

Intonation in Dalabon

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been increased interest in documenting intonational phenomena in minority or endangered languages in Australia, as well as elsewhere. In this paper the latest findings are outlined from an ongoing study of intonation in an indigenous Australian language, Dalabon, also known as Ngalkbun or Ngalbon. Dalabon is a member of the Gunwinyguan family (non-Pama-Nyungan), and is spoken by fewer than ten speakers as a first language. It is a highly polysynthetic language with head and dependent marking patterns within the NP and highly complex verbal morphology (Evans 2006). Two aspects of intonational typology are taken into consideration in this study. First of all, we naturally assume that Australian languages have intonationally defined groupings, like most of the world's languages. Secondly, with respect to the role of "pitch height", there is as yet no convincing evidence that any Australian language has lexical tone or lexically contrastive pitch accent, although there is some evidence that intonation is used to signal local prominence within an intonational phrase. Most Australian languages have been analyzed as having lexical stress, and previous analyses of Bininj Gun-wok, a near-neighbour of Dalabon (e.g. Bishop 2003, Fletcher and Evans 2000) have assumed that it is a stress-accent language. However, there are at least two unresolved issues in our analysis of Dalabon. We are not entirely certain of the relationship between word-level prosody and intonational structure in Dalabon. It is also not clear whether there is more than one level of intonational constituency.

Previous analyses of Dalabon (e.g. Sandefur and Jentian 1977) suggest certain syllables in words are metrically more prominent than others. However our results so far suggest that the only consistent phonetic cue to lexical stress is pitch level, i.e. there is a consistent rise to a high pitch peak in syllables that are close to the left edge of intonational constituents. This strong pitch movement has usually been interpreted as "primary stress" in earlier analyses and is usually aligned with the first or second syllable of an intonational constituent. Similarly there is generally a second pitch peak that occurs near the right edge of intonational constituents, which is not unlike sentence or phrasal stress in stress-accent languages. This peak generally occurs on the antepenultimate, penultimate or final syllable of a phrase. There is no real evidence of de-accenting, and there is no clear evidence that unaccented syllables can be further differentiated on the basis of metrical prominence. At first pass, this suggests that basic use of intonation in Dalabon is primarily phrasal or edge-marking and that perhaps Dalabon has been wrongly analysed as a stress language. However local emphasis can be signaled with an extra high pitch accent *within* an intonational constituent, and this pitch peak generally aligns with a heavy 'accentable' syllable. Dalabon like Bininj Gun-wok (Bishop 2003), has some features of a stress-accent language, without being a "typical stress language" (Gussenhoven 2006:218). In this paper a revised analysis of Dalabon intonation will be presented, taking into account recent re-analyses of a corpus of spoken narratives and wordlists collected in Arnhem Land, Northern Territory.

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