

International Linguistic Association

Monthly Lecture Series

Saturday, February 3, 2024. 11 AM - 12 PM (EST)

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Temporal organization of gesture and prosody in conversation in Luganda

Abstract

A growing body of evidence supports the argument that prosody and gesture comprise a single system. Prosody and gesture interact temporally, for example, in the expression of prominence (Swerts & Krahmer, 2010; Wagner et al., 2014; Prieto et al., 2015; Ambrazaitis & House, 2017, 2022, inter alia). It has been shown in many languages that gestures, particularly beat gestures, are closely aligned in time with prominent syllables (e.g. Krahmer & Swerts, 2007; Loehr, 2007). However, prominent syllables and large pitch movements are often confounded in the languages that are studied, leading to ambiguity about which prosodic characteristics are most relevant for temporal alignment.

Luganda (ISO 639-3) is a Great Lakes Bantu language spoken in Uganda. The definition of prominence in Bantu languages is somewhat unclear, meaning that the potential anchor points for gesture are also rather difficult to define. Focus, a target for phonetic/prosodic prominence in many languages, does not appear to be prosodically marked in many Bantu languages (cf. Hyman, 1999). Penultimate lengthening, that is, a phonological lengthening of the penultimate syllable of the word, has been proposed as a prominence location in Eastern and Southern Bantu languages (Odden, 1999; Hyman, 2013). Luganda does not have penultimate lengthening on a phonological level, although syllables in penultimate position tend to be phonetically longer than their counterparts in other positions (Hyman, 2013). Luganda's tonal structure is constrained such that a maximum of one transition from High to Low may arise within a word (McCawley, 1970). Similar patterns have been argued to underlie reanalysis of tone to stress in some Bantu languages (Ratliff, 2015). Thus, the location of the final high tone or the start of the falling contour is also a possible candidate for a perceived prominence.

The current study uses video and audio conversational data from two two-party Luganda conversations, which were orthographically transcribed and translated to English by native speakers of Luganda. All hand gestures from all speakers, as well as the apices of the movements, were annotated using the video without access to the audio or the transcript. On the basis of the orthographic transcriptions and the audio data, penultimate syllables, F0 falls, and phrase boundaries were identified, and were investigated as points of possible alignment for gestures by investigating the distribution of gesture apices around these prosodic alignment points, as well as by investigating which alignment point was closest to each individual gesture apex. Initial investigations suggest that all three prosodic alignment points are used as gestural anchor points in Luganda, with penultimate syllables and phrase boundaries being used relatively more frequently than F0 falls. The results will be contextualized among findings for other languages as well as within theories regarding the cognitive mechanisms which underlie prosody-gesture alignment.

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Margaret Zellers is Assistant Professor for Phonetics and Phonology at Kiel University, Germany. She completed her PhD in 2011 at the University of Cambridge with the title *Prosodic Detail and Topic Structure in Discourse*, and subsequently held postdocs in York (UK), Stockholm (SE), and Stuttgart (DE). Her research interests cover a variety of prosodic aspects of spontaneous speech, including the functionality of contrastive structures, aspects of turn management, and backchannelling behaviour.

For more information about the speaker, click on the links below:

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Date & Time: February 3, 2024 at 11:00 AM Eastern Time (US and Canada)

ZOOM LINK: <https://bmcc-cuny.zoom.us/j/81719737886>

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