A Givenness Illusion

In recent years, a series of studies have shown evidence that the prosodic prominence of individual words depends on their frequency and their contextual 'accessibility.' These effects have been argued to be a consequence of the optimal use of a channel with limited capacity, where the signal for words carrying less information is reduced and that for words carrying more information is boosted, leading to a 'smooth signal' (e.g., Aylett & Turk 2004). The information theoretic approach rationalizes elegantly why the use of prosody seems to reflect contextual salience. This information theoretic perspective is often assumed to provide a more principled and parsimonious account for the distribution of prosodic prominence in general and the placement of accents in particular than linguistic theories focus and givenness, which view prosodic accent placement as syntactically constrained way to encode anaphoric relations to salient linguistic antecedents. This talk reviews evidence that despite the intuitive appeal, facts about prosodic prominence across languages cannot easily be reduced to such an information-theoretic rationale in terms of accessibility (cf. Wagner & Klassen, submitted) or predictability. While information-theoretic processing effects on prosody are unquestionably real, it seems that a theory of the grammatical encoding of focus that posits alternative sets (Rooth 1992) is nevertheless necessary, and indeed focus effects seem to override those of predictability or accessibility when in direct competition. Some of the stranger properties of the anaphoric use of prosody to mark focus and givenness are looked at: In English, but not (or less so) in French, there is an apparent phonological effect that creates a 'givenness illusion' when a semantic contrast is marked without making a sufficient phonological contrast at the same time (Wagner 2011). A curious consequence of this effect is that identical rhymes sound good in French but bad in English (Wagner & McCurdy 2010). The effect doesn't follow from any existing theory of focus or givenness (or information theoretic accounts for that matter), and raises a number of puzzles, including with respect to what it means to be either semantically or phonologically contrastive.