Phrase languages in prosodic typology

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Guest talk for *Prosodic Universals* course at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst

October 1, 2026

Overview of talk

- Word- and phrase-level prosodic typology
- The case of South Asian languages
- “Phrase languages” as a prosodic type
  - Data from Ethio-Semitic
- Additional questions to explore

Abstract

A traditional approach to word-prosodic typology treats stress and tone as binary parameters. Less is understood about the typology of phrase-level prosody, in particular intonation. In “stress-accent” languages, especially West Germanic, word stress is cued by an intonational pitch accent and utterances are demarcated by phrasal boundary tones. In this talk, I identify a range of contrasting prosodic qualities in another group of languages, subsets of which have been labeled “edge-prominence” languages or “phrase” languages. These include French, Korean, Austronesian languages, Ethio-Semitic languages, and languages of South Asia. Qualities that many such languages share include (1) word stress that is absent or relatively “weak”, (2) a word-sized prosodic constituent that is demarcated by a rising F0 contour, (3) a relative instability in the alignment of intonational tones, and (4) a strategy of marking narrow focus via prosodic boundary insertion. I argue that analytic details about such languages that are sometimes fixated on in this literature, such as whether word stress is present and whether intonational tones constitute pitch accents, obscure an overall unity that may best be captured by positing fewer distinct types. Finally, I observe that many such languages display a head-final SOV syntax, and I speculate whether this is purely coincidental. I adopt the term “phrase language” for this prosodic type, and I leave open future directions for refining prosodic typology.

Word- and phrase-level prosodic typology

Word-level prosodic typology

- Approaches to word-prosodic typology concentrate on types of prosodic marking in the lexicon, with **stress** and **tone** as binary parameters.
  - Stress is a **syntagmatic** feature; syllables are designated as relatively strong in the word.
  - Tone is a **paradigmatic** feature; TBUs are associated with tones in the tonal inventory (e.g., H, L).

	+LEXICAL STRESS	−LEXICAL STRESS
+LEXICAL TONE	Swedish Fasu (Papuan)	Japanese Yoruba
−LEXICAL TONE	English, Kuot (isolate)	French, Korean

Ladd (1996), Hyman (2006)

Word-level prosodic typology

- A subset of tonal languages display lexically-specified pitch contours – called **lexical pitch accent.**
  - Tone in these languages has a syntagmatic component.

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+LEXICAL TONE	**Swedish** Fasu (Papuan)	**Japanese** Yoruba
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Ladd (1996), Hyman (2006)

Phrase-level prosodic typology

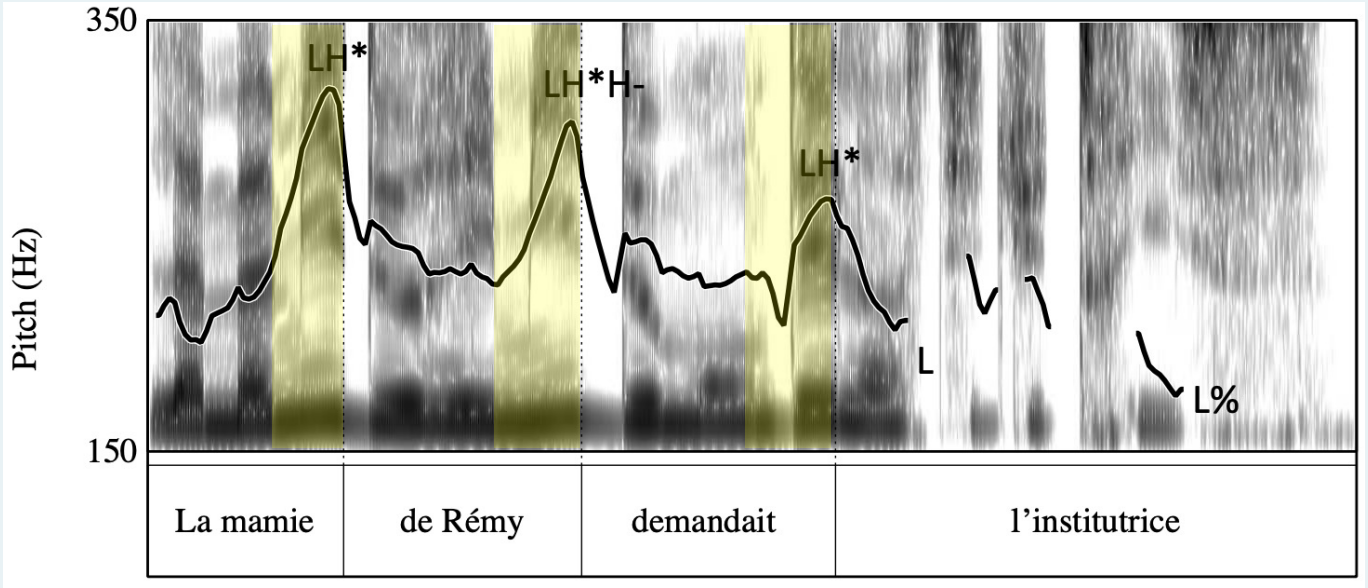
- Approaches to phrase-prosodic typology often concentrate on **intonation.**
- In non-lexical tone languages (English, Korean, etc.), intonation may play a larger role in terms of prosodic chunking, pragmatics, etc., because F0 is less constrained.
  - I will mainly focus on the phrase-prosodic typology of this group of languages.
- Typological work in this area is overall preliminary.
  - Lindström & Remijsen (2005:844) – "Our knowledge on crosslinguistic variation in intonation is so limited that distinct types have not become apparent."

Phrase-level prosodic typology

- In the Autosegmental-Metrical (AM) model of intonational phonology (Pierrehumbert 1980, Ladd 1996), a distinction is made on the basis of intonational tone type.
  - **Pitch accents** – Associate to stressed syllables.
  - **Boundary tones** – Associate to prosodic phrase edges.
- Languages are often classified in prosodic typologies based on how their intonational tones are categorized.

Intonation in French and Korean

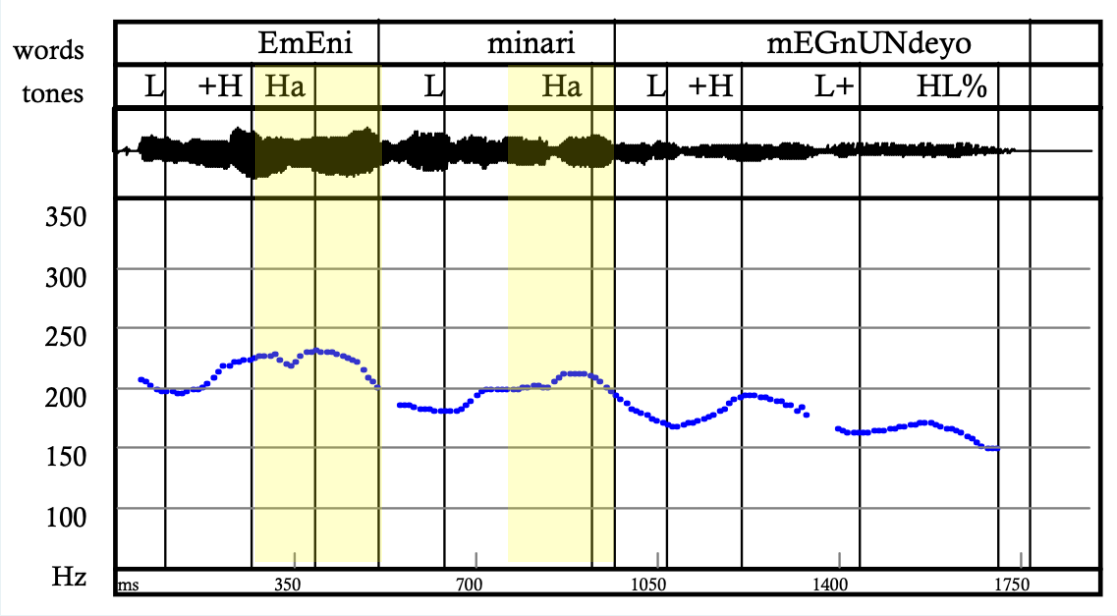
- In French, **Accentual Phrase (APs)** – a small prosodic constituent – are demarcated by final rising pitch movements.
- These rises are attributed to a H* pitch accent which targets a position of "phrasal stress". (Jun & Fougeron 2000, 2002, D'Imperio et al. 2008, 2012)



'Remy's grandmother asked for the teacher.' (D'Imperio et al. 2012:17)

Intonation in French and Korean

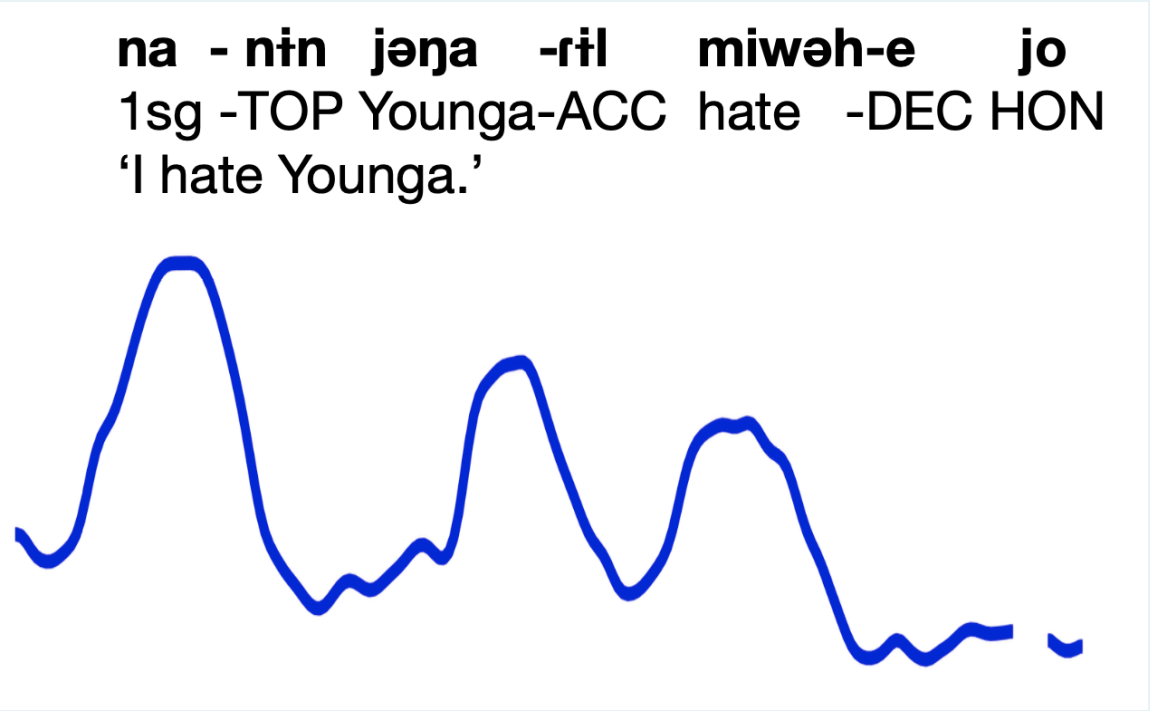
- In Korean, APs are likewise demarcated by final rising pitch movements.
- These rises are attributed to a Ha boundary tone at the AP right edge. (Jun 2004, 2005)



'Mother eats dropwort.' (Jun 2004:18)

Intonation in French and Korean

- The intonation pattern in French and Korean is sometimes referred to as **“repetitive rising contours”** pattern (Khan 2016).

