

Tools and methodology for exploring the prosody-pragmatics interface: lessons from Nigerian Pidgin

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In Nigerian Pidgin, or Naija, a language spoken by some 100 million people in Nigeria, the role of prosody in topic-marking remains an understudied question, particularly with regards to the way in which speakers distinguish between topics which are readily present in the minds of their interlocutors, and less cognitively accessible ones such as those being introduced for the first time. To explore this topic, we employ an innovative bottom-up approach based on a combination of manual pragmatic annotation, automatic prosodic stylization, and exploratory statistical analysis, with the goal of establishing relationships between the pragmatic functions of left-detached topics, and their melodic characteristics. Our contribution intends first and foremost to present the tools and methodology used in this study, with a particular focus on the production of stylized prosodic contours using the software SLAM+ as well as the various statistical approaches used to explore the relationship between prosody and pragmatic structure. We will also describe the benefits and limitations of our approach, as well as the major findings made through our research so far. We believe that our methods may provide a useful and versatile starting point for studying the role of prosody in other low-resource languages provided the existence of a sufficiently-sized corpus of recorded speech.