Prosodic (de)accentuation in English and French

While Germanic languages consistently use prosody to convey information status (i.e., whether an item is new, given, or contrastive), Romance languages have been argued to differ substantially in how information status affects prosody (Ladd 1996, a.o.). For example, Swerts et al (2002) show that within NPs, the discourse context alters accent distribution in Dutch but not in Italian. Specifically, Swerts et al (2002) report that Dutch uses pitch accent to indicate that an item is new or contrastive and deaccentuation to signal given information, while the prosodic intonation seems to remain the same across contexts in Italian. Although such studies have shown that Romance languages tend not to use prosody to mark information status, it has not been shown under what specific conditions prosodic deaccentuation or accentuation is felicitous or not in these languages. Furthermore, it is not known if the size of the syntactic domain influences whether prosodic deaccentuation can occur. The present paper focuses on deaccentuation domains in Germanic and Romance, comparing English and French, in order to address these questions. Pilot studies suggest that deaccentuation is used consistently to relay given information in English, but only for corrective focus in French.

The present study investigates deaccentuation domains of given strings (in **bold**) in four different conditions, where the string has an antecedent: (1) syntactic parallelism, (2) contrastive focus, (3) corrective focus, and (4) cleft construction. A fifth condition serves as a control, where the target string has no antecedent, as in (5).

1. I heard that Joe is into cycling. – Yeah, yesterday, he fixed up a blue bike and a red **bike**.
2. Yesterday, Joe bought a blue bike. – Really? Yesterday, Francis bought a red **bike**.
3. Yesterday, Joe bought a blue bike. – No, he bought a red **bike**.
4. Yesterday, Joe bought a blue bike. – No, it was a red **bike** that he bought.
5. Joe is always purchasing cycling gear. Yeah, yesterday, he bought a red **bike**.

In order to directly compare how different conditions affect the use of prosody as conveying information status or not, the structure of the French experiment is parallel to the English one, as exemplified in (6)-(10). However, these conditions may not be as equally as acceptable between English and French. In French, for example, a cleft construction is used as a natural response to introduce a focussed string (Féry 2001, a.o.), while in English clefts are much less productive. To capture these intuitions, the present experiment asks the participants to rate the naturalness of each response given the context.

6. J’ai entendu dire que Jean-Philippe magasinait des meubles. – Ouais, hier, il a acheté une table rouge et une chaise **rouge**.
7. Hier, Jean-Philippe a acheté une table rouge. – C’est vrai? Mon ami a acheté une chaise **rouge**.
8. Hier, Jean-Philippe a acheté une table rouge. – Non, il a acheté une chaise **rouge**.
9. Hier, Jean-Philippe a acheté une table rouge. – Non, c’est une chaise **rouge** qu’il a acheté.
10. Jean-Philippe magasinait des meubles. – Ouais, hier, il a acheté une chaise **rouge**.

Additionally, in order to understand if phonological or syntactic size plays a role in what can be deaccented, as it seems to for focussed constituents in French (Féry 2001), items were of different sized constituents. Within the NP, the size of the target string is either monosyllabic (8 items) or disyllabic (8 items) to test for possible phonological size constraints. To test for possible syntactic restrictions on deaccentuation, this study includes 8 relative clause items, as in
(11) and 6 sentence items, as in (12). In total, there are 30 items, each with 5 conditions in both the English and French version. The data will be automatically annotated by forced alignment using the HTK speech recognizer. Pitch, intensity and duration measures of targeted strings will be extracted using Praat scripts. The statistical analysis will be a linear mixed model regression, using R, to control for subject and item effects.

(11) Peter likes to bake with apricots that are unripe. – No, he likes to bakes with pears that are unripe.
(12) George said that Harry will be hired soon. – No, Marcus said that Harry will be hired soon.

Pilot studies suggest that while English consistently deaccents a string that is given information in all conditions (except the control), French only deaccents in corrective focus. It is less clear what is happening in French under contrastive focus and syntactic parallelism conditions; the target string is usually not deaccented in these conditions, but this trend is not consistent. This is an interesting preliminary result, as it suggests that although French does not regularly use prosody to mark information status, it does have the means to do so. Concerning length or weight of the string, the pilot study results indicate that phonological or syntactic size does not seem to play a role in deaccentuation patterns in French in contrast to the variation Féry (2001) notes for focussed constituents. Finally, questions arise concerning the nature of the deaccentuation in French – when prosody is used to convey information status, has stress shifted, or is it simply a loss of stress? Results of the present experiment will shed light on these questions.

References:

