This study investigates the intonational marking of contrastive focus in Yucatecan Spanish (YS), spoken on the peninsula of Yucatán. This variety of Spanish is distinct from Standard Mexican Spanish (Suárez, 1977). YS is in close contact with Yucatec Maya, a language reported to have no prosodic marking of contrastive focus (Kügler & Skopeteas, 2007). It does, however, make use of focus fronting and is analysed as an edge-marking language with a prominent left edge (Verhoeven & Skopeteas, 2015).

Whereas in Standard Mexican Spanish, contrastive focus is signalled by a rise up to a high peak (Figures 1a, b), analysed as a L+H* pitch accent on the focus exponent (De la Mota, 2010), this stressed syllable is low in the Yucatecan variety. The question arises as to whether this low pitch is the marker of contrastive focus, or whether some other mechanism is at work.

Data from two elicitation experiments with 10 speakers of Yucatecan Spanish (two hours in total) suggest that contrastive focus is signalled in this variety by means of high pitch early in the intonation phrase (IP), followed by a fall to the primary stressed syllable of the focus exponent. The exact timing of the high pitch is subject to variation, and if enough segmental material is available, it often involves a plateau, see Figures 2a, b, c, d.

This early high pitch is found in (S)AuxV(XP) sentences with contrast on the main verb (as in 2a, b), in subject cleft sentences (2c), and in a YS-specific fronting construction (2d) resulting from language contact with Yucatec Maya (Gutiérrez-Bravo et al., submitted).

We argue that the region of high pitch is attention-seeking, preparing the listener for the upcoming contrast. Its presence appears to be obligatory, but the details of its alignment are open to contextual variation: If the focus exponent is near the left edge of the intonation phrase, the H tone surfaces at the beginning of this phrase. If it is further from the edge, then the H tone can extend up to one to two syllables before the stressed syllable. Thus, contrastive focus in this variety of Spanish is also marked by high pitch, but rather than it being on the stressed syllable itself, it is before it. This is a position with an impact on meaning cross-linguistically (Hualde & Nadeu, 2013; Ritter & Grice, 2015; Cole et al. 2015, inter alia). Interestingly, loan word incorporation into Yucatec Maya from Spanish mirrors this pattern: stressed syllables in Spanish are predominantly low toned in YM (the default tone), and crucially, they are also preceded by a high tone, generally two syllables earlier (Frazier 2012).

What the contours in Figures 2a, b, c and d have in common is an early high pitch. Functionally, they all mark contrastive focus. A left-edge phrasal H tone with a potential non-peripheral realisation captures this equivalence at the level of both phonetic substance and contrastive function. The non-peripheral realisation of phrasal tones has been attested cross-linguistically at the right edges of phrases (Grice, Ladd & Arvaniti, 2000; Gussenhoven, 2000). Our results point to a non-peripheral realisation of tones at the left edge.
(a)  ‘(El hijo) está más bien [ˈbajɔn̩do] con el perro.’  
(The son) is rather dancing with the dog.

(b)  ‘(No,) Caperucita está [ˈsaLI恩do] de su casa.’  
(No,) Caperucita is leaving the house.

Figure 1: Standard Mexican Spanish: F0 contour and orthographic transcription in (S)AuxV(XP) sentences with contrasted main verb (lexical stress in caps).

(c)  ‘Es [ˈDon ˈGatʊ y su ˈpańDilla] que están jugando golf.’  
‘It is Don Gato and his gang who are playing golf.’

(d)  ‘Ah tu primo solo [ˈvagʊr] hace.’  
‘Ah, your cousin, all he does is laze around.

Figure 2: Yucatecan Spanish: F0 contour and orthographic transcription of (a, b) (S)AuxV(XP) sentences with contrasted main verb, (c) a cleft sentence and (d) a Yucatecan Spanish-specific fronting construction.

References