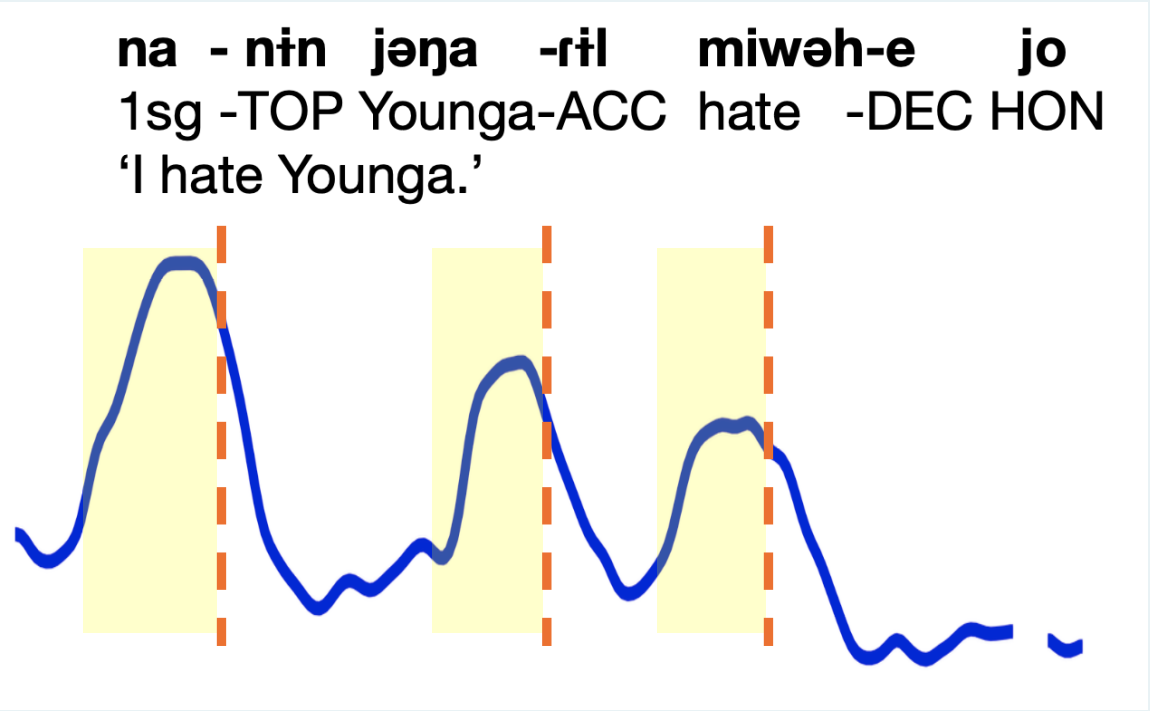


Jun (2000); screenshotted from Yu (2026)

https://sunahjun.humspace.ucla.edu/ktobi/K-tobi.html (example 8)

Intonation in French and Korean

- The rising contours demarcate **prosodic chunks** (see Yu 2024).

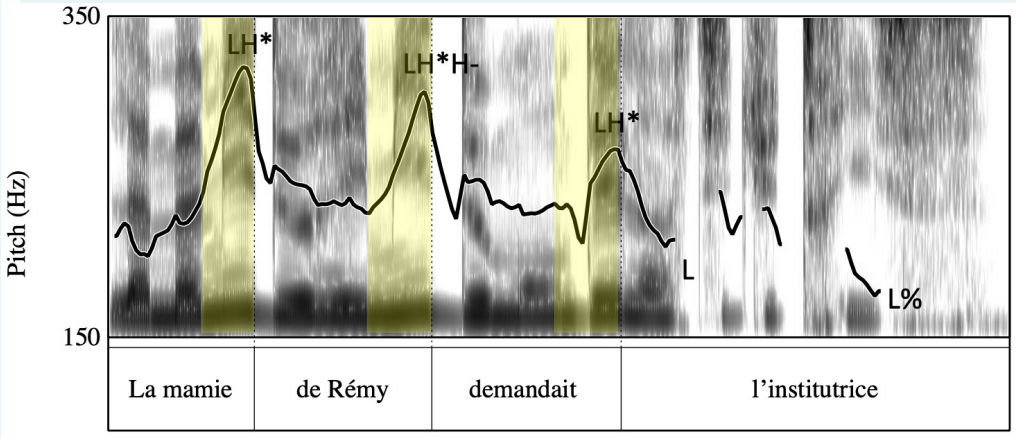


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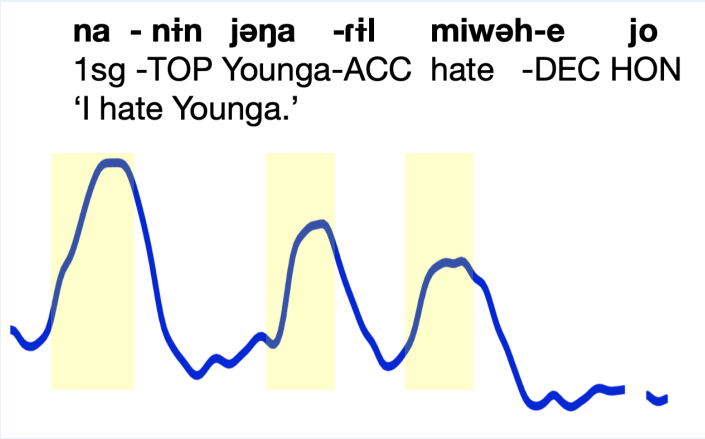
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Intonation in French and Korean

- *The intonation patterns of French and Korean are potentially similar.*
- Why are these rises considered “pitch accents” in French but “boundary tones” in Korean?



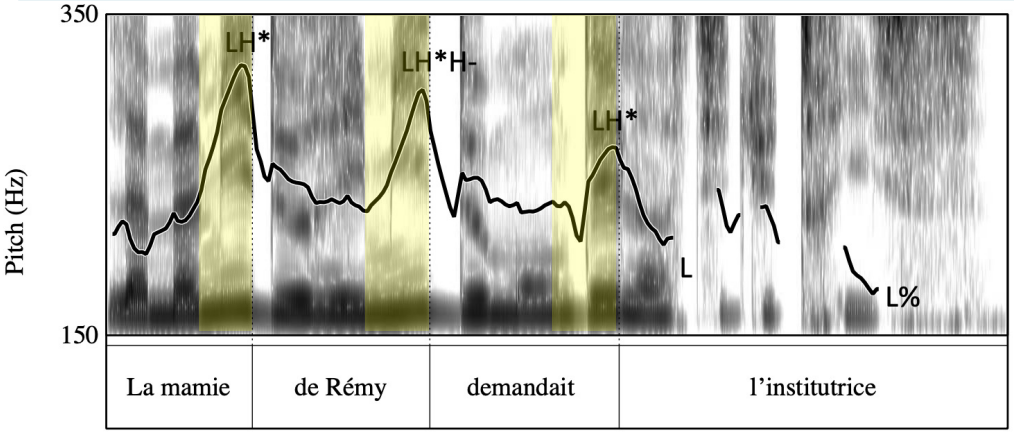
French phrasal intonation



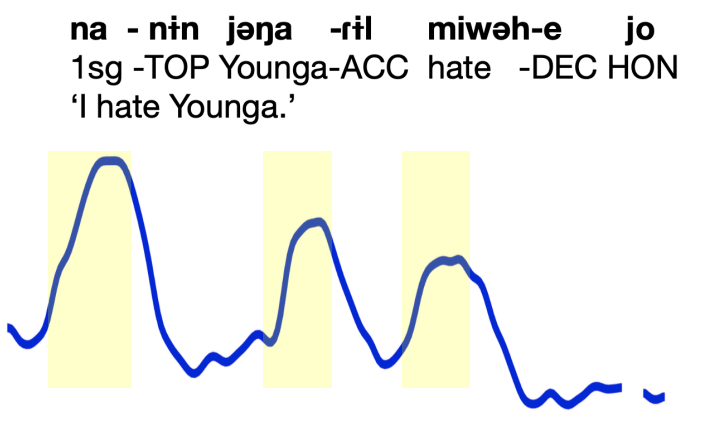
Korean phrasal intonation

Intonation in French and Korean

- *The intonation patterns of French and Korean are potentially similar.*
- Why are these rises considered "pitch accents" in French but "boundary tones" in Korean?
  1. There is a tradition of analyzing these rises as pitch accents in French.
  2. There is evidence these rises associate to a particular *syllable* in French, which is sometimes phrase-penultimate (i.e., stress avoids a final schwa).
  3. Some morphophonological evidence supports an analysis of final stress in French (Ulfsbjorninn 2022).



French phrasal intonation



Korean phrasal intonation

Typology of stress and accent

- French and Korean are separated in phrase-prosodic typologies that concentrate on the type of intonational tones. (Féry 2010, Jun 2014, Bruggeman 2020)
- This difference is sometimes framed in terms of **levels of prominence marking** – lexical vs. postlexical.

	+LEXICAL STRESS	−LEXICAL STRESS
+POSTLEXICAL PROMINENCE	English	French
−POSTLEXICAL PROMINENCE	Kuot	Korean

Non-lexical tone languages

Typology of stress and accent

- "Prominence" has various uses in this literature (Ladd & Arvaniti 2023). I try to avoid the term unless strictly in reference to metrical prominence.
- Another way to frame the relevant difference between French and Korean is whether they display intonational pitch accents.

