

Head beats and eyebrow movements as a function of phonological prominence levels and word accents in Stockholm Swedish news broadcasts

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1 Background and research question

A growing body of evidence suggests that hand, head and eyebrow movements are aligned with pitch accents in speech and in this way contribute to the production and perception of prosodic prominence (e.g., Swerts and Kraemer 2010, and references therein). Swerts and Kraemer found in a study on visual prosody of Dutch newsreaders that the more accented a word was on an auditory scale (no accent, weak accent, strong accent), the more likely it was that the word was also accompanied by a head or eyebrow movement, or both (most common in the strongly-accented words). A way of interpreting these findings is that head and eyebrow movements have equivalent, cumulative functions as building blocks of prominence.

This study is part of a project investigating how verbal prosody (e.g. pitch accents), eyebrow and head movements interact in encoding levels of multimodal prominence in Swedish, and how these prominence levels are employed by speakers and listeners in the (de-) coding of information structure. Inspired by Swerts and Kraemer, this contribution presents a first analysis of the distribution of head and eyebrow movements as a function of verbal prominence levels in Swedish news broadcasts. In our study, we make use of the fact that Swedish has two phonological prosodic prominence levels, which can be distinguished rather easily when inspecting the fundamental frequency contour. Thus, our point of departure is the question whether *phonological* prominence levels – which often, but not always necessarily reflect *perceptual* prominence levels – have an effect on the distribution of head and eyebrow movements.

Unlike so-called intonation languages like English and Dutch, Swedish is a pitch-accent language, employing pitch contrasts at the lexical level. In particular, Swedish has a binary distinction between two word accents (Accent 1, Accent 2), i.e. two different pitch accents assigned to words by means of lexical/morphological rules. In addition, words can be highlighted at the sentence level, just as in English or Dutch. For Stockholm Swedish, a phonological distinction is generally assumed between the *non-focal*, accented realization of a word (tonal pattern in Stockholm Swedish: H[igh]-L[ow]; with a different timing of the HL for Accent 1 and 2), and a *focal* realization of a word (HLH, i.e., an additional H[igh] tone). Note: While the non-focal vs. focal accents represent two different phonological prominence levels, no difference in *prominence* is generally assumed between the two word accents (Accent 1 vs. 2). Therefore, our hypothesis was that focally accented words would coincide with head or eyebrow movements more often than non-focal words, while the word accent category (Accent 1 vs. 2) should have no effect on the distribution of head or eyebrow movements.

2 Method, results and conclusions

A corpus of news readings from Swedish Television, comprising speech from four speakers (two female) and 986 words in total, was annotated for focal accents, head and eyebrow

movements, independently by three annotators. A ‘double head beat’ was annotated if two beats were clearly distinguishable within a single word. In the analysis, an annotation was counted as such in the event of an agreement between at least two annotators.

In our study, almost an equal number of head movements were annotated (229 of 986 words) as in the Dutch data in Swerts and Krahmer (228 of 985 words). However, we annotated far fewer eyebrow movements (67 vs. 303), i.e. about two, on average, per piece of news. This suggests that eyebrow movements were used rather sparsely by the speakers, presumably mostly restricted to words representing the (absolutely) most important information.

Results of χ^2 -tests revealed a dependency of the distribution of movements on the one hand and focal accents on the other, confirming our hypothesis (for eyebrows: $\chi^2=42.24$, $p<.01$; head: $\chi^2=209.11$, $p<.01$). Also, no consistent effects of the word accent type on eyebrow and head movements were found. However, there was an effect of the word accent type on the annotations of ‘double’ head movements ($\chi^2=8.46$, $p<.01$). This effect might be explained as follows: Only nine words in the entire corpus were annotated with a double head movement (to be compared with 220 annotations of simple head movements), of which seven were Accent 2 words, all of which were compounds. Compounds are characterized by a complex lexical stress pattern, containing a main and a secondary stress. In addition, focal Accent 2 words are produced with two pitch peaks. Thus, the results suggest an association of a head beat with a linguistic/phonetic prominence: possibly, a head beat requires a lexically stressed syllable to associate with, in a similar manner as is known for accentual tones.

The fact that simple head beats occurred frequently in the corpus (in 220 of 986 words) further supports the idea that head beats in general (simple or double) might have a closer association to lower-level prominence and phonological-prosodic structure, while eyebrow movements might be more restricted to higher-level prominence and information-structure coding. An analysis of overlaps of eyebrow and head beats provides further support for this conclusion, as eyebrow movements most often co-occurred with head beats (49 of 67, or 73% of the cases; to be compared with 138 of 303, i.e. 45.5%, in the data by Swerts and Krahmer). However, the figure 49 of 67 must be handled with some care, since in many of the remaining cases, an eyebrow movement did in fact fall on a word preceding a word carrying a head beat, suggesting that in these cases both head and eyebrow movements, although annotated for different words, relate to the same prominence. Restructuring the data accordingly reveals that 60 of 67 eyebrow movements (89.6%) were associated with a word that also carried a head beat. Furthermore, in 56 of these cases, the two movements co-occurred with a focal accent.

To conclude, this study suggests that head and eyebrow movements can represent two quite different modalities of prominence cuing, both from a formal and functional point of view, rather than just being cumulative prominence markers.

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References

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