

When prosody 'compensates' for syntax: Modality-specific marking of contrastive subjects in French

JORINA BRYSPAERT

Fund for Scientific Research (F.R.S.-FNRS) & UCLouvain

Contrastive subjects



La Porta Nigra incarne la Trèves romaine.

'**The Porta Nigra** embodies Roman Trier.'

La cathédrale représente la Trèves chrétienne.

'**The cathedral** represents Christian Trier.'

A subject is contrastive when a set of **alternatives** is explicitly given or implicitly recoverable in the discourse context

~ **contrastive topics** (Büring 2003, 2016; Lee 2008, 2017; Wagner 2012)

Contrastive subjects – explicit (lexical) marking



La Porta Nigra incarne la Trèves romaine.
'The **Porta Nigra** embodies Roman Trier.'

La cathédrale **par contre** représente la Trèves chrétienne.
'The **cathedral** **by contrast** represents Christian Trier.'

CONTRASTIVE ADVERB

Different syntactic positions

~ information structure (Altenberg 2006; Dupont 2015, 2021; Lenker 2010)

[par contre]** la cathédrale **[par contre]** représente **[par contre]** la Trèves chrétienne **[par contre]

[by contrast] the cathedral **[by contrast]** represents **[by contrast]** Christian Trier **[by contrast]**

Different syntactic positions

~ information structure (Altenberg 2006; Dupont 2015, 2021; Lenker 2010)

[par contre] *la cathédrale* **[par contre]** *représente* **[par contre]** *la Trèves chrétienne* **[par contre]**

[by contrast] the cathedral **[by contrast]** represents **[by contrast]** Christian Trier **[by contrast]**

**Between subject
and finite verb**

Mark the contrastive
nature of the subject

Different syntactic positions

~ information structure (Altenberg 2006; Dupont 2015, 2021; Lenker 2010)

[par contre] la cathédrale [par contre] représente [par contre] la Trèves chrétienne [par contre]

[by contrast] the cathedral [by contrast] represents [by contrast] Christian Trier [by contrast]

Before subject

Broad contrast;
linking device

Between subject and finite verb

Mark the contrastive
nature of the subject

Different syntactic positions

~ information structure (Altenberg 2006; Dupont 2015, 2021; Lenker 2010)

[par contre] la cathédrale [par contre] représente [par contre] la Trèves chrétienne [par contre]

[by contrast] the cathedral [by contrast] represents [by contrast] Christian Trier [by contrast]

Before subject

Broad contrast;
linking device

Between subject and finite verb

Mark the contrastive
nature of the subject

Inside the VP

Transition between
established and
new info

Written versus spoken

Spoken French: contrastive adverbs appear very often before the subject (84%, 495/591 cases)
(Brysbaert & Lahousse 2025)

- (1) *La Porta Nigra incarne la Trèves romaine.*
***Par contre** la cathédrale représente la Trèves chrétienne.*

→ No systematic **syntactic** marking of the scope: in clause-initial position, the adverb typically expresses a broad contrast, without highlighting e.g. the subject

→ **Prosodic** marking of the scope?

Par contre la cathédrale | représente la Trèves chrétienne.

PROSODIC BOUNDARY STRENGTH

Hypothesis

The prosodic boundary to the right of the subject is stronger when the subject is contrastive (2) than when the subject is not contrastive (3)

- (2) **Knoops** a un accent à couper au couteau mais pour moi ce n'est pas un accent typique de la région de Charleroi
par contre Van Cauwenberghe |^{STRONG} n'a pas d'accent et je ne sais pas dire sa provenance (VALIBEL)

'**Knoops** has a very strong accent but for me it is not a typical accent of the Charleroi region
by contrast Van Cauwenberghe |^{STRONG} has no accent and I cannot tell where he is from'

- (3) c'est vrai que on disait que on avait l'impression quand même que les gens lisaient moins par exemple
par contre le le livre |^{WEAK} est toujours euh est toujours un cadeau (CFPP)

