

THE PROSODY ON NARRATIVES OF BASQUE NATIONAL IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

In this paper the role that prosody plays in oral narratives will be analysed drawing on Wennerstrom (2001) framework on prosody in discourse analysis. For this paper, I will use the recording of several topic oriented qualitative interviews in which the speakers had to expose her ideas about their beliefs and attitudes towards Basque national identity. These interviews followed a protocol in which the subjects had to answer questions about different aspects of national identity, these questions were grouped around several thematic areas (question sets) following De Cillia et al. (2000) methodological approach.

This analysis will show how the argumentation in “narratives of national identity” is not only organized lexicogramatically (as in De Cillia 2000 analysis of narratives of national identity) but also prosodically by the use of high pitch accents to “highlight” certain ideas, and low pitch accent to “background” others. I will also observe how deictical elements aligned with prosody serve to systematise the structure

of discourse, and how evaluative language, e.g epistemic modality (Palmer1986, Simpson 1993) lined up with prosody serves to emphasise or diminish the point of view of the speaker's. In this sense, evaluative lexical items align with high pitch accents the moment the speaker desires to highlight the truth value of the proposition. However, they can also be backgrounded when they are embedded in ideas that are peripheral to the main ideas or in parenthetical. Besides this the speaker employs prosody to emphasize loaded lexical items or words that contribute to the climactic essence of the narration. Therefore prosody helps in the expression of subjectivity and directly in the modalization of speech. In essence, this research can enlighten the study of intonation in discourse analysis.

Keywords: intonation, discourse, narratives, national identity.

## INTRODUCTION

This research started with the idea of examining the linguistic devices involved in the construction of Basque national identity, in the context of personal narratives, in which subjects had to present their feeling and attitudes towards the idea of their 'nation' and 'nationality'. The material collected on these interviews revealed interesting ways in which the discourses is linguistically organized specially in terms of the modalization of speech (i.e use of epistemic modality indicative or subjunctive and hedging) along with personal deixis (more or less use of impersonal versus personal forms) and symbolic deixis (Levinson1983: 65) by which the subject creates a relationship between the deictic center and a subjective symbolic element (e.g 'our culture', 'our country ). However prosody was a forgotten issue, although one can make the case that in this context prosody is a meaningful component and very likely to be related to both; 'epistemic modality' and 'deixis'.

That is, if we consider epistemic modality as either lexical or grammatical components "that signal the degree of involvement that the speaker has in the content of his message" (Simpson 1993: 48) and consequently in his ideological stances, we can observe that certain lexical or syntactic key elements during the argumentation are

emphasized prosodically in order to convey emotion or attitude and to add special evaluative status to certain parts of the speaker's argumentation about their ideologies. As I will show later on during the interviews, such was the case with 'hedging-intensifiers' (Hubler 1983) 'realmente' (really), 'por supuesto' (of course) which were continuously foregrounded with the use of high pitch accents. Therefore prosody helps in the expression of subjectivity and directly in the modalization of the speech.

On the other hand deixis and prosody hand in hand, help in the organization of the speaker's discourse, that is either personal (e.g. 'I' or 'You'), spatial ('here', 'there') or temporal (e.g. 'then', 'suddenly') deixis when correlated with prosody aid in the narrative structure i.e., in the flow of the speaker's narrative (Wennerstrom, 2001)

This paper will be divided in three sections, the first one a review of Wennerstrom (2001) chapter on 'Prosody in Oral narratives', the second a revision of the methodology for the interviews to national identity and third, a thorough analysis of the data focusing on the boundary and tonal points of the narratives that served either (a) to structuralize the speakers' argumentation in spacio-temporal and personal terms (deictic elements) alongside with (b) an analysis of the climactic key words during the narration and the lexicogrammatical elements that were emphasized during it. The analysis of the data will also mention moments in which the relation between entonational contour and meaning does not follow the same pattern as in Wennerstrom's (2001) framework, and can be associated to a dialectal features specific of the Spanish spoken in the Basque Country

## **PROSODY IN ORAL NARRATIVES: WENNERSTROM FRAMEWORK**

The organization of oral narratives is normally associated and reduced to its structural components. Labov and Waletzky (1967) analysis of oral narratives specifies three structural components in informal stories: abstract (introductory element), orientation (the setting), complicating actions (events of the narrative plot) and resolution (ending). The authors highlight the importance of two secondary elements: the coda (narrative element that brings the narrative back to the present interaction) and evaluation (assessment of the narrative events). The narratives tend to be connected by

transition points which lead the story from the orientation to the complicating action points, which are normally marked with verb tenses, lexical particles or deictical elements. But do speakers only employ structural devices to organize narratives?

