

Intonation and grammar in Somali

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Abstract

In many languages, sentence modes, such as question vs. declarative, and information structures, such as new vs. given, are closely associated with systematically varied intonation. The traditional view, however, assumes that such intonation is absent in Somali and that intonation is only used for emotion. This is because obligatory grammatical markers in Somali rigidly mark sentence mode and information structure. But is it true that Somali lacks systematically varied intonation? Our comprehensive phonetic investigation of Somali prosody reveals that Somali has a systematically varied intonation to convey differences in sentence mode and information structure where the grammatical markers play a crucial role in determining intonation. In differentiating the intonation of declaratives from questions, declarative sentence type markers behave like a prosodic pivot from where F0 lowering starts. The new information is marked by the leftmost syntactic position followed by a sharp decrease in pitch, which starts on the focus marker. We demonstrate how grammatical markers play a role in determining intonation.