The Role of Duration as a Correlate of Accent in Lekeitio Basque

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Abstract

Northern Bizkaia Basque shares important prosodic features with Japanese, including the existence of a lexical distinction between accented and unaccented content words, the presence of phrase-initial rises and the consistent realization of accents as tonal falls. In this paper we investigate whether NB Basque is also like Japanese in not making use of syllable duration as a correlate of accent, as has been suggested in recent work. The analysis of experimental data from 6 native speakers of the variety spoken in the Bizkaian town of Lekeitio confirms the hypothesis that the presence of an accent on a given syllable is not manifested in an increase of its duration in this language. Other things being equal, accented and unaccented syllables do not have significantly different durations in neutral declarative sentences. More tentatively, the same results are also established for two other sentential conditions: under narrow focus and in postfocus position.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of duration as an accentual correlate in the Basque dialect spoken in Lekeitio. In an important book, Beckman [1] concludes that a crucial difference between stress-accent languages such as English and non-stress-accent (e.g., pitch-accent) languages such as Tokyo Japanese, is that in stress-accent languages prominence is conveyed by a number of correlates, including, besides pitch, duration and intensity. In non-stress accent languages, such as Japanese, on the other hand, the only correlate of accent is pitch. In particular, duration is not used as an accentual correlate in Tokyo Japanese. However, in Japanese segmental length is a phonologically contrastive feature, which serves to distinguish single from geminate consonants and short from long vowels. This may lead us to suspect that perhaps the reason why Japanese does not make use of duration to signal the presence of syllables with prosodic prominence is the avoidance of phonetic neutralizations regarding durational features. It would thus be interesting to test Beckman’s typological hypothesis against data from a language with similar accentual features as Japanese, but without phonologically contrastive length. Some western Basque dialects, such as the one spoken in Lekeitio, appear to present precisely the combination of features that we need to test the hypothesis. These dialects, which do not have either a single/geminate consonant contrast or a short/long vowel contrast, share a number of prosodic features with Japanese, including the following: (a) lexically words may be either unaccented (the larger group) or accented, (b) accents are realized as a fall in pitch on the posttonic (H*L), and (c) there is a tonal rise at the beginning of phrases, giving rise to high-pitch stretches extending from the second syllable of the phrase to the accented syllable [2], [3], [4], [5]. In [6] durational measurements of accented and unaccented syllables are presented for two Basque speakers. Although the authors conclude that duration is not used as a correlate of accent, the results are not completely conclusive for one of the two subjects. For this reason, in this paper we undertake a more detailed investigation with a greater number of subjects.

2. Methodology

The subjects for this study were 6 native speakers of the Basque dialect of Lekeitio, 5 female and 1 male, between 26 and 61 years of age. All speakers are bilingual in Spanish. The recording took place in Lekeitio, in the home environment of the speakers and under quiet conditions. We used a Marantz PMD tape recorder with an ATR20 unidirectional microphone.

To elicit the data we employed a set of sentences written in Spanish on index cards (one sentence per card). There was a total of 55 cards, of which 50 constituted the test materials for the experiments reported here. Subjects were asked to translate the Spanish sentences orally into Lekeitio Basque, a task that they found easy to perform. The reason for using this translation procedure is that Lekeitio Basque is a local variety which is not normally used in writing. Standard Basque, on the other hand, lacks the accentual contrasts which are the focus of this investigation and would have introduced a clear risk of interdialectal interference. Writing the stimuli in Spanish was clearly the best option. Each sentence was repeated three times. Cards were presented in an arbitrary order and were reshuffled between repetitions. The interaction between subjects and researcher before and during the recording was all in Lekeitio Basque. The data were transferred to a PC and analyzed with PitchWorks by Scicond.

The 50 sentences used in this study form 25 near-minimal or minimal pairs in Lekeitio Basque, where the syllable to be measured bears an accent in one member of the pair and does not in the other, but is segmentally identical in both sentences. Thus, although a variety of syllables were used, the syllables in the two groups to be compared (accented vs. unaccented) are segmentally matched.

Some sentences are neutral declarative sentences and some others are intended to bear narrow contradictory focus on a specific item. By narrow contradictory or correctional focus we mean contexts in which a speaker utters a sentence correcting one of the words or syntactic phrases that her interlocutor has stated incorrectly. For instance:
3. Results

We will present the results for neutral declarative sentences and for sentences with narrow, contradictory focus separately.

