Phrasal Stress in Mandarin: an Investigation Using Focus

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Overview

- Mandarin has been argued to exhibit nonhead phrasal stress, the structural stress that falls on the nonhead constituent of a phrase (Nonhead Stress Rule; Cinque, 1993; Duanmu, 2007).
- Nonhead Stress Rule has never been tested in Mandarin using focus as a diagnostic tool. Focus-introduced metrical prominence is only associated with the stressed syllable, i.e., the nonhead, in a disyllabic phrase.
- Nonhead Stress Rule is confirmed in Mandarin. The NarrowFocus prosodic environment amplifies the difference in two phrase stress patterns, and therefore helps better differentiate a modifier-noun (ModN) phrase and a verb-object (VObj) phrase.

Nonhead Stress Rule

- The Nonhead constituents are less predictable than their syntactic Heads, and therefore carry more information.
- The most prominence is assigned to the least predictable form.
- Phrasal stress falls on the modifier in a ModN phrase and on the object in a VObj phrase.

Method: Focus as a Diagnostic Tool

- 15 homophonic pairs of disyllabic phrases (σ1σ2). Each pair consists of a ModN phrase and a VObj phrase.
- Target phrases were elicited in two discourse contexts: BroadFocus and NarrowFocus.
- Measurement: \( \text{Duration Ratio} = \frac{\text{Duration}(\sigma_1)}{\text{Duration}(\sigma_2)} \)
- Three native Beijing Mandarin speakers from Cornell University produced 833 trials.

Variation: Idiosyncrasy Not Randomness

- \( \text{Duration Ratio} \) of ModN does not increase, which might arise out of the underlying strong-weak pattern in Mandarin disyllabic phrases.
- ModN and VObj are better differentiated under NarrowFocus.

Elected References