One specific aspect forgotten in the organization of discourse is that of intonation. Wennerstrom analysis of intonation in different discourse genres, highlights the importance of specific intonational units in the organization of oral narration. The author displays a framework which focuses in (a) the alignment of prosody with organizational elements and; (b) as a device to create evaluative effects. According to the author, prosody aligns with lexicogrammatical bounds and with the organization discourse in several ways. First, 'pitch accents' align with different constituents of the story to convey their status in the information structure of the story. 'Phrase final pitch boundaries' are also important to mark shifts in order foreground to background information creating hierarchies in the discourse. Finally, 'initial pitch boundaries', 'key' and 'paratones' (Yule 1980) indicate the degree of integration of the new constituent with the previous one.

However in the oral narrative, the speaker not only organizes the structure of a story but he/she also highlights certain aspects of it by employing prosodic cues. This is what Labov and Waletzky calls "evaluative devices" by which the speaker assesses the events, evaluate the importance of the story, and communicates his emotions towards it. These evaluations or expressions of emotions could be external to the story i.e., individual clauses in which the speaker suspend the story line to talk about his point of view, or internal to the story i.e lexical intensifiers, manipulation in the syntax or quotations which can add special evaluative status to certain parts of the narrative. Wennerstrom (2001) analysis pays special attention to the story teller's performance i.e., to his expression of emotion and his evaluation of the story and its relation with prosody. She observes that certain lexical items (adverbs or adjectives which act as intensifiers e.g. really, a lot, terrible) tend to cluster with prosody (pitch accents) in order to emphasize the speaker's evaluation. Besides this, other structural elements, such as syntactic manipulations, (e.g. the use of auxiliaries in English to emphasize actions 'She *did* use her toothbrush') aligns with pitch peaks to mark a contrast in the events of the narratives. The same happens with quotations inside the stories; all of them are initiated in a higher pitch range than other utterances in the narratives.

Further, Wennerstrom notes that in the absence of these evaluative devices, prosody itself can also call attention to what the speaker deems climactic in the story. Prosodic features can be manipulated –speed up, slow down, exaggerated or diminished- in order to convey emotion and attitude. Thus, certain words which are not specifically value laden (e.g., prepositions) can be high pitched to enliven the storytelling event.

Last but not least, the author affirms that there is not a universal storytelling style as storytelling varies depending on story genres and on the speech community in which it is performed, as the expression of emotion always depends on social factors such as age, class, gender or ethnicity or it can be something very idiosyncratic. In this sense culture plays also an important role (Ladd 1996) culture regulates the expression of emotion between what could be demonstrated in public or private. Based on this idea, Wennerstrom encourages ethnographic research to include prosody in the analysis of narrative and of other genres as well.

In conclusion, Wennerstrom framework for prosodic analysis in discourse provides justification for an expanded role on prosody in the study of discourse and it is an excellent starting point to analyze narratives of national identity. This approach highlights importance of prosody in the delivery of information and the interplay between prosody and emotion without underplaying the cultural aspect of emotion and its relation with speech.

## **NARRATIVES OF BASQUE NATIONAL IDENTITY**

In this research I am not going to analyze narratives which are orthodox compositionally speaking, i.e., narratives which present a sequence of events and states. In fact the genre I am analyzing, although being coined ‘narratives of national identity’ by Wodak et al. (2000) is more precisely described as an “argumentative discourse rhetoric” aimed at building rhetorically one’s beliefs about a specific topic (Longacre 1983).

