

Focus and accent in English

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Contrastive focus in English is marked with a rising accent (autosegmentally L+H*) and broad (all new) focus with a high accent (H*). However, inconclusive production and perception evidence supports the idea that L+H* is simply an emphatic version of H*, not phonologically distinct from it. We used Rapid Prosody Transcription to test these two views. Forty-seven speakers of Standard Southern British English (SSBE) listened to 86 SSBE utterances and marked the words they considered *prominent or emphatic*. Accents (N = 281) were independently coded as H* or L+H* using phonetic criteria, and as contrastive or non-contrastive using pragmatic criteria. If L+H* is an emphatic H*, L+H*s should be rated more prominent than H*s; if the accents encode a pragmatic distinction, contrastive accents should be rated more prominent than non-contrastive ones. The results showed effects of both accent and pragmatics (L+H* > H*; contrastive > non-contrastive) and no interaction. Contrastive L+H*s were rated most prominent, non-contrastive H*s least prominent, while non-contrastive L+H*s and contrastive H*s had average and almost identical ratings. Participants used different strategies: some focused on accent type, others on pragmatics, and still others made neither distinction. These results suggest that a reason for the continuing debate about H* and L+H* may be that the accents form a weak contrast which some speakers acquire and attend to while others do not. Similarly, researchers who focus on contrastive L+H* and non-contrastive H* see distinct categories, while those who focus on non-contrastive L+H*s and contrastive H*s tend to see a continuum.