The phonetics of focus in Yoloxóchitl Mixtec

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There is a growing body of evidence that prosody and information structure influence the realization of tones in lexical tone languages (Lee, 2014, Scholz, 2012, Xu 1999). The current study presents the results of an experiment examining prosodic focus in Yoloxóchitl Mixtec (YM), an Otomanguean languages spoken in Guerrero, Mexico.

YM has a complex tonal system with twenty tonal melodies possible on disyllabic stems (DiCanio et al. 2014). Tone production was examined in three prosodic conditions: narrow focus, contrastive focus, and sentential focus with eight native speakers. Acoustic results show that tones under contrastive focus are realized with the largest pitch range expansion and pitch raising, followed by narrow focus and sentential focus. Words produced with contrastive and narrow focus have similar durations, but words under sentential focus are shortened. Interestingly, these prosodic effects are found to be stronger in stressed syllables than in unstressed syllables, suggesting that focus is sensitive to the prosodic hierarchy.

The results demonstrate the importance of prosody to studying lexical tone systems and pinpoint an important source of variation in the existing YM corpus. They also highlight the usefulness of experimental techniques in the exploration of prosody in endangered languages (c.f. Clopper & Tonhauser, 2013).

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