The principal aim of this study was to gather data which include the ‘subjective aspects of Basque identity’. This was carried by eight topic-oriented qualitative

interviews, to determine subject's beliefs and attitudes. Since the subjects were in Spain, the interviews were carried on telephone calls and taped simultaneously with a 'Recording control set'; a device that could record and play back telephone calls through the telephone handset. The interviews followed a protocol in which the questions were grouped around several thematic areas (question sets) following Wodak et al. (2000) methodological approach to the analysis of narratives of national identity. For this analysis I will focus on responses to two questions of the questionnaire that I employed in my research: *Which images come up to your mind when you think about the Basque Country? Do you think that your attitude towards your 'being Basque' is different through the generations?*

For the prosodic analysis I will focus on several issues. First, drawing on Labov and Waletzky's analysis of narrative organization, I will observe if argumentative rhetoric follows any type of structure which is at the same time aligned with prosody. Second, I will emphasize the role that prosody plays (high pitch accents) when associated with lexicogrammatical elements during the speaker's exposition of ideas, in order to background or foreground certain beliefs and not others. Special attention will be paid to the use of deictical elements which serve to organize the structure of discourse. Last but not least, I will observe how evaluative language (epistemic modality) aligns with prosody to emphasise or diminish the point of view of the speaker's ideas.

### **Analysis**

The first question that is given to the subject is "Could you please tell me the ideas that come to your mind when you think about the Basque Country? This question aimed at activating subjects' ideas about the attachment that they have towards their land. Normally subjects' representation of the Basque land was recreated in terms of an idyllic Basque Country: green mountains, beautiful landscape, gorgeous cities...

"Las ideas que me vienen a la CABEZA cada vez que pienso en el PAIS VASCO son ideas relacionadas con el PAISAJE : con el verde de las MONTANAS y los ARBOLES eh::[ NO SE POR QUÉ es QUIZÁS lo primero que se me viene a la CABEZA porque es lo primero que veo cuando me asomo a la ventana y veo Bilbao y veo las MONTAÑAS porque el País Vasco es muy montañoso] asi que yo diria que lo primero

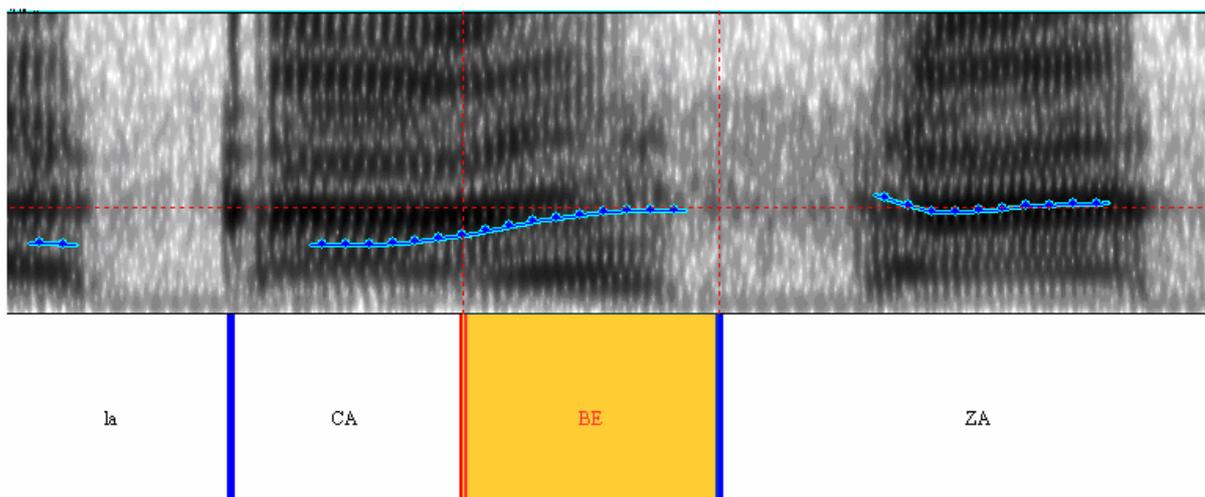
que se me viene a la CABEZA es eso, aunque luego si pensara mas POR SUPUESTO me vendrían mas a la cabeza todos los símbolos la ikurrina que es la bandera nuestra y tal, pero lo primero que pienso es en el PAISAJE”<sup>1</sup>

For the transcription I used these conventions:

CAPITAL LETTERS (words I want to analyze)

[] (paratones or parenthesis in the argumentation)