'it is true that people used to say that they nevertheless had the impression that people were reading less for example
by contrast the the book |^{WEAK} is still uh is still a gift'

Methodology

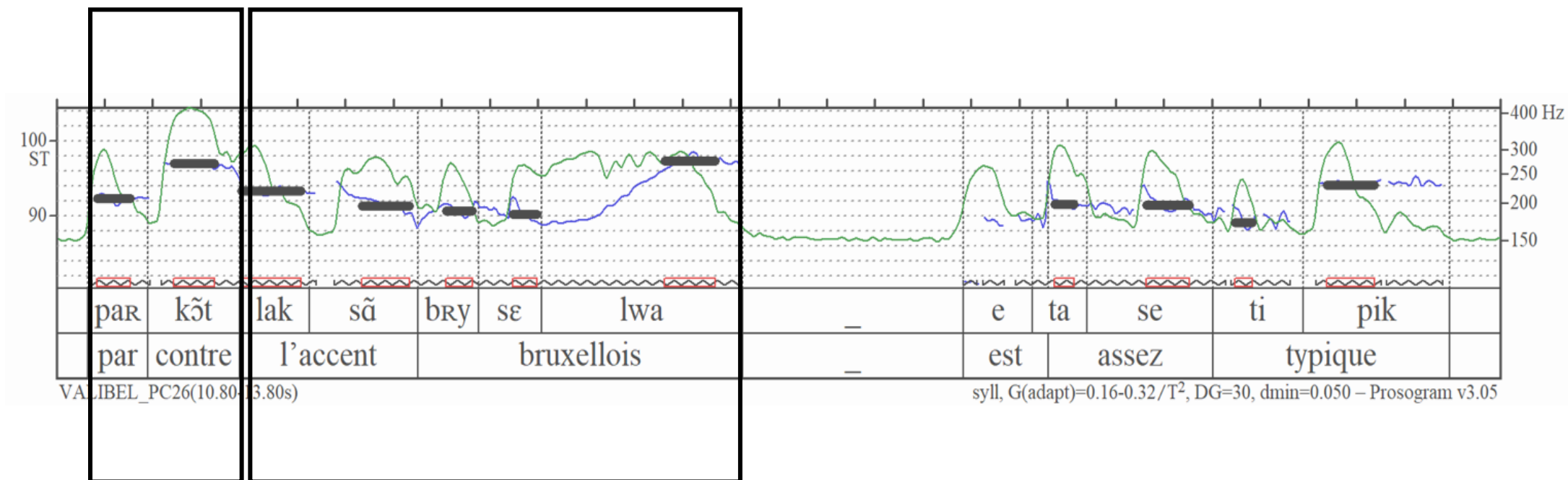
Two complementary approaches:

- Corpus analysis (Brysbaert & Simon 2025)
- Production experiment (Brysbaert & Brunetti, in preparation)

Corpus analysis

- **51 occurrences** of *par contre* in clause-initial position followed by an accentuable preverbal subject
- Extracted from 4 corpora, consisting mainly of (socio-)linguistic interviews: CFPP, CRFP, OFROM, VALIBEL
- Discursive analysis: subject contrastive or non-contrastive
- Acoustic analysis: strength of the prosodic boundary following the subject, measured based on **3 acoustic parameters** (e.g. Brunetti, Avanzi & Gendrot 2012; D'Imperio & Michelas 2014; Simon & Christodoulides 2016)
 1. Presence/absence of a long silent pause after the subject
 2. Maximum pitch on the last accentuable syllable of the adverb ↔ maximum pitch on the last accentuable syllable of the subject
 3. Relative duration of the last accentuable syllable of the adverb ↔ relative duration of the last accentuable syllable of the subject

