

Hindi prosody through the lens of Prominence Theory

Jennifer Cole, Northwestern University

Across languages, it is often observed that variation in the prosodic form of utterances relates to information structure (IS). Expressions that convey new information or focus are distinguished from expressions that are discourse-given through the phonological specification of intonational features and/or their phonetic implementation. Evidence from numerous studies demonstrates the prosodic encoding of IS in Hindi/Urdu [1-6], though with some differences in experimental findings across studies. The occurrence of inconsistencies across studies is not unique to research on Hindi, and points to a more general problem in prosody research: IS effects on prosody in speech production are not uniformly observed within or across languages. For example, research on English and German reveals a stochastic mapping between intonational features and IS categories marking focus, with further variability due to speech style. Research on these and other languages also points to substantial differences among speakers in their prosodic spell-out of IS distinctions, at both the phonological and phonetic levels of representation.

This talk looks beyond IS to examine several other factors that influence prosodic variation in speech production. From work on Hindi, English, Russian and other languages, we observe independent effects on prosodic variation due to word order, subjecthood, animacy, IS, and speaker affect. Following recent proposals [7-9], I argue that these myriad effects on prosody are subsumed under the notion of prominence, a scalar property that relates the communicative importance of an expression to its perceptual salience. I discuss a Prominence Theory of prosodic variation in the context of my ongoing study of Hindi (with T. Luchkina and V. Puri), which highlights the need to distinguish prominence perceived on the basis of the acoustic signal from prominence grounded in structural and semantic properties. This work also highlights the use of language that is natural, expressive, and syntactically rich for investigating prosodic variation and its role in linguistic communication.

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