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Special Issue Introduction

Language *and* Speech

Speech Prosody and Beyond: Exploring Interface Phenomena and Understudied Languages

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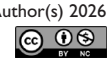
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Abstract

This special issue brings together six papers exploring how speech prosody intersects with other linguistic, cognitive and social domains, with particular attention to methodological diversity and understudied languages. The collection addresses a range of complementary topics: the role of intonation in resolving lexical ambiguity in Korean; the perceived personality traits of synthetic versus natural voices; prosodic modifications children make in demanding communicative contexts; perceptual cues to lexical pitch accent discrimination in South Kyungsang Korean; rhythmic differences between Hadari and Bedouin Arabic dialects; and durational marking of lexical stress beyond the stressed syllable in Soikkola Ingrian and Ayutla Tlapanec. Collectively, these studies make valuable contributions to the empirical and theoretical foundations of prosody research. By combining diverse methods with a broad linguistic scope, the collection provides a basis for future research on how prosody interacts with other dimensions of language and communication.

Keywords

prosody, cross-linguistic, prosody and beyond

1. Introduction

This collection brings together six studies investigating the complex interplay between prosodic phenomena and other aspects of communication, language or cognition across diverse languages. These studies advance our understanding of how prosody functions not merely as a

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'suprasegmental' layer of language and speech, but as an integral component of linguistic systems that interacts dynamically with lexical, syntactic, paralinguistic and developmental dimensions of language use.

The papers were selected following presentations and discussions at the 'Speech Prosody and Beyond (SPaB)' workshop held in Seoul, South Korea, on June 20 to 22, 2023, organised by the UK-South Korea Prosody Research Network. The Network's aims included enabling prosody researchers to share skills and knowledge, broaden their research horizons and diversify the languages and populations represented in prosody research.

The significance of this collection lies in its demonstration of prosody's multifaceted role across typologically distinct languages, many of which remain understudied. By examining a range of languages and language groups – including English, Korean, Arabic dialects, Finnic and Otomanguean languages – these studies reveal both language-specific patterns and commonalities between unrelated languages. The collection's interdisciplinary approach bridges traditional boundaries between phonetics, phonology, psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics, offering insights that extend beyond description to broader questions about how prosody contributes to communication and language use.

While broadly phonetic in orientation, the studies used a range of speech elicitation and perception methods. For instance, Yi et al. (2026) developed an age-appropriate 'spot the difference' task to study speech production in preschoolers aged 3 to 5 years. The child participants were given two pictures that differed in a single item, whose name served as the target word. An adult conversational partner then guided each child to identify the difference. Jones et al. (2026) carried out gating experiments using auditory stimuli with manipulated fundamental frequency (F_0) to investigate the role of F_0 ambiguity resolution in Korean. Ghadanfari et al. (2026) adapted a speech cycling paradigm (Cummins & Port, 1998; Tajima, 1998) to analyse potential timing differences between Hadari and Bedouin dialects of Kuwaiti Arabic. Kim et al. (2026) used smartphone recordings of read sentences, along with synthetic equivalents, as stimuli in an online emotion rating task. Traditional field-based elicitation techniques were also used to investigate understudied languages, such as Soikkola Ingrian and Ayutla Tlapanec (Kuznetsova et al., 2026); here, the methodological innovation lay in combining a comparative approach with rigorous statistical analysis.

Taken together, these studies combine methodological diversity with a broad linguistic scope to advance prosody research. Below, we summarise how they contribute to broadening the linguistic scope of prosody research (Section 2) and deepening theoretical understanding (Section 3).