	+LEXICAL STRESS	−LEXICAL STRESS
+INTONATIONAL PITCH ACCENT	English	French
−INTONATIONAL PITCH ACCENT	Kuot	Korean

Non-lexical tone languages

Typology of stress and accent

- English is a "**stress-accent**" language; word-level stress is cued by intonational pitch accents. (Pierrehumbert 1980, Beckman 1986)

	+LEXICAL STRESS	−LEXICAL STRESS
+INTONATIONAL PITCH ACCENT	**English**	French
−INTONATIONAL PITCH ACCENT	Kuot	Korean

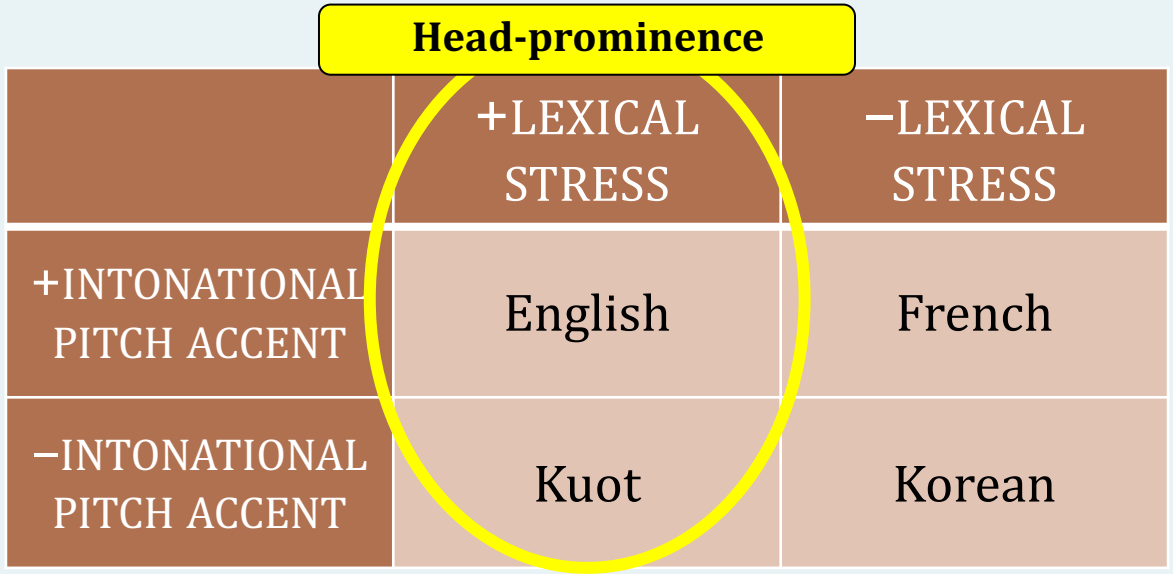
Typology of stress and accent

- Kuot has contrastive word stress cued by duration. H tones mark phrase edges and do not anchor to stress (Lindström & Remijsen 2005).

	+LEXICAL STRESS	−LEXICAL STRESS
+INTONATIONAL PITCH ACCENT	English	French
−INTONATIONAL PITCH ACCENT	**Kuot**	Korean

Head- vs. edge-prominence typology

- In Jun's (2014) prosodic typology, English and Kuot are called **head-prominence** languages.
  - They display "prosodic heads" (stressed syllables).
  - In English, narrow focus is cued by a pitch accent (in practice, this is what "head-prominence" usually refers to).



Head- vs. edge-prominence typology

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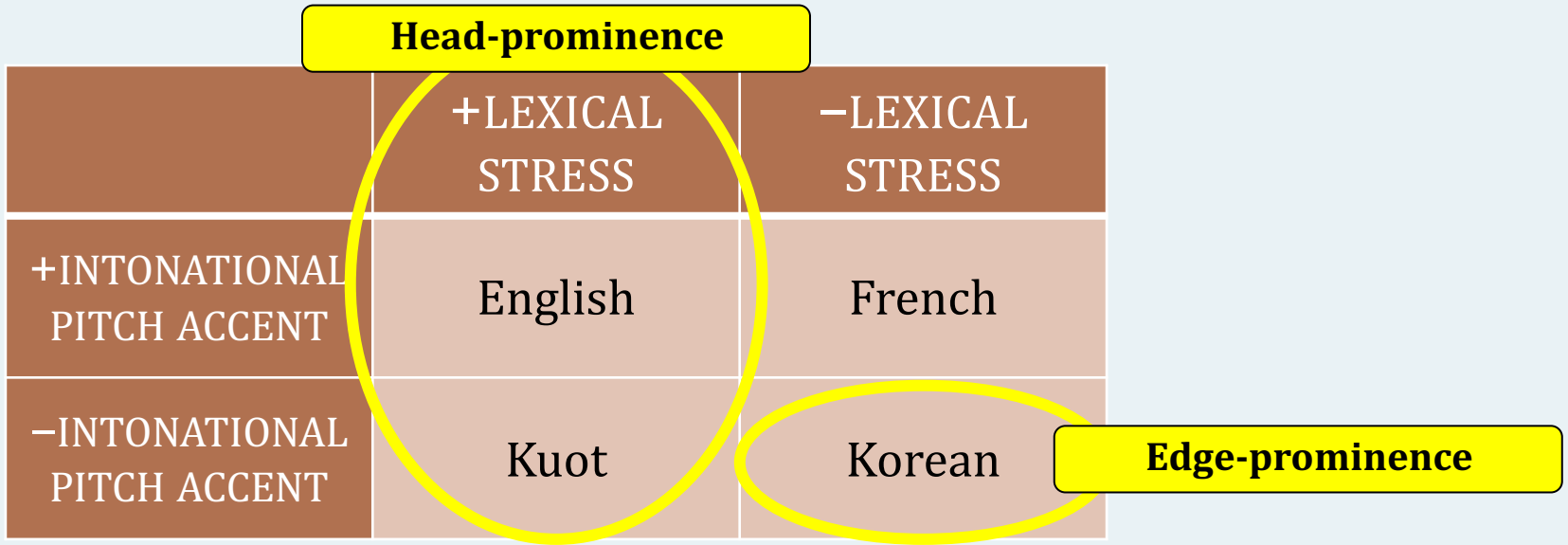
- Jun also puts lexical tone languages (e.g., Cantonese) in this category.

Head-prominence

	+LEXICAL STRESS	−LEXICAL STRESS
+INTONATIONAL PITCH ACCENT	English	French
−INTONATIONAL PITCH ACCENT	Kuot	Korean

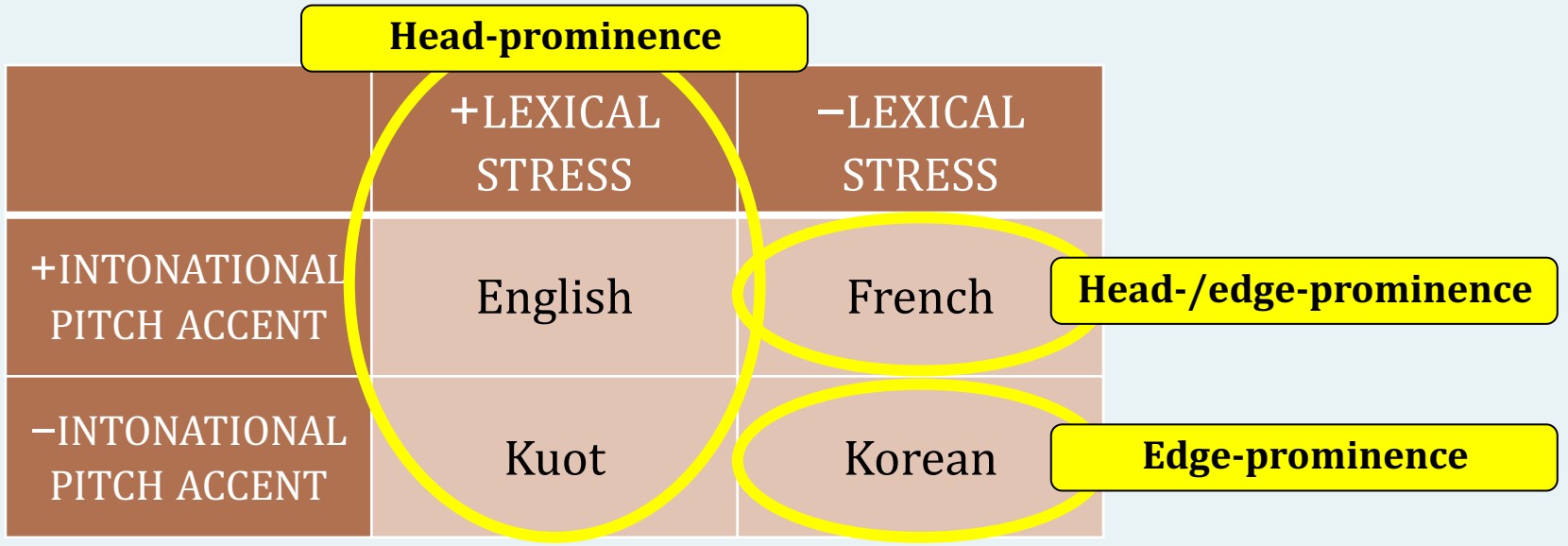
Head- vs. edge-prominence typology

- Korean is an **edge-prominence** language.
  - There are no prosodic heads (stressed syllables).
  - Narrow focus is cued by an inserted prosodic phrase boundary.



Head- vs. edge-prominence typology

- French is a **head-/edge-prominence** language.
  - Analyzed as displaying prosodic heads – stressed syllables at the phrase level – cued by an intonational pitch accent.
  - Narrow focus is cued by an inserted prosodic phrase boundary.



Reconsidering this approach

- French is analyzed as (1) displaying stress (at the phrase level) and (2) displaying intonational pitch accents. These qualities are consequential in Jun's (2014) typology, constituting a type difference with Korean.
- As we refine prosodic typology, it may be "missing the point" to not highlight the similarities between French and Korean.

Reconsidering this approach

- French is analyzed as (1) displaying stress (at the phrase level) and (2) displaying intonational pitch accents. These qualities are consequential in Jun's (2014) typology, constituting a type difference with Korean.
- As we refine prosodic typology, it may be "missing the point" to not highlight the similarities between French and Korean.
- **What other languages are similar to French and Korean in prosody?**

The case of South Asian languages

Prosody in South Asian languages (SALs)

- A “strikingly similar” prosody has been observed in a diverse range of South Asian languages (Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austroasiatic). (Féry 2010, Khan 2016)
  - No lexical tone.
  - Word stress is non-contrastive and plays little to no role in intonation.
  - Repetitive rising contours at the right edge of Accentual Phrases (APs).

