

# The prosody of contrastive focus and verum focus in rejections

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## Rejections: Function and prosody

### Function

- **Rejection:** Speaker S will not accept a proposition  $p$  associated with an utterance by an interlocutor into the common ground (CG).  
A: I suppose Benny is thinking about buying raffle tickets.  
B: Benny doesn't want to buy raffle tickets!
- **Correction** = rejection with narrow focus offering corrective alternative

### Prosody

- **Rejections**
  - ▶ **VERUM focus** on finite verb: in German H\* when in positive clause rejecting negative assertion (Turco, Braun, and Dimroth, 2014); L\*+H when in negative clause rejecting conjecture (Seeliger and Repp, 2023) (L\*+H is also best-fitting in perception; Röhr, Grice, and Baumann, 2023).
  - ▶ **Contradiction contour:** English/Catalan (%H (L\*) L\* L-H%) → also conveys that addressee should have been aware that what is rejected is false (Espinal and Prieto, 2011)
- **Corrections**
  - ▶ **Corrective focus:** increased prosodic prominence (↑ duration, ↑ F0 excursion, ↑ intensity); increased occurrence of L+H\* in German corrections – **in comparison to assertions with narrow non-contrastive focus**

## Research question

Are the prosodic characteristics of **corrective focus** due to the speech act **rejection** or due to the **contrast** relation?

## Production study

- German rejections in four different information structure conditions
  - ▶ **All-new** ( $O_NV_N$ ): hypernyms for object and verb are introduced; whole proposition is rejected. No lexical contrast.
  - ▶ **All-given** ( $O_GV_G$ ): object and verb are lexically given; whole proposition is rejected. No lexical contrast.
  - ▶ **Narrow contrastive focus on object** ( $O_CV_G$ ): alternative to object is introduced, verb is lexically given.
  - ▶ **Narrow contrastive focus on verb** ( $O_GV_C$ ): vice versa.
- Dialogues between three speakers; participant = speaker 3
- 24 subjects, 12 items, 1116 utterances available for analysis

S1: Oh, by the way, you know, Susi, the antiquarian on Müllerstraße? She was at one of those auctions last week and shopped like a madwoman. She told you, right?

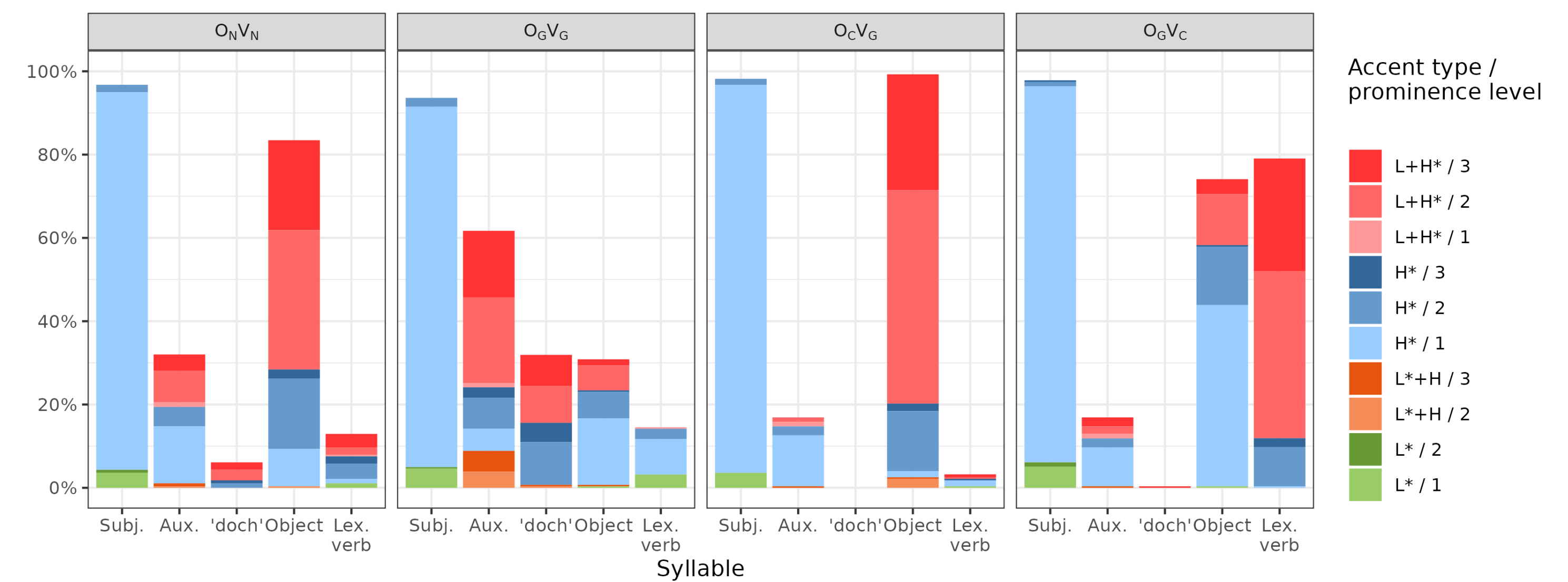
S2: Yes. I think she doesn't even have enough storage space for all the things she bought. Wasn't she going to put some of her stuff in a garage behind the ring road anyway, Alex? ...

...But I don't think she wants to put porcelain there. ( $O_NV_N$ )  
...But I don't think she wants to store vases there. ( $O_GV_G$ )  
...I think she wants to store artworks there. ( $O_CV_G$ )  
...I think she wants to exhibit vases there. ( $O_GV_C$ )

S3: Susi will da doch Vasen lagern!  
Susi wants.to there MP vases store  
'Susi wants to store vases there then!'

