Information Structure and Prosody in Uncharted Territory

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Research on the prosodic realization of information structure (IS) in well-studied languages has revealed that the types of meaning involved are both formally complex and can interact with utterance meaning in complex ways. In English, for example, the notion of focus as realized through pitch accent location gives rise to semantically rich presuppositions that can act as strong constraints on the interpretation of certain underspecified expressions (Beaver & Clark, 2008; German, 2009; Djalali, Pierrehumbert & Clark, 2008; Hirschberg & Ward, 1991). Moreover, it has been shown that the difference between categories like focus and contrastive topic are not properties of individual expressions that can be determined from discourse status, but instead form part of a complex meaning that must be computed over the semantic content of the sentence (Büring, 2003). In languages like French, different types of "focus", (e.g., information focus, contrastive focus, corrective focus) are marked by distinct prosodic patterns (see German & D'Imperio (to appear) for a review), and seemingly basic notions such as Givenness may involve distinct presuppositions in French as compared to English. Taken together, the evidence from well-studied languages suggests that it is problematic to assume any particular conception of IS meaning (focus, contrast, givenness, topic) as prior when seeking to discover the marking system of an understudied language. In this talk, I will first provide an in-depth review of how the characterization of the IS-prosody mapping has required an approach that is both formally rich and language-specific. By highlighting not just how known languages differ, but how they might differ, the goal is to provide a broader landscape within which to generate hypotheses. An emphasis will be placed on making the construction of formal theories accessible to non-specialists.