

The cohesive function of prosody in Ékegusií (Kisii) folktales

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Introduction

Realizations of prosody

- pause
- accent
- pitch reset
- intonational parallelism
- intonational contour

Functions of Prosody

- signals phonological structure
- signals syntactic structure
- signals discourse prominence
- signals affect
- abets information flow

Prosody as Cohesion

- helps listeners to detect discourse boundaries, and the degree of cohesion or discontinuity between successive utterances
- structure (whether phonological or syntactic) is always cohesion-forming

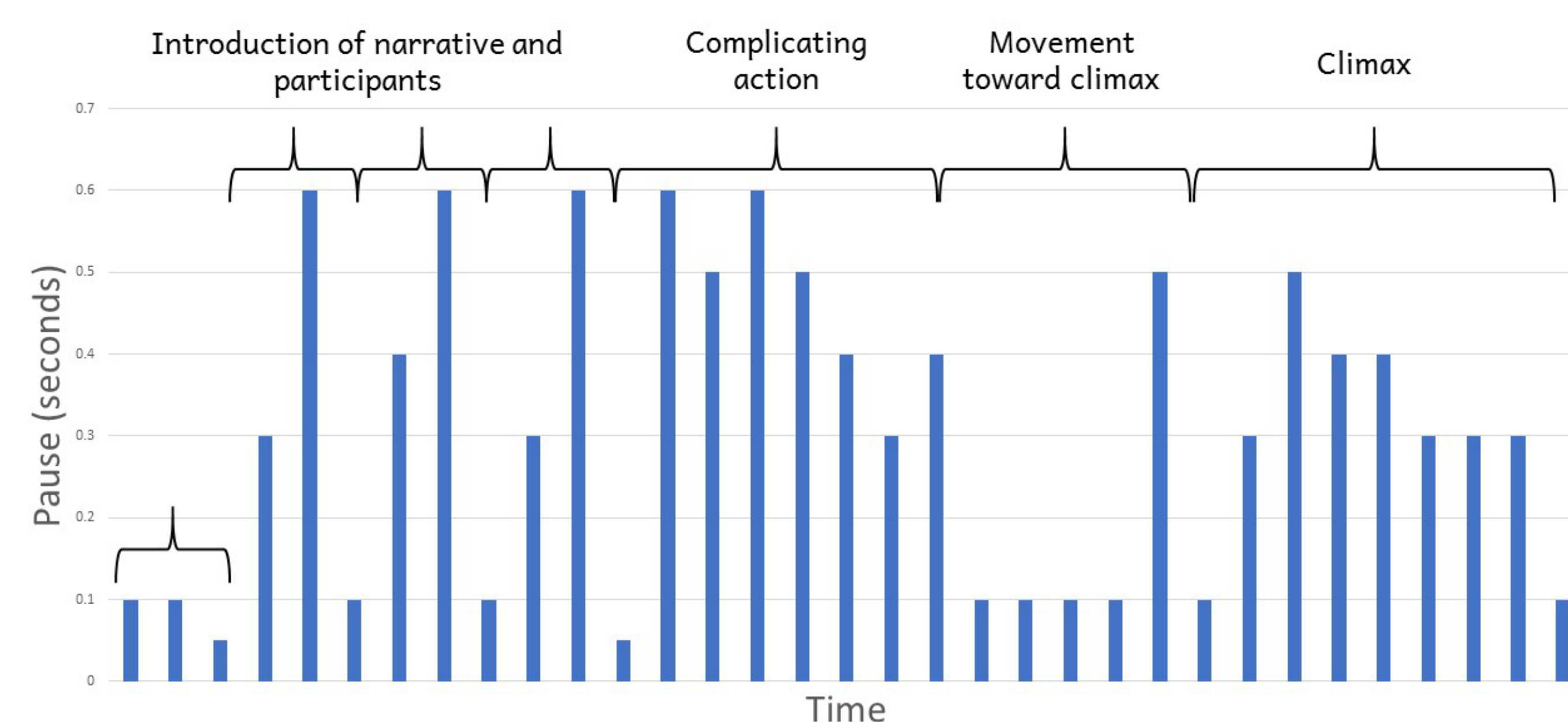
This study shows how prosodic features are used by speakers to lend cohesion to their discourse, by signaling the transitions from one unit of discourse to the next, the relations that hold between those units, and their relative prominence.