Corpus analysis – example



Adverb

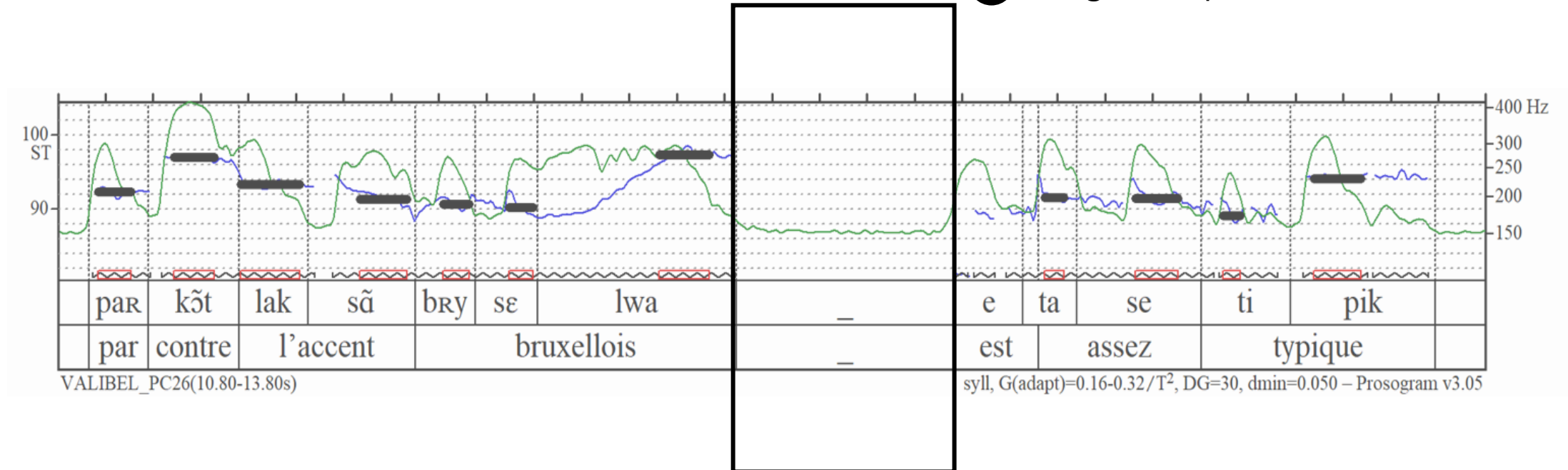
Preverbal accentuable subject

'by contrast the Brussels accent is quite typical'



