

# A FUNCTIONAL APPROACH TO THE PROSODY OF INFORMATION PACKAGING

MATTHIAS MITTENDORFER

LINGLUNCH

JUNE 13 2025



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Part I

Background

**Information packaging:** (Vallduví, 1994, p. 4; cf. Chafe, 1976)

“[A] structuring of sentences by syntactic, prosodic, or morphological means that arises from the need to meet the communicative demands of a particular context or discourse”

- (1) a. (What did Richard do?) Richard ate the old BEANS.
- b. (Which beans did Richard eat?) Richard ate the OLD beans.
- c. (What did Richard do with the old beans?) Richard ATE the old beans.

- propositional content identical
- difference lies in how the information is packaged, not in the information per se

## Core terminology:

- **Topic** (vs. Comment): referent the utterance is *about* (Hockett, 1958; Lambrecht, 1994; Reinhart, 1981; Strawson, 1964)
  - **Focus** (vs. Background): communicatively most important/salient information; generates alternatives; answer to WH-question (Dik, 1997; Krifka, 2008; Rooth, 1992)
  - **Givenness**: orthogonal to Topic/Focus (Chafe, 1976; Clark & Haviland, 1977; Halliday, 1967; Kuno, 1976)
- (2)
- a. (What did Richard do?) [Richard]<sub>T</sub> [ate the old BEANS]<sub>F</sub>.
  - b. (Which beans did Richard eat?) [Richard]<sub>T</sub> ate the [OLD]<sub>F</sub> beans.
  - c. (What did Richard do with the old beans?) [Richard]<sub>T</sub> [ATE]<sub>F</sub> the old beans.

NB: related, but not identical to the various conceptions of *theme-rheme*

**English:** most important grammatical reflex found in prosody

## Basic assumptions of autosegmental-metrical phonology:

- intonation = string of sequentially ordered local pitch events (H and L) (i.a. Beckman & Pierrehumbert, 1986; Ladd, 2008; Pierrehumbert, 1980)
- three types of pitch events
  - pitch accents (T\*)
  - phrase accents (T-)
  - boundary tones (T%) } e.g. H\* L-L%; L+H\* L-L%; etc.
- prosodic constituency hierarchy (i.a. Beckman & Pierrehumbert, 1986; Nespor & Vogel, 2007)
  - Intonational Phrase (IP) – e.g. H\* L-L%
  - Phonological Phrase (PP) – e.g. H\* L-

## A- / B-Accent distinction: (Bolinger, 1958; Jackendoff, 1972)

- A-accent
  - Focus accent
  - high pitch accent with low phrase accent/boundary tone ( $H^* L-L\%$ )
- B-accent
  - Topic accent
  - high pitch accent with low phrase accent/high boundary tone ( $((L+)H^* L-H\%$ )

(3) A: Well, what about FRED? What did HE eat?

B:  $[[\text{FRED}]_{\text{Top}} \text{ ate the } [\text{BEANS}]_{\text{Foc}}] \sim$ .

(Jackendoff, 1972, p. 261)

→ see also Büring (2003), Pierrehumbert and Hirschberg (1990), and Steedman (2000)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>B-Accent defined in terms of contrast

## **Hedberg and Sosa (2007):** study on spontaneous English dialogue

- testing correlation between A-/B-accent and Topic and Focus
  - systematic correlation between intonation and information packaging confirmed
  - empirical situation more complex than A-/B-accent distinction
- no clear Topic or Focus accent in the data → results generally inconclusive

## **Hedberg (2006):** review of results (2007 study)

→ miscoding, optionality of contrastive coding, target undershoot

"[I]nformation structure categories [. . .] may be indeterminate" (Hedberg, 2006, p. 377)

## Problems in Hedberg and Sosa (2007):

- imprecise understanding of Contrast
  - no clear pragmatic definition provided (aside from alternativeness)
  - B-accent (or rather L+H\*) implicitly assumed as a Contrast-marker
- imprecise definitions of the coded categories (from Gundel, 1988)
  - **Topic:** An entity, E, is the topic of a sentence, S, iff, in using S the speaker intends to increase the addressee's knowledge about, request information about, or otherwise get the addressee to act with respect to E.
  - **Comment:** A predication, P, is the comment of a sentence, S, iff, in using S the speaker intends P to be assessed relative to the topic of S.
  - **Focus:** That part of the linguistic expression that realizes the comment.

