

1An integrated tool for (macro)syntax-intonation correlation analysis

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Abstract

Many efforts are presently made to elaborate large corpora of spontaneous speech (PFC, CFPP2000, C-PROM, ESLO, PFC, Rhapsodie, ORFEO to quote a few), in order to offer the research community large databases that could be used in many aspects of linguistic research. I introduce here new functions of the WinPitch software addressing two aspects of oral corpus analysis:

1) Data mining functions involving specific speech unit (such as conjunctions, weak verbs, etc.) to retrieve rapidly and efficiently their occurrences and their context, displaying automatically the corresponding speech segments together with their acoustical analysis (F0 curve, spectrogram, etc.)

2) Tools enabling the correction of pitch curves resulting from adverse recording conditions, in order to obtain reliable F0 data for further processing (statistical analysis, automatic annotation of sentence intonation, etc.).

Index Terms: spontaneous speech, fundamental frequency, intonation transcription, concordancer.

1. Introduction

A lot of interest is presently devoted to the linguistic analysis of non-prepared speech, and in particular to the prosodic correlates of syntactic and macrosyntactic units. In this type of research, it is assumed that prosodic events help the listener to dynamically reconstruct the prosodic structure intended by the speaker, and eventually allow to infer the syntactic organization of the sentence with which the prosodic structure may be congruent or not.

To investigate this process, it seems at first that patient and meticulous examination of data would be required. Say for example that we want to know about the prosodic correlates of the occurrences of the conjunction “*parce que*” (because) in a set of spontaneous recordings of French.

Instead of listening to hours of recordings to retrieve pronounced occurrences of the key word, we would attempt to retrieve “*parce que*” in all the available text transcriptions of the recordings, and find in a second stage the corresponding speech segments in order to analyze their prosodic properties. This task would be further facilitated if the transcription is aligned, i.e. if bidirectional pointers between text segments and corresponding speech segments have been implemented. This would enable the easy retrieval of every occurrence of the appropriate speech segment from a text selection.

Still, most of the tools available today stop at this stage, even if concordancer of transcribed text items are readily available, listing all occurrences of the search item with together with its left and right contexts.

The new function implemented in WinPitch goes a little bit further by providing the following functions to allow the

user to efficiently and rapidly examine a large number of data with a minimum of manipulations:

1. Generation of a text transcription from alignment files in various largely used formats (Praat textgrid, Transcriber trs, C-Oral Rom xml, Necte xml, CRF alg, etc.);

2. Concordancer: generation of a list of occurrences of the search word, with its left and right contexts. This list is automatically created in Excel format;

3. Automatic retrieval of the search word occurrence in a context selected by the user on the Excel table generated in step 2, with a single mouse click.

4. Extraction of the corresponding speech segment from the proper sound file, played back with all relevant acoustical data displayed (spectrogram, fundamental frequency F0, intensity and duration curves).

2. Integrated concordancer

Figures 1 to 4 illustrate the details of the operations involved. In Fig. 1 The user enters the key word “*parce que*”, selects an appropriate alignment format (Transcriber trs in this example), and clicks on any of the file names stored in a common directory. This directory should contain all the alignment files of interest, together with their corresponding sound files. In the case of Praat textgrid files, the corresponding sound files must have the same name as their textgrid counterpart, as Praat textgrid files do not contain any reference to their corresponding speech file.

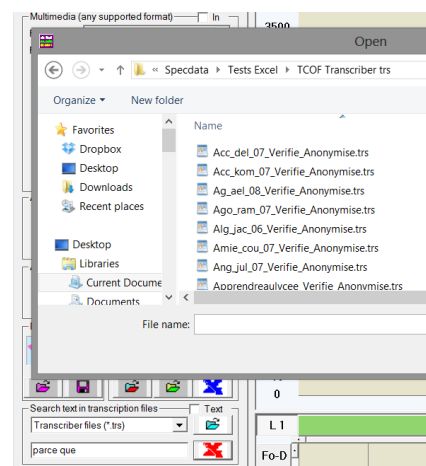


Figure 1. Entering the key word “*parce que*” and selecting a Transcriber files in a directory containing all files of interest.

An Excel table listing all found occurrences of the key word is immediately generated (Fig. 2). This operation is very fast, in the example of *parce que*, the completion takes less than one second to scan 104 files giving 1194 occurrences.

Figure 2. Fine Table generated automatically listing the occurrences of the entered keyword (“parce que”). The whole process takes less than 1 second for a list of 104 files and 1194 occurrences found.

3. Instant data access

When the user clicks on any line of the excel table, a specific occurrence of the keyword is selected together with its left and right contexts, with span values of about 256 characters (rounded to the next word limit). The corresponding text and speech segments are then automatically retrieved and displayed, as shown in Fig 3 and Fig. 4.

