

Maltese (and Maltese English) prosody research: back and forth from the lab (in)to the wild

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Post-lexical prominence is a complex phenomenon which we generally assume to be somewhat “parasitic” on lexical prominence in that it is generally assumed that lexically stressed syllables, together with boundaries, serve as the anchoring points for various types of tonal events. Research on Maltese (and, by extension also on Maltese English) prosody shows that, as in other languages, prominence is often achieved by the association of tonal elements with sentence stress, so-called pitch accents. Tonal association with secondarily stressed elements and/or right edge boundaries is also possible. More interestingly in the context of this talk, evidence is emerging for tones having a different type of association at the left edge, precise domain still to be determined. What degree of prominence is signalled in these latter cases is not yet known.

This talk starts by reporting on a lab study of the intonation of wh-question intonation in Maltese. The study clearly shows the presence of a H tonal element which is anchored at some sort of left edge rather than to a lexically stressed syllable. Examples from more naturalistic data demonstrating left edge H tones occurring in a wide variety of structural contexts are provided, and the necessity of returning to the lab in order to work out the precise nature of the domain of association of these tones illustrated.

A sketch is provided of what we know so far (and do not yet know) about the contribution of different tonal elements to signalling prominence in Maltese (and Maltese English), attempting, in so doing, to throw light on the role of prosody in conveying meanings of different sorts. I will focus in this talk on the story that is emerging in the context of both lab experiments and research involving the use of more naturalistic data with a view in particular to addressing questions such as:

- 1) Do speakers use left edge tonal elements in a systematic way?
- 2) Do left edge tones serve, for example, to orient a listener’s attention, and if so, to what?
- 3) More generally, is it possible to identify any acoustic or other evidence for a prominence-cueing function of prominence in such left edge tones on the part of the producer, and are left edge tones which are not associated with lexically stressed syllables perceived as prominent by the listener?

References

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