3.1. Neutral sentences

The materials for this comparison are the first 30 sentences in the list in the appendix. For each of the 6 subjects we obtained 90 tokens (30 x 3 repetitions), which form 45 pairs depending on whether the measured syllable bears an accent or does not. Duration measurements were performed from soundwaves and spectrograms, using both visual and auditory information. An example is shown in figures 1 and 2, corresponding to sentences 17-18 respectively, where measured syllables are capitalized. In several cases, it was impossible to obtain reliable measurements. In such cases we eliminated both that token and the corresponding matching token. For instance, if in the second repetition of sentence 11, which contains the word lagunen ‘of the friend’, the syllable gu could not be reliably measured, we eliminated both that token and also the second repetition of sentence 12, containing lagunen ‘of the friends’, so that the accented and the unaccented groups would always be balanced for each subject.

Table I shows means and standard deviations (in ms.) of unaccented syllables (extracted from odd-numbered sentences) and corresponding accented syllables (from even-numbered sentences).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Unaccented Mean(StDev)</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Accented Mean(StDev)</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>t-test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MA</td>
<td>140.22(35.8)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>141.48(32.2)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>p=.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AE</td>
<td>116.39(20.57)</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>120.1(19.44)</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>p=.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EdE</td>
<td>118.88(21.14)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>121.6(20.72)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>p=.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EuE</td>
<td>127.78(27.44)</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>120.71(20.3)</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>p=.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IE</td>
<td>121.24(26.24)</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>117.87(25.1)</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>p=.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UC</td>
<td>126.16(23.55)</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>121.46(21.35)</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>p=.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The last column shows the results of a two-tailed t-test comparing the duration of unaccented and accented syllables for each subject individually. In no case was this difference statistically significant.

3.2. Narrow focus sentences: target word under narrow focus

In many languages narrow focus causes lengthening of accented syllables (cf. [7], for Spanish). We hypothesized that in words bearing narrow, contradictory focus a durational difference between accented and unaccented syllables may emerge in Lekeitio Basque, even if duration is not used as an accentual correlate in neutral declarative sentences. To test this hypothesis we included sentences 31-40 in the list in the appendix. In these sentences the target word is intended to bear contradictory focus, indicated by capitalization. Again, the syllable whose duration is measured is unaccented in odd-numbered sentences and accented in even-numbered sentences.

The results are shown in Table II. Given the small number of tokens, t-test results are to be interpreted with caution. The difference between the means is significant for one speaker out of 6 (AE). We tentatively conclude that duration is not employed as a correlate of accent in Lekeitio Basque, even under narrow focus. On the other hand, for all speakers, durations of both accented and unaccented syllables are greater than in neutral sentences (Table I). Thus, it appears that in Lekeitio Basque the effect of narrow contradictory focus is to increase the duration of the whole focalized word, not only of the accented syllable. Another
effect is the increased absolute F0 value of the peak, giving rise to blocking of downstep and intermediate phrase boundary insertion (cf. [4]). As an illustration, see figures 3-4, corresponding to sentences 33-34, respectively.

3.3. Target word in post-focus position

After a word bearing narrow focus, pitch range is greatly reduced, an effect that has also been observed in other languages. See for instance figure 5, corresponding to sentence 48, where the (correctively) focalized word PERTZÓNEN is followed by the accented word bidxótzak. We hypothesized that the flattening of the pitch in postfocal position might lead speakers to use other acoustic cues to signal the presence of an accent in this environment, especially given the fact that important lexical contrasts (including the distinction between singular and plural in several morphological cases) rely on the presence of accents on particular syllables. We thus wanted to test the hypothesis that as the reliability of the main accentual cue (pitch in our case) becomes compromised, other acoustic features such as duration may be recruited to express lexical accentual contrasts.

We tested this hypothesis with sentences 41-50 in the appendix. That is, we compared the relative duration of accented syllables after focus, such as dxó in Figure 5, with that of unaccented syllables, such as dxo in Figure 6 (corresponding to sentence 47). The results are presented in Table III.

