

- oral or poster -

Intonational focus marking in tone languages: The case of Beaver (Northern Athabaskan)

It has been generally assumed that tone languages are more restricted in their use of intonational mechanisms to signal information structure than languages without lexical specifications of pitch (Cruttenden, 1997; Hartmann, 2007). Many tone languages rely on particles or syntactic means for this purpose, as McDonough (2003) has found for Navajo, which does not appear to encode information structure in prosodic cues.

However, various prosodic ways of marking focus have been documented for tone languages, and this paper presents one which so far has not been found in this type of language. In contrast to Navajo, Beaver, a Northern-Athabaskan register tone language of Canada, makes use of a falling initial phrase accent -HL to mark focused constituents. This intonational tone is accompanied by an expansion of pitch range with a subsequent compression on post-focal material.

The findings for Beaver complement and expand the attested strategies for prosodic focus marking in tone languages, which will be briefly surveyed and systematized in the second part of the presentation. So far, two main mechanisms have been reported: First, the manipulation of pitch range, e.g. focal expansion and post-focal compression as in Mandarin (Xu, 1999; Peng et al., 2005) or H-raising as in Haussa (Leben et al., 1989). And second, changes in intermediary level phrasing (Downing et al., 2004, on Chichewa, Kügler, 2007, on Yucatec Maya), and the concomitant changes in the realization of lexical tones (cf. Hyman, 1999, for an analysis of focus in Bantu languages). In addition to these two main strategies, longer duration has been found to be a reliable cue to information structure in a few tone languages, as for example in Taiwanese (Pan, 2007). Finally, in languages with very restricted tone systems, intonational accents (“pitch accents”) can signal focus (e.g. Gussenhoven, 2004, on Central Franconian), a strategy well-known from non-tonal languages.

Beaver adds a further strategy to this set, because here, focus is marked by intonation in a non-restricted tone language, in the cross-linguistically highly unusual shape of an initial phrase accent. It thus raises further doubt about the widespread assumption that tone languages are more restricted in their use of intonational mechanisms to signal information structure than languages without lexical specifications of pitch.

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