Phrasing is key: the syntax and prosody of focus in Georgian

Lena Borise
(Research Institute for Linguistics, Hungarian Academy of Sciences)

In this talk, I provide an account of the syntactic and prosodic properties of focus in Georgian, a Kartvelian language of the Caucasus. Like many verb-final languages, Georgian has a preverbal focus position, which houses wh-phrases and narrow foci, but the latter can also be placed postverbally. Based on standard syntactic tests as well as some language-specific evidence, I show that, despite appearances, immediately preverbal placement of wh-phrases and narrow foci does not have the same underlying syntax. Specifically, wh-phrases in Georgian undergo A-bar movement to the specifier of a dedicated projection, accompanied by verb raising, while preverbal narrow foci remain in situ, with non-focal material undergoing displacement that allows for focus-verb adjacency. Taken together, these results show that, in a single language, more than one syntactic strategy may be used in order to achieve linear adjacency between narrow focus/wh-phrase and the verb.

Next, I show that the distribution of focus-induced prominence in Georgian provides empirical support for focus projection accounts, according to which narrow focus on the (direct) object may be realized in the same way as VP-/broad focus, while narrow focus on the subject has a different prosodic realization. Based on experimental data, I show that narrowly focused subjects are marked by specific F0 patterns and prominence of the stressed syllable, while the prosody of utterances with narrowly focused objects does not differ from VP-/broad focus contexts. The novelty of this result lies in that narrow foci of both types surface in the immediately preverbal position, and, syntactically, are found in situ; nevertheless, they have systematically different prosodic realizations. This means that prosodic structure has the ability to reflect differences in syntactic structure even when they are not reflected linearly.