

## Prosodic cues to syntactic features: How prosody guides reanalysis

**Background.** As is known from the literature, minimizers can feed Jespersen’s Cycle (JC) and become negative markers through several rounds of syntactic and semantic reanalysis (e.g. Breitbarth et al. 2013a; 2020). Furthermore, minimizers have been analysed as containing a tacit focus particle (Giannakidou 2007, Chierchia 2013): under negation, they exhaustify all the alternatives lexically activated in a pragmatic scale. These new negators at the beginning of JC often start out as narrow focus negators (Blaxter/Willis 2017, Breitbarth et al. 2020). Syntactically, this may be captured by a [focus] feature on the minimizer (cf. Lohnstein 2016). The current paper zooms in on exactly this transition from a minimizer to a narrow focus negator. The main aim is to understand the role of the interface between prosody and syntax in this transition. A more general aim is to explore ways of bringing experimental methods into the study of diachronic syntax.

**Empirical domain.** We focus on the Italo-Romance language spoken in the Veneto region of Italy. Venetian *miga* (< Lat. *mica* ‘crumb’) is in the stage where it can express narrow polarity focus (Breitbarth et al. 2013b), but not yet neutral sentential negation (1a). Gazzolese *mia* (near Verona) has already further progressed in the cycle, and become a neutral expression of sentential negation: it has lost its meaning of minimizer and its scalar effect (1b). Nevertheless, it is still able, in certain contexts, to express polarity focus (1c).

- (1) a. A: *Ti ciami la munega in ciesa?* B: *No ciamo miga la munega*  
A: ‘Will you call the nun at the church?’ B: ‘I won’t call the nun at all’
- b. A: *Cossa nasse se no vegno co ti?* B: *No ciamo mia la munega*  
A: ‘What happens if I don’t come along with you?’ B: ‘I will not call the nun’
- c. A: *Ciamito la munega in ciesa?* B: *No ciamo MIA la munega*  
A: ‘Will you call the nun at the church?’ B: ‘I won’t call the nun at all’

Earlier studies have shown that there are prosodic correlates with the stages in this development: in focus contexts, *mia* has prosodic prominence, in neutral negation contexts, it does not (Magistro et al. to appear). In (1c), capitalization is used to express this difference.

**Aims.** The current paper addresses the question of how the reanalysis from minimizer via polarity focus negator (and eventually to neutral negator) works in detail. Specifically, we would like to understand how the feature [focus] of the original minimizer use can survive semantic reanalysis and be retained on the intermediate element, against economy principles like Feature Economy (van Gelderen 2011) or Avoid Pragmatic Overload (Eckardt 2009). We will show that PF influences the interpretation and the attribution of features to *mia*. Our hypothesis is that focal *mia* (the intermediate stage) should be prosodically similar to minimizers in Gazzolese.

**Method.** In order to experimentally test this, we recorded 10 speakers aged 20–40 from Gazzolo eliciting 6 target dialogues × 2 randomizations (total: 120). The target dialogues were designed to elicit the usage of two non-grammaticalized minimizers under negation (2), whose literal interpretation with the scalar effects is preserved: *gossa* ‘drop’ and *fregola* ‘crumb’.

- (2) A: *Tanto lo so che te ghe bevuo tuto* ‘I vin del nono B: *No go bevuo una gossa del vin del nono*  
A: ‘I know that you drank all grandpa’s wine’ B: ‘I haven’t drunk a drop of grandpa’s wine’

**Results.** As hypothesized, the two minimizers used in negative contexts are acoustically prominent (fig. 1a). This acoustic prominence corresponds to a pitch accent, which is similar to the pitch accent on the reanalysed focal *mia* (fig. 1b). Moreover, the pitch levels are compressed after minimizers,

which is typical for post-focal constituents in Italo-Romance (Bocci/Avesani 2011), also suggesting the presence of a phonological phrase boundary.

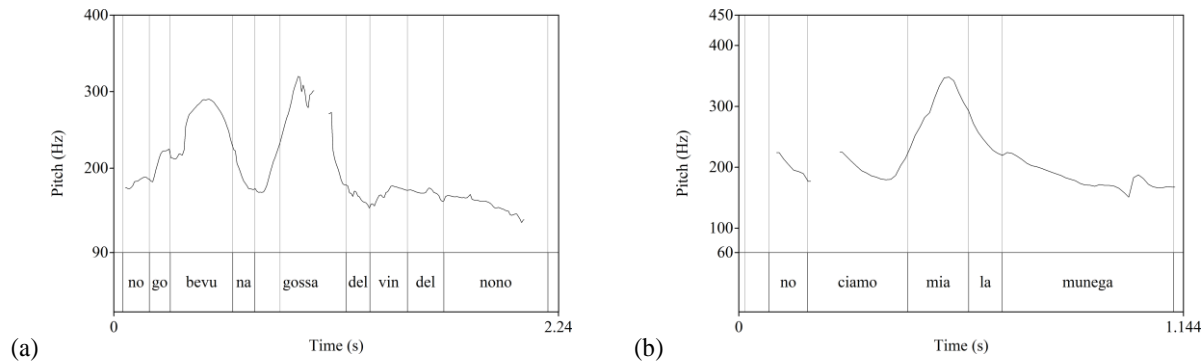


Fig. 1: Prosody of minimizers (a) and polarity focus *mia* (b) in Gazzolese

Interestingly, the presence of focus is also appreciable in syntax. When a minimizer is used, focal *mia* is banned, which can be explained by the ban on multiple foci. Neutral-negator *mia*, on the contrary, is compatible with minimizers, (3).

(3) *No go bevuo (\*MIA<sup>OK</sup>mia) na gossa del vino del nonno*

**Interpretation.** The data show that the [focus] feature on minimizers is not only semantic, but also has a prosodic correlate. We argue that during reanalysis, when the semantic value is not easily transparent, the prosodic cues trigger the feature maintenance in the intermediate stage. At the point when a minimizer is reanalysed as a (polarity focus) negator, it initially keeps the prosodic prominence. This prominence allows the element to still be parsed with the feature [focus] despite semantic reanalysis, and makes it (a) available in narrow focus contexts and (b) incompatible with minimizers. Our data therefore lend empirical support to the prosodic bootstrapping hypothesis, according to which language acquirers exploit the prosodic structure of an utterance to figure out its syntactic architecture and recover the meaning of unknown words (Gleitman/Wanner 1982, De Carvalho et al. 2017).

**Outlook.** The paper explores how experimental evidence for a change in progress – from minimizer via polarity focus to (eventually) neutral negation – can elucidate details of diachronic trajectories, and test theoretical assumptions about syntactic and semantic features. We show that PF plays a dominant role in (the process of) syntactic reanalysis. Future work will have to look further into the role of prosody in the acquisition of new variants and the incrementation of the reanalysis.

### Selected References

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