Prosody in South Asian languages (SALs)

- Some scholars explicitly compare the prosody of SALs to that of French.
  (Rabin 1951:102–103, Ladd 1996:156, Féry 2010:290, Jun 2014)

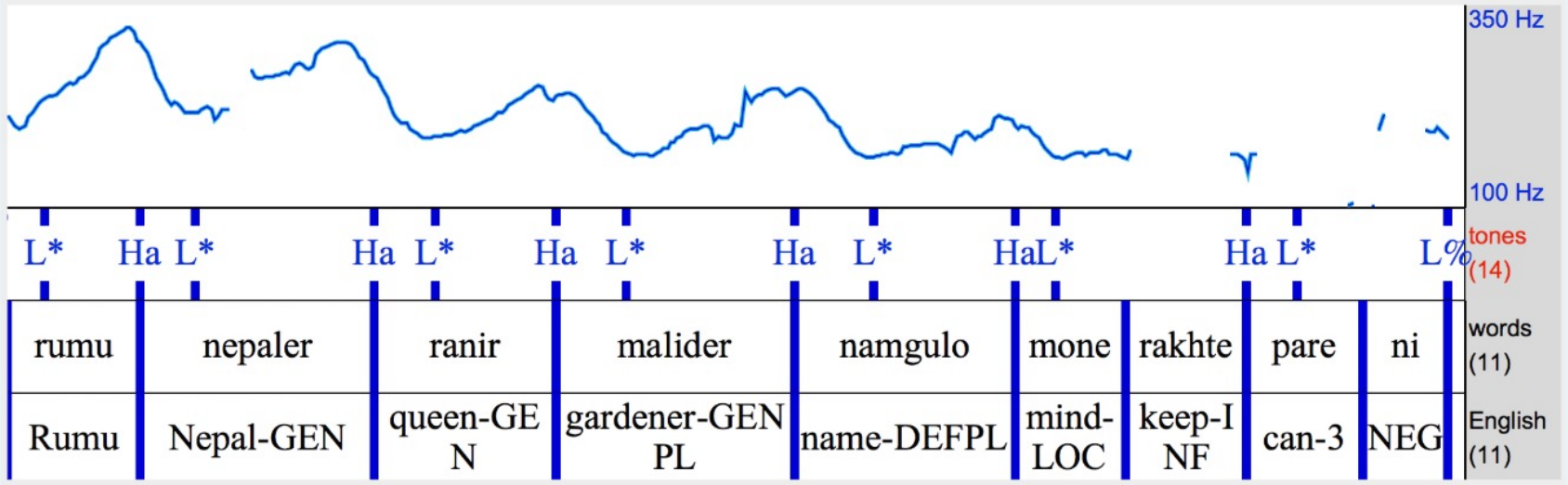
	+LEXICAL STRESS	−LEXICAL STRESS
+LEXICAL TONE	Swedish Fasu (Papuan)	Japanese Yoruba
−LEXICAL TONE	English, Kuot (isolate)	French, Korean, **most SALs**

Word-prosodic typology

Intonation in SALs

- SALs display **repeating/repeated/repetitive rising contours.**
  (Khan 2008, 2014, 2016)

Bengali (Indo-Aryan)

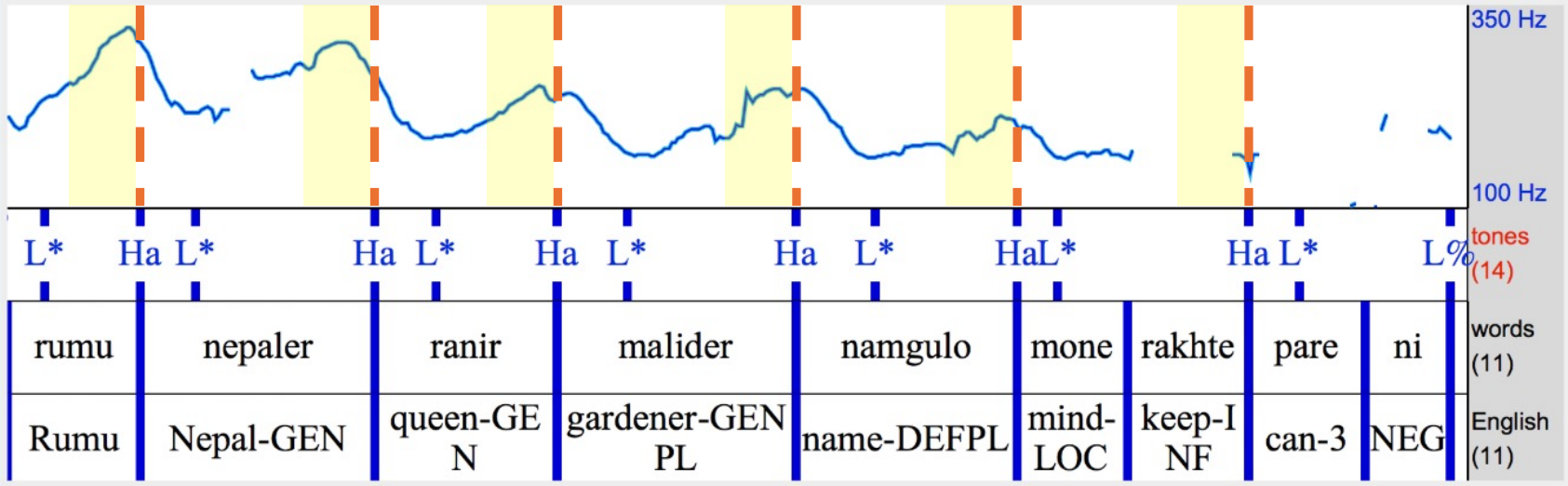


‘Rumu couldn’t remember the names of the gardeners of the queen of Nepal.’ (Khan 2019)
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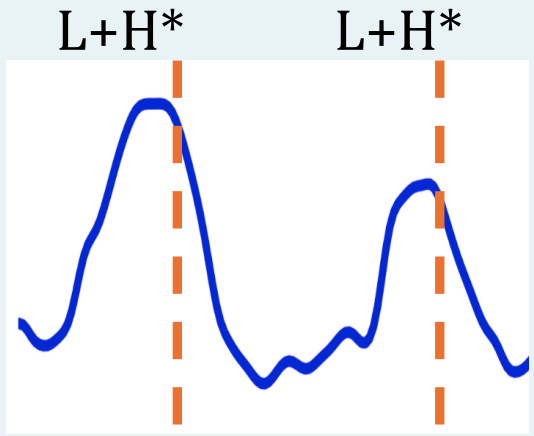
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Intonation in SALs

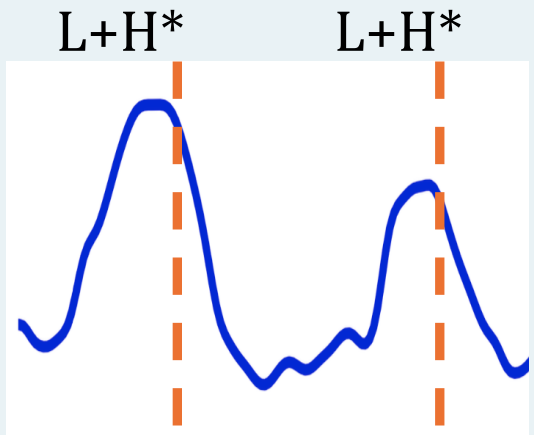
- What are AP-final rises attributed to?
  - Rising contours in French are attributed to a L+H* pitch accent. (e.g., Jun & Fougeron 2000)



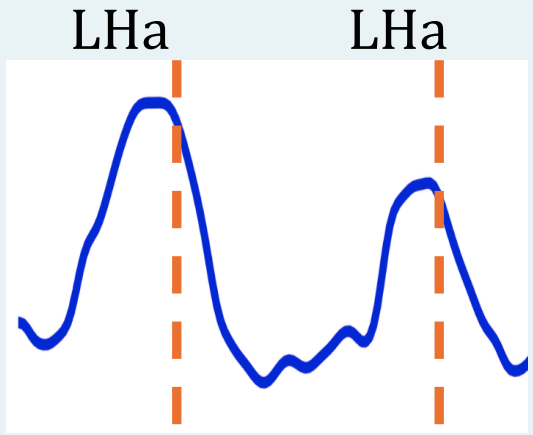
French

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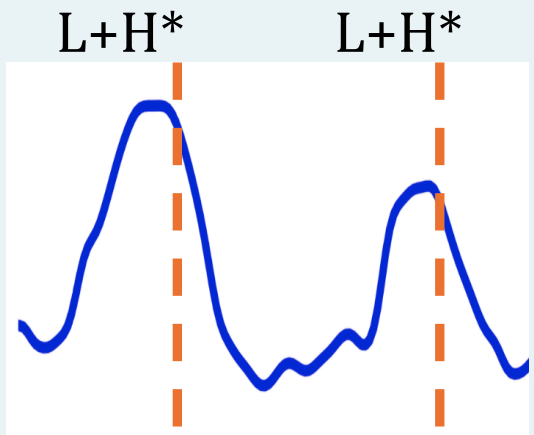
French



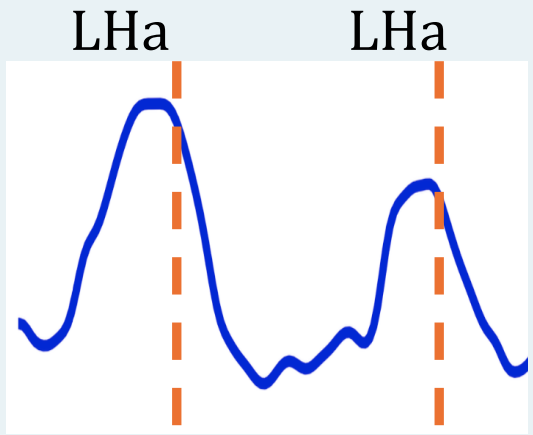
Korean

Intonation in SALs

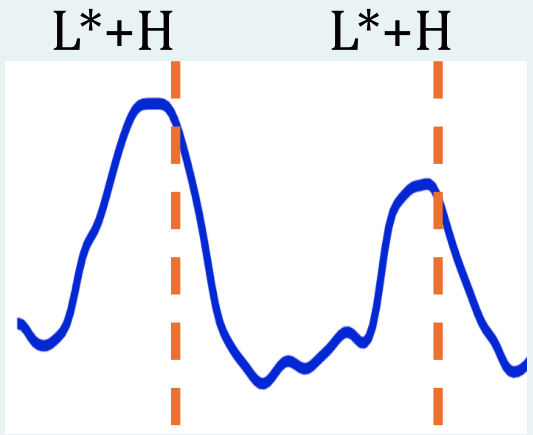
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  - Rising contours in French are attributed to a L+H* pitch accent. (e.g., Jun & Fougeron 2000)
  - Rising contours in Korean are attributed to a LHa boundary tone sequence. (e.g., Jun 2005)
  - In South Asian languages, rising contours are traditionally attributed to a **L*+H pitch accent**, with predictable word-initial stress. (Hayes & Lahiri 1991, Khan 2016)



