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Prosodic realization of focus on verbal phrases in two Chinese dialects

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A well-established observation in West-Germanic languages is that when a verbal phrase (e.g. likes movies) is uttered as new information (i.e. focused), speakers often accent (via F0 changes) the noun only (e.g. Ladd 1980 & 1996). Listeners, in turn, find that a single accent on noun sounds as appropriate as when both verb and object are accented (e.g. Gussenhoven 1987, Birch & Clifton 1995, Welby 2003). This study will report results of an experiment which was designed to examine the prosodic realization of focus on verbal phrases in two tonal dialects - Beijing Mandarin and Shanghai Chinese. Both dialects use F0 changes to indicate word meanings, but they differ in tone sandhi patterns. That is, they differ in how words group into phrasal tonal domains and how lexical tones undergo changes within the domain. Two types of focus were elicited: One provides new information to Wh-questions and the other corrections of wrong information in the preceding discourse. The goal of the study is to contribute to the development of a cross-linguistic theory of the prosodic realization of focus. [Work supported by the VENI research grant from the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research.]