Positional Prominence vs. Word Accent: Is there a difference?

One of the major unresolved issues in the study of word-accentual systems is determining what exactly counts as accent. In languages such as English, where prominent syllables are uncontroversially identified by a combination of effects on both the suprasegmental features of pitch, duration and intensity as well as on segmental realizations, there is no hesitation in attributing these effects to stress and metrical structure. Controversy arises in languages where the effects are less pronounced, have little or no effect on segments, or mark phrasal domains rather than words. A case in point is the common Bantu phenomenon of penultimate vowel lengthening, which, although often identified as accent (cf. Downing 2004), generally characterizes the penultimate syllable of phonological or intonational phrases, rather than the word (Hyman 2013). The intonational nature of such alleged “accentual” lengthening is particularly striking in a language like Shekgalagari, where penultimate vowel lengthening occurs in declarative utterances, but not in questions or imperatives (Hyman & Monaka 2011). The task of unambiguously identifying accent is often further complicated in languages with tone or so-called pitch-accent. Given the wide range of potential effects on tone, length, and segmental phonology in prominent vs. non-prominent syllables, there is no guarantee that these effects will exhibit the same “metrical coherence” (Dresher & Lahiri 1991) known from Germanic and other languages which care a lot about marking their stressed syllables. If the prominent positions conflict, the question is whether they are “accentual” in the normal sense.

In an attempt to resolve this question, in this paper I address two Bantu cases where the positional prominence effects are clearly word level and reasonably subject to a metrical (accentual) interpretation, although one that might not completely “cohere”. The first is Punu (Fontaney 1980, Blanchon 1995), spoken in Gabon. In this language greater consonant and vowel contrasts suggest that the initial root syllable is accented, tone suggests the penultimate syllable is accented, and vowel length suggests that both positions are accented. The second case comes from Lulamogi, a small, understudied language spoken in Uganda, which we have been investigating at Berkeley since last August. In this language vowel length suggests that the initial, second, penultimate and final syllables of the stem are accented, while tone suggests it is the penult. (The segmental phonology does not show significant positional prominence effects.) Although there are problems in both cases in accommodating different prominent positions and questions about ultimate foot structure, I will suggest that at least a root-initial trochee is motivated in Punu and a word-final trochee in Lulamogi. I conclude with discussion of one final complication from Luganda: whether it is moraic vs. syllabic positions which are prominent.

References