French



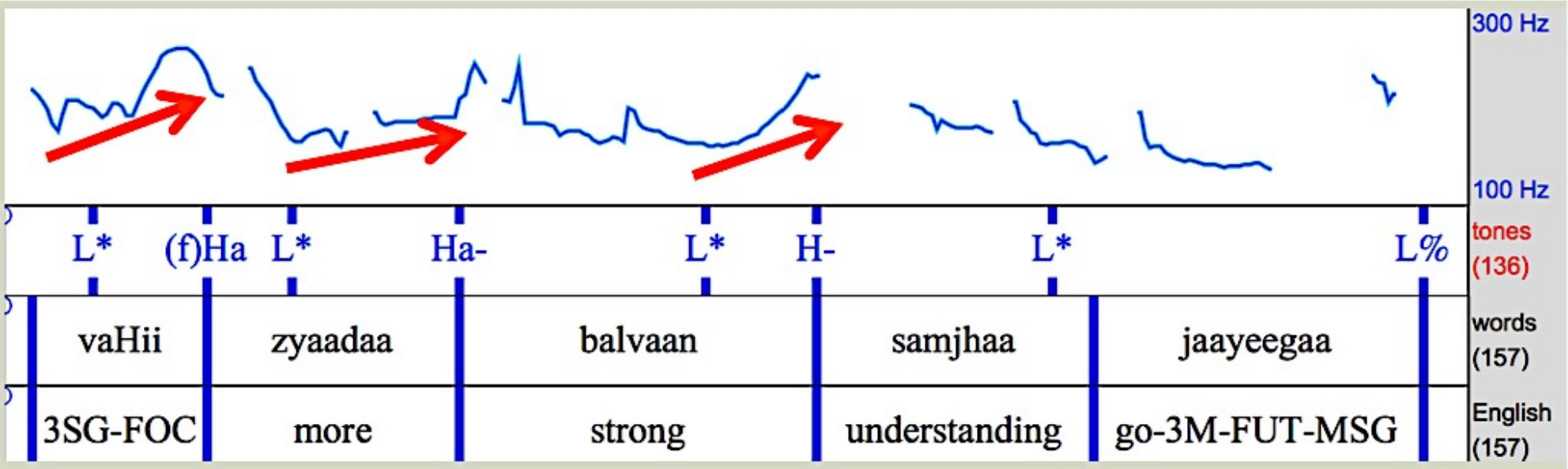
Korean



SALs

Repetitive rising contours in SALs

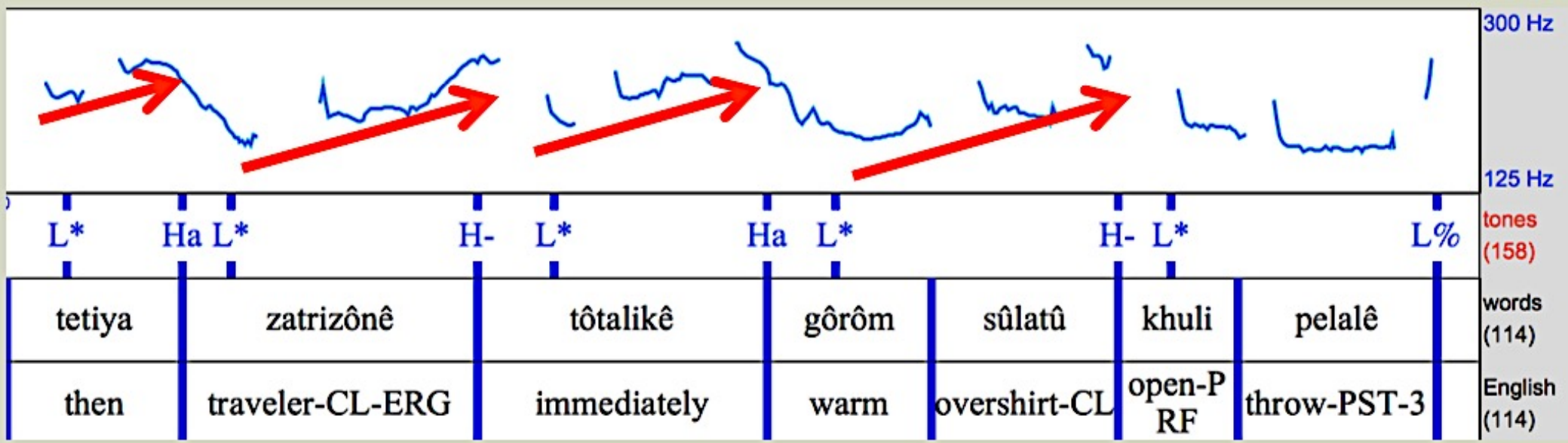
Hindi (Indo-Aryan)



'S/he will be considered stronger.'
(Ohala 1999; screenshotted from Khan 2016)

Repetitive rising contours in SALs

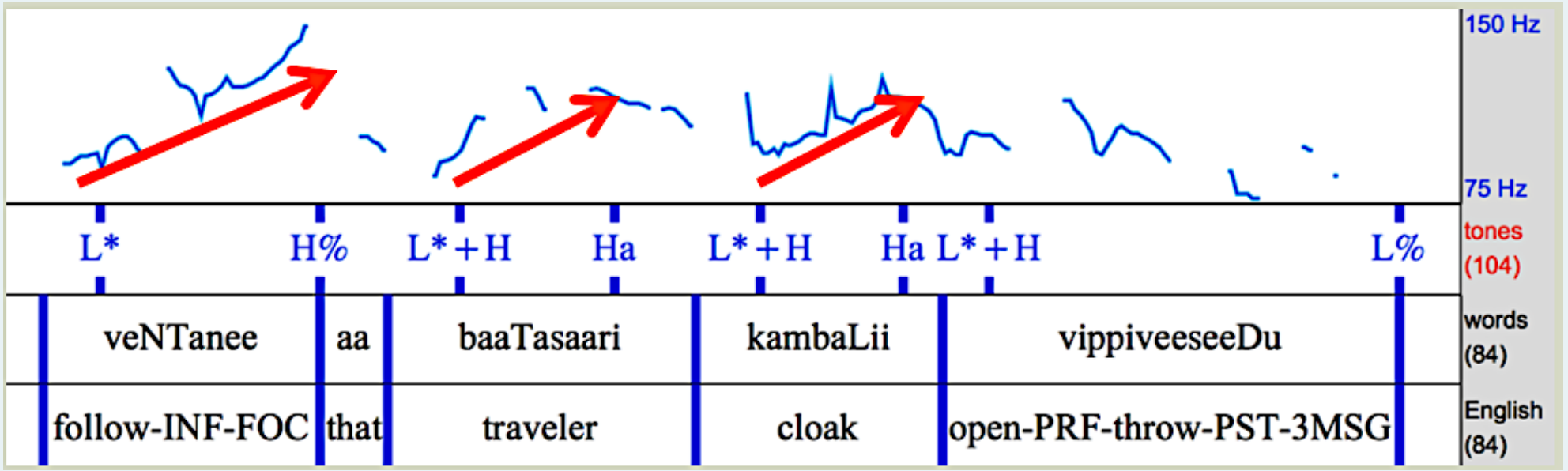
Assamese (Indo-Aryan)



'Then the traveler immediately threw off his warm cloak.'
(Mahanta 2012; screenshotted from Khan 2016)

Repetitive rising contours in SALs

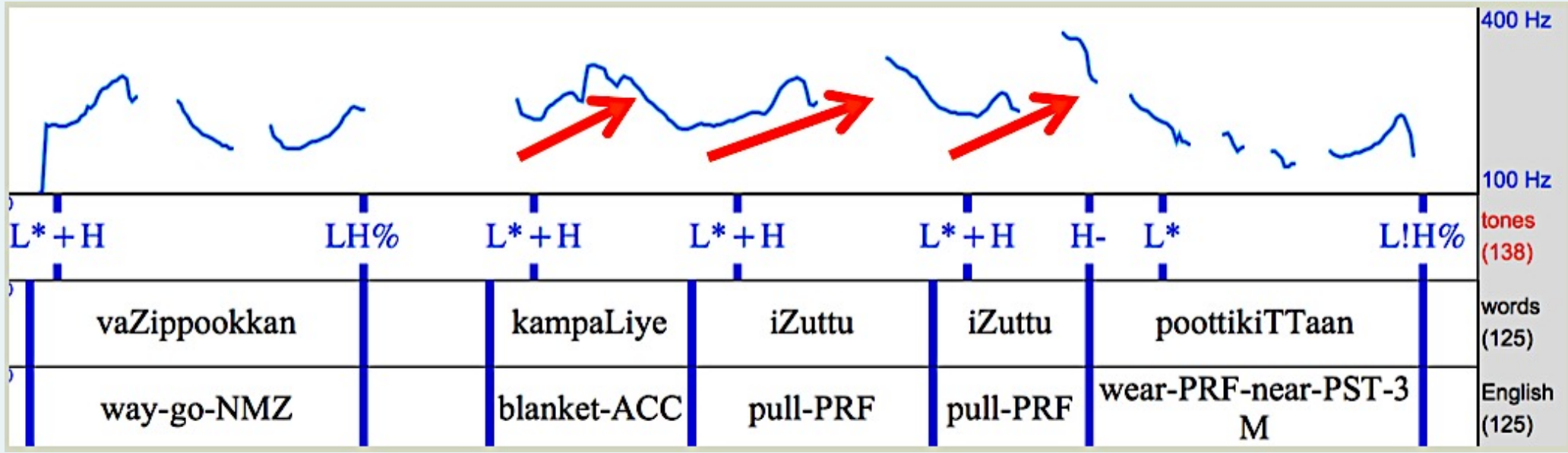
Telugu (Dravidian)



'Immediately the traveler threw off (his) cloak.'
(Bhaskararao & Ray 2016; screenshotted from Khan 2016)

Repetitive rising contours in SALs

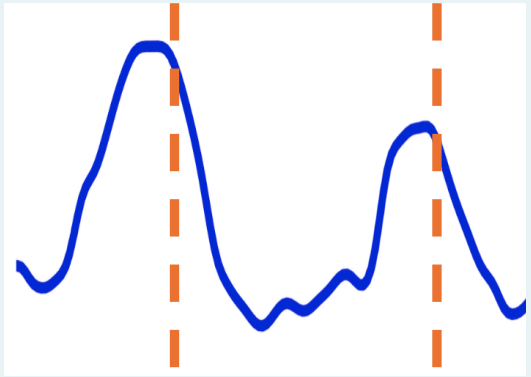
Tamil (Dravidian)



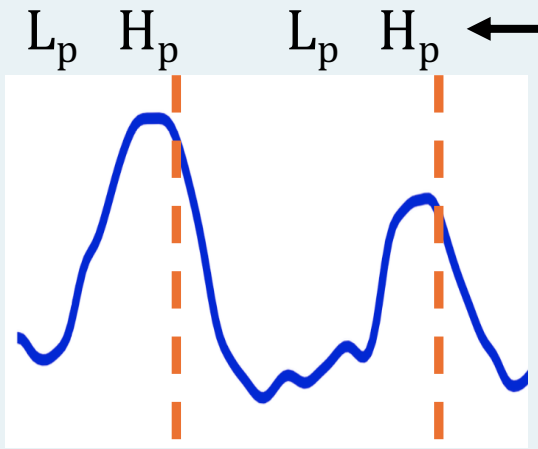
'The traveler kept pulling the blanket more tightly.'
(Keane 2004; screenshotted from Khan 2016)

Féry (2010) analysis

- Féry (2010) disagrees that the initial low is a L* pitch accent. She attributes it to a **L edge tone**, and the rise to a **H edge tone** of a **"p-phrase".**
- This parallels the analysis for Korean. (Jun 2004, 2005)



Korean



SALs
(per Féry 2010)

Féry (2010) analysis

- Féry proposes a **typology of intonation systems** to account for SALs. I will use "boundary tone" here in place of Féry's "phrase tones".
  - **Intonation languages** (English)
    - A rich array of boundary tones occur in addition to pitch accents.
    - Boundary tones express many pragmatic meanings.
  - **Tone languages** (Cantonese)
    - F0 is constrained by lexical tones; there are nearly no boundary tones.
    - As such, boundary tones do not express many pragmatic meanings.
  - **Phrase languages** (SALs)
    - *Only* boundary tones occur; no pitch accents (intonational or lexical), no lexical tone, potentially no lexical stress.
    - Boundary tones do not express many pragmatic meanings.

