

On Variability in Pitch Accent Distributions

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Speakers of germanic languages, such as Dutch and English, have been argued to use pitch accents to distinguish important from less important pieces of information in a spoken discourse, whereas listeners have been shown to be sensitive to the way such accents are distributed in an incoming utterance. For instance, when information is new or contrastive, it is typically marked with a pitch accent, and listeners find it easier to process speech when such accents indeed match the prominent information status of discourse fragments. However, when one analyses naturally produced discourse, one often observes exceptions to this general rule and variability, both between and within speakers, in how accents are distributed in spoken sentences. In this talk, I will elaborate on factors that may explain this variability, in particular focusing on the extent to which accents vary as a function of speaker type (e.g. good vs bad speakers), as a function of intonational differences between a speaker's first and second language, and as a function of the degree to which a speaker takes into account the listener's perspective on the ongoing discourse.