How discourse interpretation of intonation does and does not connect to grammar

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We know more about the meaning of intonational melodies than is sometimes realized. Why do yes/no-questions across languages often show a final rise (Is it raining? [/]) and wh-questions less so (who has arrived? [/] or [\]) while alternative questions show an obligatory final fall (Is it raining [/] or snowing [\]) ? Clearly it is not the speech-act of a question that is indicated by rising intonation (it is the same in all these cases). An idea that has been proposed for German is that the final rise only codes continuation, and that yes/no-questions are clipped alternative questions (Is it raining [/] ~~or isn't it raining [\]~~). This cannot be upheld since many languages differentiate between yes/no-questions and continuation in the intonation. (English is in fact such a language, a property not visible in the simplified illustrations of this abstract.) Elements of an interesting solution are present in Bartels 1997 (building on Pierrehumbert and Hirschberg 1990). The important core is reviewed and put on a more principled footing in the first part of this talk. A central element of the account is a separation of intonational meanings and sentence grammar: intonational meanings operate on salient propositions, not on the output of compositional semantics, i.e. not on literal sentence meanings.

The second part of the talk argues for a revision in the theory of the semantics of focus, crucially importing the separation from above, which is here also argued to separate focus meaning and sentence grammar. The central empirical issue addressed is raised by recent work of Lisa Selkirk. An accent is possible on a new constituent that follows a narrow focus. *Who gave something to Mary? [BILL]$_{FOCUS}$ gave a BOOK$_{NEW}$ to Mary*. This is problematic for the semantic theory of focus by Rooth 1992. It will be argued to fit with a revised account in which focus operates on salient propositions, formally disconnected from compositional semantics (the literal meaning of constituents). Independent evidence for this step is shown.

Thus, meanings of intonation contours and the meaning of focus are argued to connect only indirectly to sentence grammar and its compositional interpretation.

How does this division fit with the fact that one class of languages encodes the distinction between declaratives and yes/no-interrogatives in the morphosyntax (typically by inversion in interrogatives), while another class of languages appears to encode this distinction only in the intonation, not employing inversion or similar morphosyntactic means? Brazilian Portuguese (BP) is a language of the latter kind. Joint experimental results, with Filomena Sandalo and Bernadette Abaurre, are presented, bearing on this issue. Our results on nuclear contours in BP allow us to extend results of de Moraes (1984): It is possible to isolate what codes declaratives and what codes yes/no-interrogatives in the intonation of BP. In the current account, this is different from [/] and [\] above, and we argue that BP intonation additionally codes the equivalents of [/] and [\] above. The combination of these with 'declarative' vs. 'interrogative', we argue, gives rise to three intonational categories of BP: (a) an equivalent of falling declaratives (It's raining. [\]) (b) an equivalent of rising yes/no-question (It's raining? [/]) and, crucially (c) an equivalent of rising declaratives (declarative questions, see Gunloson 2001 – It's raining? [/]). Thus, there seem to be concrete melodic categories that encode something similar or identical to what is encoded by syntactic inversion in other languages – 'declarative' vs. 'interrogative'.

Arguably the category 'declarative' is not just the absence of an interrogative feature (such as [+wh]) but a speech act category that attributes the content of a clause to a discourse participant. With this, the overlap between intonational meanings and compositional

meanings can be localized: Similar speech act meanings can be encoded by both. However, the separation from above holds up: Where the speech act meanings are morphosyntactically encoded, they operate on the output of compositional semantics; where the speech act meanings are intonationally encoded, they arguably operate on indirectly related salient propositions. Thus, it appears that the pragmatic meanings that are expressed can overlap, while the domains that they operate on are formally disjoint.

References

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