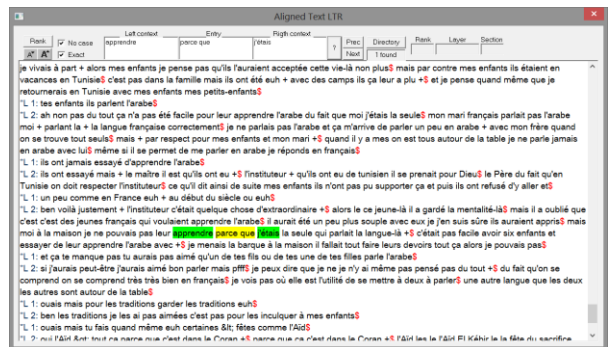


Figure 3. Automatic generation of text from alignment files and selection of the entered key word (“parce que”), highlighted with its immediate context.

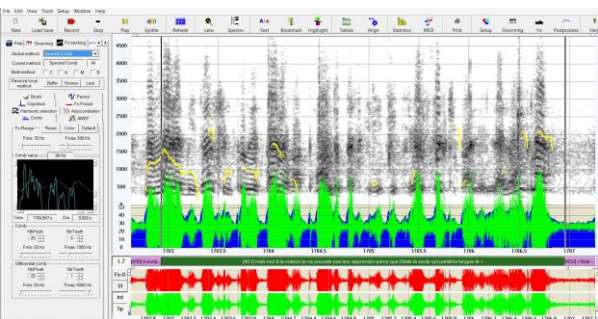


Figure 4. Resulting display of the spectrogram, intensity and pitch curves corresponding to the segment automaticity retrieved from the Excel table.

Integrating this function in one single software package makes possible specific research topics on prosody that would have been seen as too time consuming previously.

4. F0 foes

Whereas the integrated concordancer described above can be a valuable time saver, the actual acoustic analysis of prosodic events can prove disappointing when researchers are confronted to obviously erroneous fundamental frequency curves, while this parameter is one of the most important in prosodic analysis.

Indeed spontaneous speech recordings are often performed in noisy conditions, in places where echo and other not so obvious sources of problems are present (an example is given in Fig. 4). More specifically, the measurement of fundamental frequency is particularly sensitive to recorded speech signal distortions due to:

- 1) Poor signal to noise ratio;
- 2) Filtering of low frequencies eliminating low harmonics for male voices;
- 3) Harmonic blur due to room echo in the recording places;
- 4) Encoding in formats such as mp3 or wma with excessive compression levels;
- 5) Presence of external sound sources (car engine, overlapping speech segments, etc.);
- 6) Presence of creaky segments where the fundamental frequency is not really defined.

The speech analysis software Praat [7] for instance, de facto standard in this domain, revealed itself unsatisfactory for F0 tracking for a large number of recordings of the Rhapsodie project [10]. This leads first to evaluate the most frequent causes of F0 errors, then to elaborate various solutions in order to obtain reliable pitch curves. Among causes identified as sources of reliable speech pitch curves, we have:

1. Use of microphones with a poor response in low frequencies, resulting in the absence of the first harmonics in the spectrum (especially for male voices);
2. The presence of an important echo in the signal linked to the recording room dimensions, producing harmonic blurs. An unvoiced consonant can for example appear voiced due to the falsely observed continuity on the first harmonic;
3. A recording level too low, often due to an excessive distance between the microphone and the speaker, resulting in a low signal to noise ratio;
4. Use of AVC (automatic volume control) in the recording process, which distorts the speech intensity curve and indirectly producing errors the evaluation of vowel spectra;
5. Presence of multiple sound sources, in particular generated by low frequency engines (presence of a fridge in the recording room, etc.), or speech overlapping;
6. Excessive compression of the speech signal (e.g. wma or mp3 with a high compression parameter), giving when converted into waveform shifted spectral peak frequency

values undesirable for spectrum based algorithms (Cepstrum, Spectral Comb,...);

To address these potential problems en to ensure the generation of reliable F0 data, WinPitch has a catalog of methods applicable independently on user-selected speech segments:

Frequency domain methods

1. Spectral comb [4], obtained by correlation of the signal spectrum with a spectral comb with variable teeth intervals. Harmonics frequency range retained in the computation are user selectable;

2. Spectral brush [5], obtained by aligning signal harmonics on a selectable time window followed by a spectral comb analysis;

3. Cepstrum [9], evaluation of the periodicity of the log spectrum;

4. Swipep, developed by IRCAM, derived from the Swipe algorithm [2] based on harmonic detection followed by a Viterbi smoothing process;

5. Harmonic selection followed by spectral comb, with the retained harmonics selected by the user from a visual inspection on a simultaneously displayed narrow band spectrogram;

Time domain methods

6. Autocorrelation, operating directly on the speech waveform, available in three flavors, standard, normed Praat [1] and Yin [3], with adjustable window duration;

7. AMDF: average magnitude difference function, with the window length and the clipping percentage user adjustable;

8. Period analysis: F0 values are obtained from period's measurements from pitch markers placed automatically in a first pass and later manually corrected by the user;

These various methods give globally comparable results on good quality recordings. However, for lower quality recordings, the main problems can occur.