Background, Data & Methods

- Ékegusií (Gusii, Kisii), Great Lakes Bantu, southwest Kenya
- Endangered: ~600,000 speakers, few under 30 y.o.
- 24 folktales recorded near Kisii Town, Kenya, Summer 2014
- Lexical database, with audio, ~14,000 words
- Texts annotated for prosodic features listed above
- Prosodic boundaries were *not* marked - just the features

Pauses

The length of pauses helps structure the text into its narrative stages



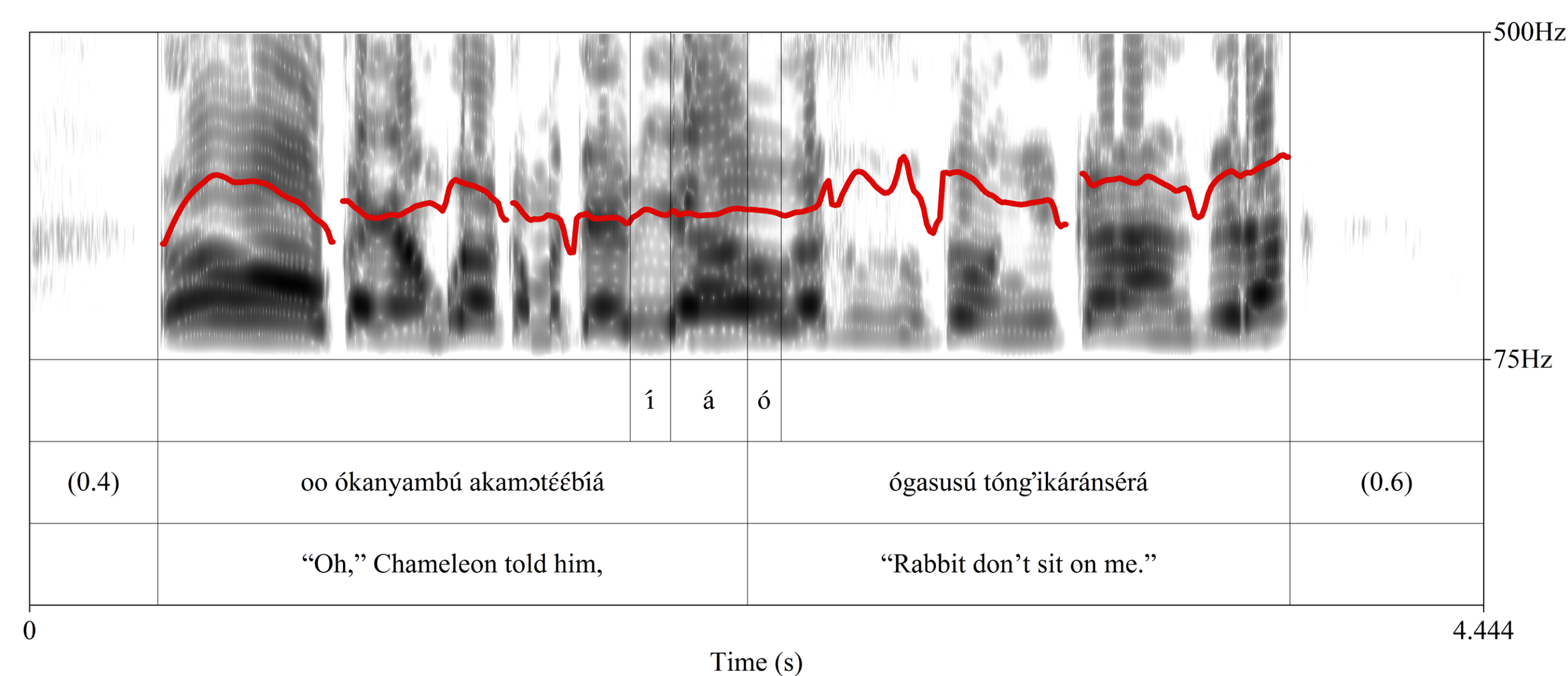
Pauses (cont.)

