

Linearity and tone in the unfolding of information

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In this talk I want to explore how the interaction of primary tone and grammatical expectation functions in the linear unfolding of unplanned spoken text. Tones with end falling movement are generally thought to signal completion in Southern Standard British English. But as is well known not every non-interrogative utterance is completed by a falling tone. Similarly, in English New information in the unmarked case follows Given information within the clause with the 'Newest' information found clause finally. Yet, in spoken discourse clauses frequently do not correlate with speaker turns and neither are speaker turns restricted to a single point of information. In previous work I have identified a unit which realizes an act of telling called the increment. Increments which may be multi-clausal are identified on the basis of three criteria: (1) the satisfaction of grammatical expectations, (2) the presence of a falling or rise-falling tone and (3) the perturbation of existing shared knowledge.

I use a small corpus of monologue and dialogue produced by a group of UK university students to illustrate how the interplay of grammar, intonation and shared context enables individual speakers to foreground the parts of their message which they project as maximally informational in real time. I will specifically describe cases where maximally informational parts of the message do not occur in increment final position and discuss their significance.