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The prosody of topics in two varieties of Swedish: Effects of contrast and referential status

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Two studies are presented which explore the prosodic marking of topics in South and Stockholm Swedish. To provide a very basic definition, the topic of a sentence is the constituent that the rest of the sentence is saying something about (see [5] for a more elaborate definition). Topics have been further classified in various ways, see e.g. [3,4,6]. A well-studied type of topic is the Contrastive Topic (CT, e.g. [3]) as exemplified in (1); (2) exemplifies a non-contrastive case (henceforth, nonCT).

(1) Contrastive Topic: A: ‘What do wild animals like?’ B: ‘The bear_[TOP] likes honey.’

(2) Non-contrastive Topic: A: ‘What does the bear like?’ B: ‘The bear_[TOP] likes honey.’

Some accounts make reference to another information-structural (IS) dimension in distinguishing between types of topics, namely its referential status, i.e. new vs. given information (e.g. [4]). Our point of departure, however, is that the two IS dimensions – topic/comment and given/new information – are principally independent of each other in the sense that any type of Topic (such as a CT) may contain either new or given information.

In the presented studies, we explore whether new vs. given topics on the one hand, and different types of topics on the other, are distinguished prosodically in two selected varieties of Swedish. Both exhibit a lexical pitch-accent distinction (Accent I vs. Accent II), but they also differ crucially from a prosodic-typological point of view [2]: Stockholm Swedish behaves like an intonation language in that new information is typically highlighted by means of a sentence-level pitch accent, while South Swedish lacks such a device; intonation is first of all encoded by modifying the lexically-determined pitch patterns [1,2].

Study 1 compares two types of topics – a CT and a nonCT condition – where both conditions could be classified as containing non-new (given or accessible) information, as in (1) and (2) above. Study 2, on the other hand, compares new topics with given topics, where both conditions can be classified as contrastive. Both studies explore elicited speech data involving a question-answer paradigm, but, for external reasons, they differ in the degree of experimental control. Study 1 investigates highly-controlled laboratory speech, recorded in single-speaker sessions with about 10 speakers per dialect. This study involves both dialects, while study 2 was conducted for South Swedish only, with three pairs of subjects, and explores more freely elicited data.

Results obtained from study 1 suggest, for Stockholm Swedish, that both CT, nonCT, and a third condition – sentence-initial narrow focus – are marked by a rising sentence-level pitch accent on the initial word, which is realized differently in all three conditions in terms of F0 range, maximum, and level (see Fig. 1a). For Southern Swedish (see Fig. 1b and 1c), a more complex picture emerged, since speakers employed different strategies. The most common one involved modifying the range or level of the F0 patterns determined by the lexical pitch accents (Fig. 1b), as expected [1,2]. Another frequent strategy involved a rising pitch accent on the initial word, where the lexical pitch accent would normally stipulate a fall (Fig. 1c) – thus a pattern more similar to the one found in Stockholm Swedish and other intonation languages (e.g. [4]). This rising pattern was observed in CT for the two speakers shown in Fig. 1c, but other speakers (not illustrated here) used also it in the non-CT or in the initial focus condition.

Results from study 2 are currently being analysed, and further phonetic dimensions beyond F0 (such as durations) are taken into account. A complete account of the results will be presented at the conference.

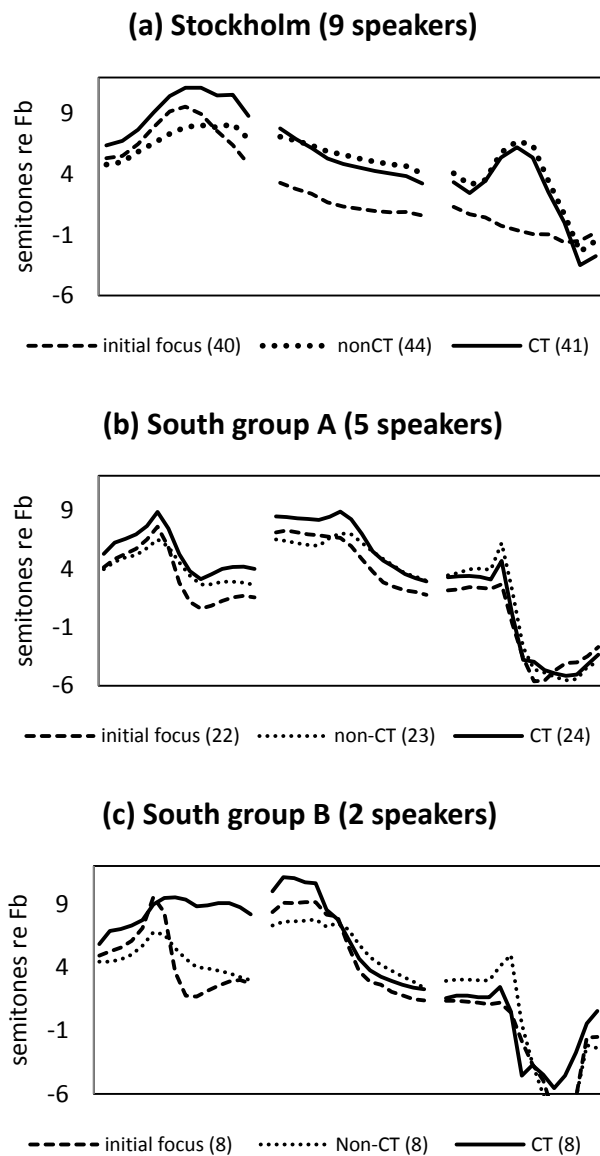


Figure 1: Results from a subset of study 1, using the test sentence *Wallander förlänger till November*. ('Wallander is continuing until November'). The plots are mean F0 contours (*N* in parentheses); gaps in the plots mark word boundaries (the function word *till* is excluded from the plots). The time scale is normalised. Semitones relate to an estimate of the individual speakers' base F0. (The extremely low F0 values (< 0 st) reached towards the end of the sentence are due to creaky voice.) Note that both conditions CT and non-CT involve a sentence-final narrow focus.

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