

The prosody of focus in a free word order language

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Prosody often encodes focus and givenness at the utterance level [1]. Within noun phrases (NPs), languages use phonological prosodic means such as accenting focused and new information, and deaccenting given information, as well as phonetic prosodic cues such as relative pitch height and variation in intensity. Some languages, however, do not mark focus within NPs prosodically [2].

This talk is concerned with how focus and givenness are realised within NPs in Djambarrpuyŋu, an Australian Indigenous language. An NP is considered here as a noun and its semantically related modifiers, such as adjectives, for example: “a red fish”. When said in the utterance “yesterday I saw a red bird and today I saw a red fish”, “fish” is in focus (and new), while “red” is given. Like many Australian languages, Djambarrpuyŋu allows free word order at the utterance-level, and additionally permits discontinuous nominal constituents in which the noun and modifiers occur distributed throughout the clause [3]. In other Australian languages, the variability is found to be constrained by information structure both at the utterance level and within NPs [4], [5]. This talk addresses how prosody and word order are used by Djambarrpuyŋu speakers to mark focus and givenness within NPs.

An experiment was conducted in which NPs with varying focused constituents (either the adjective, the noun, or the entire noun phrase) were elicited. The resulting NPs were coded as being contiguous (with adjective and noun in neighbouring positions), discontinuous (where there was one or more intervening words between the adjective and noun), or as a single word (where one word was deleted). The linear order of the adjective and noun was considered. Accent distribution, accent type, and the occurrence of pauses, as well as the measures of f0 peak, RMS amplitude peak, and duration of the target words, were investigated with respect to their focus or givenness status and word order. Word order contributes to distinguishing focus conditions in both contiguous and discontinuous NPs. However, prosodic analyses suggest that the correlates typically associated with focus-marking are not born out in these Djambarrpuyŋu data, with some intriguing exceptions.

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