By nature, spectral based methods (such as the Spectral Comb) evaluate the signal fundamental frequency from the harmonic structure (i.e. the harmonic spectral lines of voiced segments), obtained from a Fourier transform. This requires an analysis signal time window relatively long (in the order of 32 ms or 64 ms for male voices with F0 equals to 100 Hz), which in turn prevents a correct tracking for fast rising or falling F0 values. The autocorrelation-based methods such as Yin may also exhibit this limitation even if they are based on the time domain (The reason stems from the time window usually selected for the autocorrelation). Other problems may arise when the fundamental frequency is very weak or absent (due to some filtering in the recording process for example);

The presence of pseudo-harmonics due to the presence of echo in the recording room can adversely affect frequency-

based methods. The evaluation of the signal fundamental frequency of the Comb method for example is based on the detection of at least two consecutive harmonics. Echo produced by some harmonics, depending on the room dimensions, can generate trails of some harmonics long enough to make an unvoiced segment appear voiced (see Fig. 2) and confuse the algorithm detecting these components. It is quite difficult to differentiate automatically this spectral configuration from examples where a low frequency filtering would provoke spectral patterns similar to the ones generated by echo.

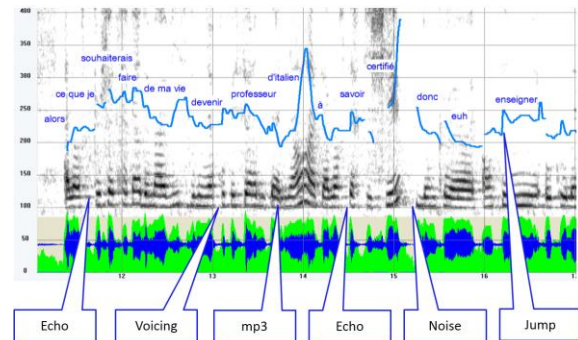


Figure 5. Most common sources of errors for F0 tracking (Rhap-D0003, PFC)

5. Cleaning F0 curves

To apply one of these methods, the user first selects a F0 tracking method in the command window (Fig. 6). Then a time window is selected on screen with the mouse guided by visual inspection of an underlying narrow band spectrogram. By releasing the mouse left button, the corresponding segment of the signal is automatically reanalyzed with the selected method, replacing F0 data with the new obtained values.

The new F0 curve segment is displayed in a color specific to the tracking method chosen, so that the user can identify visually on the overall F0 curve the tracking method pertaining to a specific time segment. Furthermore, by moving the cursor on screen, the corresponding command box corresponding to the F0 tracking method used for the wave segment defined by the cursor is displayed dynamically in the command box, together with all parameters values used for the chosen tracking method (Fig. 6).

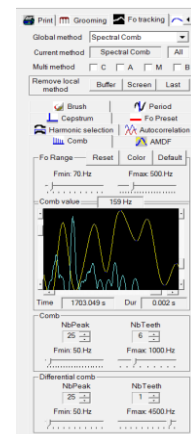


Figure 6. Set of command boxes, for user selection of an alternate pitch-tracking algorithm applied locally on a speech segment.

A file containing all the information about corrections made can be saved in text format, as well as a .pitch file describing the corrected pitch curve to be exported to Praat.

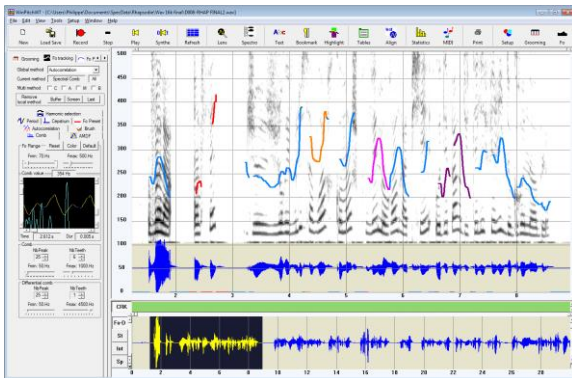


Figure 7. F0 curve sections are displayed in different colors according to the F0 tracking method used. The corresponding command box selected automatically on the left side (Rhap-D1001)

The two functions described above address the main concerns of researchers in the field of prosodic events analysis in their relationship with other structures of the sentence, syntactic and informational. The concordancer allows investigating a large number of occurrences of selected syntactic categories items, whereas the fundamental frequency “cleaning” gives reliable data in most cases retrieved by the concordancer, even in adverse recording conditions.

6. WinPitch as shareware

The software program is presently a shareware, whose installation code is free for the asking. WinPitch is downloadable from www.winpitch.com.

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