→ more constrained theoretical framework needed

## Part II

# Methodology

## Questions under discussion (QUD):

- pragmatic method for information-structural analysis
- each assertion comes with an implicit QUD
- QUD determines which part of assertion is focused / backgrounded / not-at-issue

## Criteria for QUD formulation:

- Q-A-CONGRUENCE  
Assertion of target utterance must be a possible answer to QUD
- MAXIMIZE Q-ANAPHORICITY  
Questions must consist of as much given (or highly salient) material as possible
- Q-GIVENNESS  
Questions can only consist of given (or salient) material<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>i.e. familiarity in a broad sense

- (4) We didn't meet at Cambridge and we didn't in Ipswich either although we were both born there. [...] *But we certainly met in Stratford.*

Q<sub>1</sub>: {Where did you meet?}

> A<sub>1</sub>: [[We]<sub>Top</sub> certainly met [in Stratford]<sub>Foc</sub>]<sub>~</sub>.

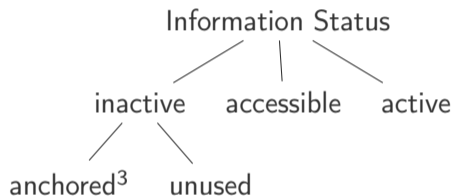
(S1B-023 #022)

'~' = F-Domain (Background + Focus)

### Advantages:

- operationalises the identification of Focus constituents
- provides guidelines for the identification of Topic constituents
- deals with some aspects of pragmatic Contrast (e.g. structural parallelism, bridging)

## Givenness (Topic expressions):



(cf. Lambrecht, 1994; Prince, 1981)

- Referential anchoring as precondition for potential Topic status

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<sup>3</sup>Referential anchoring: *A boy* vs. *A boy I know*

## ICE-GB:

- covers a wide variety of genres (private conversations, interviews, etc.)
- includes audio files + search software

## Data:

- collected 420 independent discourse segments (utterances, parentheticals, etc.) from 23 different texts
- collected three additional data sets on
  - dislocation (60 utterances)
  - preposing (43 utterances)
  - parallel constructions (69 utterances)
- data analysed using
  - QUDs (e.g. Brunetti et al., 2021; Riester et al., 2018)
  - ToBI (Tones and Breaks Indices) (e.g. Silverman et al., 1992)

## Part IV

### Empirical analysis

## RESULTS: TOPIC EXPRESSIONS & PROSODY

	o	H*	!H*	L*	L+H*	L+!H*	L*+H	H+!H*	H*+L	Total
active	233	56	2	0	12	0	0	1	0	304
accessible	7	23	1	3	6	1	0	0	0	41
unused	0	10	0	0	5	0	1	0	0	16
anchored new	0	8	4	0	3	1	0	0	1	17
<b>Total</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>378</b>

Table 1: Distribution of pitch accents on A-Topic expressions

- clear correlation with activation status found
  - active entities tend to be unaccented → preferred Topic expressions (cf. Lambrecht, 1994)
  - accessible, unused, anchored entities → (!)H\* as an activation accent
- B-Accent (L+H\*) as 'Topic accent' unlikely<sup>4</sup>

