strict one-to-one relationship between focus and prosodic prominence. This correspondence has been elevated by a number of authors to the level of axioms, even though not all of them agree on the nature of prominence. For Jackendoff (1972:237), focus has to have the 'highest stress' of its domain and for Truckenbrodt (1995:165) and for Büring (2009:178) the 'highest or maximal prominence.' Büring uses prominence as a cover term for all kinds of prosodic reflexes, not only stress. For him, prominence is equivalent to the head on a metrical grid. But the last decade has uncovered a number of languages for which the equation of focus with prominence is difficult to maintain, as for instance some Gur, Kwa, Tchadic and Bantu language (Fiedler et al 2009), West Greenlandic, Cantonese, Vietnamese, Malayalam and other Indic languages, a number of American languages, Georgian, and even French.

An alternative view of the universal reflex of focus will be proposed: focus tries to be prosodically aligned with a higher prosodic constituent, a prosodic phrase or an intonation phrase, and alignment is usually to the right. Prominence is then a correlate of alignment, since both main accent and focus tend to be aligned to the right/left of a prosodic constituent.

The fact that focus alignment is only a tendency explains two caveats. First, higher ranking constraints can block alignment, like syntactic constraints militating against movement, or constraints against insertion of prosodic boundaries. This explains why alignment is achieved more or less successfully, depending on the syntactic or prosodic restrictions imposed by the rest of grammar. Second, focus needs to be organized on a scale. Information focus is weaker than contrastive focus, which is itself weaker than corrective focus. When coming to the data, it will be shown with statistical comparison that the marked structures accompanying focus are found more often in contexts eliciting a contrastive focus than information focus.

The data will be drawn from the literature and from a comparative study on focus with results of experiments eliciting spontaneous but similar sentences in different languages: English, French, Finnish, German, Georgian, Hungarian, Konkani and Mandarin Chinese. On the basis of the results, it will be shown that these languages use partly similar strategies for focus, but that they also differ from each other in significant ways.

Languages have a common aim in the expression of focus: they all try to align a focused constituent with the right (rarely left) edge of a higher prosodic phrase (phonological phrase or intonation phrase). But they use different strategies to fulfill the aim (a kind of conspiracy), some of them will be presented in the talk:

• Italian (Samek-Lodovici 2005) and Hungarian displace a focus constituent to the right or the left of an intonation phrase. In Hungarian this is accompanied with a drastic compression of post nuclear material.

• French cannot displace constituents to the right. Instead some constituents are clefted to obtain alignment with the right of an intonation phrase (Hamlaoui 2009).

• Chichewa inserts prosodic boundaries after a focus, in using prosodic correlates (Kanerva 1990).

• Cantonese and many African languages create prosodic phrases by inserting particles, bearing a special tone for instance.

• In Georgian, a focused constituent is generally adjacent to the verb and delimited to the left with a prosodic phrase boundary.

• In Indian languages and West Greemlandic, prosodic phrases are the bearers of boundary (or phrasal) tones which are enhanced with the phrase is in focus.

• In English and German, all tonal information after the focus is deleted (postnuclear deaccenting), aligning the strongest accent to the right of the prosodic phrase.

In sum, the formation of prosodic phrases motivated by syntax and information structure is a universal phenomenon, but the assignment of pitch accents perceived as prominences is not. A typological account needs to address this asymmetry.

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