

Sources of variability in prosody perception: Language, Listener, Attention

Jennifer Cole, Northwestern University

Across languages, prosodic patterns vary in their phonological form, phonetic expression, and in their function related to linguistic meaning. Models of prosodic typology, and the prosodic theories that underlie those models, rest heavily on evidence related to the prosodic patterns speakers produce under different grammatical, pragmatic, or discourse conditions. It follows that claims about cross-linguistic differences are valid only to the extent that speakers from the same language or dialect group produce similar prosodic patterns for a given linguistic condition. Increasingly, through advances in statistical modeling and with the analysis of larger datasets, findings from production studies show significant differences among individual speakers (e.g., Niebuhr, et al. 2011; Mücke & Grice 2014; Cangemi et al. 2016; Cangemi & Grice 2016; other works reviewed in Cole 2015). These findings of individual speaker variation challenge some traditional ideas about prosodic representation and the relationship between prosodic form and prosodic meaning, and raise new questions about how listeners cope with such variation. This talk builds on prior work, exploring prosodic variation from the listeners' perspective. I present an overview of findings from several of my recent studies examining whether and how listeners vary in their perception of prosodic prominences and boundaries in conversational speech—across prosodically diverse languages and individual listeners, and in relation to listeners' attentional focus. These studies are methodologically united in examining prosody perception with untrained listeners, using Rapid Prosody Transcription to capture a listener's real-time auditory impressions of prominence and boundary. The findings point to variation in the selection and weighting of prosodic cues across languages and individual listeners, and due to attentional factors, but also reveal common patterns that (mildly) support the claim of a universal, biological basis for the linguistic use of prosody.

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