Prosody and pragmatic constraints in (de)coding verbal actions

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This work explores the communicative level of actionality in spoken language (speech acts), examining: (a) the prosodic means through which actionality is conveyed in speech and (b) the pragmatic-cognitive parameters that guide speech acts production and interpretation. We will present experimental studies conducted within the *Language into Act Theory* framework (L-AcT; Cresti, 2000; Moneglia & Raso, 2014) and will contribute to the reformulation of the methodology used in those studies (Moneglia, 2011) by considering results achieved in more recent research (Rocha, 2016). We will argue that (i) actionality in speech is conveyed through prosody – contrary to the concept of speech act adopted, e.g, by Egorova *et al.* (2014); (ii) prosodic forms pertain to an abstract level and are realized through distinct profiles that also convey attitude (i.e. the manner through which acts are performed, e.g., polite, irritated, urgent, etc.); (iii) both illocutionary and attitudinal variation can make the profile perceptually different (Fig. 1); and (iv) pragmatic parameters play a major role on the (de)codification of the act, including making it possible for different prosodic forms to be accommodated into other acts when they are incompatible with those parameters (Fig. 2 and 3).

Within L-AcT, actionality is conceived as the communicative nucleus of speech. Each naturally occurring utterance corresponds to the performance of an act (illocution) towards the interlocutor (Austin, 1962). The utterance, i.e. the smallest stretch of speech showing pragmatic and prosodic autonomy, necessarily has an illocutionary tone/information unit, and may have other optional non-illocutionary units fulfilling different informational functions. Prosody conveys the function of each unit, signaling whether it is illocutionary or not. Prosody also specifies the illocutionary or non-illocutionary function of the unit. Therefore, the same syntactic-semantic string may be uttered in an illocutionary or non-illocutionary manner, and may be used for the performance of different acts or for different non-illocutionary functions.

It is possible to identify different prosodic forms corresponding to different illocutionary values. Within illocutionary units, actionality (or illocutionary force) is conveyed by a limited number of syllables (the so-called nucleus) that varies depending on the illocution; the non-nuclear parts of the unit (preparation and/or coda) are optional and make up the semantic content of the unit.

Nevertheless, prosody also conveys the attitudinal function (Mello & Raso, 2011). Attitude manifests itself throughout the unit – nucleus included – and it may have strong perceptual effects. The analysis of attitude leads to important methodological consequences regarding the study of illocutions for at least two reasons: (i) the illocutionary prosodic form must be regarded as pertaining to a more abstract level that always manifests itself under the influence of attitudinal indexes that

interferes with the realization of the prosodic profile; (ii) substitution tests (i.e. putting, in an experimental context, the prosody of an illocution in the elicitation scene of another illocution) do not allow one to determine – through perceptual evaluation of the contextual (in)adequacy of the realization of a given act – whether two illocutions share the same form or not, since an occasional perception of inadequacy may be due to a mere attitudinal difference, as Rocha (2016), through perception tests, demonstrates with respect to the illocution of order.

Indeed, illocutions are not realized/perceived/recognized exclusively through prosodic parameters, but also through a limited number of pragmatic parameters (attentional focus, status of the communicative channel, proxemics, among others). These parameters gain essential importance for the identification of an illocution, as they place constraints on the interpretation of the intention. A perception test conducted by Rocha & Raso (in preparation) shows that the replacement of a prosodic form with another one (each of which corresponding to different acts, namely request of confirmation and offer) does not cause "estrangement", since the incompatibility of pragmatic parameters between the two acts leads to the accommodation of the illocutionary form. This suggests that intentionality recognition is largely governed by pragmatic factors, even in the presence of different prosodic forms (Fig. 2), in accord with many experiments dealing with neuronal activation during the process of act recognition (Iacoboni, 2009, among many others).
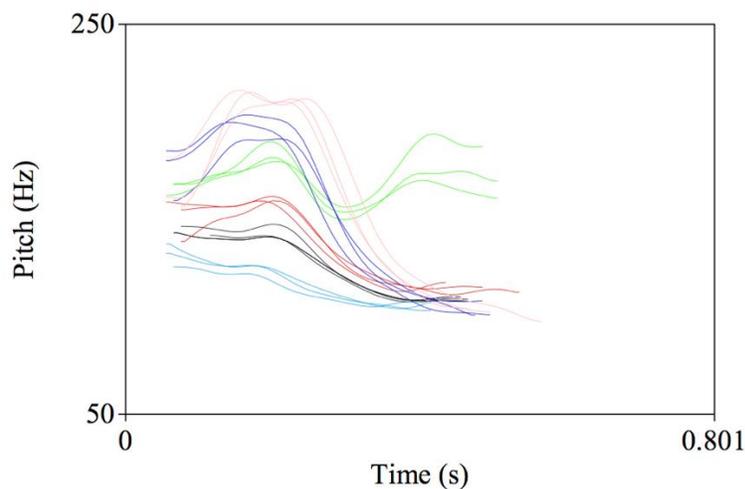

Fig. 1 – Superposition of f0 contours of utterances performing the illocution of order with the following attitudes: Reference (black), Urgency (light blue), Politeness (green) "without Irritation" (red), "with little Irritation" (dark blue), "with much Irritation" (pink). Locution: *pega o livro* (grab the book).
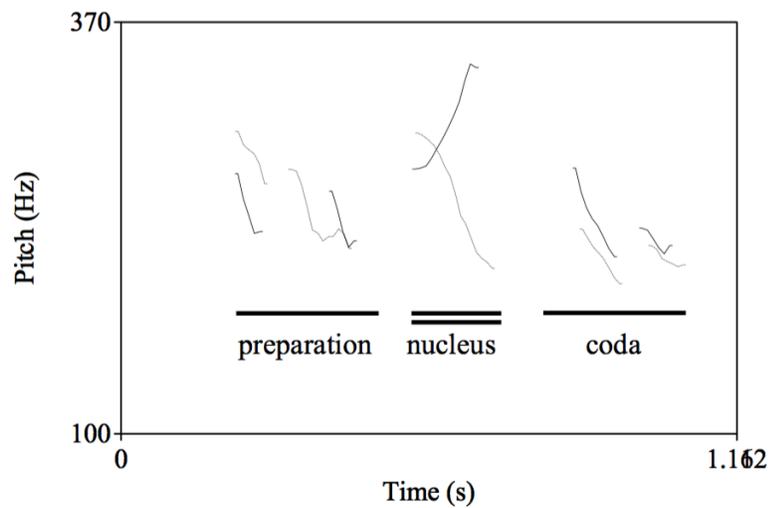
Fig. 2 – Superposition of f0 contours of utterances performing the illocutions of Offer (continuous line) and Request of Confirmation (dotted line) with the attitude of Reference. Locution: *suco de pêssego* (peach juice). Note that the nuclei show movements in opposite directions.

Fig. 3 – Left: The woman offers peach juice to the man by uttering "peach juice". Right: the man brings on some drink and the woman, by uttering "peach juice", asks him to confirm whether or not the drink is peach juice.

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