Corpus analysis – example

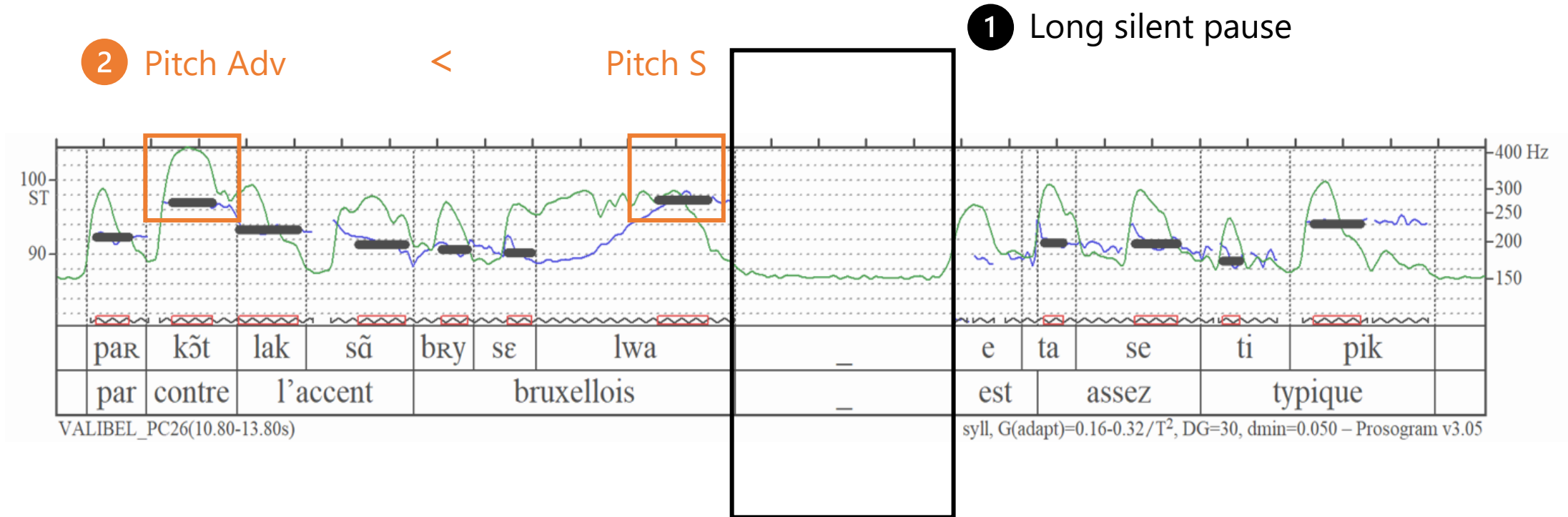
1 Long silent pause



'by contrast the Brussels accent is quite typical'



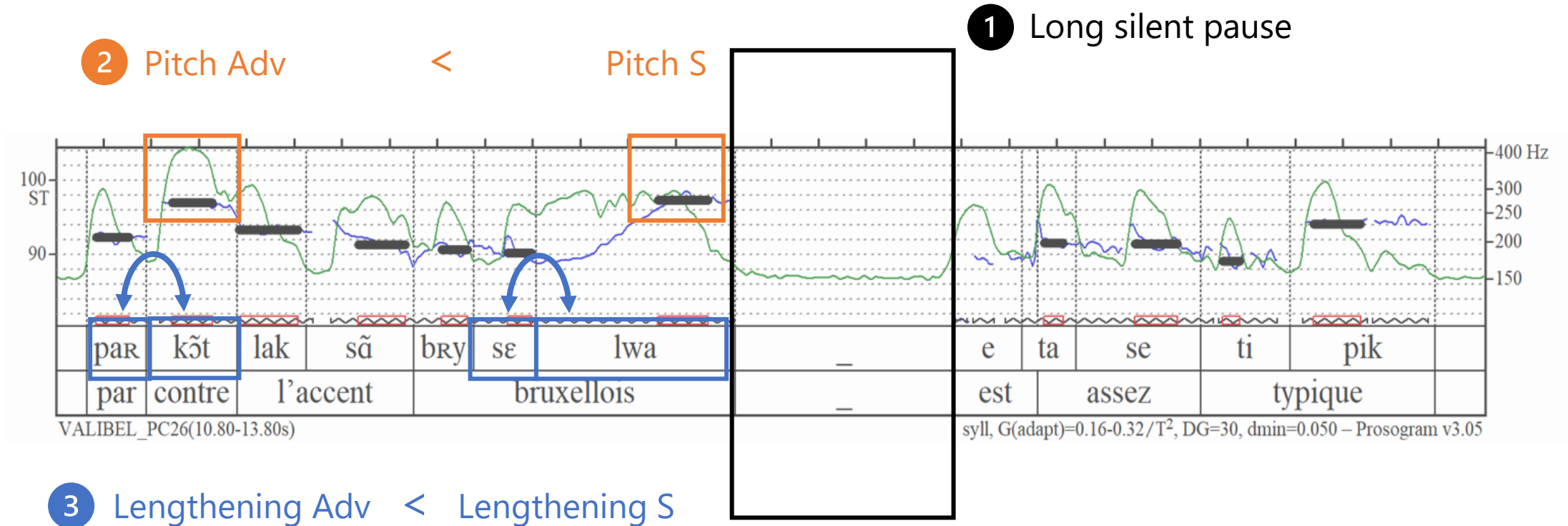
Corpus analysis – example



'by contrast the Brussels accent is quite typical'



