

Acoustic Correlates of New and Given Information in Cameroon English (CamE) Intonation

Yves Talla Sando Ouafeu

Englisches Seminar Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg i. Br.

sandoyves@yahoo.com

Abstract

Studies on English intonation have reported that native English speakers make a clear distinction between new information, that is information newly introduced in the discourse structure, and given information, that which can be recovered from the previous context either situationally or anaphorically, by accenting the former and deaccenting or de-emphasizing the latter (Halliday, 1967; Chafe, 1976; Fowler and Housum, 1987; etc.). Most of these studies have argued that native English speakers place a high pitch accent (H*) accent on new information and a low pitch accent (L*) on given information if it is at all accented (cf. Brown, 1983; Pierrehumbert and Hirschberg, 1990). Only very few of these surveys point to intensity or duration as acoustic correlates of new and given information (cf. Wennerstrom, 1994). By contrast, findings on some non-native English varieties or New Englishes (NEs) have suggested that their speakers rarely or hardly differentiate between new and given information in the discourse structure. Such findings claim that non-native English speakers tend to accent both new and given information in the discourse structure (Gumperz, 1982; Wennerstrom, 1994; Gut, 2005; etc.). Talla Sando (2005) recently arrived at the conclusion that unlike speakers of other non-native English varieties, Cameroon English (CamE) speakers make new information more prominent than given information in the discourse structure. A question arises as to whether Cameroon English speakers acoustically implement the accenting of new information and the deaccenting of given information in a way analogous to native English speakers'. This study is therefore an investigation of the acoustic correlates of both types of information in CamE intonation. It intends to show that, unlike studies on native English, the most obvious acoustic properties of new and given information in CamE intonation are intensity and duration. In other words, this study aims at demonstrating that Cameroon English speakers utter new information louder than given information and also make the vowel on the stressed syllable of new information longer than that on the stressed syllable of given information.

References

- Brown, G. (1983). Prosodic structure and the Given/New distinction. In Cutler, Ann and D. Robert Ladd, eds., *Prosody, Models and Measurements 1983*. Springer-Verlag, Berlin, pp. 67-78.
- Chafe, W.L. (1976). Givenness, contrastiveness, definiteness, subjects, topics and point of view. In Charles N. Li, ed., *Subject and Topic 1976*. Academic Press, New York.
- Fowler, C.A. and J. Housum (1987). Talkers' signaling of 'new' and 'old' words in speech and listeners' perception and use of the distinction. *Journal of Memory and Language*, **26.5**: 489-504.
- Gumperz, J. (1982). *Discourse Strategies*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Gut, U. (2005). Nigerian English prosody. *English World-Wide*, **26.2**: 153-177.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1967). Notes on transitivity and theme in English: part 2. *Journal of Linguistics*, **3**: 199-244.
- Pierrehumbert, J. and J. Hirschberg (1990). The meaning of intonational contours in the interpretation of discourse. In Cohen, Ph.R., J. Morgan and M.E. Pollack, eds., *Intentions in Communication 1990*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Massachusetts, pp. 271-311.
- Talla Sando Ouafeu, Y. (2005). *Intonational Meaning in Cameroon English Discourse: A Sociolinguistic Perspective*. PhD dissertation, submitted to the University of Freiburg, Germany.
- Wennerstrom, A. (1994). Intonational meaning in English discourse: a study of non-native speakers. *Applied Linguistics*, **15.4**: 399-420.