

Multiple cues to focus

Amalia Arvaniti, Evangelia Adamou, and Argyro Katsika

Research on the syntax and pragmatics of focus often assumes that focus is associated with prominence, which is often in its turn said to be realized as high or rising pitch. In this view, phonetic details such as the distinction between high and rising pitch are seen as immaterial and often discarded. On the other hand, in the autosegmental-metrical framework used to study the intonation of focus, the existence of distinct pitch accents denoting focus is accepted; the differences between them are said to depend on the realization of pitch, especially differences in the alignment of tonal targets. The importance attributed to such differences leads to little tolerance for variability and has given rise to standing disagreements, e.g., as to whether English has a $H^* \sim L+H^*$ contrast.

We used a corpus of Romani spontaneous and semi-spontaneous data from 12 speakers of Greek Thracian Romani to examine the syntactic and phonological properties of focus. The data indicate that Romani uses two accents, H^* for new information, and $L+H^*$ to indicate contrastive focus. The two accents are by and large distinguished by differences in pitch: H^* is realized as a fall within the stressed syllable; $L+H^*$ shows a marked rise before the fall. These differences, however, are not always present in exactly this form: e.g., $L+H^*$ may be realized as a long plateau or as a fall from markedly high pitch. Further, phonetic parameters beyond pitch play a part in the realization of each accent: e.g., $L+H^*$ is accompanied by longer accented syllable duration. Finally, not all parameters need be present for the accent to be successfully identified. A very similar picture emerges from the study of a Greek corpus in which speakers read sentences in contexts leading to the realization of the focal accent as H^* (new information), $L+H^*$ (contrastive focus) or $H+L^*$ (information considered by the speaker to be in the common ground and thus obvious): multiple cues, not of all which were constantly present were the norm.

The variable phonetic realization of accents and the use of multiple (and thus redundant) cues in both Romani and Greek is in line with the view that a principled distinction must be maintained between the phonetics and phonology of intonation. Intonation should be treated as a component of phonology to which standard diagnostic criteria apply: attention should be paid not only to the phonetic details of accent realization but also to pragmatic meaning when establishing intonation contrasts, while intonation contrasts should not be collapsed when studying focus from a semantic or syntactic perspective. Finally, the idea that intonational contrasts are based exclusively on differences in pitch or that target alignment is the primary cue to accent should be abandoned in favour of a more nuanced view of the realization of intonation that takes into account both the autosegmental (f_0 -related) and the metrical (prominence-related) component of the AM framework and their associated phonetic exponents.