

German sentential stress reconsidered

An evaluation of a phase-based account of German accent placement

This paper offers a reexamination of the data on German main phrasal stress placement used in Kratzer & Selkirk (2007) to motivate a phase-based account of syntax-prosody mapping. I argue that the data can be reanalyzed as a maximally simple pattern that could be accounted for by the nuclear stress rule (NSR, cf. Cinque 1993), or by assuming a perfect match between syntax and prosody in terms of Match Theory (cf. Selkirk 2011). I suggest this can be achieved with some assumptions about the semantics of weak definites and relational nouns and how they interact with givenness.

The phase-based account (K&S 2007) is motivated mainly by two empirical observations: A contrast in stress placement in stative vs. eventive intransitive verbs (1) and the unstressability of VP-internal PPs that are c-commanded by a direct object bearing main stress (2).

- (1) a. Eventives: no pitch accent on verb [K&S (2007)]
Ich hab' gelesen, dass die Metallarbeiter gestreikt haben.
I have read that the metal workers gone.on.strike have
'I read that the metal workers went on strike.'
- b. Statives: pitch accent on verb
Ich hab' gehört, dass der Rhein stinkt.
I have heard that the Rhine stinks
'I've heard that the Rhine stinks.'
- (2) a. VP-internal PPs lack stress in presence of direct object [after K&S (2007)]
... dass María [_{VP} Kinder zur Schule] fährt.
... that Maria children to.the.ACC school drives
'... that Maria drives children to school.'
- b. VP-internal PPs are stressed in absence of direct object
... dass María [_{VP} zur Schule] fährt.
... that Maria to.the.ACC school drives
'... that Maria drives to school.'

Concerning (1), K&S's account is based on the syntactic analysis proposed by Diesing (1990), that eventive predicates license a null topic, allowing the subject to stay low. I show that assuming Diesing's analysis (3), sentential stress will fall on the most deeply embedded element (the DP *die Metallarbeiter* in (3a), the *vP stinkt* in (3b)), lending itself well to an analysis in terms of the NSR or a perfect match between syntax and prosody.

- (3) a. [_{CP} dass [_{TopP} pro [_{TP} [_{vP} [_{DP} die Metallarbeiter] gestreikt] haben]]]
b. [_{CP} dass [_{TopP} [_{DP} der Rhein] [_{TP} [_{vP} stinkt]]]]]

The pattern in (2) could not be reduced to this simple stress pattern. Because it is not the most deeply embedded phrase that bears sentential stress, but the higher direct object, these cases motivate the assumption that the highest phrase in the phase (here: *vP*) receives sentential stress. The judgment of unstressability has been contested by Féry (2011), noting that this stress pattern is optional and only possible in the particular kinds of examples chosen in K&S (2007). I add that the PP in (2a) contrasts with PPs with an indefinite DP (4), in which sentential stress falls on the PP.

- (4) ... dass María Kinder zu einer Féier fuhr.
... that Maria children to a.DAT party drove
'... that Maria drove children to school.'

Abstract

The optionality reported by Féry can be made sense of by assuming that VP-internal PP in (2a) is optionally interpreted as *given* (cf. Schwarzschild 1999). I suggest that in (2a), this is due to an interpretation of the DP inside the PP as a weak definite. Schwarz (2013) notes that colloquial German has a weak/strong distinction for definite determiners. The reduced morphology on the determiner in the PP *zur Schule* (2a) indicates that the DP is interpreted as a weak definite.

- (5) a $\llbracket \text{the}_{\text{weak}} \rrbracket = \lambda s. \lambda P. \iota x [P(x)(s)]$ [Schwarz (2016)]
b $\llbracket \text{-r schule} \rrbracket = \iota x [\text{school}'(x)(s_i)]$

Connecting this to Schwarzschild's proposal about the semantics of phonologically interpretable givenness, the PP *zur Schule* could be derived as given iff it has a salient antecedent A and it is entailed by A modulo \exists -type shifting, i.e. if (7) is entailed.

- (7) $\exists x. \text{school}'(x)(s_i)$

(7) is not part of the asserted content in (2a), because it is not part of the lexical meaning of *Kind* ('child'). However, it is presupposed by the use of the definite which in (2a) could be characterized as a case of bridging (cf. Clark 1975). If we can extend Schwarzschild's proposal to include (parts of) utterances that are entailed by a conjunction of a salient antecedent and the extralinguistic contextual presumptions, we could reasonably say that (5b) may or may not be interpreted as given, depending on whether it is contextually entailed.

Most obvious is how this might work in the case of (2a), with a situationally unique weak definite DP inside the PP. However, I will give similar arguments for the other examples given in K&S, which aren't reported in this abstract. They involve PPs with a relational noun (*an einen Freund*, 'to a friend'), and a Carlsonian weak definite (*im Supermarkt*, 'in the supermarket') (cf. Carlson et. al. 2006). Although the latter is tricky to achieve derivationally, I show that it is in contrast with indefinite DPs that supply a novel discourse referent.

Accordingly, the optionality in sentential stress patterns that allows for German VP-internal PPs to remain unstressed in the presence of a c-commanding stress-bearing direct object, can be accounted for in terms of pragmatic variation. If this explanation can be maintained, and the stressless VP-internal PPs constitute an instance of an information-structurally marked case, the regular stress-pattern in German all-new sentences could be characterized in terms of the NSR (or a perfect match) for these cases as well.

References:

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