Accentless Words and Recursive Phrasing in Turkish

Turkish has been argued to be a pitch accent language (Levi 2005), but this has not been incorporated into the few existing intonational analyses (Özge and Bozşahin 2010, Kan 2009). I present an analysis of the phrasing with the pitch accent typology in mind. First I show how true accentlessness is observed in the intonation of regularly (=finally) stressed words in Turkish. Then I propose an analysis whereby main prominence lies in a conspiracy between recursive phrases and rightward tone spreading.

Turkish has two accent classes: regular (final) and lexical (non-final). Regularly stressed roots transfer stress under suffixation whereas lexically accented roots have fixed accent placement regardless of suffixation. Such ‘culminativity’, is a common characteristic of pitch accent languages (Levi 2005).

(1) a. kitap-lık-lar-ımız-d´a book-der-pl-poss1pl-loc ‘on our bookshelves’
   b. p´ast-a-cı-lar-ımız-da cake-der-pl-poss1sg-loc ‘among our cake chefs’

This and other evidence leads Levi (2005) to conclude that Turkish is a pitch accent language like Japanese and varieties of Basque. Specifically, Levi’s measurements lead to the conclusion that fundamental frequency is the sole determiner of pitch accent in Turkish, not duration or intensity. First I show that just like Lekeitio Basque (Jun and Elordieta 1997) Turkish exhibits true accentlessness in its intonation.

The first relevant observation is that a uniform H- marks all prenuclear phrases in Turkish, irrespective of accent status (intonational data from Kamali 2011). In Figure 1, left panel, both preverbal words are prenuclear (as is the case with most negative sentences). These phrases are comprised of a regularly stressed word (initial), and a lexically accented word (middle). Since a H- tone is present in both cases, it must be independent from accent and this precludes the possibility of a H* at the right edge of the regularly stressed word. Thus, in the prenuclear position, true accentlessness is observed in Turkish.

Figure 1: Left: Sentence in falsum focus. Right: Sentence in wide focus.
As nuclear items, too, regularly stressed words appear amenable to a description as accentless. The middle word in Figure 1, right panel, is nuclear this time, and fails to show a significant pitch bump corresponding to the stressed final syllable, replicating Levi’s (2005) and Kan’s (2009) observations. This fairly general picture points in the same direction: namely that regularly stressed words are in fact accentless.

However insignificant this final syllable is pitch-wise, it is where the sentence accent is felt to be. This arises from the placement of the final fall, which in this (and other integrated) examples fall on the transition from the preverbal item to the verb in wide focus sentences. Without accent, one way to make this juncture tonally significant is to assume a boundary. However, to keep the prenuclear and nuclear boundaries distinct (one requires a H- and the other expressly rejects a H tone), the nuclear phrase is proposed to be recursively embedded inside another PhP including the verb. The H- tone is triggered by a following left bracket, which is not found after a nuclear element due to this recursion (à la Truckenbrodt 1999).

(2) \((L_{-} \text{ Bunalanlar} H_{-}) (L_{-} (L_{-} \text{ limonluya} \text{ yönendirmeli} )\))

Notice that the verb in Figure 1, right panel, is placed on a lower reference line than the nuclear and prenuclear phrases. This is a crucial component of the nuclear stress configuration and requires explanation. In the proposed phrase-based analysis, the lower reference line of the verb comes for free. Assuming all phrases start with a L-, the verb onset must then start lower than the previous level of the nuclear plateau, yielding the terracing pattern found in Figure 1, right panel. Finally, rightward tone spreading ensures retained heights we observe throughout with the predicted exception of lexically accented words.

In conclusion Turkish exhibits true accentlessness in its sentence intonation. This is the case in both prenuclear and nuclear occurrences, rendering ‘final stress’ in Turkish most likely a perceptual default. Following a reasonable null hypothesis that prosodic structure of the VP mirrors the syntactic structure, we can derive the terracing pattern found in Figure 1, right panel. Finally, rightward tone spreading ensures retained heights we observe throughout with the predicted exception of lexically accented words.

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References