2. Expanding the Empirical Foundation Through Language Diversity

Researching understudied languages is essential for revealing linguistic possibilities that existing theories may overlook. The languages and varieties investigated in this issue include Kuwaiti Arabic dialects (Ghadanfari et al., 2026), English (Yi et al., 2026), Korean (Jones et al., 2026; Kim et al., 2026), including the South Kyungsang variety (Joo & D'Imperio, 2026), and Soikkola Ingrian and Ayutla Tlapanec (Kuznetsova et al., 2026). The investigation of understudied varieties provides essential data for testing the cross-linguistic validity of prosodic theories developed primarily on the basis of well-studied European languages. These contributions help address the empirical imbalances that have historically characterised phonological theory and, in some cases, document important linguistic phenomena in communities where language vitality may be under threat.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that prosody is a domain in which multiple dimensions of linguistic organisation converge and interact. The papers reveal how prosodic phenomena can serve phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic and sociolinguistic functions.

This multifunctionality makes prosody a valuable window into the integrated nature of linguistic competence and the ways in which different components of the grammar interact during real-time language use.

For instance, Ghadanfari et al. (2026) examine rhythmic variation between the understudied Hadari (urban) and Bedouin (nomadic) varieties of Kuwaiti Arabic. In a metronome-timed speech cycling task (Cummins & Port, 1998; Tajima, 1998), participants repeated six-syllable phrases with either trochaic (strong-weak . . .) or iambic (weak-strong . . .) stress patterns. The phrases were aligned to a metronome beat, with the time interval between beats varying across blocks. Hadari speakers tended to be more consistent in the timing of phrase-final stressed syllables within the phrase repetition cycle regardless of whether these syllables were heavy or light. The authors identify the greater scope for unstressed vowel reduction in Hadari as a key factor in these subtle but robust dialectal differences. Thus, relatively small, gradient variations in stress-related durational contrasts have implications for performance in temporally constrained tasks. The findings contribute to our understanding of how dialect-specific linguistic structure shapes temporal organisation and provides insight into rhythmic variation between the two varieties of Kuwaiti Arabic.

Kuznetsova et al. (2026) also take a comparative approach to studying the durational marking of stress in two understudied varieties: Soikkola Ingrian and Ayutla Tlapanec. Finnic varieties are or were spoken in Finland, Estonia, the Russian Federation and Latvia, and most of them are endangered or moribund. The Soikkola dialect of Ingrian, examined in this study, is spoken near the Russian-Estonian border and it is nearly extinct. Tlapanec is an endangered Mexican language; Ayutla Tlapanec (Otomanguean), the variety examined here, is understudied and spoken in the state of Guerrero. Kuznetsova et al. use recordings of read speech to examine in detail how lexical stress is durationally marked outside the stressed syllable. Soikkola Ingrian and Ayutla Tlapanec have different stress patterns: primary stress tends to be on the word-initial syllable in Soikkola Ingrian, whereas Ayutla Tlapanec is considered to have word-final stress. Despite this difference, both varieties show stress-induced lengthening outside the stressed syllable rhyme.

The focus on South Kyungsang Korean (SKK) in Joo and D'Imperio (2026) broadens the empirical basis of lexical pitch accent research, which has historically been dominated by a limited set of dialects and languages. By examining SKK listeners' perception of high (H) and rising (LH) lexical pitch accents and manipulating key contour features, the study provides valuable data from a relatively underrepresented Korean dialect. These data support cross-dialectal and cross-linguistic comparison by testing whether perceptual sensitivities to contour shape observed in other languages also hold for SKK. Such comparisons help establish which perceptual cues to lexical pitch accents are shared across varieties and which are specific to particular dialects or languages.

3. Advancing Theoretical Frameworks

Several papers in this collection address important questions about the cognitive architecture underlying prosodic processing and provide evidence for refining our current understanding. First, Jones et al. (2026) highlight the need for formal grammatical accounts to incorporate the interaction between prosody and lexical semantics. The findings challenge the prevailing view that prosody is the primary cue for disambiguating sentences with a content pro-form (CPF) like 'nwukwu' (who/someone) in Korean. Previous research has emphasised the role of prosody in disambiguating a sentence such as 'halmeni-kkeyse nwukwu-lul manna-syess-eyo' (grandmother-SBJ.HON. who/someone-OBJ meet-HON.PST-POL), which can be interpreted as a statement ('grandmother met someone'), an open question ('who did grandmother meet?') or a polar question ('did grandmother meet someone?') (Yun, 2019; Yun & Lee, 2022). For instance, Jun and Oh (1996) showed that accentual phrasing is a key cue to disambiguation: the open question interpretation was

preferred when the CPF and the following verb formed a single Accentual Phrase (AP), whereas the polar question interpretation was preferred when there was an AP boundary between them. The CPF also tends to be acoustically more prominent (with higher F_0 and amplitude) or narrowly focused in open questions than in polar questions (Jones, 2016; Song et al., 2022).

