

When ‘not less’ is still more: emphatic consonantal lengthening in Multicultural London English

Sam Hellmuth¹ and Elisa Passoni²

¹University of York, ²Queen Mary University of London
sam.hellmuth@york.ac.uk, elisa.passoni@qmul.ac.uk

Speakers of Multicultural London English (MLE) are anecdotally known to deploy Emphatic Consonant Lengthening (ECL), in which a stressed word-initial onset is lengthened (Figure 1). We explore the relative contribution of temporal~spectral cues in realising this type of discourse-pragmatic prominence.

The intonational phonology of Multicultural London English (MLE) has received little attention to date (*pace* [1, 2]). In contrast, the distinctive characteristics of MLE – for other linguistic levels – have been established for several decades [3]. A complicating factor for work on MLE prosody is the fact that most available MLE data is spontaneous speech elicited in sociolinguistic interviews, which does not facilitate systematic intonational description of an undescribed variety. Our results here thus rely on a method developed for forming intonational generalisations from spontaneous speech sociolinguistic interview data, whereby tokens for prosodic analysis are identified in the corpus on non-prosodic criteria to avoid circularity. An advantage of interview data elicited in interactive dialogue is that it yields a wider range of pragmatic and interactional contexts than typically obtained in traditional fieldwork unscripted monologues, or scripted dialogues, so is more likely to result in fully vernacular speech data.

We present results from using this method to collect a set of Emphatic Consonant Lengthening (ECL) tokens for analysis, identified by segmental phonetic cues. For comparison, we also collected two types of polar questions, identified on a ‘next-turn-proof’ basis. We obtained 52 ECL + 140 polar questions in corpus data from 8 (4F/4M) teenaged East London L1 English speakers of Caribbean heritage (6 recordings, mean duration ~1hr) from the *Generations of London English* (UK ESRC 2023-2026) and *Linguistic Innovators* (UK ESRC 2004-2007) projects. Identified tokens were manually annotated by two transcribers (inter-transcriber agreement 93%) for contour shape (fall, rise, rise-fall etc) and key segmental landmarks (preaccentual + accentual + any postaccentual syllables, see Figure 1) in the target accentual domain, which was utterance-final in polar questions and on the lengthened word/phrase for ECL. We used landmark registered fPCA with time-warping [4] to explore the shape of F0 contours, and their mapping to utterance types and assigned contour labels, controlling for stress position.

ECL tokens display salient lengthening of word-initial consonants for emphatic effect. Voiced obstruents are favoured targets overall, but labial nasals are the single most common targeted segment, as in the example in Figure 1. Voiceless obstruent initial clusters can also be targeted e.g. ‘crazy’ /ˈkɹeɪzɪ/ and ‘strict’ /stɹɪkt/. The most commonly observed contour on ECL tokens is a rise-fall (41/52; 79%), but this is also the most common contour on yes/no-questions (ynq: 61/73; 84%) and on declarative questions (dqu: 43/67; 67%). Figure 2 visualizes reconstructed contours in registered time in the subset of tokens which contained postaccentual syllables and were labelled as bearing a rise-fall (N=77), by number of postaccentual syllables; the majority have either one postaccentual syllable (N=49; 65%) or two (N=16; 21%). We used fPCA to explore F0 curves in all tokens with/without postaccentual syllables present respectively (regardless of assigned contour label; N=94/77), in each of which PCs1-2 explain >90% of the variance. We then ran a mixed effects model to predict PC1 and PC2 in each data subset, with utterance *type* as fixed factor and random intercepts for *speaker* and *item* (random slopes were not included due to the unavoidably uneven distribution of tokens across speakers/items in unscripted data), then compared to a null model with random effects only to gauge the effect of the fixed factor. Figure 3 visualizes predicted PC1 and PC2 by utterance *type* for each data subset. We interpret PC1 in terms of overall F0 register and PC2 in terms of the alignment/scaling of F0 peaks and valleys. There is a main effect of *type* for PC1 in tokens without postaccentual syllables (i.e. with final stress), whereby dqu are realised in a higher register than both ynq/ECL (which overlap in register completely). For PC2, there is a main effect of PC2 for tokens with postaccentual syllables (i.e. with non-final stress), whereby the F0 peak is higher, and the following fall steeper, in ynqs, than in either of dqu or ECL.

