

The role of prosody in language learning, language change and language evolution

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This talk addresses how prosodic patterns contribute to creating structure in vocal signals, thus facilitate language learning, and in turn influence language change and language evolution. The first part of the talk will compare prosodic patterns in human and non-human tetrapod vocalizations. It is suggested that prosodic patterns that occur cross-linguistically and thus possibly have evolutionarily old origins may be processed similarly by humans and non-human tetrapods. Secondly, the talk discusses the effects of various prosodic patterns on speech segmentation, showing that acoustically salient and cross-linguistically occurring cues such as pauses and final lengthening are more relevant than language-specific stress patterns for recognizing and learning words in continuous speech. Thirdly, the talk will introduce the aesthetic perception of prosodic patterns as a potential factor that may determine the learnability and transmissibility of language. The fourth part of the talk will show that native and non-native speakers of English realized speech pauses very similarly, suggesting that general physiological and cognitive processes lead to a high learnability of pauses across languages. Finally, I will show that the above-mentioned learning biases manifest in actual diachronic language change by demonstrating that the prosodic shapes of newly emerging words in the history of English assimilated to the prosodic shapes of highly frequent already existing words. Thus, overall, the talk will inform how biological and cultural pressures interact in language learning, transmission, change and evolution.