- the participants are introduced and given descriptions, topic-comment style, each separated by a long pause
- the complicating action is a sequence of utterances, where each utterance correspond to one step in a sequence of events
- each step in the complicating action is followed by a long pause, creating a slower narrative pacing
- pauses are extremely short during the movement toward the climax, creating a rapid pacing

Speakers use pauses to structure texts into major narrative sections, and control their pacing, thereby giving cohesion to each section.

Vowel Elision

- Ékegusií typically elides vowels at word junctions
- Sometimes elision fails to occur phrase-internally, creating minor prosodic breaks

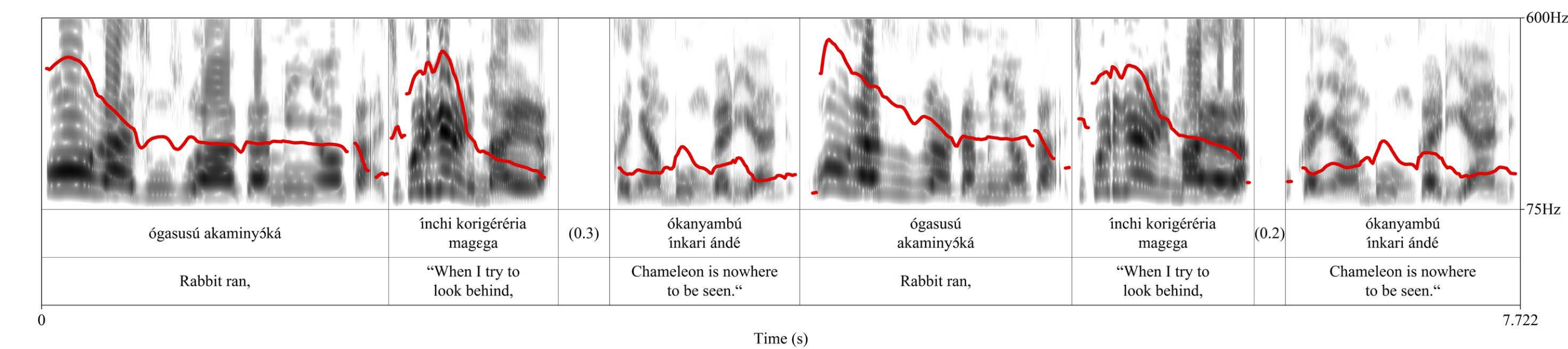


Vowel elision can be manipulated to create minor prosodic breaks even without pause, most typically at the transition to reported speech, or to demarcate distinct events in a rapid sequence.

Intonational Parallelism

- *Isotony* or *intonational parallelism* is the realization of the same intonational contour on separate, typically successive, stretches of speech.
- By repeating the same intonational contour across two stretches of speech, the speaker highlights a similarity between them, whether in form or semantic content.

Intonational Parallelism (cont.)



Pitch Reset

Problems determining pitch reset:

- canonical cases of pitch reset are rare in the Ékegusií corpus
- terminal contours or prosodic accent may interrupt declination trends
- pitch may reset down rather than up
- many utterances show a flat contour or even a gradual rise
- reported speech consistency shows a higher register



Pitch reset is best understood as a more holistic property of how hearers perceive phrases, abstracting away from the parts of the pitch contour that are irrelevant to the overall trend.

Intonational Contour

Ékegusií has many types of intonational contours, each with a dedicated function. Classifying these contours as simply H or L, or falling or rising, fails to capture important differences between them. Some examples:

- **sharp terminal rise:** backgrounding function, for conditionals, new topics, and 'when'-clauses
- **gradual terminal rise:** continuing topic, more information to come
- **high level register:** extended sequences of events
- **sharp fall to low register:** conclusion of sequence of events

Speakers attend to the overall, conventionalized pattern of the intonational contour, rather than individual pitch targets.

Conclusion

Each prosodic feature helps delineate units of discourse and convey their relationship to the units around them. These features work in tandem to create stronger or weaker breaks in the discourse, thereby creating hierarchical prosodic structure.