

Asymmetric prominence of correlates of wh-words in San Martín Peras Mixtec

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Introduction. Correlates of wh-words (CW) are realized with prosodic prominence in many languages [4]. In this presentation, I extend this generalization to San Martín Peras Mixtec (SMPM) (ISO: JMX), a tonal language. I argue that the bolded CW in (1) is prosodically distinct from the same word when elicited in a broad focus context, as in (2).

(1) *What did Maria give to Juan?*

Chìchí tàshī ñá ntà'ǎ rà
mushroom gave her hand him
“She gave him a MUSHROOM.”

(2) *What happened today?*

Chìchí tàshī Maria ntà'ǎ Juan
mushroom gave M. hand J.
“Maria gave a MUSHROOM to Juan.”

In SMPM, high tones at the right edge of CWs are raised in pitch when compared to the same tone in a broad focus context.

Additionally, I argue that two current theories for how correlates of wh-words receive prominence cannot account for the pattern of SMPM. First, I argue that SMPM has no default prominence pattern—thus, theories that rely on movement of default pitch accents onto constituents that are not given in the context are insufficient [2]. Second, I show using tone sandhi and vowel length that CW are not aligned to a major prosodic boundary in the language [1]. Instead, I claim that CW are a type of focus [3], and that this status triggers phonological pitch-raising.

Background. SMPM is an Oto-Manguean language spoken in Oaxaca, Mexico, and in diaspora communities throughout California. It has default VSO word order and has 5 distinct tones: low, mid, high, falling and rising. CWs are fronted to a preverbal position. Additionally, the language permits fronting of constituents in broad focus contexts.

The prominence of CWs in SMPM. Recordings were made of one female speaker answering broad focus and wh-questions. 36 bisyllabic target words were recorded 8 times in each question context, resulting in 576 total target syllables. The mean pitch in ERB was taken at 10 points within each syllable nucleus and compared across sentence type. Word final high tones are realized with a higher F0 value (~0.2 ERB) when they are at the right edge of a CW. This raising is equivalent to slightly more than half the distance between each level tone (~0.35 ERB) and is statistically significant. However, this prominence is asymmetric: only high tones are realized at a higher pitch when at the right edge of CW—other tones remain unchanged. There are no significant durational differences. Prior to the conference, I plan to confirm these findings with more speakers during an upcoming trip to Mexico.

Further implications. This prominence pattern is highly targeted—one tone in one position is affected. In this respect, SMPM is distinct from some other tonal languages where the entire pitch range is expanded under focus [5]. This diversity of patterns suggests a variety of prominence strategies in tonal languages—some primarily phonetic and some arguably phonological. Additionally, the asymmetric pattern displayed in SMPM may help adjudicate between differing theories of how CWs receive their prominence. Indeed, the pattern in SMPM suggests that formal features such as [FOCUS] can directly trigger phonological effects without mediation from prosodic structure. This suggests that the mapping from syntax to prosody can be sensitive to this feature. **Selected References.** [1] Féry, C. (2013) Focus as prosodic alignment. [2] Kratzer, A. and Selkirk, E. (2018). Deconstructing information structure. [3] Rooth, M. (1992). A theory of focus interpretation. [4] Selkirk, E. (1995). Sentence prosody: Intonation, stress and phrasing. [5] Xu, Y. (1999). Effects of tone and focus on the formation and alignment of F0 contours.

