In Northern Bizkaian Basque (NBB), there is a lexical distinction between accented and unaccented words. Accented words surface with a falling pitch accent (H*+L), whereas unaccented words do not surface with any kind of pitch accent, except when appearing immediately preceding the verb or in isolation, where they are assigned a H*+L accent (Hualde 1999). A pitch accent marks the right edge of a phonological phrase (φ) (Elordieta 1997, 1998, 2007, Jun & Elordieta 1997, Gussenhoven 2004, Elordieta & Hualde 2014). However, Jun & Elordieta (1997) report prosodic boundaries between two unaccented words in the Lekeitio variety of NBB. The factors allowing for such boundaries have not been studied.

In order to throw light on the issue of the possible existence of phrasing boundaries across unaccented words, we devised an experiment where 4 native speakers of two varieties of NBB (Aulestia and Lekeitio) read 34 sentences with different numbers of phrases, words and syllables. The sentences were composed of one or two syntactic arguments (XPs) before the verb. When there was only one XP, it could be composed of two, three or four words (i.e. (ωω), (ωωω) and (ωωωω)), and when there were two XPs, the phrases could have one, two or three words, with the following combinations: (ω)(ω), (ω)(ωω), (ω)(ωωω), (ωω)(ω), (ωωω)(ω) and (ωω)(ωω). Thus, there was a maximum of four words before the verb in all sentences. Words could be shorter (2/3 syllables) or longer (4/5 syllables), in order to test the relevance of relative length (in number of syllables) for prosodic phrasing. The sentences were presented in computer slides, and the subjects were instructed to read them as neutral sentences (responding to e.g. ‘What happened?’). Each sentence was repeated three times, for a total of 408 utterances.

φs in NBB are marked by an initial LH tonal sequence (cf. references above). A pitch fall of at least 1.5 semitones between the last syllable of a word and the initial syllable of a following word was interpreted as an initial L of a φ (provided it was also followed by a rise on the second or third syllables, to form an initial LH). The results show that in these sequences of unaccented words Lekeitio speakers do not produce prosodic boundaries, within or across syntactic phrases. Aulestia speakers, on the other hand, do produce φ-boundaries across syntactic phrases, leaving a lefthand φ without stress or pitch accent. These results have interesting implications for the Match Theory of the interface between syntactic and prosodic constituency (Selkirk 2009, 2011). Match-Phrase calls for each syntactic phrase (XP) to be mapped as a φ. However, Lekeitio Basque shows that this constraint can be overridden by higher-ranked prosodic well-formedness constraints. In order not to violate ProsProm(φ), which demands that each φ bear stress and an accent, in Lekeitio no φ is created violating lower-ranked Match-Phrase (cf. Selkirk 2011). In Aulestia, Match-Phrase is higher ranked than ProsProm(φ), and hence φs may contain an unaccented word.
References


