

Focus prosody divorced from stress and intonation in Chichewa, Chitumbuka and Durban Zulu

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Much work on the interaction of prosody and focus assumes that, cross-linguistically, there is a necessary correlation between the position of main sentence stress (or accent) and focus, and that an intonational pitch change on the focused element is a primary cue to focus. (See, for example, Reinhart 1995; Samek-Lodovici 2005, 2006; Selkirk 1984, 1995, 2004; Rooth 1992, 1996; Szendrői 2003; Truckenbrodt 1995). This work proposes not only that sentence accent is conditioned both by syntactic factors and also by semantic ones, primarily focus (Bruce 1977, Gussenhoven 1984, 1996, 1999 and many others). It also claims that focused constituents, as inherent prosodic heads, must have culminative prosodic prominence: STRESS-FOCUS (Samek-Lodovici 2005: 697):

For any XP_f and YP in the focus domain of XP_f , XP_f is prosodically more prominent than YP .

However, as other work like Ladd (1996) and Hayes & Lahiri (1991) has pointed out, the Stress-Focus correlation is mainly supported by European word stress languages where cues for sentence accent – like culminative pitch movement and duration – co-occur on the head syllable of focused constituents, lending it unambiguous prosodic prominence in the Intonational Phrase. A more universal cue to focus, they argue, is phonological (re-)phrasing: narrow focused constituents trigger different phonological phrasing from broad focused constituents. Sentence accent is a cue to phonological phrasing, not directly to focus, in this approach, and is only a potential cue - not one found in every language.

In this talk, I discuss three Bantu languages – Chichewa, Durban Zulu and Chitumbuka – and show that in all three languages phonological phrasing is conditioned by both syntax and, to some extent, focus. All three languages have phrasal stress: lengthening of phrase-penult syllables, with the penult syllable of the utterance receiving extra lengthening. The last word in a focus-conditioned phonological phrase does, then, receive phrasal stress. These languages are, then, relevant for question of whether accent or phrasing is the primary correlate of focus.

I argue that accent (stress) is not the primary correlate, as we find systematic mismatches between stress and focus. Sentence stress – realized as extra penult lengthening – remains fixed on the final word of an utterance; it is not attracted to the phonological phrase containing a focused constituent. Within phonological phrases, it is also the last word of the phrase, not necessarily the one in narrow focus, which realizes phrasal stress, and is the anchor for the question intonation melody in Chitumbuka and Chichewa. In Chitumbuka, a productive focus particle – the equivalent of English *also* – attracts phrasal stress to its verbal host, not necessarily to the word it places in focus.

The conclusion I argue for is that re-phrasing, not stress or accent (intonation register or melody), is the main prosodic correlate of focus in these languages. The interest of these languages for the typology of intonation, then, is that they illustrate languages where intonation has limited use and where, notably, intonation does not highlight focused information in the way we might expect from European stress languages.