Féry (2010) analysis

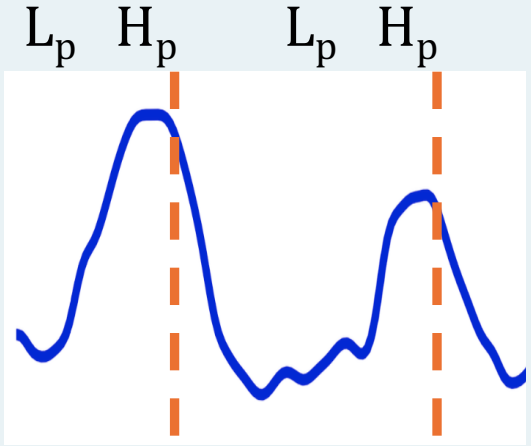
- Féry's typology involves at least two parameters:
  1. Are there many boundary tones in the language?
     - **Yes –** Intonation languages (**English, French**), Phrase languages (**SALs, Korean**)
     - **No –** Tone languages (**Cantonese**)
  2. Are there many pragmatic meanings expressed by boundary tones?
     - **Yes –** Intonation languages (**English, French**)
     - **No –** Phrase languages (**SALs, Korean**)

Féry (2010) analysis

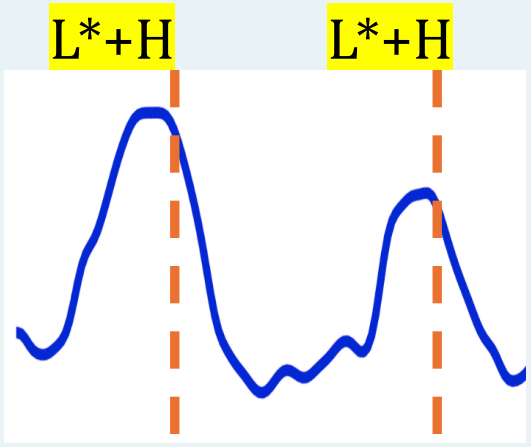
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  2. Are there many pragmatic meanings expressed by boundary tones?
     - **Yes –** Intonation languages (**English, French**)
     - **No –** Phrase languages (**SALs, Korean**)
- Féry groups French with English – not with Korean.

Khan's (2016) analysis

- Khan (2016) departs from Féry (2010) in insisting there are L* pitch accents in SALs.



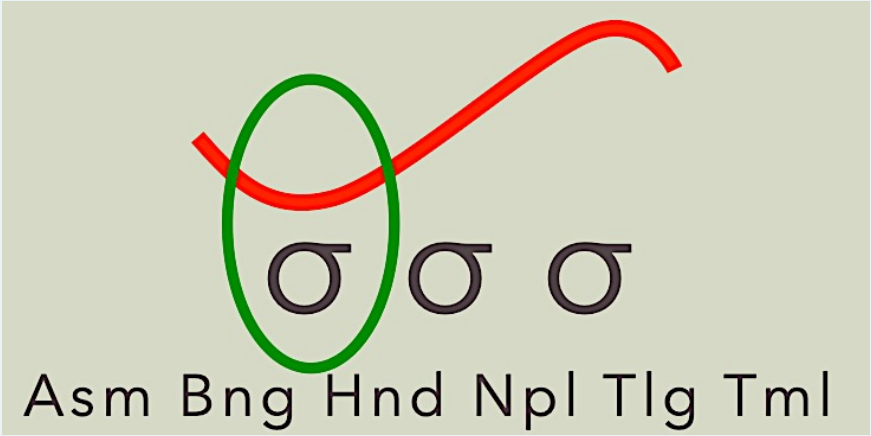
SALs
(per Féry 2010)



SALs
(per Khan 2016)

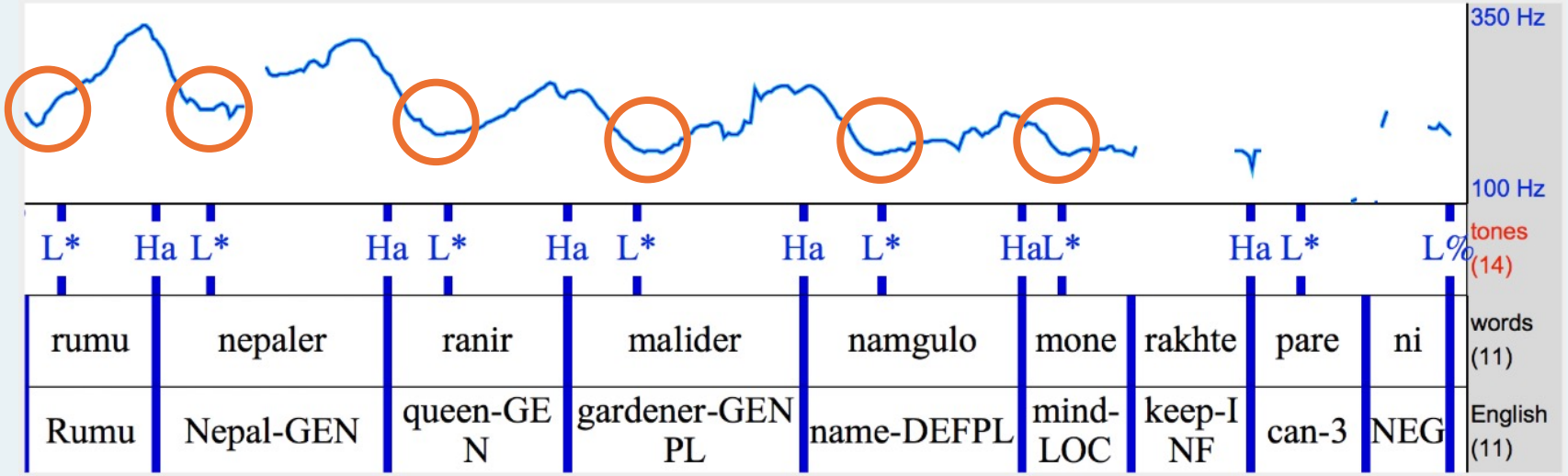
Khan's (2016) analysis

- Khan's evidence for L* pitch accents in SALs is as follows:
  - There is independent evidence for initial stress in SALs. E.g., initial syllables host more phonological contrasts, and loanwords get truncated so stress remains initial.
    - (Asher & Keane 2005, Khan 2008, 2016)
  - In many SALs, the AP-initial L is consistently aligned with the stressed syllable.
    - Though in Assamese and Hindi, the L can shift rightward.



Khan's (2016) analysis

- L* pitch accents aligned with word-initial stress in Bengali:



'Rumu couldn't remember the names of the gardeners of the queen of Nepal.' (Khan 2019)
https://www.reed.edu/linguistics/khan/B-toBI/tones.html

Reconsidering this approach

- Féry (2010) and Khan's (2016) analyses diverge in whether they posit L* pitch accents in SALs.
- *This point of divergence is consequential in Jun's (2014) head- vs. edge-prominence typology.*

Reconsidering this approach

- If SALs display L* pitch accents, they are **head-/edge-prominence languages** in a category with French.

	+LEXICAL STRESS	–LEXICAL STRESS
+INTONATIONAL PITCH ACCENT	English	French, **SALs**
–INTONATIONAL PITCH ACCENT	Kuot	Korean

Head-/edge-prominence

Reconsidering this approach

- If SALs do not display L* pitch accents, they are **edge-prominence languages** in a category with Korean.

	+LEXICAL STRESS	–LEXICAL STRESS
+INTONATIONAL PITCH ACCENT	English	French
–INTONATIONAL PITCH ACCENT	Kuot	Korean, **SALs**

Edge-prominence

Reconsidering this approach

- Are French, Korean, and SALs more similar in their prosody than these typologies would suggest? **Do they form a prosodic type?**

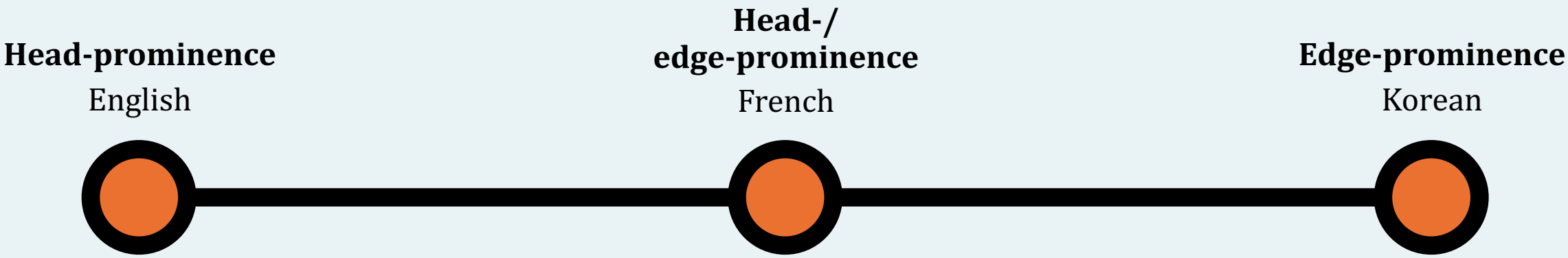
“Phrase languages” as a prosodic type

Refining phrase-prosodic typology

- Féry (2010) defines **phrase languages** as follows:
  - Only boundary tones occur; no pitch accents (intonational or lexical), no lexical tone, potentially no lexical stress.
  - Boundary tones do not signal many pragmatic meanings.
- I propose a generalization of the term “phrase languages” to capture a range of languages which contrast in prosody with **stress-accent** languages.

Refining phrase-prosodic typology

- In Jun's (2014) typology, French has qualities of both head-prominence and edge-prominence, so it is classified as intermediate in type to English and Korean.



Refining phrase-prosodic typology

- Such a typology may obscure the fact French is (potentially) much closer in prosody to Korean than it is to English.



Refining phrase-prosodic typology

- Does it feel insightful to group Korean, French, and SALs under one prosodic category – **phrase languages** – to highlight their contrast with **stress-accent** languages (English, Italian)?