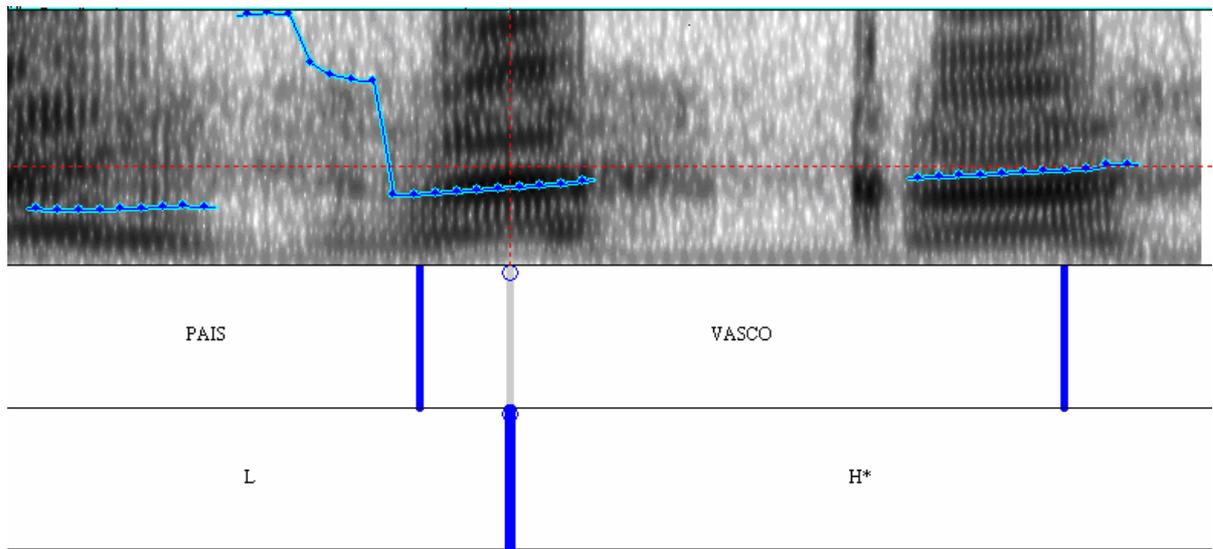
In this paragraph the subject starts responding by rephrasing the interviewer’s answer, “*the ideas that come up to my mind when I think about the Basque Country [...]*” this starting relates to the ‘abstract component’ (Labov and Waletzky 1967) of the narrative which aims at indicating that the argumentation is about to begin. In this starting sentence, the speaker uses high pitch boundaries separating this sentence in to two prosodic phrases: thus *The ideas that come up to my mind* (H%) and *each time I think about the Basque Country* (H%) both high raising boundaries could have the function of soliciting backchannels from the interviewer to see if the question was understood correctly. I have to remark that in this sentence and afterwards in her exposition, the subject uses constantly L+H\* not to contrast different elements of a sentence, but as an idiosyncratic feature of her speech (my explanation). Thus, “cabeza” (mind) and “Pais Vasco” both hold a L+H\* pitch accent. The example below shows the L+H\* in the words *la cabeza*. (221 HZ) and the compound word Pais Vasco (203 Hz)



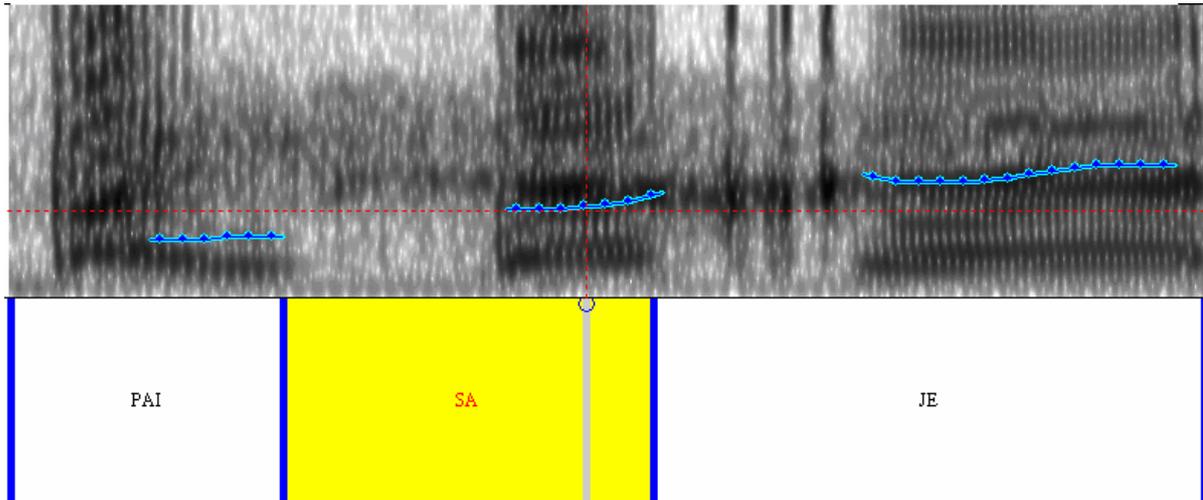
In my analysis:

