



Accents and prosodic phrasing influence wh-question interpretation

***Joe Castle, *Torianne Crouch, *Katherine Griffiths, and Dr. Katy Carlson**

Department of English, Caudill College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

Introduction

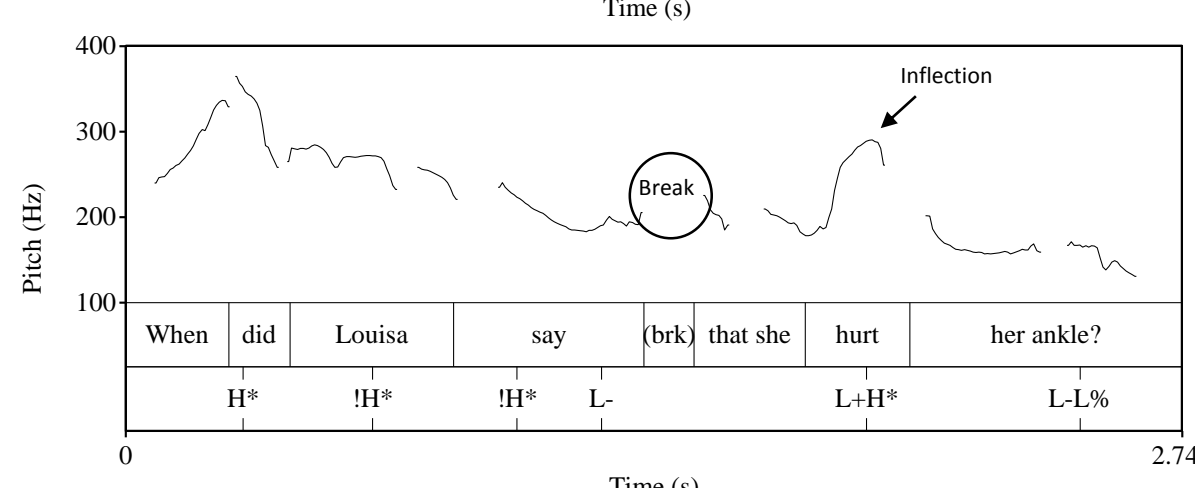
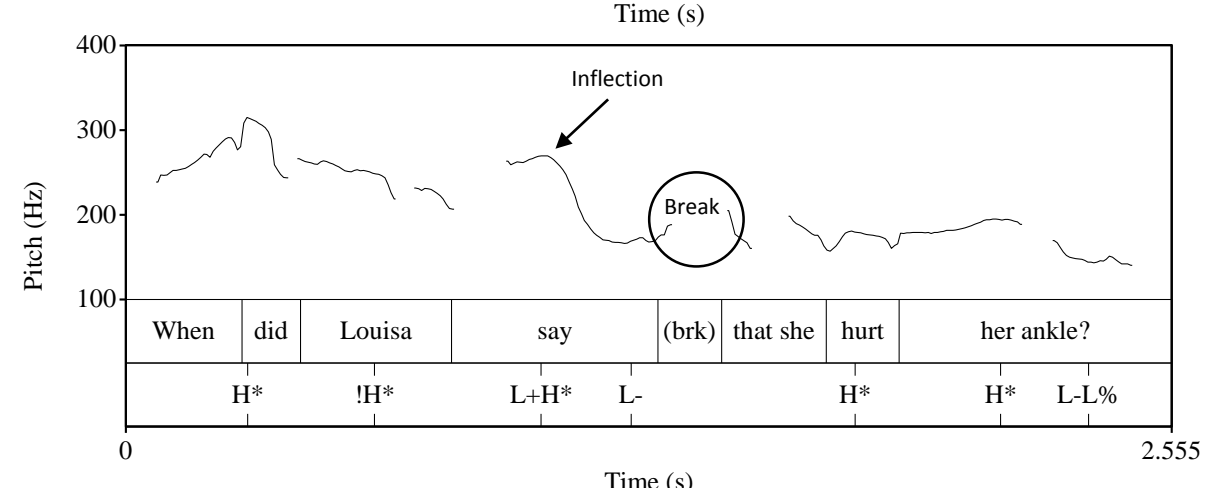
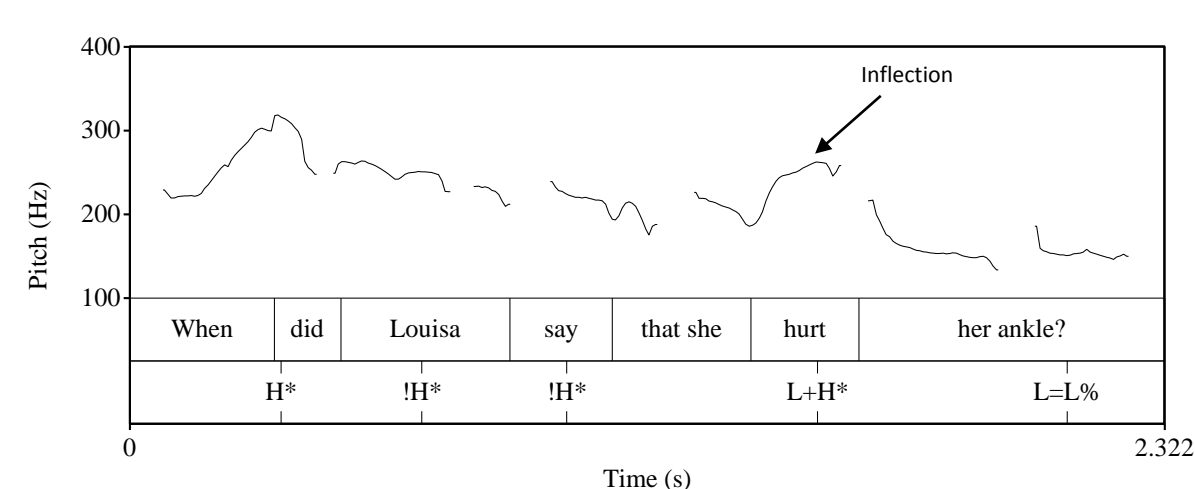
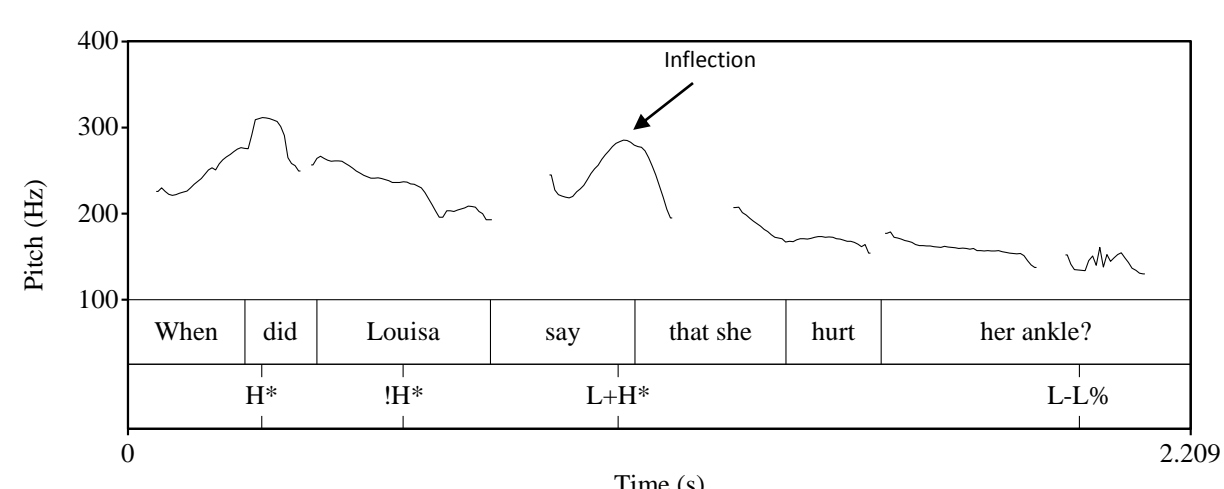
- Some clauses within sentences can be ambiguous; therefore, listeners must make a decision as to how to attach the clauses.
- In a sentence like:
 - When did Louisa say she hurt her ankle?
 - Louisa said it on Tuesday [Verb₁ attachment]
 - Louisa hurt her ankle on Tuesday [Verb₂ attachment]
- Prosodic definitions:** prosodic boundaries are breaks between phrases; **accents** are when you make one word louder and higher than others for emphasis
- Hypothesis 1:** A prosodic boundary after V₁ will increase V₁ associated answers because the V₁ will be the only verb in the same prosodic phrase as “when”: (when did Louisa say) (she hurt her ankle)
- Hypothesis 2:** Accenting each of the verbs would increase attachment to that verb, due to the Focus Attraction Hypothesis (Schafer et al. 1996).

