Information Structure in Egyptian Arabic:
a probabilistic approach to the study of themes

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This paper reports on the results of a study providing quantitative, statistically-based evidence for the effect of different linguistic factors on the prosodic encoding of thematic constituents in Egyptian Arabic, based on earlier qualitative corpus-based work on the available constructions (El Zarka 2013). Thematic constituents are defined here as sentence-initial topics including referential topics (Reinhart 1982; Lambrecht 1994) and frame topics (Chafe 1976) as well as relational presuppositions (Jackendoff 1972; Matic 2003; El Zarka 2013).

Some of the main findings are:

- Themes in EA are associated with rising contours while rhemes are associated with falling contours (El Zarka 2011, 2013).
- The default topic accent is a simple rise (H* in Hedberg & Sosa 2008), contrary to e.g. Spanish, Italian or German.
- Although contrast, topic shift and information status (given vs. new) have a statistically significant influence on the intonation associated with the thematic constituent, prosodic encoding of either syntactic or information structural categories (such as contrastive topic, shifting topic and continuing topic) is not uniform.
- Additional factors such as the status as pronominal status of the thematic constituent, new discourse segments and phonological weight also influence the prosodic encoding (in terms of both the intonation contour and the likelihood of phrasal breaks).

In sum, the present study provides evidence that a probabilistic model of the mapping of the segmental string to prosodic features is superior to the assumption of a one-to-one mapping of information structural and prosodic categories. It confirms the assumption that contrast, topic shift and information status are to be viewed as factors that influence the prosodic shape of a thematic constituent rather than as independent linguistic categories.

References