[..] paratone,

**CAPITAL LETTERS** : do not mean that they hold a H\* . They are the specific words I have chosen for the analysis.

*La cabeza**Pais Vasco*

After this brief starting she begins enumerating the aspects that come up to her mind whenever she thinks about the Basque-Country. The idea of the beauty of the Basque landscape (*el paisaje*) is introduced. The word “*paisaje*” “the landscape” holds L+H\* pitch accent making it more salient in her discourse (205 Hz). Then she lists two important elements of the Basque landscape “the green of the mountains” and “the trees” in which both ‘*montañas*’ (mountains) and ‘*árboles*’ (trees) hold high pitch accents as they are important information in her description, in fact the H\* in *montañas* (238 Hz) is even higher than the high pitch accent of “*paisaje*” (205 Hz) highlighting it as the most important element of the Basque landscape. On the other hand, “*árboles*” (trees), being an element already embedded in the concept of mountain holds a less prominent high pitch (195 Hz).

*Paisaje*

After she mentions the idea of the landscape, she marks a parenthesis in her exposition using a low paratone. This parenthesis serves her to evaluate this idea and give an explanation of why the landscape is important for her. This low paratone is also aligned with an speed up in tempo, moreover we can observe correlation between the use of a low paratone and the introduction of evaluative language “*no se por qué*” (I don’t know why) and “*quizás*” which also indicates that her evaluation wants to be backgrounded as it forms part of her subjectivity; in this case both evaluative elements, the adverb “*quizás*” (maybe) and the evaluative clause “*no sé por qué*” (“I don’t know why”), hold a low pitch accent (L\*). During this paratone she rephrases again the interviewer’s question “the first thing that it comes to my mind”, in this sentence “*cabeza*” (mind) holds a lower pitch accent than the first time is mentioned (183 Hz), moreover “*montaña*” as well holds a lower pitch (we can say that it is even non accented) with respect than the first time it is mentioned. The word Bilbao can be consider to be aligned with a H\* pitch inside the paratone however it is not as prominent as the H\* pitch accented lexical items in the beginning of her explanation, outside the paratone (it holds 188 Hz) as she is trying to evaluate the main idea; the importance of the landscape.

Following this parenthesis she raises her pitch again and moves to the resolution of her exposition summarizing her thoughts and emphasizing the idea that the first thing appearing to her mind is ‘*el paisaje*’ (the landscape) (152 Hz). The noun phrase ‘*el paisaje*’ ‘the landscape’ contains a lower pitch than the first time it is said as it marks “the coda” i.e the narrative element that brings the narrative back to the present

