

Topics, afterthoughts and prosody in Beja (North-Cushitic)

Martine Vanhove

Beja (North-Cushitic, Afro-Asiatic), like most Cushitic languages, is considered an SOV language and lacks dedicated topic or focus markers or constructions (although some devices may function, rarely, as focusing ones). Spontaneous data recorded in Sudan during the last 15 years show that the SOV constituent order is not rigid and that it may vary to fit information structure needs.

S is indexed on nonfinite verbs and a lexical or pronominal subject is not obligatorily expressed. But S systematically surfaces when a new referent (at the beginning of a sequence – cf. Moneglia and Cresti 2006 – or contrasting to a previous referent in the context, or extracting one referent among a set of referents previously mentioned) is introduced. The data shows that prosody is an important cue that helps differentiate between the grammatical function of S and its function at the level of information structure. When a lexical or pronominal form at the nominative case is prosodically detached from the rest of the utterance either by a break with a continuing contour, most often followed by a pause (fig. 1), or, rarely, by a terminal break with a falling contour, even if still conforming to the canonical order, S functions as a topic. Its pitch and exact prosodic contour may vary from H, to HL (in case of terminal break), or, rarely, to M. Conversely, the prosodic integration of S within the same IU as the verb, and a L or M pitch range are the prosodic cues that indicate that S is not a topic but a grammatical subject (fig. 2). This prosodic difference does not hold true when S belongs to the long set of “emphatic” personal pronouns.

S may also occur after the verb in which case it functions as an afterthought topic shift, as all constituents occurring after the verb. It may occur in a separate intonation unit (IU) or in the same IU as the rest of an utterance (fig. 3), but is always pronounced at a lower average pitch range than the preceding context or IU, and often with a rather flat prosodic contour.

An OSV constituent order is also found (rarely). In this order, O is always topicalized but, contrary to a topicalized S, it may or may not be included in the same IU as S and V, and its pitch is always H.

Based on a 1.5 hour-online pilot corpus, sound aligned, segmented into prosodic units and fully glossed and annotated for grammatical categories (partly available online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1075/scl.68>. website), this presentation will discuss the relationship of topicalization and afterthoughts with prosody in Beja and propose an annotation system for retrieval purposes in ELAN.

Reference

Moneglia M., Cresti E. 2006. C-ORAL-ROM Prosodic boundaries for spontaneous speech analysis. In: Kawaguchi Y. Zaima, S. Takagaki, T. (eds.). *Spoken Language Corpus and Linguistics Informatics*. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: Benjamins, pp. 89-114.

Fig. 1

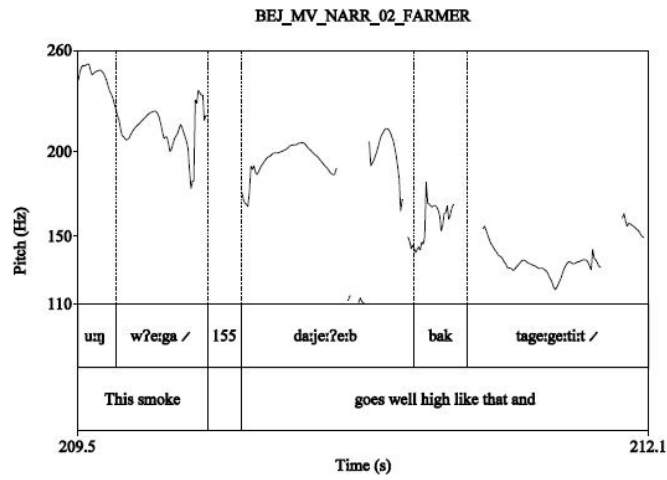


Fig. 2

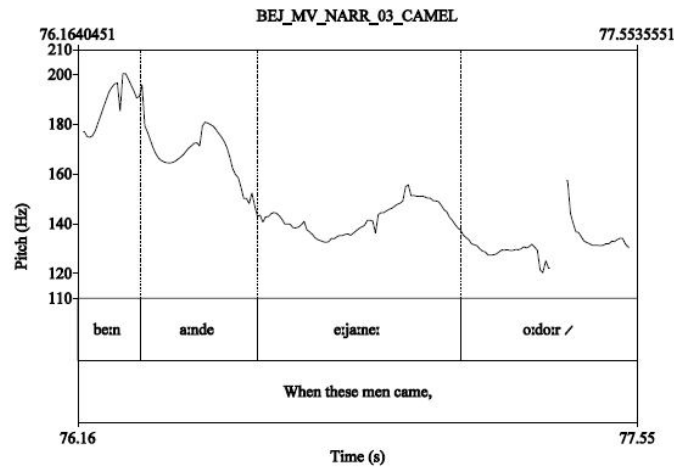


Fig. 3

