

Semantic and Prosodic Prominence – Pronouns Realisation in spontaneous Mono- and Bilingual English

Marlene Böttcher¹

¹*University of Stuttgart, Department of English Linguistics*

Background: The realisation of prosodically prominent pronouns (PRO) in English carrying stress or an accent is conditioned by information structure. As function words they generally occur unstressed and as given referents they are generally deaccented. Accents (PA) are realised if the pronoun is in focus ([1]). In pro-drop languages like Turkish and Greek these semantically prominent pronouns are overtly realised rather than “dropped” opposed to PRO realisation in English, German and Russian ([2]; [3]; [1]; [4]; [5]).

Recent research on spontaneous discourse has shown to allow for PA on given referents, i.e. spontaneous intonation is distinct from reading intonation ([6]). This was confirmed for pronouns in an investigation of spontaneous narrations by both mono- and bilingual speakers of English ([7]). PRO were found when in focus, especially in cases of contrastive focus and contrastive topics. Additionally, PRO were realised in phrasal edge position, i.e. if realised at the beginning or the end of an intonation phrase or as its only constituent. The bilingual group in [7] comprised heritage speakers (HS) of Russian, Turkish and Greek. The different language background of the speakers are taken up in this study.

Study: The present study presents an analysis of spontaneous speech by 4 monolingual and 16 bilingual speakers (4xGerman, 4xRussian, 4xTurkish, 4xGreek) of English from the RUEG corpus ([8]). The spontaneous narrations in the RUEG corpus portray a car accident and were elicited in two situations with different formality. The subcorpus of 35 minutes of speech consisted of 40 narrations with an average length of 53,4 s and 150 words. The 400 personal pronouns produced over all narrations were analysed for semantic prominence, i.e. contrast ([9]) and prosodic prominence, i.e. relative prominence and PA placement ([10]; [11]). There is a preference for longer narrations including more words in the formal situation (fs) and for more pronouns in the informal situation (is) (cf. Table 1).

Results: Overall, there were more PROs produced in formal compared to informal narrations. This tendency was strongest for the monolingual speakers, while HS produce a similar number of unprominent pronouns in both situations. Likewise, the number of semantically prominent pronouns was similar for both situations for the HS, while monolinguals produced less of these contrastive pronouns in informal compared to formal narrations (cf. Figure 1).

There was a considerable number of PROs independent of semantic prominence induced by contrast (N=45, cf. Table 2). While speakers of all groups produced such PROs, there is a preference for one type with regard to language background (cf. Table 2). German HS produce the highest number of phrase final PROs. While both monolinguals and Greek HS produced no separately phrased pronouns due to e.g. hesitation.

There were also a number of semantically prominent pronouns produced without prosodic prominence. While the monolingual speakers marked semantically prominent pronouns prosodically with full prominence and a PA in 90% of all instances (N=9), HS left contrastive pronouns often prosodically unmarked, realising PAs in only 47% of the cases (N=17, cf. Table 3 for distribution over speaker groups). The speaker groups differ as such that German and Turkish HS produce weaker prominences, while Greek and Russian HS produce a number of full prominence PA.

Discussion: While the respective heritage language did not have an influence, bilinguality and the formality of the situation did, i.e. there is a tendency to produce less PROs by HS and overall more PROs in formal narrations. The number of PROs not expressing a semantic contrast can be explained by the previously reported aspects of prosodic phrasing and the spontaneous nature of the data (Böttcher & Zerbian, 2020). These instances were not analysed as expressions of contrast. However, given the spontaneous nature of the data it is still possible that speakers were having a contrast in mind. The number of pronouns expressing a semantic contrast not carrying prosodic prominence, predominantly produced by HS, is in line with the overall tendency for these speakers to avoid PROs altogether. The analysed data suggests an overgeneralization of HS to deaccentuate pronouns as function words in connection to given referents even when they are semantically prominent.

Table 1: Averages of seconds (t(s)), words, pronouns (pro), referential (ref) and deictic (deix) pronouns in a narration in formal (fs) and informal situation (is) across speaker groups (mono=monolingual, bi=bilingual, R=Russian, T=Turkish, G=Greek)

situation	t(s)		words		pro		ref		deix	
	fs	is	fs	is	fs	is	fs	is	fs	is
speaker group										
mono	55,0	28,3	148	82	7	8	4	4	3	4
biD	76,0	64,0	189	176	9	12	6	7	3	5
biR	50,8	36,5	114	93	7	8	4	4	3	4
biT	60,0	55,8	176	188	9	19	6	12	3	7
biG	51,8	56,0	155	177	7	16	4	10	3	6
all	58,7	48,1	156	144	8	12	5	7	3	5

Table 2: Number of prosodically prominent pronouns expressing no semantic contrast in regard to prosodic phrasing (by speaker group (mono=monolingual, bi=bilingual, R=Russian, T=Turkish, G=Greek)

	mono	biD	biR	biT	biG
Phrase final	2	12	5	5	4
Small IP/hesitation	0	2	2	3	0
Phrase initial/Topic	2	3	0	3	6

Table 3: Number and percentages of semantically prominent pronouns in relation to their prosodic prominence by speaker group (mono=monolingual, bi=bilingual, R=Russian, T=Turkish, G=Greek)

		mono	biD	biR	biT	biG
Prosodic Prominence	0	1	2	3	10	3
	≥1	9	1	4	10	4
	PA	9	1	4	8	4

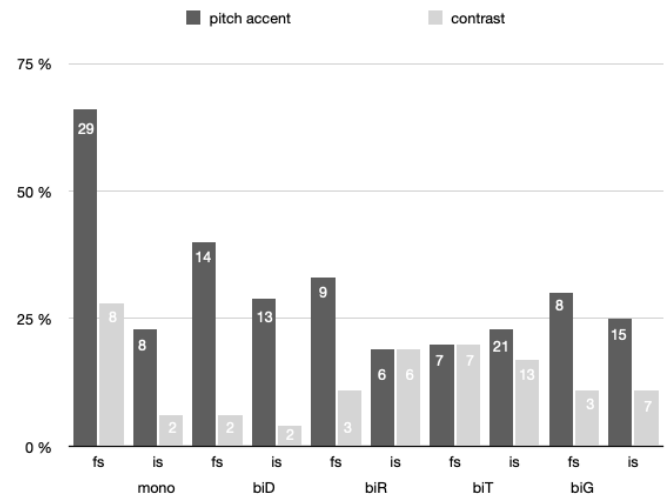


Figure 1: Number and percentages of accented and semantically prominent pronouns (contrast) in formal (fs) and informal narrations (is) across speaker group (mono=monolingual, bi=bilingual, R=Russian, T=Turkish, G=Greek)

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