

Prosodic Prominence in English Intransitive Sentences

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Prominence in Intransitive Sentences. English intransitive sentences vary in whether their subject or predicate bears main prominence in broad-focus contexts. Several proposals have linked the preferred prominence pattern directly to argument structure, in particular to the unaccusative/unergative distinction (e.g. Selkirk 1995, and many others). In this paper, we report on a series of experiments that support an alternative topicality-based account, under which differences in verb class indirectly interact with the likelihood of construing the subject as topical. Our proposal draws on insights from Jäger (2001), Wagner (2007), and Kratzer & Selkirk (2007).

Experiment 1. We compared intransitive sentences with unaccusative and unergative predicates, holding the contribution of the sentence to the discourse and the relative contributions of the subject and predicate as constant as possible. Earlier experimental studies (Hoskins, 1996; Irwin, 2010) arguably did not properly control for other factors, e.g. animacy in the case of Hoskin's study. One example from our 12 items is given in (1). Production data from a Latin-square-design dialogue experiment of 24 participants were (i) acoustically analyzed, (ii) perceptually coded by several annotators, and (iii) played to separate group of participants in a context-retrieval task. The results (mixed model analyses on (i-iii)) showed no significant effect of argument structure. Prominence varied systematically between pairs of examples, but the choice within pairs between unaccusative/unergative had no effect, suggesting that once information structure is controlled for, argument structure is not relevant.

Experiment 2. We kept argument structure constant and varied verb class on a different dimension, comparing verbs of appearance/coming into existence and verbs of disappearance (both unaccusative, Levin 1993), using the same method. The subject can more easily be construed as topical with a verb of disappearance, since referents of topics usually have to be present/existent in the situation before the described event. Stimuli consisted of 6 items (2). Results show a significantly higher proportion of predicate stress with verbs of disappearance than with verbs of appearance, as expected.

Experiment 3. Here we varied the *subjects* and held the *predicates* constant. Intransitive sentences with human and non-human animate subjects were compared. Based on typological evidence, Givón (1976) argues that human subjects are more likely to be construed as topical. Stimuli consisted of 12 items varying by two conditions, as exemplified in (3). Results show a significantly higher proportion of predicate stress with human subjects than with non-human subjects, as predicted.

A topicality-based approach. We propose that prominence falls on the subject by default in intransitive constructions and shifts to the predicate when the subject is construed as topical. We argue that the interaction with other factors due to the type of subject and predicate, e.g. unaccusativity, follows: Unergatives may, e.g., be more likely than unaccusatives to be construed with animate and human subjects (which are more likely to be construed as topical and thus favor predicate stress) simply for pragmatic reasons, due to the thematic role they assign to their subject (e.g. agent vs. theme).

- (1) Why did the coach look so concerned?
 - a. A player tripped. (unaccusative)
 - b. A player limped. (unergative)

- (2) What happened after you took the medication?
 - a. A rash formed. (verb of appearance)
 - b. A rash faded. (verb of disappearance)

- (3) Why was the farmer concerned?
 - a. A worker limped. (human)
 - b. A cow limped. (non-human)

Selected References: Jäger, Gerhard (2002). Toward a dynamic model of Topic Marking. *Journal of Semantics*. Kahnemuyipour, Arsalan. (2004). *The syntax of sentential stress*. Ph.D. University of Toronto. Kratzer, Angelika and Elisabeth Selkirk (2007). A phase theory of prosodic spell-out. *Linguistic Review*. Givón, Talmy. Topic, pronoun, and grammatical agreement. In C. Li (ed), *Subject and topic*. Wagner, Michael. (2007). A note on stress in intransitives in English. *Snippets*.