Prosodic boundaries and spontaneous narratives

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The study presented here is a part of a larger project in which we investigate how word order, intonation and morphology collaborate in conveying information structure in a set of typologically different languages. Languages are grouped by their default word order, i.e. verb-initial, verb-medial and verb final. Material used is elicited utterances, spontaneous dialogues, spontaneous accounts of everyday activities and spontaneous narratives. The final aim is to establish a typology of spoken discourse concerning word order and prosodic type (intonation, tone and phrase languages). An important step lies in establishing a methodology to work with a large set of languages. Our methodology provides for an independent analysis of syntactic and prosodic levels with no pre-supposition about their role in signaling information structure. No fine distinction into focus/non-focus is involved. This will allow us to build a general discourse typology for a set of typologically different languages to establish general features of interaction of prosody and syntax in signaling information structure.

We tested the methodology in two different types of oral narratives in Kammu, a Mon-Khmer language spoken primarily in Laos. We compared how intonation and word order are used to signal information- and discourse structure in spontaneous accounts about growing rice and in spontaneous spoken folk narratives. The dialect under investigation has two lexical tones, Low and High, and we show that the tonal Kammu behaves as a typical phrase language despite the occurrence of lexical tones. Available boundaries are enhanced to mark information structuring. Topic is always placed before Comment by syntactic movement if necessary. There is a prosodic signaling of the boundary between Topic and Comment. Discourse structure as well tends to be reflected in prosody. Thus, we find higher boundary tones near the Discourse Units. We find also systematic prosodic differences between the two speech genres. The results are discussed in terms of a typology of spoken discourse.