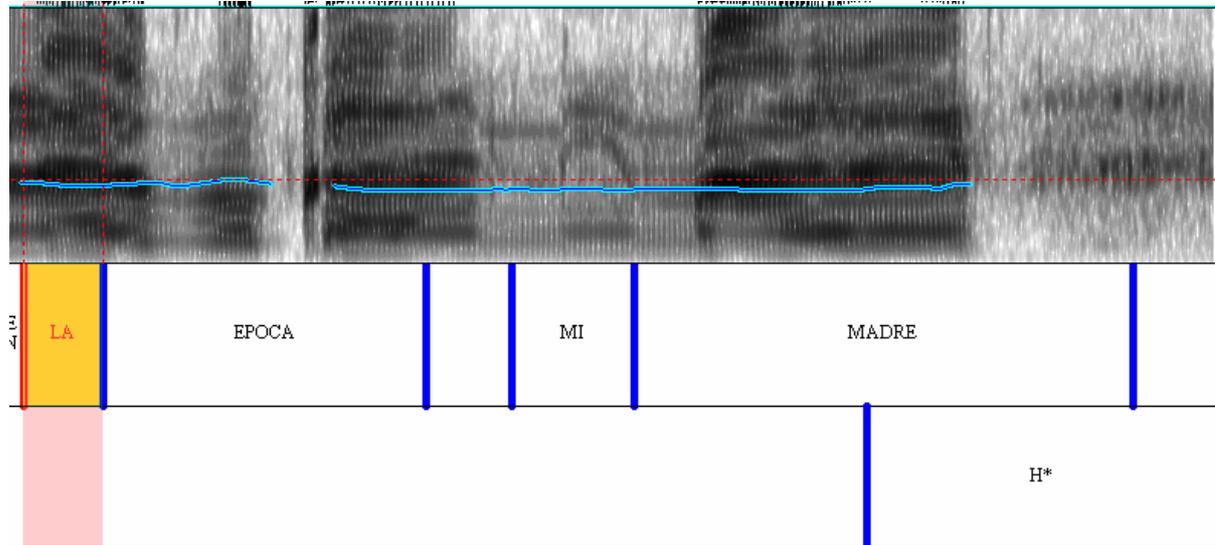
interaction. We also has to mention that before this final resolution and after the paratone the speaker makes use of the evaluative element “por supuesto” which holds a high pitch accent (193HZ) in the sentence “*si pensara mas por su puesto me vendrían más a la cabeza todos los símbolos* ( “if I thought more about it of course all the symbols will come up to my mind”) . By using a high pitch accent in this specific evaluative item, the speaker highlights the importance of another idea in her argumentation the fact that other elements such as symbols will come up to her mind if she thought about the Basque Country.

The next paragraph deals with the differences in the attitudes about Basque national identity between the generation of the speaker’s mother generation.

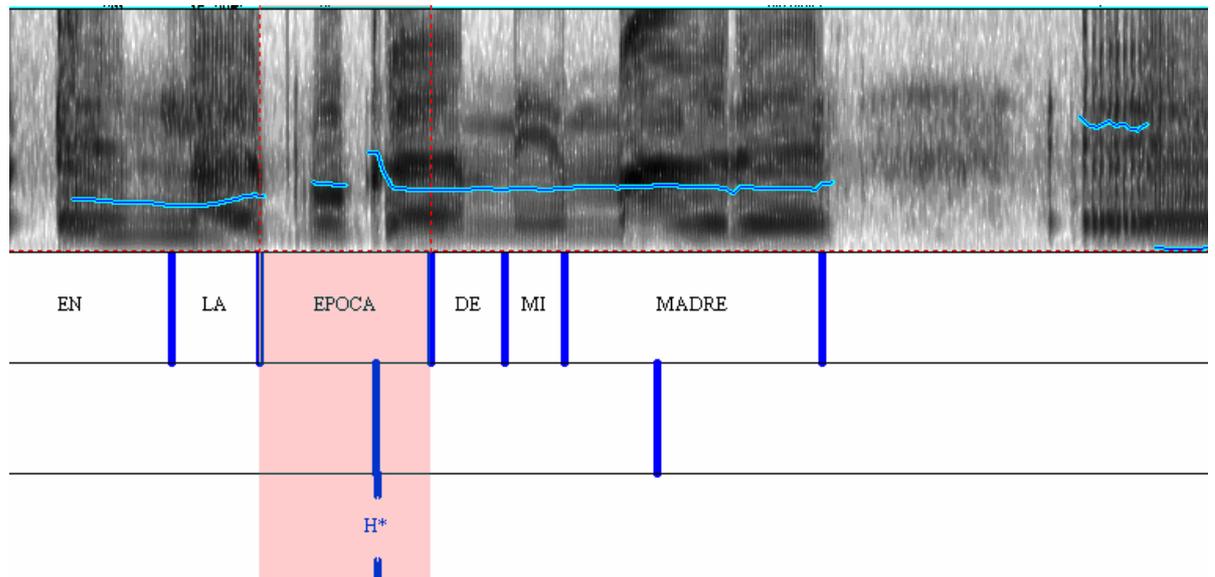
“Si creo que es distinto porque por ejemplo en la EPOCA DE MI MADRE, era mucho más duro, [EN LA ÉPOCA DE MI MADRE podrías ser, se podía ser vasco pero era más peligroso porque te podían meter en la cárcel] EN MI ÉPOCA y para toda la gente de mi edad, [yo tengo 21 años] pues es mucho más fácil, puedes ser más libre, más libremente puedes querer ser vasco pero sabes que no estás en peligro [lo de mi MADRE era casi más, casi de vida o MUERTE] o sea que NOSOTROS vivimos mucho mejor”

