The role of edges in prosodic articulation of discourse in phrase languages.

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Based on our results from spontaneous narratives in Japanese, Mongolian and Kammu (a Mon-Khmer language spoken in Laos), we propose that languages that primarily would be described as phrase languages (Féry 2010) also use boundaries for discourse means. Moreover, it is the rightmost boundaries that are involved in their articulation irrespectively of whether the language is prosodically right or left edged. We also speculate that such a high load of boundary tones is due to the lack of lexical stress in our language set.

We analyze information structure, syntax and intonation separately and then compare them to deter-mine the connections between them. We divide information flow into Information Units (IUs) consisting of Given/New or only New information. An IU consists of Topic (what the proposition is about) and Comment (information about the Topic) or only Comment.

All three languages have a high functional load of tone on the lexical level, Kammu having lexical tones (low/high), Japanese having word accent and Mongolian having Accentual phrase (left-edged rises on prosodic words) (Karlsson 2014). Kammu marks prosodic boundaries on the right phrase edges while Mongolian and Japanese have left-edged phrase boundaries. Beside this primarily syntactically motivated use of intonation we found that all three languages use prosody to articulate discourse structure, though means and preference are language specific. In all three languages right edges are involved in this articulation. Japanese and Kammu primarily mark Topic/Comment dichotomy. Kammu marks the Topic/Comment boundary by a higher boundary. Further, the scaling of the rightmost boundary is used for discourse structuring (Karlsson et al. 2015). For the Japanese narratives, each speaker produced a higher mean F0 for the Topic than for the Comment (mean difference of 1.84 semitones). The phrase-final F0 peak was also higher for Topic than Comment (mean difference of 1.36 semitones). Thus, Japanese involves both changes in pitch range and the level of local final highs to articulate Topic-Comment. The rightmost boundary is instead used for other pragmatic means (Maekawa 2015). Six Mongolian narratives have been analyzed. For all four speakers except one there was no significant difference in average F0 between Topic/Comment, nor for the phrase-final F0 peak. The rightmost edge of IUs tends to have the highest F0 value and it seems to correlate with the new-given dichotomy: it is higher when New information coincides with the second part of the IU (most often Comment). The dichotomy Topic-Comment is instead signaled by pause rather systematically, though it remains to be investigated.

To summarize, the rightmost position is used for discourse meanings, and this is irrespective if it is already used for linguistic purposes (phrasing and focusing in Kammu). This leads to a rather high functional load of the rightmost edge in such languages. Further, all three languages lack metrical head (lexical stress) for alignment of pitch accents, and it might be the reason for the prevalence of aligning prosodic events to the edges.

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