Revisiting intonational pitch accents in Swedish: Evidence from lexical accent neutralisation

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Background
Standard Swedish is often assumed to have “essentially only one intonation contour”,
while most other European languages exhibit “a large number of pitch accents to signal various shades of information status” (Gussenhoven 2004).

But: Hardly any “shades of information status” have been treated for Swedish yet.

Study 1: Confirmations vs new information

Production data

- Prepared dialogues, read by pairs of speakers, containing test sentences like Ja, det var med bilen “Yes, (it was) by car”
- Test word either accent I (bilen “the car”) or accent II (bilar “cars”)
- Sentence placed in different contexts, where test word either represents given information (confirmation) or new information
- 9 speakers, 5 pairs of test words → 180 utterances in total

Results and Discussion

96 % of the new-information cases produced with an H- (focal accent) on the test word, e.g. Fig. 1.

87 % of the confirmations produced without an H- accent; word accent distinction often maintained in these cases, see Fig. 2.

Are the accents found on the test words in confirmations simply the “pure”, non-focal word accents? - This “lack of H-" is better analysed as a falling sentence accent, i.e. “H+L-”. Why?

23 % of accent II cases lacking H- produced with an “accent I like” pattern, e.g. Fig. 3.

Why does this word accent neutralisation occur?
→ Low functional load of word accents and given information only part of the explanation!
→ Test words produced with a falling sentence accent (H+L-)
→ H+L- in connection with accent II (perceptually) similar to H- with accent I; both have a high-pitch vowel onset
→ Reduction of the word accent gesture implies perceptual enhancement of the contrast between H- and H+L-

Are the claims made here concerning perceptual aspects plausible?

Study 2: Confirmations vs new information

Perception (reaction time) data

- Stimuli: 12 phrases containing accent I, e.g. han (juger “he’s lying”, 12 phrases containing accent II, e.g. det regnar “it’s raining”;
- All stimuli phrases spoken both by a female and a male speaker; 4 pitch patterns (Fig. 4), combined with each stimulus phrase

→ 96 stimuli represent a match of word type and pitch pattern
→ 96 stimuli represent mismatch conditions
→ 20 subjects; task: identify a stimulus as a bekäftelse (“confirmation”) or a nyhet (“new information statement”)

See Ambrazaitis (2009) for further details and discussions.

References