For this excerpt, I will focus my attention on the use of temporal deictical elements and on their alignment with phrase boundary tones and pitch accents. In this case the deictical elements “*en la época de mi madre*” ( in my mother’s generation) and “ *en mi época*” (in my own generation) divides the speaker’s argumentation in two parts comparing the situation in both generations. The speaker repeats two times “en la época de mi madre”, both of them hold a phrase boundary tone H-H% indicating continuity in her speech however, the first time “*en la época de mi madre*” is mentioned, the overall pitch of the boundary tone is higher (199 HZ) than the second time (188 HZ). Inside this deictical expression, the first time it is pronounced there is not difference between which of the words containing the expression holds a H\* although “*época*”(time) seems to be a little bit accented (205 Hz). The second time however the word “*época*” comes back after a long parenthesis, which means that it is phrase bearing a high paratone (and even comparable higher tone than the other words of the expression holding 234Hz).

significantly it contains a L+H\* pitch accent which serve to reinforce the information expressed the first time *en la época de mi madre* appears reinforcing the idea that when her mother was born everything was more difficult“.



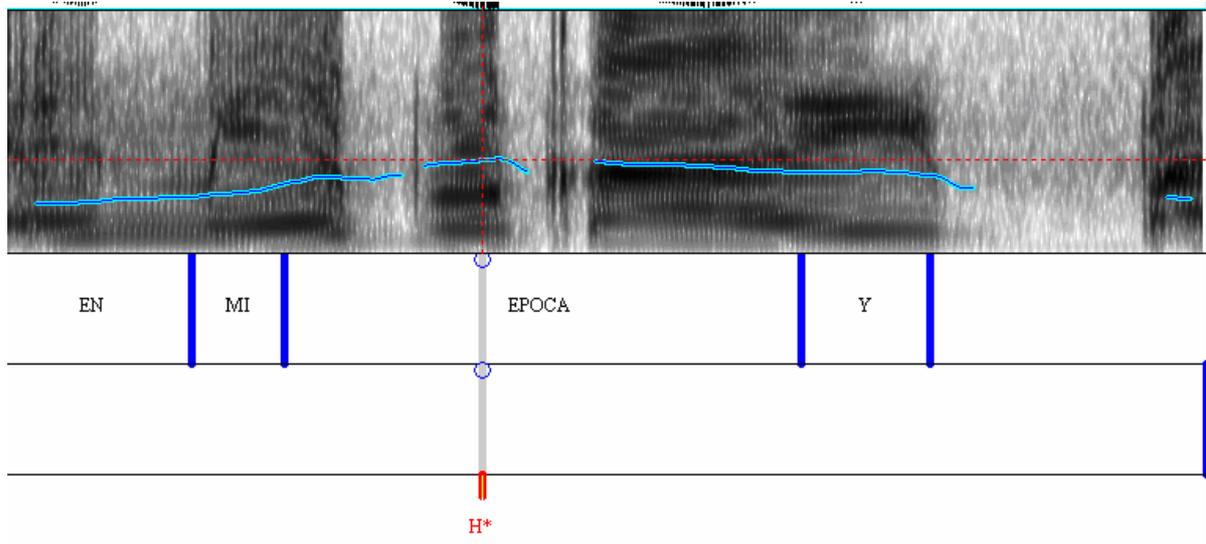
“ En la época” *First time*



“en la época” *Second time*

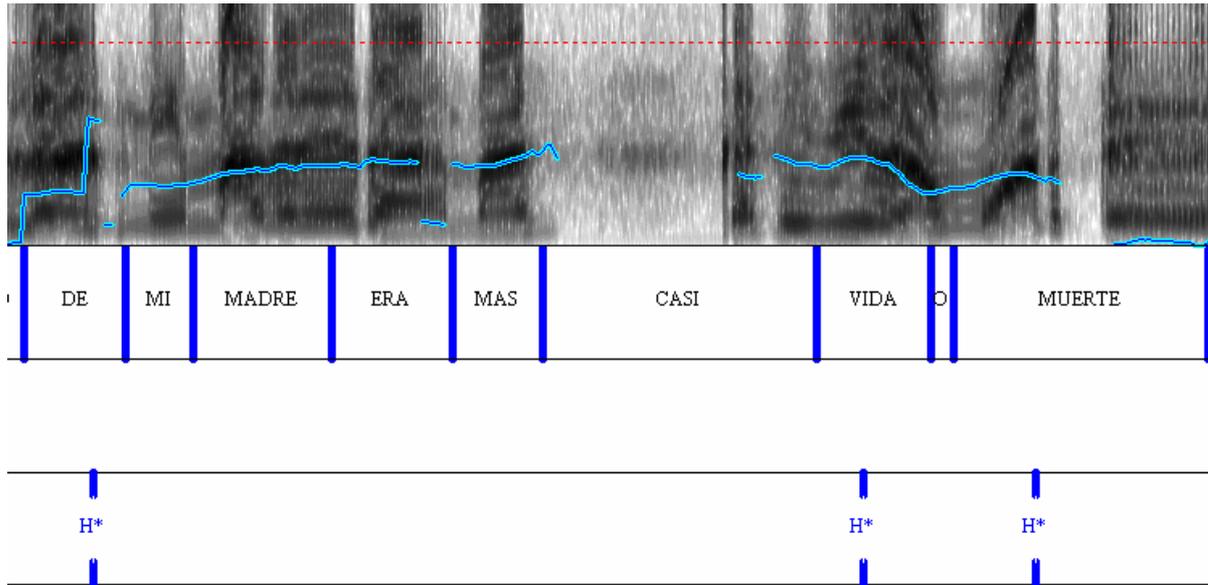
The second time the boundary phrase holds a lower overall pitch is due to the fact that the second “*en la época de mi madre*” is embedded in a low paratone in which the speaker gives an explanation of why it was more difficult to live in her mother’s time, thus she lowers her overall pitch marking the entry of a parenthetical. However during

this paratone she employs prosody to highlight words which are emotionally loaded for her “*peligroso*” (dangerous- 181 Hz), and “*carcel*” (jail-194 Hz). After the paratone she rises her pitch up aligning prosody with the change of temporal deixis in her narrative thus, “*en mi época*” the word ‘*época*’ (time) contains L+H\* accent (227Hz)



As she explains, nowadays Basque can be spoken freely and it does not involve a danger activity as in past times. Her presentation of the difference between both periods of Spanish history provokes that words such as “danger” don’t need to be highlighted as they do not form part of the speaker’s present (the second time danger is presented holds a L\* 184Hz).