Corpus analysis – example



'by contrast the Brussels accent is quite typical'

Corpus analysis – results

Quantitative overview:

Acoustic parameters indicating a strong prosodic boundary	Number of examples
3 parameters	7 (14%)
2 parameters	4 (8%)
1 parameter	21 (41%)
0 parameters	19 (37%)
Total	51 (100 %)

3 acoustic parameters (7/51 examples)

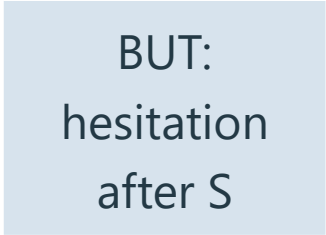
In all these cases, **the subject** is contrastive (i.e. there is an explicit **alternative** in the discourse context)

(4) [CONTEXT: command of Walloon]

***les jeunes** parlaient un peu wallon j'ai pu me rendre compte par la suite qu'ils le parlaient pas bien [...] euh **par contre les personnes âgées** euh vous disent ah mais attention tu dis ça c'est pas comme ça c'est pas le bon terme (VALIBEL)*

*'**young people** spoke a bit of Walloon I later realized that they did not speak it well [...] uh **by contrast elderly people** uh tell you ah but be careful you say that it's not like that that's not quite the right term'*

1. Long silent pause following S: 461 ms
2. Relative duration [ʒe] > relative duration [kõt]: 2,9 > 1
3. Max. pitch [ʒe] > max. pitch [kõt]: difference of 3,2 st



2 acoustic parameters (4/51 examples)

- In all these cases, the subject is contrastive
- Quantitative overview:

2 acoustic parameters	Number of examples
Pause + relative duration	2
Pause + pitch difference	1
Pitch difference + relative duration	1
Total	4

→ For these 4 cases, there may be a valid reason why one of the parameters is not realized

2 acoustic parameters (4/51 examples)

For example: no pitch difference due to length of subject (and complex contrastive relation)?

written vs. spoken French + **France vs. Belgium**

- (5) *mais la presse française ça dépend quelle presse mais euh évidemment Le-Monde euh la le Le-Figaro et cetera cette presse écrite-là euh s'exprime très bien par écrit m moi je parlais surtout du français oral [...] non je ne fais pas tellement de de différence **sur le français oral** en tout cas **par contre sur le français écrit les médias français et les journaux français** ont beaucoup plus de style que **les journaux belges*** (VALIBEL)

'but the French press it depends which press but uh obviously Le Monde uh the the Le Figaro etc. that written press there uh expresses itself very well in writing. M- I was mainly talking about spoken French [...] no I don't really make much of a difference about **spoken French** anyway **by contrast** concerning **written French the French media and French newspapers** have much more style than **the Belgian newspapers**'

1 acoustic parameter (21/51 examples)

- Contrastive subject (9 examples)

(6) ***les Liégeois** trouvent que j'ai un accent euh **les Parisiens** aussi euh **par contre** **les Français du Nord Pas-de-Calais** trouvent que je n'ai pas d'accent* (VALIBEL)

*'**the Liégeois** think that I have an accent uh **the Parisians** as well uh **by contrast** **the French people from Nord Pas-de-Calais** think that I don't have an accent'*

- Non-contrastive subject (12 examples)

(7) *il y a la Fête des voisins [mm] que je pense pas qu'ils l'aient fait cette année euh ici là où j'étais avant ils le faisaient pas **par contre** l'année dernière **les voisins** avaient enfin les voisins l'immeuble avait organisé un une petite fête entre Noël et nouvel an* (CFPP)

*'there's the Neighbors' Day [mm] which I don't think they did this year uh here where I was before they didn't do it **by contrast** last year **the neighbors** had well the neighbors the building had organized a small party between Christmas and New Year'*

1 acoustic parameter (21/51 examples)

Quantitative overview:

1 acoustic parameter	Number of examples
Pause	1
Pitch difference	3
Relative duration	17
Total	21