Jones et al. manipulated the F_0 range over the CPF or the following verbal phrase and used a gating paradigm (Grosjean, 1980). In this paradigm, an ambiguous spoken utterance was presented in progressively longer segments ('gates'). At each successive gate, the listener attempted to interpret the ambiguous utterance. This approach allowed the researchers to examine the time course of ambiguity resolution and determine how much prosodic information listeners needed to resolve ambiguity. They expected that an expanded F_0 range over the CPF would favour an open question interpretation; an expanded F_0 range over the verb would favour a polar question interpretation; and the utterance-final boundary tone HL% would favour a statement interpretation. They also predicted that varying the F_0 range incrementally across five steps would produce corresponding gradient variation in listeners' responses (i.e., the larger the F_0 range, the higher the rate of identification of the intended interpretation).

However, these predictions were only partially supported. Korean-speaking listeners successfully identified statements at the end of the utterance. Listeners also identified open questions, but only after hearing the verbal constituent. Polar questions were never reliably disambiguated on the basis of their natural prosody, and listeners showed a strong bias towards the open question interpretation. The stepwise changes in F_0 range did not produce corresponding gradient changes in listeners' responses, suggesting that factors other than prosodic variation also influenced listeners' interpretations. The results therefore indicate a need to revise the model proposed by Jones (2016), which used the location of the F_0 range expansion (over the CPF vs. the following verb) to predict listeners' interpretations within the framework of lexical functional grammar.

Jones et al. thus show that the relationship between prosody and interpretation is more complex than previously described. Their results suggest that prosodic cues may be overridden by listeners' interpretive biases and that the interface between lexical semantics and prosody requires further investigation. The authors further suggest that the gating paradigm may reveal individual differences in the timing of interpretive decisions: some listeners commit to an interpretation early in sentence processing, whereas others wait until more information becomes available (Hansen et al., 2023).

Turning from adult perception to children's speech production, Yi et al. (2026) offer a developmental perspective on the emergence and maturation of preschoolers' prosodic control in response to communicative challenges, as well as on the relationship between speech-motor and socio-cognitive development. Adults' speech adaptation has been widely studied within the framework of Hyper- and Hypo-articulation (H&H) theory (Lindblom, 1990). Within this framework, adult speakers adjust their articulatory effort along a continuum between hyper-articulation (e.g., effortful and exaggerated articulation in clear speech or Lombard speech produced in noise; Lombard, 1911) and hypo-articulation (e.g., less effortful and relaxed articulation in conversational speech). These adjustments depend on the communicative context, including listeners' needs and the risk of reduced intelligibility.

Yi et al. examined speech production in children aged 3 to 5 years under one hypo-speech condition (conversational speech) and two hyper-speech conditions: noise-adapted speech, produced in background noise, and clear speech, produced for an interlocutor who pretended to have difficulty hearing. Their analysis showed that young children could modify their speaking styles in response to these communicative challenges, but the developmental trajectory differed between the two hyper-speech conditions.

In the noise-adapted condition, the communicative challenge was environmental; speakers increased their vocal effort, potentially involuntarily, in response to interference with auditory feedback. Children in all age groups modified acoustic features in noise-adapted speech relative to

conversational speech. Their noise-adapted speech showed increased mean F_0, F_0 range, and mean energy in the 1 to 3 kHz frequency range (a mid-frequency region in which speakers increase energy when producing clear speech; Krause & Braida, 2004), along with slower speaking rates.