Crucially, the register, alignment and scaling of F0 in segmentally-lengthened ECL tokens does not vary systematically from that in auditorily parallel contours produced on polar questions by the same speakers in the same dialogues. We interpret this as an instance of temporally-cued discourse-pragmatic prominence. We will discuss these patterns in the context of prior descriptions of parallel features in relevant substrate languages, including Jamaican/Trinidadian Creole. We will also discuss initial results of ongoing analysis of the duration of the lengthened consonant(s) relative to that of the host ECL target.

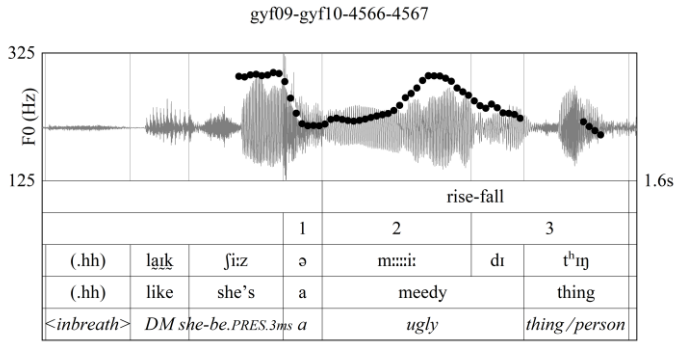


Figure 1: Sample token of emphatic consonant lengthening (ECL) produced by speaker gyf10.

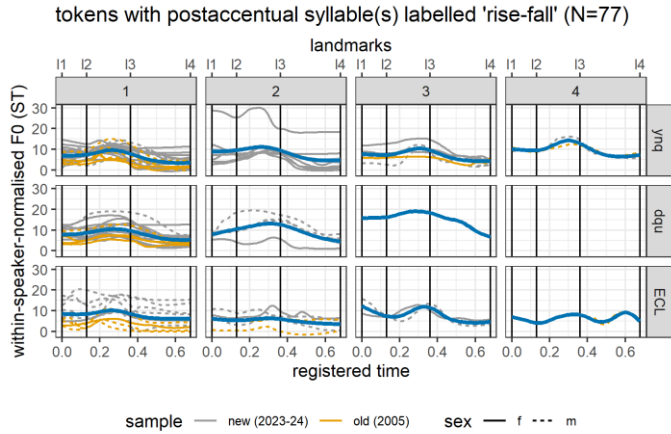


Figure 2: Landmark registered individual token curves (grey/orange) and GAM (REML)-smoothed f0 curves (blue) for tokens with postaccental material which were labelled as rise-fall, by sentence type and by number of postaccental syllables (1-4).

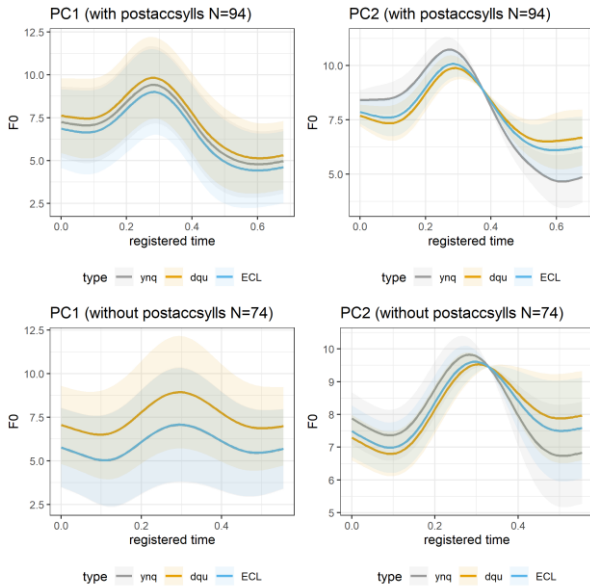


Figure 3: Predicted PC curves by sentence type, in the data subsets with and without postaccental syllables (total N=168).

References:

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