

Abstract

This thesis examines the (perceived) prominence relations (stress and accent levels) in Southern Standard British English. In line with previous descriptions it was found that stressed words adjacent to utterance boundaries, or major phrase boundaries, are perceived as more prominent than stressed words in intermediate positions, but contrary to many descriptions in the traditional British school of intonation analysis it was not found that the final stressed word (the so-called nucleus) is generally more prominent than all other words in the phrase. Only 15-20% of the neutral, context-free utterances had a clearly more prominent final item.

In utterances where one word is emphasised due to some type of narrow focus there is both a local effect on the emphasised item, resulting in significantly higher perceived prominence on this word, and a global effect on surrounding words, which are perceived as less prominent; in other words a combined foregrounding and backgrounding of items inside and outside of the focus domain, respectively.

The backgrounding effect is largest in post-focal position, where the prominence level of all stressed words is reduced, regardless of their distance from the focal accent. In pre-focal position the reduction in prominence level is inversely proportional to the distance from the focal accent: immediately adjacent items are reduced the most.

The relevance of these observations was demonstrated in an experiment which examined the relation between perceived prominence and perceived information structure. As expected, listeners perceived utterances in which one item was particularly prominent as responses to questions about this single constituent – they heard the item as being in (narrow) focus. This was true of intended neutral and intended focused utterances alike and in all positions in the utterance, even when the most prominent item was in utterance final position, that is, the default location of the nucleus.

The relative reduction of non-focal items contributed to the perception of focus, and the results suggested that post-focal reduction is more important than pre-focal reduction, in accordance with the results of the prominence perception experiments.

A brief account of the acoustic parameters F_0 and duration is presented. The variation in F_0 mirrored the perceived prominence in a fairly direct way in both neutral utterances and in pre-focal, focal and post-focal position: F_0 movements were almost absent in post-focal position but were reduced in inverse proportion to the distance from the focal accent in pre-focal position. The duration data indicated a larger pre-focal shortening effect and only a very modest post-focal effect. The two acoustic parameters thus seem to operate differently depending on their position relative to the focal accent.