Does syntax win over prosody? – An auditory acceptability study on the interpretation of „only“
Antje Sauermann, Frank Kügler & Heiner Drenhaus, University of Potsdam, Germany
sauermann@ling.uni-potsdam.de; {f.kuegler;h.drenhaus}@googlemail.com

Introduction
The interpretation of “only” depends on syntactic (c-command) and prosodic (pitch accent, e.g. L+H* accent) constraints [1]. Previous research demonstrated that syntactic preferences can sometimes be overwritten by prosody [2] and context [3].

Questions: Can prosody overwrite the syntactic preferences to associate “only” with an adjacent constituent (Exp. 1)? Can prosody overwrite the c-command constraint or syntax the requirement that “only” associates with an accented constituent (Exp. 2)?

Experiment 1 (only-NP-NP)

Method
- speeded acceptability judgements on a scale ranging from unacceptable (1) to acceptable (6)
- 23 students from University of Leicester, monolingual speakers of British English

Material
- 32 items (capital letters indicate L+H* accent):
  a) The manager showed only THE BISHOP the altar but not THE CHAPLAIN.
  b) The manager showed only THE BISHOP the altar but not THE ORGAN.
  c) The manager showed only the bishop THE ALTAR but not THE CHAPLAIN.
  d) The manager showed only the bishop THE ALTAR but not THE ORGAN.

Results
- Higher acceptability ratings for the prosodic match conditions (a) and b) than for the mismatch conditions (c) and (d), regardless of syntactic match or mismatch
- Impact of prosody but not of syntax on the acceptability judgements
- No effects on reaction times

Experiment 2 (NP-only-NP)

Method
- 23 monolingual native speakers of British English from Leicester University

Material
- 32 items (capital letters indicate L+H* accent):
  a) The manager showed only THE BISHOP the altar but not THE CHAPLAIN.
  b) The manager showed only THE BISHOP the altar but not THE ORGAN.
  c) The manager showed only the bishop THE ALTAR but not THE CHAPLAIN.
  d) The manager showed only the bishop THE ALTAR but not THE ORGAN.

Results
- High acceptability ratings for the prosodic and syntactic match condition (d), low ratings for each of the mismatch conditions regardless of prosodic or syntactic match (a)–(c)
- Prosodic and syntactic constraints influence acceptability judgements
- No effects on reaction times

Conclusions
- Experiment 1 showed that prosody overwrite scope preferences and thus disambiguates between scope ambiguities.
- Experiment 2 showed that syntactic and prosodic constraints are important to interpret “only”. Prosody did not overwrite the c-command constraint and syntax not the requirement to associate “only” with an unaccented constituent.
- Results concerning the reaction times are less clear, presumably due to the use of a 6-point scale for the acceptability judgements.

References

Acknowledgement
Many thanks to Kevin Paterson for helpful comments and access to the research facilities at Leicester.