Recursion and embedding in the prosody of two languages
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It is probably not exaggerated to claim that a large part of the relevant literature assumes that all languages behave more or less alike as far as prosody-syntax interactions are concerned, modulo some parametrizations, like head direction or the syntactic domains aligning with prosodic categories. It will be shown that this view has to be revised, as languages can radically differ in an unexpected way.

After introducing some results on syntax-prosody-interface in German, two production experiments in German and Hindi will be presented. The first experiment, conducted with Gerrit Kentner, examines different groupings of three and four names (see Wagner 2005 for similar experiments in English). The second experiment, with Fabian Schubö, addresses double center-embedded relative sentences (see Hunyadi 2006 for some results in Hungarian). Pitch and duration were analyzed in details in more than a thousand utterances. It turned out that in German, syntactic grouping, recursion and embedding are mapped very closely in prosodic phrasing, pitch scaling being altogether a better indicator of complex syntactic relationships than duration, especially as in relative sentences. Hindi, on the other hand, behaves in a different way: nearly no difference in pitch or duration of groupings of names could be found, and center-embedded sentences showed a downstep throughout rather than the more finely-grained pitch scaling of German.

The intonation systems of the two languages will be advanced as an explanation for the difference in syntax-prosody mapping. German is an intonation language, which changes pitch accents and boundary tones along with pragmatic meanings, whereas Hindi is a ‘phrase language,’ with tones at the level of the phrase, and a much more rigid prosodic pattern. As a conclusion, the expression of embedding and recursion in the prosody may turn out to be dependent on the kind of intonation system of the language investigated. More experiments are needed to verify this thesis.