Refining phrase-prosodic typology

- Current phrase-prosodic typologies often parameterize features of relevance to West Germanic.
- The distinction between pitch accents and boundary tones matters for intonation in West Germanic languages. *In phrase languages, this distinction may not matter that much.*



Refining phrase-prosodic typology

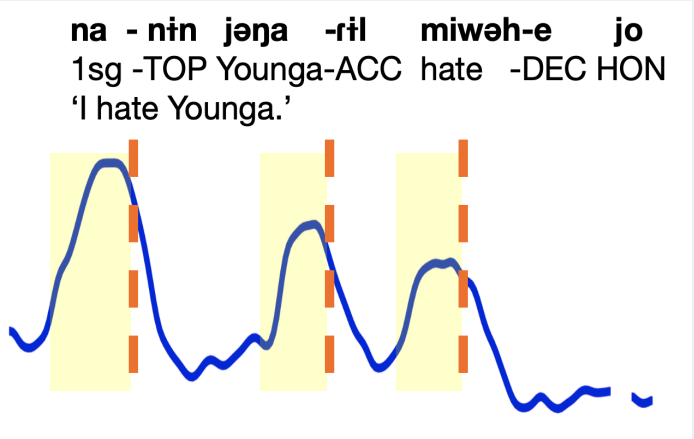
- **What features of phrase languages can we identify in common?**

Characteristics of phrase languages

- **Phrase languages**
  1. **Predictable/absent/unclear word-level stress.**
     - Much literature is concerned with the question of whether languages display a predictable stress pattern that is only weakly acoustically signaled, or may lack word stress altogether. (e.g., Goedemans & Van Zanten 2014, Bruggeman 2020, Kellogg 2026)
     - *Perhaps this is not a question that matters that much for the prosody of phrase languages.*
- **Stress-accent languages**
  1. **Contrastive word-level stress.**

Characteristics of phrase languages

- **Phrase languages**
  2. **(a) An Accentual Phrase in the prosodic hierarchy, and (b) a prevailing intonation pattern of repetitive rising contours that demarcate APs.**



- **Stress-accent languages**
  2. **(a) Less discretized prosodic phrasing (i.e., larger prosodic units), and (b) more variable intonational melodies.**

Characteristics of phrase languages

- **Phrase languages**
  3. **Variable alignment of intonational tones, especially salient H tones.**
     - I use “salient H tones” to remain neutral as to the identity of pitch accents vs. boundary tones, because in phrase languages *it may not really matter*.
- **Stress-accent languages**
  3. **More stable alignment of salient intonational H tones (pitch accents).**

Characteristics of phrase languages

- **Phrase languages**
  4. **Narrow focus cued by an inserted prosodic phrase boundary.**
- **Stress-accent languages**
  4. **Narrow focus cued by a pitch accent.**
     - I.e., the heart of Jun's (2014) head- vs. edge-prominence distinction.

Characteristics of phrase languages

- Phrase languages
  1. Predictable/absent/unclear word-level stress
  2. AP in the prosodic hierarchy demarcated by repetitive rising contours
  3. Variable alignment of intonational tones
  4. Narrow focus cued by inserted prosodic phrase boundary
- ***These features co-occur in French, Korean, and South Asian languages.***

Characteristics of phrase languages

- Phrase languages
  1. Predictable/absent/unclear word-level stress
  2. AP in the prosodic hierarchy demarcated by repetitive rising contours
  3. Variable alignment of intonational tones
  4. Narrow focus cued by inserted prosodic phrase boundary
- My goal in framing this typology is to capture broad similarities that stand in contrast with the highly specific prosody of West Germanic and other stress-accentual European languages (which may represent the exception rather than the rule).
- **What other languages display phrase language characteristics?**

Ethio-Semitic prosody

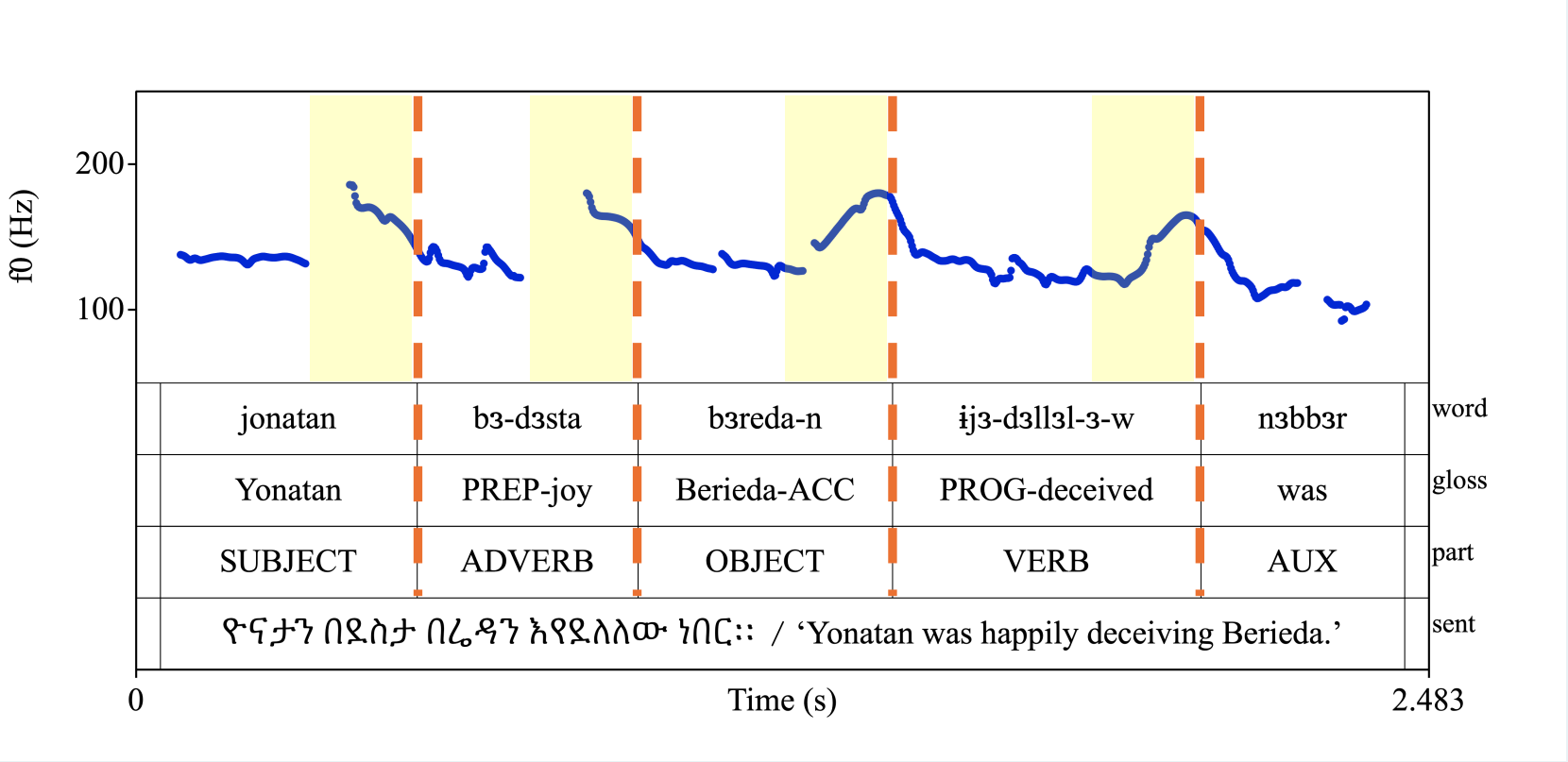
- Ethio-Semitic (Amharic, Tigrinya, Harari, etc.) likely constitutes another locus for phrase language characteristics.
  - A lack of lexical tone.
  - Word stress has been "notoriously hard to pin down" (Gragg & Hoberman 2012:165).
  - AP-final rising pitch movements (Kaech 2022).
- Ullendorf (1995:197) – "Common to all [Ethio-Semitic] languages is the 'instability' of the accent."

Ethio-Semitic prosody

- Rabin (1951:102–103) **places Amharic in a prosodic class with Indian languages and French**, displaying a “non-expiratory” (non-stress) accent which is “constantly shifting”.
- Hayward (1991:27) states Amharic has no pre-designated “anchor points” for intonational tones because the language “does not have stress”.

Ethio-Semitic prosody

- Repetitive rising contours in Amharic (Kellogg 2026).



Austronesian prosody?

- There is a fair amount of discussion about the potential lack of word stress in Austronesian (Indonesian, Malay, Tagalog, etc.).
  (e.g., Goedemans & Van Zanten 2014, Athanasopoulou et al. 2021, Farinella et al. 2025)
- My impression is that these languages exhibit many qualities of phrase languages, but I am less knowledgeable about their phrasal intonation. (I need to do more reading!)
- *Any insight would be appreciated!* For instance, do Austronesian languages display repetitive rising contours?

Conclusion

- A range of diverse languages – French, Korean, South Asian, Ethio-Semitic, Austronesian – display prosodic features in common, that stand in contrast with features of stress-accent languages.
- These features include (1) predictable/absent/unclear word-level stress, (2) an AP constituent demarcated by a final pitch rise, (3) variable alignment of intonational tones, and (4) narrow focus cued by prosodic phrasing.
- Existing prosodic typologies, especially when fixating on the type of intonational tones, may fail to capture these similarities in a satisfactory manner.
- It may be useful to refer to these languages in a unified way; I propose the term **phrase language** for this purpose (from Féry 2010).

Additional questions to explore

(1) Could syntax matter to intonational type?