→ The duration parameter may be realized “by default” to mark the boundary of an accentual phrase (e.g. Simon & Christodoulides 2016)

0 acoustic parameters (19/21 examples)

- Contrastive subject (9 examples)

(8) **les gens de Bodange** allaient à la messe en allemand à Wisenbach [...] **par contre les gens du petit hameau de Tracbois** vont à Fauvillers en français (VALIBEL)

'the people from Bodange went to mass in German in Wisenbach [...] **by contrast the people from the small hamlet of Tracbois** go to Fauvillers in French'

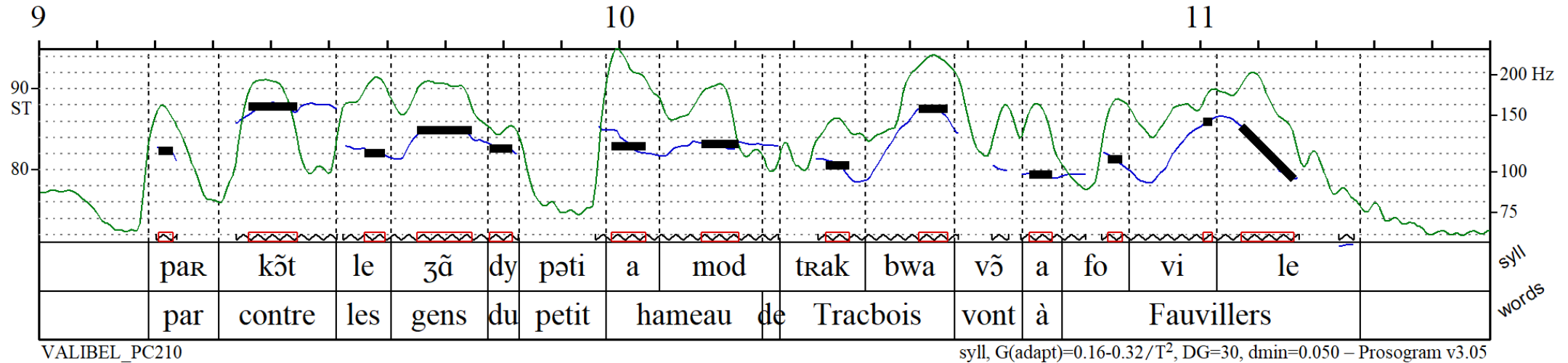
- Non-contrastive subject (10 examples)

(9) *on a vu tiens voilà ça aussi arriver ces codes de portes qu'on aurait jamais pensé j'avais vu ça à New York en soixante-quatre jamais j'aurais pensé qu'à Paris on aurait des codes [...] tiens voilà ça c'est une chose de ville jamais je n'a-* **par contre la ville** est devenue très très belle (CFPP)

'we saw well there that too happen these door codes that one would never have thought of I had seen that in New York in sixty-four never would I have thought that in Paris we would have codes [...] well there that's a city thing I never di- **by contrast the city** has become very very beautiful'



0 acoustic parameters (19/21 examples)