Method

- Conditions varied the presence and absence of a prosodic break and whether the first or second verb was accented.

Sample item: When did Louisa say that she hurt her ankle?

- When did Louisa SAY that she hurt her ankle?
 - When did Louisa say that she HURT her ankle?
 - When did Louisa SAY ip that she hurt her ankle?
 - When did Louisa say ip that she HURT her ankle?



- 52 subjects listened to 24 questions with ambiguous structures and were then asked to choose the statement that best fit how they understood the question as in (3).

(3) Which answer would best fit how you understood the question?

- Louisa said it on Tuesday. (V₁ attachment)
- Louisa hurt her ankle on Tuesday. (V₂ attachment)

Results

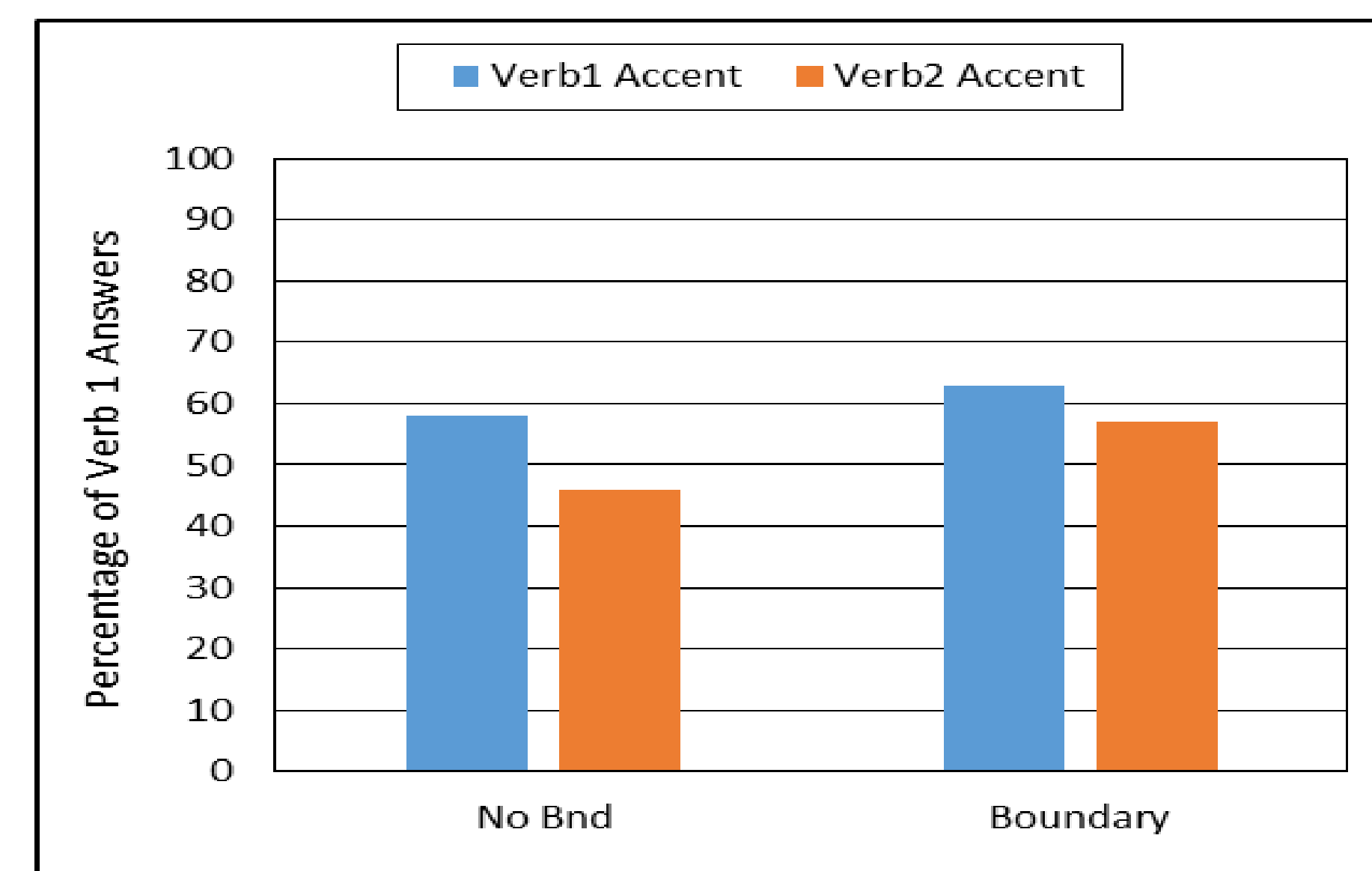
Our predictions were confirmed with:

- Highest** V₁ attachment rate when accenting V₁ with a prosodic boundary.
 - “When did Louisa SAY ip that she hurt her ankle?”



- Lowest** V₁ attachment rate when accenting V₂ with no prosodic boundary.
 - “When did Louisa say that she HURT her ankle?”

As expected, the other two conditions were intermediate:



- Summary:** Both verb accents and prosodic boundaries increased high attachments.

Conclusion

- Accents draw the attachment of modifying phrases even when they precede the verbs to which they can attach.
- This extends previous research (Carlson & Tyler in press) showing accent effects in other structures (non-questions).
- It also replicates research showing prosodic boundary effects on attachment, e.g. Carlson, Clifton, & Frazier 2001, and again extends them to questions.

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References

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