Alexandre Delfino (Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte): Prosodic marking of referential status in Brazilian Portuguese

Abstract

During discourse production, the speaker refers to entities and events from the real world using linguistic forms. A mental model is built as new information is added and integrated to previous information. A rising trend (Prince, 1981; Gundel et al., 1993, among others) has shown that the traditional dichotomy between new and given information statuses is not applicable to a whole range of discourse referents in real life conversations. The information status can be signalized by morphosyntactic marking e.g. (in)definite articles or by acoustic marking e.g. pitch accent. In West Germanic languages, new referents tend to be marked with a phrasal accent (H*), and given referents tend to be deaccented. Baumann (2006) shows that accessible referents tend to be marked with an intermediate phrase accent (H+L*). In Brazilian Portuguese, Arantes et al. (in preparation) show that there are some prosodic differences between new and given referents like (a) longer duration in new referents and (b) new referents tend to present a rising F0 contour at the beginning of the NP whereas in given referents these F0 variation is less prominent or even absent. The aim of the present study to investigate how different degrees of informational status are prosodically marked along the speaker's discourse. For this study, we designed a corpus of approximately 90 paragraphs, distributed into three conditions: given, new and accessible. For each group of sentences, we set one target word, which is embedded in a control phrase. Preceding text determined if the target NP was given, new or accessible. This study analysed word duration, global F0 measures and time-normalized F0 contours of the DP of the target word. The current results show that the duration is the most expressive feature. Also, the F0 contours associated with the three giveness levels are different, especially those elicited by given and new referents. The accessible status, howerver, is either too sensitive to its semantic relationship to the prime word or it is not relevant for BP speakers.