

# The influence of information status on the prosody of sentence topics

---

Stefan Baumann & Jane Mertens

University of Cologne

stefan.baumann@uni-koeln.de, jmerten9@uni-koeln.de

The aim of this production study on German was to investigate whether differences in the information status of a sentence-initial referent and the type of focus domain the referent is part of influence its prosodic realisation. Our motivation was the unclear status of prenuclear accents: Are they just 'ornamental' (Büring 2007) or do they express meaning differences (e.g. Féry & Kügler 2008)? We hypothesize a positive correlation between the informativeness of a sentence topic and its prosodic prominence.

29 native speakers read out 20 different mini-stories. By varying the second context sentence we designed four conditions rendering the subject argument in the target sentence either *given*, *accessible*, *new* or *contrastive* (1).

(1)

Context 1	Nach dem langen Winter freuten sich alle auf ein paar sonnige Stunden im Freien.
Context 2a <i>given</i>	Die Nonne kümmerte sich um den Klostergarten.
Context 2b <i>accessible</i>	Im Klostergarten blühten die ersten Pflanzen.
Context 2c <i>new</i>	Die Sonne schien schon den ganzen Tag und der Schnee war endlich geschmolzen.
Context 2d <i>contrastive</i>	Der Mönch hat einen Brombeerstrauch gegossen.
Target	Die <u>Nonne</u> hat einen Mandelbaum gegossen.

We found that initial referents were consistently marked by rising prenuclear accents (92%), even on *given* items. Nevertheless, results show a subtle influence of information status: The *newer* the referent the wider the range and the steeper the rise on the accent. Surprisingly, however, contrastive topics were mostly produced as prosodically less prominent (flat hat pattern), probably due to the parallel syntactic structure in the double focus context. In sum, the phonetic effects suggest that prenuclear accents in German are to some extent affected by the information structure of an utterance, challenging a strict view on prenuclear accents as being merely 'ornamental'.

**References:** • Büring, D. 2007. Intonation, semantics and information structure. In G. Ramchand & C. Reiss (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of linguistic interfaces*, 445–474. Oxford: OUP. • Féry, C. & F. Kügler. 2008. Pitch accent scaling on given, new and focused constituents in German. *Journal of Phonetics* 36(4). 680–703.