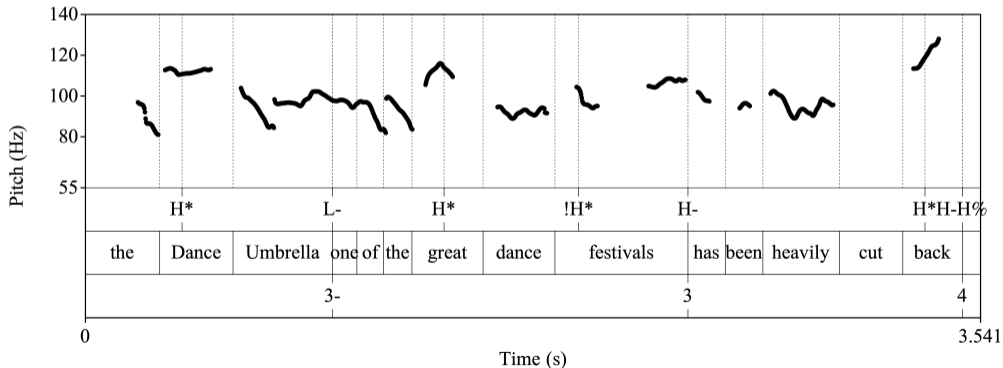
<sup>4</sup>including L-H% sequence not shown here

## Activation accents:

- (5) The turmoil [...] has meant that a lot of local boroughs have been pulling out and even renegeing on their promises. Theatres like the Almeida, which has a wonderful record, have been cut by twenty per cent. [*The Dance Umbrella*]<sub>Top</sub>, *one of the great dance festivals, has been heavily cut back.*

(S1B-022 #026)

- (6) [The Dance Umbrella]<sub>Top</sub>, one of the great dance festivals, has been heavily cut back. [Play](#)



## Accented active elements:

- (7) a. But I do believe we made it clear all the way through that we are insisting that the United Nations resolutions are complied with and [*THAT*]<sub>Top</sub> *means an unconditional withdrawal from Kuwait.*

(S1B-027 #013)

- b. In times of stress pastoralists are very mobile. *If there's a drought, [THEY]<sub>Top</sub> can get up and move.*

(S2A-047 #078)

- Lambrecht (1994) → sentence accents establish pragmatic relations
  - accents on non-active referents establish new Topic relation
  - accents on active referents mark discontinuity (e.g. Topic shift, unexpectedness)
- no Topic shift/unexpectedness in the examples here though → really Topic accents?

**Topics in English:** (see also Prince, 1997, 1998, on dislocation/preposing)

*[...] Topic assignment is necessarily a rather arbitrary affair. After all, P1 [i.e. clause-initial] position can be filled only once, and thus Topic assignment can only take place in those cases where P1 is not already filled by some other element [...]. Obviously, this is not a desirable situation.*

*(Mackenzie & Keizer, 1991, p. 193)*

**No independent evidence for topichood**

- Lambrecht's claim empirically not supported in the morphosyntax
- prosody of Topic constituents related to activation/Emphasis not topichood

**Topic not a grammatically relevant notion in English**

i.e. no need for a 'Topic accent'

# RESULTS: FOCUS EXPRESSIONS & PROSODY

	o	H*	!H*	L*	L+H*	L+!H*	L*+H	H+!H*	H*+L	Total
centr. Focus	1	345	69	26	43	9	0	1	4	498
per. Focus	1	78	6	6	14	1	1	2	1	110
<b>Total</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>423</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>608</b>

Table 2: Distribution of pitch accents across central and peripheral Focus expressions

## Focus:

- all Focus expressions (but two) accented
  - 498 assertions carry H\* or !H\* → Focus accent
  - ≠ A-accent/H\* L-L%

## Broad Focus:<sup>5</sup>

- (8) And if there's going to be any Conservative criticism of support for the arts on purely monetarist Thatcherite principles, the arts is the best investment we can possibly have. *It's the third biggest employer of labour.*

Q<sub>1</sub>: {What shows that the arts is the best investment we can possibly have?}