In her final explanation, she summarizes her thoughts accenting the fact that her mother’s generation went through (“*lo de mi madre*”) a more painful situation than the one the young Basque community is going through nowadays (*lo nuestro*). She opens up a high paratone to start her resolution of the question. In this high paratone she highlights “*lo de mi madre*” using a H\* pitch accent in “*madre*” (213 Hz) and emphasizes words loaded of emotional background “*vida*” (225 Hz) or “*muerte*” (192Hz) and setting as unimportant the experience of the Basque young community by backgrounding it using a L\* pitch accent in “*nosotros*” and in general a lower pitch range in the sentence “*osea nosotros vivimos mucho mejor*” (‘that is, we live better’).



*“Lo de mi madre era mas de vida o muerte”*

## CONCLUSION

The texts revealed that deictic elements, evaluative elements, and loaded lexical items align with prosody for different purposes. On the one hand, deixis aligns with intonation and H\* pitch boundaries and H% boundary tones, helping in the structure of the discourse. Evaluative lexical items also line up with high pitch accents the moment the speaker desires to highlight the truth value of the proposition, however, they can also be backgrounded when they are embedded in ideas that are peripheral to the main ideas or in parenthetical. Besides this, the speaker employs prosody to emphasize loaded lexical items or words that contribute to the climactic essence of the narration.

The only thing that doesn't seem to be very clear in this analysis is why the speaker uses L+H\* when she is not contrasting lexical items but only emphasizing, Is this idiosyncratic of each speaker? Is it language specific?. One way to find this out would be to check out standard analyses of the phonology of Spanish intonation as it might be that speakers of this region of Spain ('Basque Spanish' speakers) use such bitonal pitch accents by default or it is related to contact with Basque. In conclusion, Wennerstrom (2001) approach to intonation in oral discourse proves to be an optimal approach to the analysis of prosody in oral narratives.

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