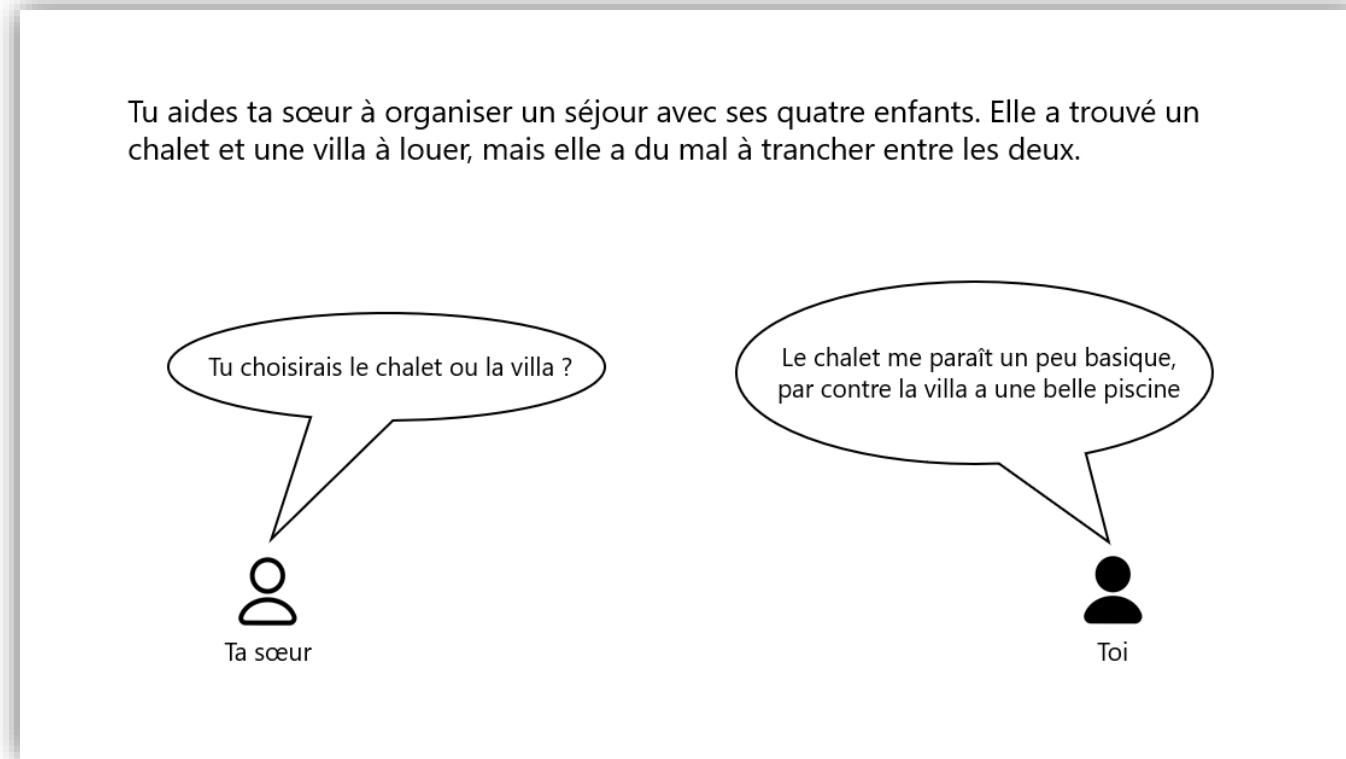
1. No long silent pause following S
2. Relative duration [bwa] < relative duration [kỗt]: $1 < 1,8$
3. Max. pitch [bwa] < max. pitch [kỗt]: difference of 0,4 st

Corpus analysis – conclusion

- Only when the subject is contrastive, speakers insert a strong prosodic boundary after the subject (11 examples with 2 or 3 parameters)
 - Prosodic phrasing in French
 - may serve to delimit the scope of the contrast introduced by a contrastive adverb in clause-initial position
 - may produce discourse effects similar to those obtained through variation in the syntactic position of the adverb in written French
 - However, most cases in our corpus display few or no acoustic parameters indicating a strong prosodic boundary
- Experimental research to test the robustness of these findings

