Prosody and information structure in Egyptian Arabic: do we witness the emergence of a prosodic focus-background construction?

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Whether information structural categories, specifically focus, may be signalled by prosody alone in Egyptian Arabic is still a matter of debate. Although the results of recent acoustic studies suggest that focus is marked by prosody in this language, evidence from speaker-variability and specifically from perception speaks against this view.

Taking a usage-based approach to grammar, I will offer evidence from production and perception to support the claim that the prosodic pattern found in a focus-background context does not (yet) constitute a conventionalized form-meaning pairing in Egyptian Arabic, but perhaps an emerging construction.

Specifically, I will present a configurational investigation of prosodic patterns based on a production experiment with all-new, topic-comment and focus-background sentences produced by 18 speakers of Egyptian Arabic. The results show strong speaker variability in the productions as well as gradient manifestations of the focus-background pattern. In addition, I will present the results of a perception study where Egyptian listeners largely failed to map prosody onto pragmatic meaning.

The findings on Egyptian Arabic are important for the discussion of focus marking in non-deaccenting languages because they suggest that lack of deaccentuation and consequently gradient rather than categorical focus realization may impede the conventionalization of the association between prosodic form and information structural function.