Prosodic marking of the fixed focus position in Georgian

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Overview
Georgian, a language with a fixed structural position reserved for the focused element, also uses prosody to signal focus. The data presented in this paper shows that various types of foI – wh-questions (WHQs), yes-no questions (YNQs), and contrastive contexts – bear the same prosodic marker of focus: the phrase accent L aligned with the penultimate syllable of the predicate. The double-marking of the same feature in syntax and prosody raises questions as to why language does not rely on just one of these strategies.

Georgian: basic facts

Stress Stress placement in Georgian is a matter of debate. I adopt the view that Georgian stress is fixed on the initial syllable, based on experimental evidence in Vicenik & Jun (2014). In contrast, Robin & Waterson (1952) and Aronson (1990) argue that stress placement in Georgian depends on the syllable count.

Word order Georgian allows surface SOV and SVO, with no interpretive difference reported (Hewitt 1995). Georgian is head-final, which suggests that SOV is underlying (Skopeteas, Fery & Asatiani 2009); some embedded structures (masurals and nominalizations) must be SOV.

Focus Strong preference to place focused elements in the immediately preverbal position (Vicenik & Jun 2014). Postverbal focus placement also reported (Skopeteas et al. 2009 et seq.), but disallowed by some speakers. Only preverbal focus is discussed in this work.

Exhaustivity Preverbal focus is compatible with both exhaustive and non-exhaustive interpretations (Skopeteas & Fanselow 2010, Skopeteas & Fery 2011).

Data collection
The results reported here come from a pilot study carried out with a native speaker of Georgian (ML female, in her 50s, Tbilisi resident) in Cambridge, MA. Target utterances were recorded in the phonetics laboratory at Harvard University and analyzed using Praat (Boersma & Weenink, 2016).

All-new declarative clauses
For the description of the tonal structure of Georgian, I am adopting the tonal inventory proposed in Vicenik & Jun (2014).

All-new declarative intonation: a succession of accentual phrases each bearing an L* pitch accent on the initial syllable, followed by H(a) boundary tone, with downstep throughout the utterance. Focus-marking I phrase accent is absent from all-new declaratives.

Yes-no questions (YNQs) differ from all-new declaratives in that the sequence of L* Ha marked phrases, in YNQs L phrase accent appears on the predicate, followed by a H accentual phrase boundary. The rest of the clause is deaccented until the clause-final H% or HL% boundary tone.

Prosodic realization of focus
There are two types of prosodic focus marking (Büringer 2009): introducing a pitch accent on the focused element (focus-as-pitch, English, Germanic languages), and adding/deleting phrase boundaries (focus-as-phrasing, Japanese, Korean). The data presented here shows that Georgian uses a phrase accent to mark of focus, and therefore falls into the first category (cf. Skopeteas et al. 2009 et seq. for the alternative view).

Yes-no questions (YNQs)

Yes-no questions (YNQs) differ from all-new declaratives in prosody only. Instead of the sequence of L* Ha-marked phrases, in YNQs L phrase accent appears on the predicate, followed by a H* accentual phrase boundary. The rest of the clause is deaccented until the clause-final H% or HL% boundary tone.

Improvments over previous accounts
Vicenik & Jun (2014) tentatively suggest that a phrase accent H+L (corresponds to L in the current analysis) might be associated with focus. Their account is consistent with the data, except in cases like (2), in which L appears without the preceding high target in YNQs. The current approach doesn’t run into the same issue. Skopeteas et al. (2009 et seq.) argue that Georgian focus is prosodically manifested in alignment with prosodic boundaries. This account, like that of Bush (1999), does not account for the rigid alignment of L with the penultimate syllable. In contrast, the phrase accent account of Georgian focus developed here offers a unified analysis of different types of focus contexts and structural configurations.

Cross-linguistic perspective
The Georgian facts are in line with the recent evidence that Hungarian, another language with a structural position reserved for focus, realizes focus prosodically in addition to syntax (Genzel et al. 2015).


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