In the clear speech condition, by contrast, the communication challenges concerned the interlocutor's hearing needs. Voluntary adaptation to these needs required socio-cognitive awareness on the part of the children. In this condition, children's age influenced their adaptations. Only the older children, aged 5 years, appeared to increase their vocal effort (as indicated by mean energy in the 1–3 kHz frequency range), whereas there were no statistically significant differences in F_0 parameters between the conversational speech and clear speech conditions. Furthermore, only the older children paused significantly more frequently in clear speech than in conversational speech, potentially facilitating listeners' speech processing.

The intelligibility of these speaking styles was assessed in a subsequent perception experiment in which adult listeners identified keywords from children's speech presented in noise. Older children's speech was more intelligible than younger children's across speech types, but the intelligibility benefits of the two hyper-speech conditions differed by age. For younger children, noise-adapted speech was more intelligible than conversational speech, whereas clear speech was not. By contrast, older children's noise-adapted speech and clear speech was significantly more intelligible than their conversational speech. These findings show that children progressively develop their ability to modify speech in response to communicative challenges. They suggest that children initiate and refine adaptations to accommodate their listeners as their cognitive and social skills develop. The study calls for further investigation of developmental changes in speech-motor control and socio-cognitive abilities, particularly the relationship between children's speech development and theory of mind (Miller, 2006).

Questions about the perceptual representation of prosody are addressed by Joo and D'Imperio (2026), who test whether listeners' categorisation of lexical pitch accents in SKK is guided by discrete tonal targets posited by the Autosegmental-Metrical (AM) model (e.g., Beckman & Pierrehumbert, 1986; Ladd, 2008; Pierrehumbert, 1980), or by recognition of the tonal configuration as a whole. This study thus addresses a long-standing debate about whether lexical pitch accents are perceived primarily through specific tonal landmarks or through the overall shape of the pitch contour.

By demonstrating that perceptual judgments are shaped by multiple interacting dimensions – H peak alignment, rise shape and segmental duration – the study reinforces the view that a multidimensional representation of pitch accents may better reflect human perception than a purely target-based account. These findings align with broader calls in the literature for richer, multidimensional accounts of tonal perception that integrate temporal dynamics with static target information (e.g., Albert et al., 2025; Iskarous et al., 2024) and support the extension of AM-based accounts to incorporate contour-level information (see Arvaniti et al., 2026).

Complementing these studies of processing and representation, the cross-dialectal and cross-linguistic comparisons presented by Ghadanfari et al. (2026) and Kuznetsova et al. (2026) help identify the parameters along which languages and varieties can vary in their temporal organisation. Ghadanfari et al. innovatively apply the speech cycling paradigm (Cummins & Port, 1998; Tajima, 1998) to the study of dialectal differences between two varieties of Kuwaiti Arabic. This application demonstrates how laboratory phonetic techniques can illuminate subtle but systematic differences between closely related varieties, providing new tools for understanding the prosodic basis of dialectal distinctiveness. The observed dialectal differences support the usefulness of the notion of a 'prominence gradient' (Nolan & Asu, 2009; Nolan & Jeon, 2014; Smith & Rathcke, 2020) in cross-dialectal and cross-linguistic research. Ghadanfari et al. also point to potential implications for turn-taking coordination in dialogue between speakers of the same or different dialects.

Kuznetsova et al. raise fundamental questions about the nature of prominence in prosodic typology (Grice & Kügler, 2021; Ladd & Arvaniti, 2023), by examining durational effects in Soikkola Ingrian and Ayutla Tlapanec. First, they use phonological evidence to argue that the observed durational effects mark stress beyond the stressed syllable itself. This is a necessary step, given the long-recognised difficulties in determining the location and phonetic correlates of stress in understudied languages. Second, they show that segments preceding the (word-final) stressed vowel in Ayutla Tlapanec and following the (word-initial) stressed vowel in Soikkola Ingrian are lengthened due to stress, contrasting with patterns reported for well-studied West Germanic or Romance languages and varieties. Relating these findings to earlier evidence from languages and varieties such as Russian, Syrian Arabic, Welsh and Welsh-accented English, they argue for a domain of stress-induced lengthening spanning up to three syllables.

