

INTONATION AND FOCUS IN WEST GREENLANDIC

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This contribution investigates the intonation of West Greenlandic, a language from the Inuit branch of the Eskimo-Aleut language family. More specifically, it concentrates on the question of focus realisation by means of intonation. Analysing this aspect of West Greenlandic grammar presents two main interests: It closes a gap in the existing research on this language and it contributes to the development of theories modelling intonation in general and the role of intonation in the expression of information structural categories in particular.

Concerning the first objective, previous work on West Greenlandic has primarily concentrated on the complex morphological or syntactic properties of this language. There are a few preliminary studies of intonation in West Greenlandic, though none of them considers the effect of focus or any other information structural category.

From the theoretical point of view, the study of this language, which differs substantially from the well-studied European languages, is extremely interesting: West Greenlandic does not have any stress or accent and is thus one of those languages that Jun classifies as “non-stress and non-lexical pitch-accent languages” [1:445]. This group of languages has not been recognised in more traditional intonational typologies categorising languages as intonation languages (e.g., English), tone languages (e.g., Mandarin) or lexical pitch-accent languages (e.g., Japanese), and only a few of these languages that do not fit into the traditional three categories have been described intonationally.

This paper analyses the intonation of West Greenlandic within the autosegmental-metrical framework and the intonational realisation of focus, examining the pitch contour on a constituent in focus and the effects on its pitch range. The results are based on an experiment in which four native speakers of West Greenlandic produced about 80 question-answer pairs in which three basic declarative sentences in unmarked – SOV – word order were varied in focus structure and focus type, as well as sentence length and construction type. Altogether, 321 utterances were recorded, which have been analysed statistically for their F0 maxima, minima and span. Also, pitch contours were identified for all words.

Because of the language’s complex and very productive derivational morphology, words in West Greenlandic express the equivalent of complete phrases in a language such as English. When uttered in declarative sentences, they usually bear one of two contours – HL or HLH – on the last two or three vocalic morae. The HLH contour can be decomposed into HL, a property of the word, and a final H, a boundary tone associated with the Phonological Phrase (cf. [2]). Whereas some speakers almost always realise the full contour, resulting in a regular HLH pattern, others predominantly use HL IP-internally or employ both to an equal extent.

The present study examines whether the choice of the pitch contour is influenced by focus and finds that, although there is considerable variation among the speakers, all of them used HLH more often on words in focus than on non-focussed words, meaning that focussed words are realised with complete contours more often than given words. Moreover, there is a clear effect of focus type for two speakers who used the full HLH contour more often for corrective than for information focus.

Also for pitch range, an effect of focus is observed, although the picture is slightly more complex here. In some cases, focus is marked by a greater span, in other cases the whole register is raised while the span is not affected. Sometimes, a combination of both effects occurs. Again there is variation between the speakers, but the overall picture also differs for the constituents. Only the non-final, i.e. pre-verbal, constituents subject, indirect and direct object are considered. As a result, the indirect object is the only constituent to occur both pre- and post-focally, namely after a focussed subject or before a focussed direct object. Accordingly, the indirect object displays the most complex pattern. Subject focus usually results in an expanded span, while focus on the direct object is primarily marked by a raised register, partly combined with a larger span. For the indirect objects, in certain cases, no statistically significant distinction between focussed and given words could be established, whereas mostly the span is larger on focussed than on non-focussed words. Most interestingly, L tones of indirect objects in focus are higher than those of some given indirect objects and lower than those of others. Because different kinds of given

indirect objects are present in the analysed corpus, it is not surprising that they display the most differentiated interaction between different types of focus and givenness.

A different marking for different focus types is also found for direct objects and subjects. For example, the larger span on focussed subjects is a result of raised H tones in the case of information focus, but achieved with lowered Ls for corrective focus, and on direct objects only information focus is marked by an extended span over and above the higher register.

Thus, in addition to describing an aspect of the intonation of West Greenlandic, the results of the present study also shed light on the question of different focus types. A clear difference between information focus and corrective focus emerges from the study.

REFERENCES

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