

Evolutionary and Phonetic Approaches to Prominence and Rhythm:

Two case studies from Italian and Romance

Francesco Burroni

fb279@cornell.edu

(Cornell University)

In the course of this talk I will try to show that synchronic phonological analyses can, and, indeed, need to be complemented by diachronic information and experimental data in order to achieve wider empirical coverage and higher cognitive plausibility.

In the first part of the talk, drawing from a tantalizing case which was widely discussed in the phonological literature since the dawns of generative phonology, i.e. the assignment of word level prominence in Italian, I will show that previous analysis fall short of appreciating the main feature of this system, that is, the existence of a tight bond existing between morphological information and prominence assignment. I will show that Italian is best modelled as a morphologically-driven lexical accent-system and corroborate the predictions of this account with preliminary data from a pilot study of stress assignment in nonce words. Further I will show that traces of the system can be observed in all closely related languages, such as Portuguese, Spanish, Romansh *etc.* It is therefore likely that the system goes back to Proto-Romance, and, thus, a possible evolutionary scenario starting from the Classical Latin system will be offered.

In the second part of the talk I will turn to a process of rhythmic readjustment of prominence in clash environments, a.k.a the 'Rhythm Rule', that is widely assumed in the phonological literature for both (American) English and Italian. I will present newly collected Italian data showing that, in clash environments, acoustic correlates unequivocally point to the fact that the default strategy is not word-level prominence shift or deletion, but rather prominence enhancement in the form of increased duration. This finding calls into question phonological approaches based solely on linguistic intuitions and can be interpreted as evidence in favor of inhibitory mechanism in speech planning that tend to favor contrast preservation of the lexical accent position.