Kuznetsova et al.'s findings show that the phonetic realisation of word stress can be distributed across multiple segments and support a broader conception of the domain over which lexical stress is realised. This challenges accounts that restrict stress-induced lengthening to the stressed nucleus or rhyme. The findings suggest that prosodic typologies should document not only which syllables bear stress but also which surrounding segments express its effects, whether these effects extend leftwards or rightwards, and over what locus. The production findings further motivate perception studies to test whether listeners use these distributed durational cues to identify word stress.

Finally, Kim et al. (2026) extend the discussion to social perception by examining how prosodic features contribute to personality impressions in natural and synthetic speech. They conducted acoustic analyses of spoken utterances in Korean and synthetic versions created to match the original utterances (voice clones). Their analysis included annotation of Intonational Phrase (IP) boundary tones. In a subsequent perception experiment, personality impressions in speech were rated along the five dimensions of the big-five personality model: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and openness (Goldberg, 1992). Principal component analysis reduced these ratings to two dimensions: P1, encompassing agreeableness, conscientiousness and emotional stability; and P2, encompassing extraversion and openness. The results identified F_0 range and voice quality as important predictors of perceived personality; for instance, wide F_0 ranges and less-modal voice quality (i.e., breathiness and creakiness) were generally associated with higher ratings on both dimensions, although the effects varied with speaker gender and speech type. For male synthetic voices, a wider F_0 range and a slower articulation rate were associated with higher P1 and P2 ratings, whereas these relationships were not observed for their natural counterparts.

This work also builds on previous phonological analyses of Korean IP boundary tones and studies on their pragmatic and affective meanings (e.g., Jun, 2000; Lee, 1990; Park, 2012). It shows that the boundary tones associated with positive affective stances can contribute to favourable personality impressions, but only when used in appropriate contexts. For example, LHL%, associated with solidarity in informal conversation, improved personality ratings in natural speech but received lower ratings when combined with honorific verbs. Such findings suggest that personality impressions depend not simply on acoustic variation, but also on how listeners interpret intonational choices in relation to linguistic and communicative context. The findings demonstrate the profound social and psychological dimensions of prosodic variation, showing how acoustic features can convey information that listeners use to infer speaker identity and social characteristics. This work connects experimental phonetics with potential applications in voice technology and human–computer interaction.

4. Conclusion

This 'Prosody and Beyond' special issue presents studies that make valuable contributions to our understanding of a range of important prosodic phenomena. The implications of these studies extend well beyond theoretical linguistics into areas such as speech development, social perception and voice technology, offering a foundation for further research across disciplines.

The study on perceptual cues to lexical pitch contrast provides a foundation for developing and testing multidimensional accounts of tonal perception. The cross-dialectal rhythmic differences examined here may inform future research on turn coordination in within- or cross-dialectal interaction. The findings on durational marking of lexical stress outside the stressed syllable rhyme highlight the need to reconsider the domain and direction of phonetic effects induced by prominence in accounts of prosodic typology. The study on the interaction between prosody and lexical semantics in ambiguity resolution raises the possibility for individual differences in the time course of interpretation, opening an avenue for further investigation. The study on the maturation of children's prosodic control in response to communicative challenges provides a basis for further research on the relationship between speech development and theory of mind. The study on how prosodic features contribute to inferring a speaker's social characteristics in synthetic speech connects phonetics with applications in voice technology and offers insight that may inform human–computer interface design.

Taken together, these studies combine methodological diversity with a broad linguistic scope to demonstrate the multifaceted roles of speech prosody and advance our understanding of its interaction with perception, development and social communication. By addressing complementary questions and identifying new avenues of inquiry, this special issue provides a stepping stone towards advancing our understanding of speech prosody across linguistic and communicative contexts.

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