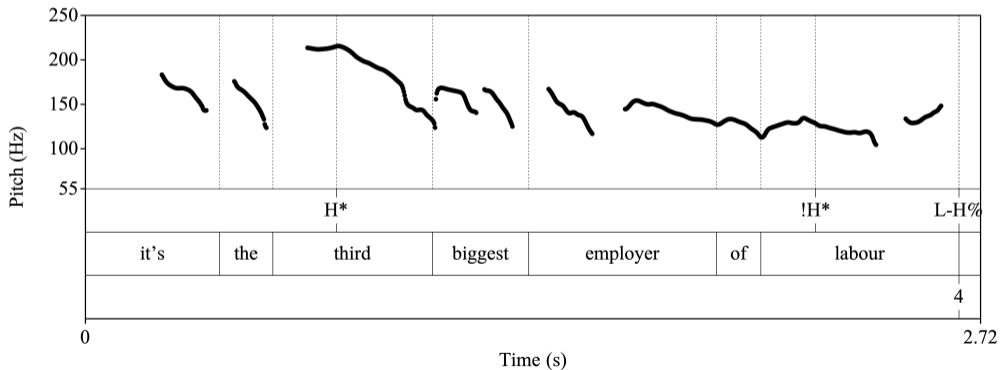
> A<sub>1</sub>: [It [is the third biggest employer of labour]<sub>Foc</sub>]<sub>~</sub>.

(S1B-022 #042)

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<sup>5</sup>NB: Default prosody

(8) It [is the third biggest employer of labour]<sub>Foc</sub>]~. Play



## Narrow Focus:

- (9) Politics does come into this and one has to say straight away I won't say it again during this programme but all three who've just spoken are active supporters of the Labour Party. [...] *So they all are committed to the Labour Party*

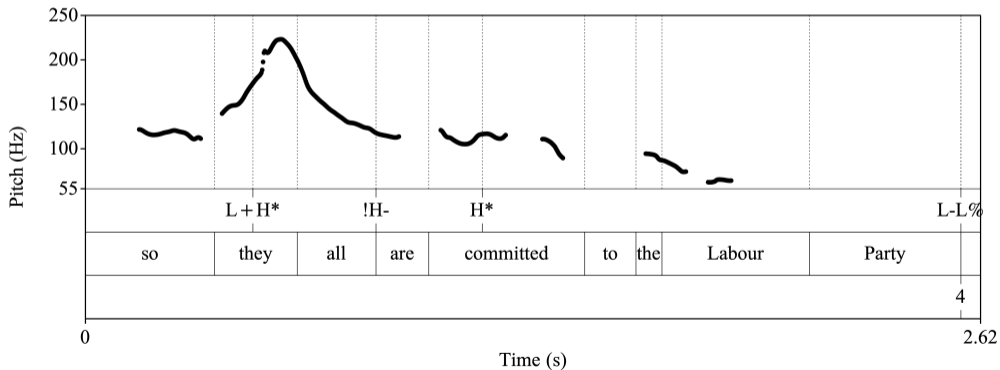
Q<sub>1</sub>: {They are what to the Labour Party?}

> A<sub>1</sub>: [They all are [committed]<sub>Foc</sub> to the Labour Party]~.

(S1B-022 #074)

- narrow Focus on *committed*
- post-focal deaccentuation of following material expected

(9) [THEY all are [COMMITTED]<sub>Foc</sub> to the Labour Party]~. [Play](#)



## Jackendoff's (1972) B-Accent:

- (L+)H\* (L-H%) originally discussed as a Topic accent<sup>6</sup>
- later related to Contrast (cf. Büring, 2003; Pierrehumbert & Hirschberg, 1990)

*S [= Speaker] employs the L+H\* accent to convey that the accented item – and **not some alternative related item** – should be mutually believed. The evocation of a salient scale plus predication can convey the effect of speaker commitment to the instantiation of the open expression with the accented item.*

(emphasis added; Pierrehumbert & Hirschberg, 1990, p. 296)

→ only Contrastive Topics receive B-accent (Büring, 2003)

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<sup>6</sup>NB: problematic for many of Jackendoff's own examples

