A cross-linguistic exploration of the intonation of Contrastive Topics

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Contrastive topics (CTs) are a subset of the information-structural category of topics. Specifically, they evoke a set of alternative questions (Büring, 1997), and thus involve an element of sub-informativity (Gast, 2010). Gast differentiates between two types of CTs, namely context-changing and context-preserving CTs. In both these kinds of CTs, more than one topic-comment relation is established. However, they differ semantically, as can be shown by the questions under discussion that they answer (QUDs; Büring, 2003). Context-preserving CTs give a partial answer to a question, indicating that the rest of the answer is still to come. Context-changing CTs, on the other hand, challenge the question they respond to as being somehow incomplete, and introduce a more adequate QUD. The difference is shown in example (1):

(1) *A) Contrast-preserving CT:*
How did the athletes do today?
Marlena gave up after an hour, Anita injured her knee.
B) Contrast-changing CT (move-insertion):
How did the athlete do today?
Marlena gave up after an hour, Anita injured her knee.

Gast (2010) claims that the two kinds of CTs are differentiated by their intonation in German. Only context-changing CTs can be realized with the so-called root contour (i.e. L*+H H-; Jacobs, 1997), while context-preserving CTs occur with a hat contour (i.e. L*+H H+L*), and recent psycholinguistic research suggests that listeners begin using these contours to disambiguate early in sentence perception (Braun & Asano, 2013). However, this intonational distinction between different types of CTs is not reported to occur in English. Rather, Büring (2003) argues that all CTs in English are marked with "background accents", usually consisting of a L+H* pitch accent, followed by a rise from the intermediate phrase boundary to the intonational phrase boundary (i.e. L-H%).

Our research investigates the phonetic realization of CTs by both German and English native speakers. Twenty-four experimental sentences were constructed for each language, matched for lexical stress position of the topic constituent and segmental make-up. Of these sentences, 8 were preceded by a question triggering a context-preserving reading, and the other 16 equally distributed between two types of context-changing CTs. The sentence sets for German and English were semantically similar, though not always identical. We recorded 15 Southern German L1 speakers, 15 American English L1 speakers, and 15 German learners of L2 English producing the experimental sentences. We will present preliminary results showing cross-linguistic differences and individual strategy differences in the production of CTs in German and English, as well as evidence for the degree to which the different intonational realizations are learned by L2 speakers of English. Our results will be placed into the context of the Speech Learning Model (Flege, 1995), relating the comparability of the intonational contours across languages to their learnability.

References

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