- ▶ Unaccented *doch*: modal particle that conveys that the addressee should have been aware of the corrected proposition
- ▶ Accented *doch*: conveys polarity contrast.

## Results: Accentuation



### Accent location

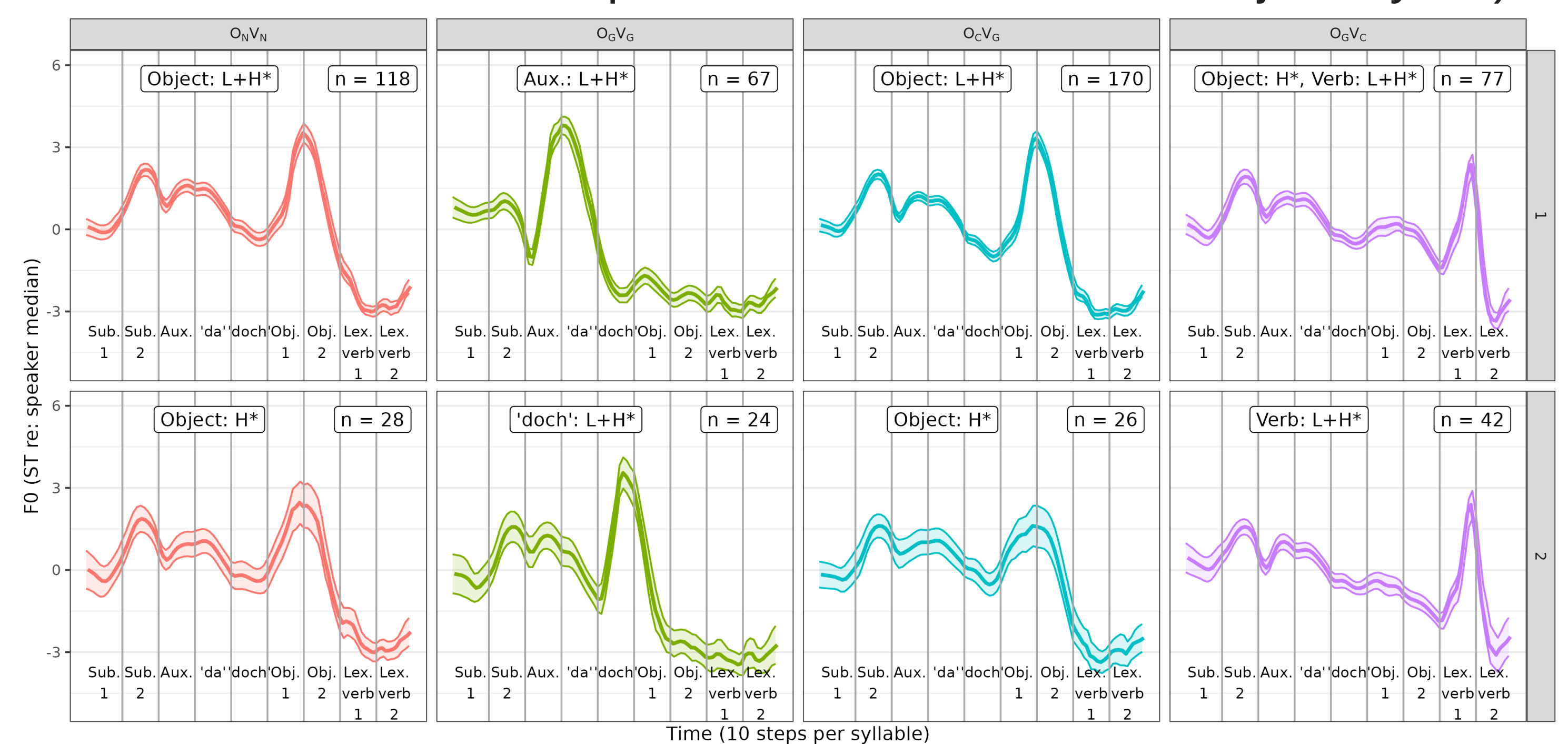
- **Contrast:** more accents on contrastive word (stronger tendency for object than for verb).
- **All-given:** more VERUM focus; more accents on *doch*.
- **All-new:** mixture of object accents and VERUM.
- **Strong post-focal deaccentuation:** Very few accents on the lexical verb if the object is accented; relatively few accents on object or verb after VERUM focus.
- **Little pre-focal deaccentuation:** Contrastive focus on lexical verb is compatible with immediately preceding object accents.

### Accent types

- **L\*+H** was surprisingly rare (conjecture: 'blocked' by *doch*?)
- **L+H\*** is more frequent on contrastive elements: More L+H\* (vs. H\*) if object is contrastive rather than new; almost exclusively L+H\* on contrastive lexical verbs.
- But **L+H\*** is also most common on new objects (**not contrastive** at all) and on accented auxiliaries (only contrastive to the extent that VERUM focus is).
- Confirms earlier findings about only loose connection between L+H\* and contrast (e.g. Grice et al., 2017)

### Contours

- The two most common accent combinations in each condition (all contours also contain a prenuclear accent on the subject, syll. 1):



## Summary

### Contrast and corrections:

- Contrastive focus is marked separately from corrections.
- L+H\* is common in rejections regardless of contrastive focus.

### VERUM focus:

- Common in rejections if there is no lexical contrast.
- No 'automatic' association with L\*+H.

## References

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