

The De-Accenting and Re-Accenting of Repeated Lexical Items

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of the de-accenting of old or 'given' information has often been taken for granted as an intonational universal, despite hints to the contrary in the literature. An attempt is made to construct a test of such de-accenting and apply it to eight languages. It is found that de-accenting and re-accenting vary according to discourse structure and to language.

INTRODUCTION

It is regularly assumed that old or repeated information is not accented in discourse. One of the most quoted statements to this effect is in Halliday (1967: 23): 'Marked tonicity occurs, in general, under either (or both) of two conditions. Either some element other than the one just specified [= the last lexical item in the tone-group] is "contrastive"; or the element just specified (and possibly others before it) is "given"—has been mentioned before or is present in the situation.' The archetypal case of "given-ness" involves a repeated lexical item, e.g. *The stadium where Manchester United play is in the EAST of Manchester*. In this example *Manchester*, as a repeated item, is de-accented and the accent is thrown back onto the word *east*.

Such de-accenting is certainly the norm for the type of English which Halliday was describing (roughly RP) and for most other dialects of English. And it is easy to think of de-accenting as some sort of cognitive universal: we do not wish to re-accent repeated information because, in Chafe's (1974) terms, it is already in the consciousness of the speaker. Yet obligatory de-accenting of this sort (for it is obligatory in English) may not be as universal as first thought. There have been hints in the literature to this effect, e.g.

(a) Crystal (1975: 44) on Brazilian Portuguese: 'This tendency [to keep the tonic syllable on the last item in the tone-unit] applies even when one has repeated items in co-ordinate constructions', e.g.

Esti livro custa cinco dolares e esti aqui tres DOLares.

(b) Ladd (1990) gives examples from Roumanian, e.g.

[...o să vedem] ce aveți și ce nu AVETI

SUBJ we.see what you.have and what not YOU.HAVE

(c) Vanderslice & Pierson (1967) give examples from Hawaiian English, e.g.

Forty t'ree per cent is gavment ownEd, and fifty seven per cent is privately OWNed.

In more phonetically- rather than informationally-oriented research Gårding (1981) elicited Greek, Swedish and French versions of the sentence *Madame Marianne Mallarmé has a mandolin from Madrid* in a context which called for a focus on *Mallarmé*. She reported that 'In Greek and French the pitch contour is flattened after focus. For Swedish, on the other hand, the situation is different. Here the accents still have their pitch configurations after focus'. The reason for this was suggested to lie in the

lexical status of the accents in Swedish. The hints in the literature above suggest that it might not be only in languages with lexical accents that post-focal accents are unflattened.

With such comments in mind I constructed an intonational test of 13 setting-response pairs where the response involved a lexical item repeated from the setting. The pairs have been loosely translated into 8 languages, and pairs of native speakers of the languages (varying in number from 1 to 14) have read and recorded the setting-responses. I have analysed all the responses auditorily and a selected sample instrumentally. The languages and number of speakers are as follows: French 15, Italian 12, Tunisian Arabic 4, Russian 2, Greek 1, Macedonian 1, Swedish 1, Spanish 1. I have further, as yet unanalyzed, data on Albanian 4, German 1, and Lithuanian 1. It is of course obvious that this is in the nature of a prototype study of intonational typology and no statistical validity can yet be claimed for the results. I present here a sample of the responses in a number of languages and then some of the general conclusions.

SETTING-RESPONSE 1

The English version of the first example is as follows:

A: If you don't hurry up, you'll be late.

B: I don't care if we are late.

In this example *late*, a repeated item, and *we*, with identical, though shifted, reference to *you*, are treated as old information in English and are hence de-accented. There are two alternatives for the placement of the accent, depending on the reduction or non-reduction of *we're* or *we are*. With reduction the accent will be on *care* hence *I don't CARE if we're late*; without reduction the accent may be on *are*, hence *I don't care if we ARE late*. The latter accentuation emphasizes the positive polarity of the outcome. When we look at other languages, we find that most languages behave similarly to English. Indeed almost all my varying numbers of informants de-accented. In French where I had 14 informants for the sentence *Je m'en fiche d'être en retard*, 11 put the last accent on *fiche* and only 3 re-accented *retard*. In Spanish I had only one informant who, in the sentence *No me importa si llegamos tarde*, re-accented *tarde*. However two further facts make the Spanish informant important. One is that my Spanish informant re-accented in every response pair that I tested. The second is that a Ph.D. thesis (Ortiz-Lira, 1993) is about to be presented in Manchester which finds re-accenting as the norm for other Spanish informants who read this sentence. One speaker of Russian and Tunisian Arabic re-accented but no significance can be attached to this. The overall conclusion for this setting-response pair is that it produces de-accenting in all the languages tested with the almost certain exception of Spanish.

SETTING-RESPONSE 2

The next example is as follows:

A: I make the answer sixteen point one.

B: Well, I make it twenty-six point one.

