
Prosody and focus recognition in Spanish: a fresh look at the Focus Prominence Rule

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The Focus Prominence Rule (FPR; Jackendoff 1972), which requires that nuclear stress falls within the focus domain, is considered one of the most stable principles governing the prosody-focus mapping. To determine whether violations of the FPR occur during production or perception, we combine the results from a perception experiment on Argentinean Spanish (Gabriel & Heidinger 2022) with a prosodic analysis of a sample of 30 stimuli used in that study. In the underlying perception experiment, we presented L1-Spanish listeners with oral production data and examined whether the focus-background partition assigned by the participants to contextless sentences coincided with the one under which these sentences had originally been produced.

To scrutinize the role of production and perception in the FPR violations (30%), we analyzed 30 productions of [_F *María*] *le da el diario a su hermano* ‘Mary gives the newspaper to her brother’ and correlated the results with the respective rates of correct focus recognition. In a relative weight analysis (Johnson 2000), we identified four significant prosodic predictors ($R^2 = 0.81$): 1) Alignment of the focal pitch accent’s H tone with the end of stressed syllable (raw relative weight (RRW) = 0.2422); 2) Duration of the stressed syllable of [_F *María*] in relation to that of the following verb (*da*) (RRW = 0.168); 3) Alignment of the L tone following the focal pitch peak with the end of the word [_F *María*] (RRW = 0.1561); 4) Alignment of the L tone following the focal pitch peak with the end of the stressed syllable (RRW = 0.1518). In 1), 3), and 4), focus recognition improves with increasing negative alignment; in 2), it improves with increasing difference in length between *-rí-* and *da*, the former being longer than the latter.

The strong impact of prosody on focus recognition suggests that FPR violations typically occur during production: Stimuli with a clear nuclear stress on the subject are interpreted as sentences with focal subjects. Given that it is also conceivable that violations would occur during perception, our results allow to discriminate between production and perception as the locus of FPR violations.

References: Gabriel, C. & S. Heidinger (2022). The focus prominence rule in Spanish from a perception perspective. *Borealis* 1(1), 141–172. • Jackendoff, R. (1972). *Semantic interpretation in Generative Grammar*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. • Johnson, J. W. (2000). A Heuristic Method for Estimating the Relative Weight of Predictor Variables in Multiple Regression. *Multivariate behavioral research* 35(1), 1–19.