

PROSODIC PHRASES IN DALABON

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In this paper I will present examples of multi-clausal intonation units and discuss the relationships found between these syntactic units grouped together through the use of intonation in the Australian language Dalabon.

Dalabon is an agglutinating head-marking polysynthetic, prefixing and suffixing language spoken in Arnhem Land by less than ten speakers. It belongs to the Gunwinyguan family which is non-Pama-Nyungan (Evans & Merlan 2003). Of special interest to this study is the complexity of verbal words in Dalabon (e.g. Evans, Fletcher & Ross 2008), which may encode subject, object, TAM, and sequential markers, as well as incorporating adverbials and nominals. The possible complexity of verbal words enables these to be quite long. In addition to the main clausal forms, subordination may be encoded using a range of manners, including formal subordination markers on the verbal word, complementising case markers on the verb, as well as verb incorporation. A previous study of Dalabon gives the average word count per intonation unit at 1.9 (Ross 2003). Previous studies of English have found the average length of an intonation unit to be four words, and some have postulated that this is the amount of information speakers can reasonably store at a given time (Chafe 1994).

I will present and discuss examples from a 30 minute corpus of data of recorded oral narratives, which have been labelled and analysed using the speech software EMU. Initial results suggest that clauses are typically each uttered in separate intonation units with or without other phrasal material, such as overt nominal phrases. Where more than one clause is uttered in the same intonation unit, the overwhelming trend seems to be that these clauses are closely related semantically, showing a sequential or simultaneous relationship. This observation raises the question of whether there is a strong correlation between intonational organization in Dalabon and the signalling of higher clausal relationships of syntactic constituents. Previous studies of the intonation of Dalabon suggest that intonation and accentuation are highly delimitative (Fletcher forthcoming) so it should not be surprising that there is a strong relationship between syntactic organization and intonational phrasing, for example.

These examples are interesting because they reveal the possibility of creating not only extremely long units of speech under a single intonational phrase, but also because of the large amounts of information encoded in a single intonation unit, due to the morphological complexity of verbal words. In this paper I will also explore the possibility that a close examination of long intonational units may reveal more about the interaction between intonation and syntactic organization in a head-marking language such as Dalabon.

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