Sentence parsing and the “parsing of prosody”: the interplay of pitch and durational cues in French sentential fragments

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The notion of parsing implies that syntactic dependency and other syntactic relations can be straightforwardly computed from the text. However, there is ample evidence showing that prosody helps disambiguate syntactic structure, even when the sentence is simply written (Fodor, 1998, 2002). Moreover, parsing is not confined to syntax. Prosodic domains are in fact marked by constellations of cues, which stand as the major empirical evidence for prosodic structure and the constituents it comprises. These cues have been shown to be used in lexical processing, in the disambiguation of syntax, or in the identification of morpho-syntactic units. Laboratory phonology approaches to the study of speech have been instrumental in the discovering and discussion of cues to prosodic structure, such as the notion of prosody as “grammar in its own right” (Beckman, 1996), and in shaping of the essential questions aimed at deepening our understanding of prosodic constituency across languages.

In this talk I provide an overview of the contribution of such work in laboratory phonology to current knowledge of prosodic constituency and phrasing, based on the discovery of phonetic and phonological cues in a variety of languages. As a case study, I will show that the emergence and use of an intermediate phrase (ip) in French is not restricted to marked syntactic structures, but surfaces at the right edge of an NP/VP boundary (Michelas and D’Imperio 2012, D’Imperio and Michelas 2014) through the complex use of language-specific cues involving pitch level and pre-boundary lengthening. Finally, I will show that the regularities found in production appear to be also actively employed in perception and morpho-syntactic parsing decisions (Michelas & D’Imperio, 2015). Here I will argue, based on these findings, that prosody guides morpho-syntactic parsing online, even in sentential fragments that do not involve classical syntactic ambiguity.

References