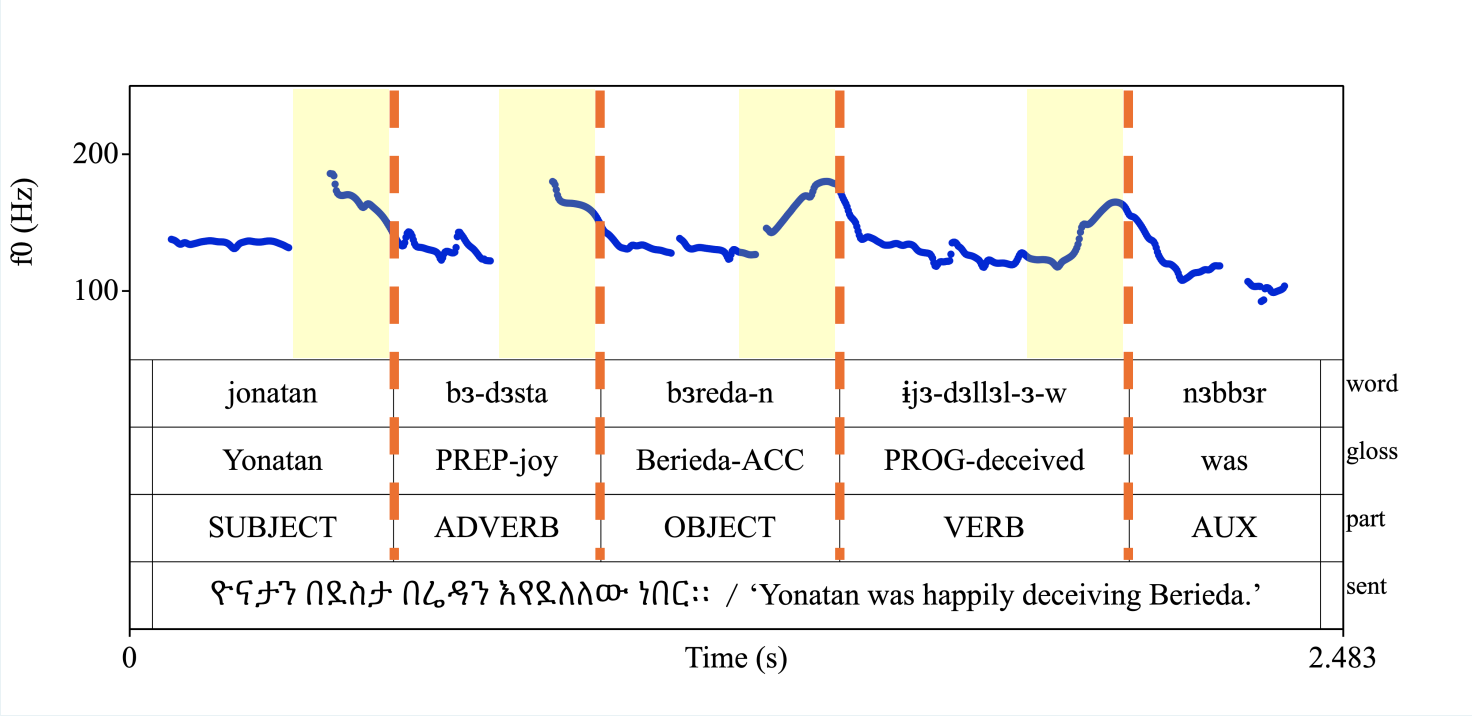
- The languages that have been characterized as displaying repetitive rising contours are also head-final SOV languages.
  - **South Asian –** Bengali, Tamil, etc. (Khan 2016)
  - **Korean** (Yu 2026)
  - **Ethio-Semitic –** Amharic, Tigrinya, etc. (Kellogg 2026)
- To my knowledge, SVO languages like French and Austronesian are not highlighted in the literature as displaying this intonation pattern.
- ***Is this a coincidence?*** Probably; SOV is the most common word order in general. *However…*

(1) Could syntax matter to intonational type?

- Many SOV languages are **preverbal focusing –** the element immediately before the verb is interpreted as focused (see Kim 1998).
- In my work, I have attempted to bridge discussions about preverbal *focus* with phonological *prominence*.
  - In Amharic, some have compared the last pitch rise in the string – in their examples, preverbal – to a **nuclear pitch accent** (Alemayehu 1987, Hayward 1991),
  - Preverbal objects in Amharic induce a leftward phrase boundary and display relatively higher peak scaling (Kellogg & Barnes 2026).
  - Similar scaling relationships are observed in Bengali; the preverbal rise is sometimes higher, though "more research is needed here" (Féry 2010:300–304).

(1) Could syntax matter to intonational type?

- Could the pressure to demarcate the boundary before the verb constitute a historical source for the final rising contour, which gets phonologized and "copied" to other phrases?

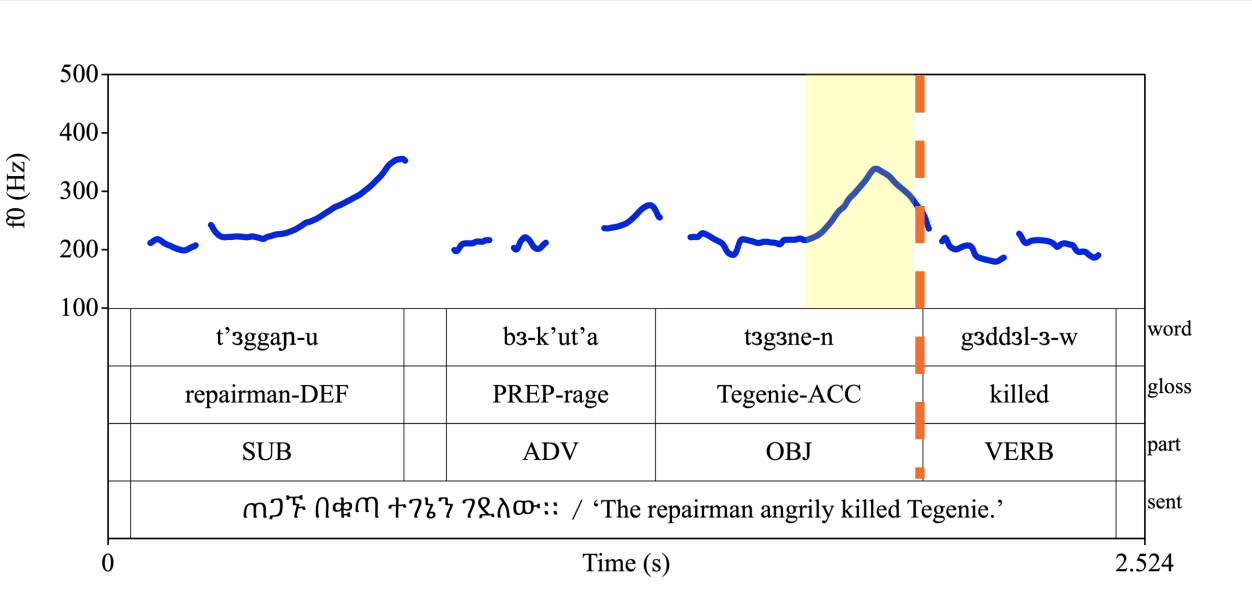


(2) Phrase-level metrical structure

- Phrase-prosodic typologies often concentrate on intonation.
- Are there other parameters of phrase-prosodic typology we might consider? What about metrical structure?

(2) Phrase-level metrical structure

- I have framed a metrical analysis for preverbal prominence in Amharic (Kellogg & Barnes 2026).

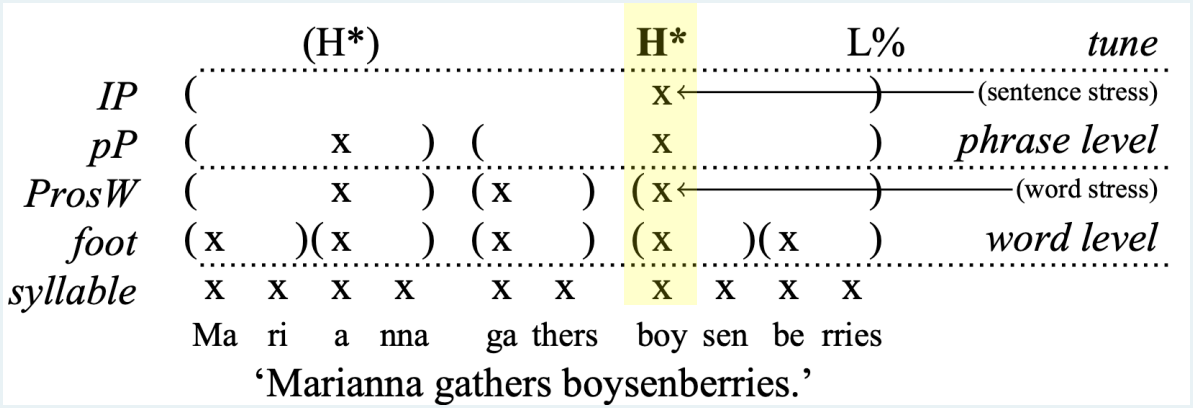


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AP	(x)^{LHa}	(x)^{LHa}	(x)^{LHa}	(x)^{LHa}	
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	repairman	angrily	Tegenie	killed	
	SUB	ADV	OBJ	VERB	

‘The repairman angrily killed Tegenie.’

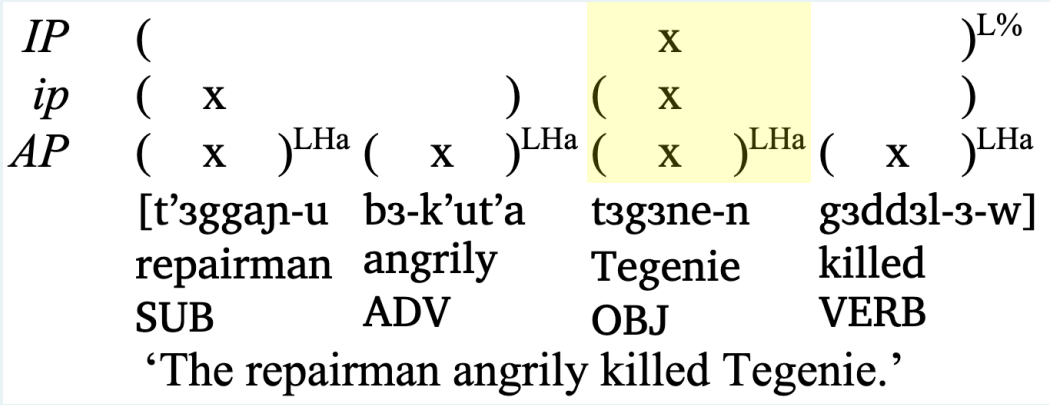
(2) Phrase-level metrical structure

- Amharic may lack word stress. This raises a question: **Can languages display metrical structure at the phrase level alone?**
  - Ladd & Arvaniti (2023:187) – "[T]he core ideas behind metrical phonology appears to us to be the most likely route to a more satisfactory understanding of how prosodic prominence works in the languages of the world."



Metrical grid for English broad focus

(e.g., Liberman 1975)



Metrical grid for Amharic broad focus

(Kellogg 2026)

Overall, much work remains to be done in this area.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts!

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Interesting comments on Féry (2010)

- **Roger**
  - Is phrase language intonation a kind of unmarked feature which many languages may independently develop?
    - *I have had this thought! It may be a default pattern that languages "revert to" when lexical stress and tone are not present.*
- **Yifan**
  - Could these edge tones in South Asian languages be analyzed as postlexical pitch accents?
    - *They are analyzed in this way in French! The analysis of these intonation patterns is language-specific (e.g., slide 32), in a manner I sometimes have doubts about.*
- **Yanran**
  - Are these intonational types mutually exclusive? French displays some characteristics of intonational languages (e.g., use of boundary tones for pragmatics), but does that mean it can't be a phrase language? Are we separating French and Bengali?
    - *Exactly, these typologies often separate languages in a surprising manner! It may be more accurate for us to think about prosodic typology in terms of* ***prosodic features*** *rather than discrete* ***prosodic types*** *(see Hyman 2007).*