# CONTRAST-MARKING IN THE PROSODY OF ENGLISH

## L+H\* on (A-)Topic/Focus expressions:

(10) a. Politics does come into this and one has to say straight away I won't say it again during this programme but all three who've just spoken are active supporters of the Labour Party. [...] *So [THEY]<sub>TOP</sub> all are committed to the Labour Party.*

(S1B-022 #074)

b. When I go home at the weekends it's not just going home to the farm which is a business it's going home to something which is much deeper than that. *It revives me [every WEEK]<sub>Foc</sub>.*

(S1B-037 #028)

Büning's claim that "all and only contrastive topics are marked by a B-accent" (2003, p. 525) problematic

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**Hedberg and Sosa (2007):** results concerning L+H\* inconclusive

**Problem:** H\*~L+H\* distinction

- phonetically, distinction not always clear (really distinct accent types?)
- distinction opposite ends of a(n Emphasis) continuum (Arvaniti et al., 2022; Ladd, 2008)
- L+H\* marks both
  - Emphasis
  - Contrast

Are there any truly contrastive L+H\* accents in the data set?

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**Are there any truly contrastive L+H\* accents in the data set?**

(11) **THE ROLE OF CONTRAST IN GRAMMAR** (adapted; Repp, 2016, p. 279)

- a. A constituent that is a candidate for being a contrastive constituent is marked differently from non-contrastive constituents [...]. The constituent is marked by the same means for all discourse relations.

*= contrast based on type of alternatives*

- b. The constituents that are candidates for being contrastive constituents in all types of alternatives are marked differently when they occur in OPPOSE or CORR in comparison to when they occur in other discourse relations.

*= contrast based on discourse relations*

## Contexts examined:

- bridging

(12) What does it mean to you, music? – **Some music means a very great deal.**

- parallel constructions

(13) Michael Heseltine has charisma. Douglas Hurd has a safe pair of hands.

- correction

## (Tentative) results:

- discourse relations relevant not alternativeness
- Contrast only systematically marked in strongly contrastive contexts
  - e.g. not all utterances involving bridging are contrastive
  - e.g. not all parallel structures involve a Contrastive Topic

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## Topic:

- little evidence for
  - Topic in English
  - Jackendoff's (1972) B-accent
- accenting better explained in terms of activation, Emphasis, Contrast-marking
  - (!)H\* as an activation/emphatic accent
  - L+(!)H\* related to Emphasis/Contrast

## Focus:

- (!)H\* clear Focus accent (less evidence for H\* L-L%/A-accent)
- L+(!)H\* related to Emphasis/Contrast

## Contrast:

- sensitive to discourse relations, not alternatives
- only strongly contrastive relations seem to be marked by L+(!)H\*

## Part VI

### An FDG analysis

## Overall characterisation:

- a “form-oriented function-to-form” approach (Hengeveld & Mackenzie, 2008, pp. 38–39)
  - function-to-form: formal features explained in terms of function
  - form-oriented: only represents functional elements which are systematically coded
- a top-down architecture with four levels of analysis
  - Interpersonal Level: discourse & pragmatics
  - Representational Level: semantics
  - Morphosyntactic Level: morphosyntax
  - Phonological Level: phonology
- three non-grammatical components
  - Conceptual Component
  - Contextual Component
  - Output Component

