

The Role of Production Factors in Acoustic Prominence

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Acoustically prominent words appear to play a role in signaling information about the status of discourse entities (Chafe, 1974; Bolinger, 1986; Prince, 1981; Jackendoff, 1972; Pierrehumbert & Hirschberg, 1990). Traditionally, it has been assumed that acoustic prominence carries linguistic focus which signals that a word, or constituent, is important or discourse new. Underlying this claim is the assumption that representations for both pitch accents and focus structure are categorical rather than continuous.

In this talk, I present data from spontaneous speech generated in a series of referential communication experiments. Speakers' use of acoustic prominence in these studies suggest that at least some of the representations that underlie prominence are continuous: there is a direct correlation between the degree of acoustic prominence on a word and the discourse history of the referent to which it refers. References to entities that were given but had not changed thematic roles (theme or goal) were produced with short duration and intensity. Referents that were given but had changed thematic roles were produced with greater prominence. Referents that were completely new to the discourse were produced with the most acoustic prominence.

Recent work in the psychology literature suggests that word form choice may be the product of speaker centered production processes (see Arnold, 2007 for a review). It will be argued that similar processes may play a role in acoustic prominence.