

Prosodic Aspects of Information Structure in Discourse

The research described in this thesis focuses on how speakers make use of prosodic aspects, such as accent lending and boundary marking pitch movements, and pauses, to realize the structure of spoken discourse. Structure in this respect refers to discourse boundaries of different depths on the one hand, and to important information at the word level on the other. Furthermore, it was investigated how *listeners* make use of these prosodic cues to detect the structure of spoken discourse, again in terms of boundaries such as sentences and paragraphs, and informative words.

To this end, first a text-based framework to analyze the structure of spontaneously spoken discourse was developed. The application of this framework to the verbatim transcriptions of spoken discourse then provided a detailed analysis in terms of discourse boundaries and important information. The combination of 1) the actual prosodic realization by the speakers, and 2) the structure perceived by the listeners, provided useful information about what prosodic means are used in the realization and perception of the structure of spoken discourse.

The results of the present study show that speakers made use of boundary tones and/or pauses to mark discourse boundaries, dependent on the depth of the boundary. Pauses were important for listeners to decide where boundaries occurred in the discourse.

To mark important information at the word level, speakers made mainly use of pitch accents. Information that was new to the discourse was realized with pitch accent more often than information that added little to the content. Pitch accents were also indicative for listeners to perceive important information.

This study is of interest to experimental phoneticians, as well as to researchers in the field of discourse studies and pragmatics.

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ISBN 90-5569-089-9



Netherlands Graduate School of Linguistics
Landelijke Onderzoekschool Taalwetenschap

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