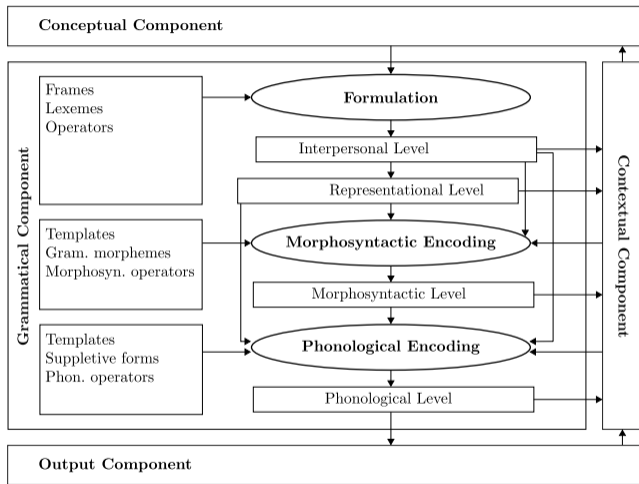


Figure 1: General architecture of FDG

## Topic, Focus, Contrast:

- pragmatic functions assigned to units within the Communicated Content
- no grammatical reflex of topichood → Topic function irrelevant
- Focus/Contrast can be assigned to different units
- Emphasis → operator

- (17) a. (What did Richard eat?) Richard ate [the old beans]<sub>Foc</sub>.  
b. (C<sub>I</sub>: [(emph R<sub>I</sub>: Richard) (C<sub>mI</sub>: [(T<sub>I</sub>) (R<sub>J</sub>)<sub>Foc</sub>] (C<sub>mI</sub>))] (C<sub>I</sub>))

## Three observations:

- H\* for Focus
- L+H\* for Contrast
- H\*~L+H\* continuum for Emphasis (→ distinction gradient, i.e. not grammatical)

## Implications for FDG

- pitch accents represented as operators on the PL (Kojadinović, 2022; Mittendorfer, 2025)
- two operators necessary
  - 'H' → triggered by Focus or Emphasis on the IL (use of L+H\* not grammatical, hence not represented)
  - 'LH' → triggered by Contrast on the IL

## Advantages of 'H' and 'LH':

- (!)H\*~L+(!)H\* remains
  - a continuum w.r.t. Emphasis (i.e. paralinguistic; shape determined in the Output)
  - a categorical (i.e. grammatical) distinction w.r.t. Focus and Contrast

## Accent placement:

- Focus accent is always nuclear (i.e. final in the prosodic unit)
- Emphasis/Contrast may be realised in prenuclear (non-final) position
- In FDG → layer at which <sup>(L)</sup>H is inserted determines position of accent
  - <sup>(L)</sup>H at PP → nuclear (Focus accent)
  - <sup>(L)</sup>H at PW → pre-nuclear (for expressions of Contrast/Emphasis)





## General conclusions:

- Topic expression
  - typically unaccented (& pronominal)
  - if accented → activation, emphasis
  - little evidence for B-accent in English
- Focus expressions
  - always accented in some way
  - (!)H\* as a Focus accent (≠ A-accent)

## In FDG:

- Phonological Level
  - H and <sup>L</sup>H as  $\pi$
  - PP layer → nuclear accent
  - PW layer → pre-nuclear accent
- H\*~L+H\* continuum
  - edges represented by  $\pi$ s (for Foc and Contr.)
  - Emphatic accent type determined in Output, i.e. paralinguistic

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## Two perspectives on Contrast:

- alternativeness (e.g. Chafe, 1976)
- discourse structure (e.g. Asher & Lascarides, 2003; Mann & Thompson, 1988)

## Repp's (2016) taxonomy:

- SIMILAR: “[T]he proposition associated with  $d_1$  and the proposition associated with  $d_2$  can both be true in the evaluation world;  $d_1$  and  $d_2$  make the same kind of contribution to the current question under discussion”

(20) John was mowing the lawn. Pete was too.

(Repp, 2016, p. 277)

$d_{1/2}$  = *discourse segments*

## CONTRAST AND DISCOURSE RELATIONS

- OPPOSE: “[T]he proposition associated with  $d_1$  and the proposition associated with  $d_2$  can both be true in the evaluation world;  $d_1$  and  $d_2$  make opposing contributions to the current question under discussion”

(21) John was mowing the lawn, but Pete was pruning the roses. (Repp, 2016, p. 277)

- CORRECTION: “ $d_1$  rejects  $d_2$  because certain background assumptions for the felicitous use of  $d_1$  are not met, or because the propositions associated with  $d_1$  and  $d_2$  cannot both be true in the evaluation world”