

Focus in Hebrew: Capitalizing on the Canonical

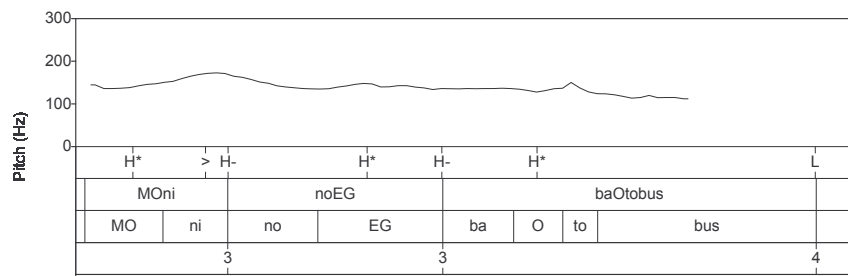
This study examines the prosodic manifestation of focus in Modern Israeli Hebrew (MH). MH capitalizes on speakers' awareness of an unmarked sentence final focus position. It is only when the focus does not occur in the default focus position that speakers use unambiguous prosodic means to highlight it. Moreover, MH shows that main sentential prominence does not consistently correlate with the focus. The findings for MH thus call into question information structure theories that claim focus is identified by main sentential prominence.

Prosodic marking of focus, which is the type of marking that MH utilizes, is one of several ways to encode focus across languages. This can involve any or several of the following, pitch accenting, prosodic phrasing, pitch range changes, deaccentuation of non-focal material, or intensity changes. The end result is that the focused constituent is made prominent. In systems which rely on prosodic marking we find prosodic markers of focus irrespective of where the focus occurs, as in English for example.

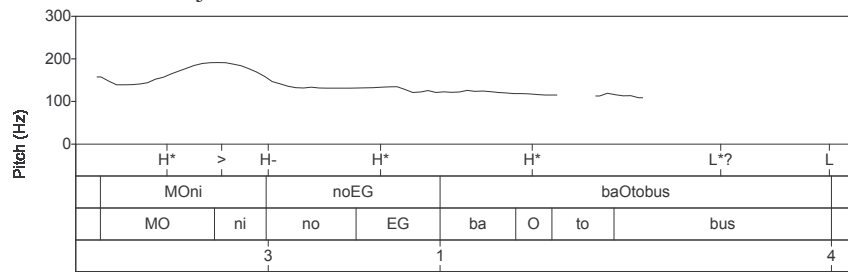
Our data indicates that the canonical focus position in MH is sentence final position. In order to observe final and non-final focus in Hebrew we elicited transitive and ditransitive utterances with varying foci. MH is an SVO language, word order changes are limited to contrast, in which case an optional topicalization may occur. Pitch tracks (1) and (2) exemplify transitive sentences with a focused object and a focused subject, respectively. In both cases the object occurs sentence finally, observing the SVO order. The lack of a prominent pitch accent on the object focus in pitch track (1) can be compared with the topical object of pitch track (2) which is prosodically nearly identical. Furthermore, we see that the subject focus in (2) prosodically differs significantly from the object focus in (1). In the ditransitive data most speakers placed the focused object in the unmarked focus position (pitch track (3)). Speakers who did not use prosodic clues to mark the focus (pitch track (4)). The marking of non-final focus can thus be contrasted with unmarked sentence final focus. Pitch tracks (1)-(4) demonstrate that when the focus is not located in the unmarked sentence final focus position, it is indicated by an expansion of the pitch range, a high pitch accent and prosodic restructuring that places the constituent in its own phonological phrase.

Initial observation of the prosodic phrasing in MH falsely indicates that prosodic phrasing changes may be the marker of focus in both final and non-final position. The unmarked prosodic phrasing for MH is (S)(VO). Focus on either the verb or the object triggers phrasal restructuring giving (S)(V)(O). While focus consistently occurs in its own phonological phrase, regardless of its position, this prosodic phrasing change results from changes not related to information structures, including decreased speech rate and the size of the constituents.

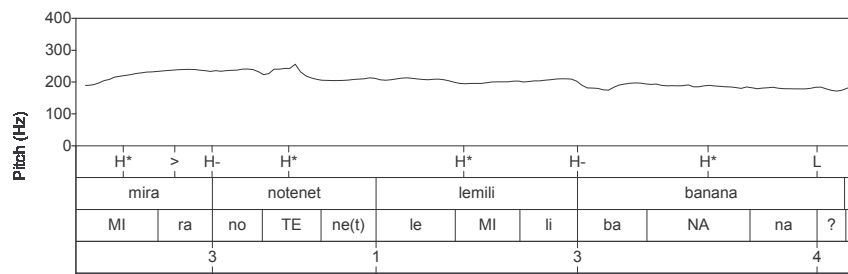
MH provides a challenge for information structure theories that claim that focus is indicated by main prominence. Following Selkirk (1995) focus is indicated by the location of the main prominence. From there the focus domain can be calculated by the projection of the [+focus] feature. For MH, since the focus is not always the most prominent accent in the utterance, it is unclear how this approach would successfully identify the focus. An additional complication is found in the discussion in Büring and Gutiérrez-Bravo (2001) on the strategies languages use in order to make the focus prominent. Languages separate into those which have the nuclear accent occurring on the focus through violating the prosodic phrasing constraints (like English) versus languages which violate word order constraints (like Spanish). MH does not sacrifice canonical word order or phonological phrasing, and limits prosodic marking of the foci to non-sentence final foci. Nevertheless, since in either case speakers are able to obtain the correct focus structure from hearing the sentence; they must be relying on a default focus position when the focus occurs finally. This presents a challenge to approaches that argue that focus marking is done by ranking phonological phrasing and word order constraints to control the position of the nuclear accent.



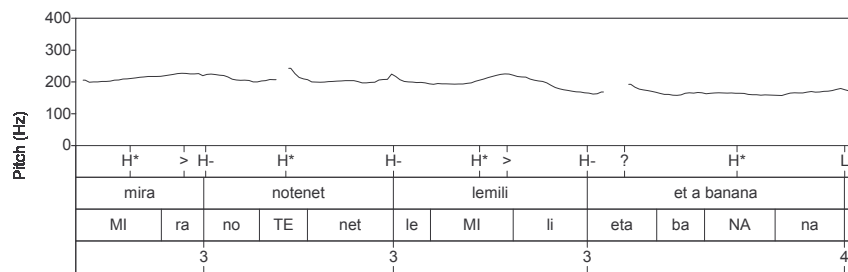
Pitch track 1- Object focus



Pitch track 2- Subject focus



Pitch track 3- Focus on the direct object (sentence final)



Pitch track 4- Focus on the indirect object (non-final)

References

Büring, D. and Gutierrez-Bravo, R. (2002). Focus-Related Constituent Order Variation without the NSR: A Prosody-Based Crosslinguistic Analysis. *Syntax at Santa Cruz* 3: 41-58.

Selkirk, E. (1995). Sentence Prosody: Intonation, Stress and Phrasing. In Goldsmith, J. (ed.) *The Handbook of Phonological Theory*, 550-569. Oxford: Blackwell.