This example is different from the preceding one in that it might be said to involve a positive accentuation for contrast as well as the de-accenting of old information. In this example the *point one* is de-accented in English and the accent in the response is on *six*. In French the sentence *Eh bien ma réponse est vingt six virgule un* produced de-accenting with the accent on *six* from 12 of the 15 informants and re-accenting with the accent on *un* from 3 informants. The Italian sentence *A me invece ventisei virgola uno* produced de-accenting on *ventisei* from 8 informants and re-accenting with the accent on *uno* from 4 informants. Otherwise there was one case of re-accenting in the Tunisian Arabic data and the single Macedonian and Spanish speakers both re-accented. As said in the previous discussion the Spanish data is the only one of these last three to which

importance should be attached. Overall this setting-response again generally produces de-accenting. But the cases of re-accenting have grown because, while the situation in French and Spanish remains the same as in setting-response 1, there is now a substantial minority in Italian using re-accenting.

SETTING-RESPONSE 3

The next example concerns the reading of football results (for a detailed exposition of this topic in English see Cruttenden, 1974). The setting-response is as follows:

A: What was the score?

B: Liverpool 1 (one), Manchester United 1 (one).

This example is clearly different from the preceding ones: the old information is now completely within the response. In English the repetition of the word *one* produces de-accenting and hence the last accent is thrown back onto the preceding word *United*. Now it might be objected that this is a very specialised type of intonational context but in fact it is not. The same sort of correlated construction produces sentences like *John has two and MARY has two*, and many similar. What happens in other languages? Firstly it has to be said that the test does not work (as I found out too late) in all languages, because a different way of reading results on radio and television is often used corresponding to *Liverpool-Manchester United 1-1*. This applied in Greek, Macedonian and Russian where the informants said that they could not possibly read results in my way. So these languages do not enter the present comparison. (Incidentally my lone Swedish informant sent me the data and for some reason chose to alter the scores to 3-2 so that data was not relevant either!) For those remaining languages where the test was legitimate, the findings were quite unambiguous: only one informant (Italian) out of the whole total used de-accenting. What this means is that de-accenting appears to be impossible with this setting-response for French, Italian, Spanish, and Tunisian Arabic, e.g. the Tunisian Arabic production was always:

l-ʔafriqi	wajd	u-t-taraji	WAHD
Afriqi	one	Taraji	one

and in Italian: *Inter uno Roma UNO*

SETTING-RESPONSE 4

The last type of setting-response to be discussed here involves pairs like:

A: That reply is correct.

B: You mean that reply is incorrect.

and

A: I think the locals are very friendly.

B: I think they are very unfriendly

I call this type of de-accenting (where it applies) morphological de-accenting. In English in such cases obligatory de-accenting takes place, e.g. *I think they are very UNfriendly*. Greek, Macedonian, and Swedish follow the English pattern (but there was only one informant in each of these languages) where all the other languages favour re-accenting (Italian 9-3, French 12-3, Tunisian Arabic 4-0, Russian 2-0 plus the solitary but presumed highly significant Spanish speaker). So, for example the French informants preferred *Moi, je les trouve très impoLIS*, the Italians preferred *A me invece sembrano molto disSmili*, and the Russians preferred *A mne kažetsja,cto oni neprIVETlivo*.

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, there appear to be at least two dimensions of variation operating: (1) There is a scale of structural likelihood of de-accenting: firstly, where it arises only from old, repeated, information, as in the first setting-response pair discussed, de-accenting appears

to be universal in so far as the sample of languages here is concerned. Secondly and paradoxically, where the presence of a repeated item is bolstered by the presence of a contrast earlier in the sentence as in the second setting-response discussed, the likelihood of de-accenting appears to be somewhat less (although of course one sentence is not enough from which to draw any strong conclusions and in any case the difference from the first example is largely in the Italian data). Thirdly, and continuing the paradox, in the third setting-response, where a repeated item and a contrast are again involved, but where the repetition and the contrast are within one speaker, there is almost no possibility of de-accenting in a number of languages. Lastly the special type of morphological contrast tested in the fourth setting-response also strongly disfavours de-accenting. A general conclusion from the four examples is that while the presence of old repeated information may encourage de-accenting, the presence of contrast may actually inhibit de-accenting in some languages.

(2) Some languages clearly favour de-accenting or re-accenting more than others. It will by now be obvious that re-accenting is much more common in the Romance languages, Spanish, Italian, and French, than in the other languages tested. But it is by no means a clear-cut difference: while de-accenting is obligatory in English (and perhaps some other non-Romance languages) both de-accenting and re-accenting are sometimes options in the Romance languages and there may be variation both between speakers, and indeed even within one speaker on grounds not yet known and of course not tested here.

Finally, to return to the quotation from Gårding (1981) quoted at the outset of this article, even the re-accenting of repeated material may involve an accent which is never particularly prominent and indeed never as prominent as an earlier accent. So we may have a sort of semi-flattening which approaches that of the accenting of post-focal lexical material in Swedish. First inspections of pitch traces of a sample of relevant data from Spanish do indeed suggest that falling pitch patterns on re-accented syllables always consist of a relatively narrow fall.

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