

The role of an individual listener in prosody perception

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Perceptual experimentation is a widely used tool to examine the nature of linguistic contrasts, including prosody. Much existing evidence on the structure of prosodic representations is obtained from perception studies. In this talk, I will draw attention to the frequently forgotten fact that individual listeners vary greatly with regards to their abilities to discriminate, identify and process acoustic signals that encode prosody. I argue that small sample sizes, recruitment of WEIRD participants, dichotomisation of participants into groups, and other common experimentation practices may be responsible for some of the controversies the field of prosody has seen over the years. I will focus primarily on controversial findings in rhythm research (such as p-centre, perceptual regularisation, and rhythmic typology) and highlight some links to related prosodic phenomena involving pitch. I will discuss how the study of prosody may benefit from understanding individual variability and outline a number of ways to capture listener abilities relevant to the perception of prosodic contrasts.