Table III: Target word in postfocus position (sentences 41-50)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Unaccented Mean(StDev)</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Accented Mean(StDev)</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>t-test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MA</td>
<td>136.9(18.92)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>137.1(24.76)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>.p=.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AE</td>
<td>120.16(15.85)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>124.95(16.98)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>.p=.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EdE</td>
<td>130.16(22)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>133.74(19.38)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>.p=.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IE</td>
<td>138.32(25.89)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>133.39(26)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>.p=.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UC</td>
<td>137.56(22.11)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>134.44(30.72)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>.p=.75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Again, although the small number of tokens forces us to interpret these data with some precaution, we must conclude that, contrary to our hypothesis, duration does not play a role in Lekeitio Basque as a correlate of accent, even in postfocal position, where pitch contours are very reduced in range.
4. Conclusion

The results of this study confirm the hypothesis that duration is not used as a correlate of accentual prominence in Northern Bizkaian Basque. Accented syllables are not significantly longer than unaccented syllables with the same segmental make-up. We have obtained these results not only in neutral declarative sentences, confirming the conclusions of [6], but also in two other environments where lengthening of accented syllables would be expected: under narrow correctional focus and following a word with narrow correctional focus. These results support the typological distinction between stress-accent and non-stress-accent proposed by Beckman [1]. Northern Bizkaian Basque (including the dialect of Bermeo) is a non-stress-accent language. Like in Japanese, duration appears not to be used to convey accentual prominence in Northern Bizkaian Basque, in spite of the fact that durational contrasts do not play any role in establishing phonological oppositions in this language and thus there is no pressure to avoid phonetic neutralizations.

A matter that we must leave for further research is the extent to which accentual contrasts are perceptually preserved in postfocal position, where the role of pitch variations is necessarily very reduced given the reduction in pitch range.

5. Appendix: Test sentences

Syllables for which durational measurements were taken are bolded.

A. Neutral declarative sentences

1. laguná ikusi dot ‘I saw the friend’
2. lagúnak ikusi doras ‘I saw the friends’
3. potiñbi erosi dau ‘he bought the boat’
4. potiñbak erosi dixus ‘he bought the boats’
5. gixonen etorri da ‘the man arrived’
6. gixónak etorri diras ‘the men arrived’
7. papellak biar dot ‘I need the paper’
8. papellak biar doras ‘I need the papers’
9. mutiñbí dixun da ‘the boy left’
10. mutiñbak dixun diras ‘the boys left’
11. lagunen amúma ikusi dot ‘I saw the friend’s (sg) grandmother’
12. lagunen amúma ikusi dot ‘I saw the friends’ (pl) grandmother’
13. Fidélen liburúia ekarri dot ‘I brought Fidel’s book’
15. gixonen prákak ikusi doras ‘I saw the man’s parts’
16. gixónak prákak ikusi doras ‘I saw the men’s parts’
17. txakurren dxeatakü da ‘it’s the dog’s (sg) food’
18. txakurren dxeatakü da ‘it’s the dogs’ (pl) food’
19. txarridexen lekua da ‘it’s the pig’s (sg) place’
20. txarriedexen lekua da ‘it’s the pigs’ (pl) place’
21. Amaíen txakurrak ikusi dot ‘I saw Amaia’s dog’
22. Amaíen txakurrak ikusi doras ‘I saw Amaia’s dogs’
23. mutiñllen platerial artun dot ‘I took the boys’ plate’
24. mutiñllen pläterak artun doras ‘I took the boys’ plates’
25. Mirenñen laguná ikusi dot ‘I saw Miren’s friend’
26. Mirenñen lagúnak ikusi doras ‘I saw Miren’s friends’

27. pertzóñen bidxotzá gustaten dxáko ‘he likes people’s heart’
28. pertzóñen bidxótzak gustaten dxákos ‘he likes people’s hearts’
29. andrákó txikiñá artun dau ‘I took the small doll’
30. andrákó txikiñak artun dixus ‘I took the small dolls’

B. Target word under narrow focus (same glosses as 21-30)

31. Amáien TXAKURRE ikusi dot
32. Amáien TXAKURRE ikusi doras
33. mutilen PLATERAr artun dot
34. mutilen PLATÉRAK artun doras
35. Miréñen LAGUNA ikusi dot
36. Miréñen LAGUNA ikusi doras
37. pertzóñen BIDXOTZÁ gustaten dxáko
38. pertzóñen BIDXÓTZAK gustaten dxákos
39. andrákó TXIKIÑÁ artun dau
40. andrákó TXIKIÑAK artun dixus

C. Target word in postfocus position (same glosses as 21-30)

41. AMÁIEN txakurrá ikusi dot
42. AMÁIEN txakurrak ikusi doras
43. MUTILEN plateral artun dot
44. MUTILEN plateral artun doras
45. MIRENNEN lagunak ikusi dot
46. MIRENNEN lagunak ikusi doras
47. PERTZÓNEN bidxoțzá gustaten dxáko
48. PERTZÓNEN bidxotzak gustaten dxákos
49. ANDRÁKO txikiñá artun dau
50. ANDRÁKÓ txikiñak artun dixus

6. References