

Prosodic phrasing in Rutooro: Attachment height and prosodic indeterminacy

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While prosodic structure largely corresponds to syntactic structure, prosody is often found to be 'flatter' than syntax. Most research addressing apparent exceptions to syntax-prosody isomorphism utilizes one of two strategies: i) pursue sentence-level phonological well-formedness explanations, i.e. a phonological solution, or ii) propose an underlying syntax that matches the surface prosodic form, i.e. a syntactic solution. In this talk, I discuss a syntax-prosody mismatch in Rutooro, (Clemens and Bickmore 2019), that defies both the strictly syntactic and prosodic explanations, arguing instead for a syntax-prosody interface solution.

Rutooro is a Bantu language of Uganda that lacks lexical tone. Instead, prominence in Rutooro is marked with a High tone (H) on the penultimate syllable of the phonological phrase (ϕ -phrase). Like many languages in the family, syntactic XPs reliably correspond to ϕ -phrases; however, we find a previously unattested pattern in the prosody of Rutooro adnominal phrases. Head nouns are marked H when they combine with strong determiners and full relative clauses (RCs). In contrast, nouns do not bear an H tone when they combine with weak determiners, adjectives, and reduced RCs. We propose that the distribution of H tones serves as a diagnostic for whether an adnominal is generated in a DP-internal or external position.

Reduced object RCs with overt subjects are a special case: the head of the reduced object RC bears an unexpected H tone, while the subject is all-Low despite the fact that it is a self-contained XP. Also in the realm of reduced RCs, when a relativized head is separated from the RC by an additional modifier, e.g. an adjective, that modifier is realized as all-Low even though it is phrasal. We propose that the attested, nonisomorphic phrasing arose to prevent i) ambiguity and ii) prosodic indeterminacy—when prosodic structure could be the output of more than one syntactic configuration—and was subsequently grammaticalized. Thus, while the prosodic realization of one specific construction in the language is exceptional, this exception allows for greater regularity in the signaling of syntactic constituency via prosodic structure.