Syntactic and pragmatic use of tonal boundary marking in French

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It is widely known that one of the functions of prosody is to signal the information structure of an utterance, i.e. its partitioning into Topic/Background and Focus. The phonology of intonation can also (among other linguistic means such as word order and morphological marking) convey structural differences such as focus scope and, in some languages, even focus type (cf. Face and D'Imperio 2005 for the difference between contrastive and broad focus in Italian and Spanish). Recent work on German and English intonation has recently questioned the impact of information structure in terms of the topic/comment partition on prosodic patterns. In contrast with stress-accent languages such as Italian, Spanish or English, French does not appear to signal focus through pitch accent placement, rather it appears to mainly employ prosodic edge marking for the same purposes.

In the first part of the talk, I will build upon Féry's (Féry 2001) insight by showing that, while phrasing is one of the strategies that French adopts in order to signal focus, the forces driving it are probabilistic and that prosodic length constraints are also at work. Specifically, I shall show recent data (German and D'Imperio 2010, in press) suggesting that the initial LHi rise may mark the left edge of contrastive focus regions in French, and that the probability of this marking increases with phrase length. Hence, both phrase length and focus scope appear to be the relevant, additive, factors for the appearance of an initial rise, while no interaction between them was found. In the second part of the talk, I will turn to another phrasing level, the intermediate phrase (ip). Very recent work shows that the emergence of an ip in French is not simply linked to a specific focus or marked syntactic structure, since a right ip boundary can occur within broad focus utterances whenever the syntactic and the prosodic structure allow it (Michelas and D'Imperio 2012, D'Imperio and Michelas 2014). Finally, I will show that the regularities found in production appear to be also actively employed in perception and morphosyntactic parsing decisions (Michelas & D'Imperio, in press).