

Prominence and RPT reconsidered

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One of the concepts that have been gaining popularity in the study of prosody is *prominence*. Prominence is essential in Rapid Prosody Transcription (RPT), a task in which lay participants mark the words that stand out for them in utterances they hear and see written. I will present results from two RPT experiments the aim of which was to explore the extent to which prominence is associated with the (putative) H* ~ L+H* contrast in English; this contrast has been treated by some researchers as purely phonetic and by others as reflecting a pragmatic difference between new and contrastive information. The results of the first experiment showed that prominence judgements for words accented with H* and L+H* accents were strong only when form and function worked synergistically: H*-accented words used non-contrastively were unlikely to be marked as prominent, L+H*-accented words used contrastively were very likely to be marked as prominent, while prominence judgements for H* contrastive accents and L+H* non-contrastive accents were at chance level. These general trends, however were not consistent across participants: some prioritized acoustic information, others prioritized pragmatic information, while a third group showed no strong preference. To further investigate the possible reasons behind these three response patterns, we conducted a second study and additionally collected data on the Empathy Quotient (EQ), musicality, and Autism Quotient (AQ) of the participants. EQ has been shown in previous research to associate with greater sensitivity to pragmatics, while AQ and musicality have been shown to associate with attention to phonetic detail. The aggregate results of the second experiment replicated those of the first. Individual participant responses were not affected by AQ. However, participants with high EQ did prioritize pragmatic over phonetic cues (i.e. they favoured contrastive accents independently of shape). Finally, those scoring high in musicality were most sensitive to phonetic cues, as predicted, but only when such cues combined with prototypical pragmatic functions, thereby leading to very high scores for contrastive L+H*s and very low scores for non-contrastive H*s among those scoring high in musicality. The implications for the H*~LH* contrast in English, on the one hand, and for PRT and the concept of prominence, on the other, will be discussed.