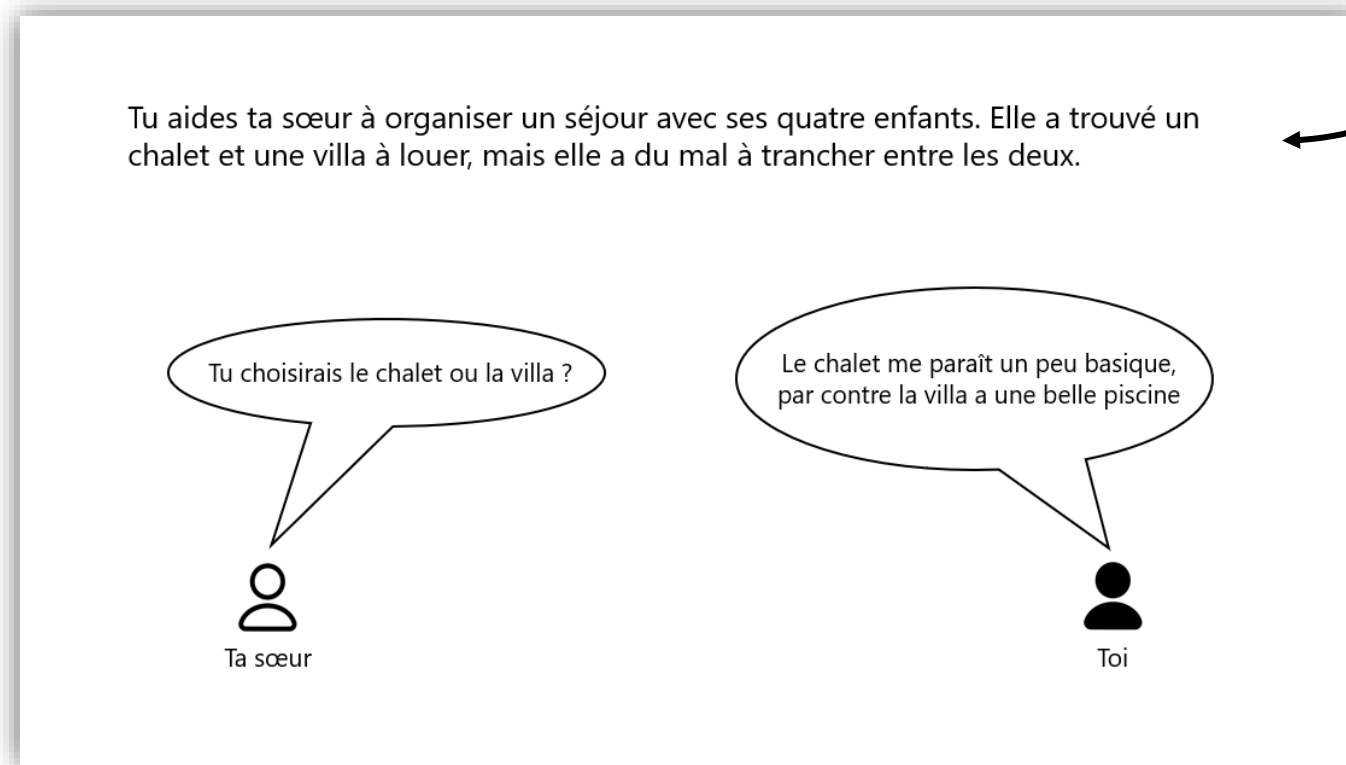
Production experiment – methodology

- **Participants:** 2 groups of native speakers from Belgium and France
- **Procedure:** read-aloud task based on dialogues



Production experiment – methodology

- **Items:** 12 experimental items x 2 conditions
- Same target sentence in two different discourse contexts



Production experiment – methodology

- **Items:** 12 experimental items x 2 conditions
- Same target sentence in two different discourse contexts

Condition A:
contrastive
subject

Tu aides ta sœur à organiser un séjour avec ses quatre enfants. Elle a trouvé un chalet et une villa à louer, mais elle a du mal à trancher entre les deux.

Tu choisirais le chalet ou la villa ?



Ta sœur

Le chalet me paraît un peu basique,
par contre la villa a une belle piscine



Toi

Production experiment – methodology

- **Items:** 12 experimental items x 2 conditions
- Same target sentence in two different discourse contexts

Condition B:
non-contrastive
subject

Tu viens de réserver une villa pour un séjour avec toute la famille. Ta sœur n'est pas convaincue.

Tu penses que la villa plaira aux enfants ?



Ta sœur

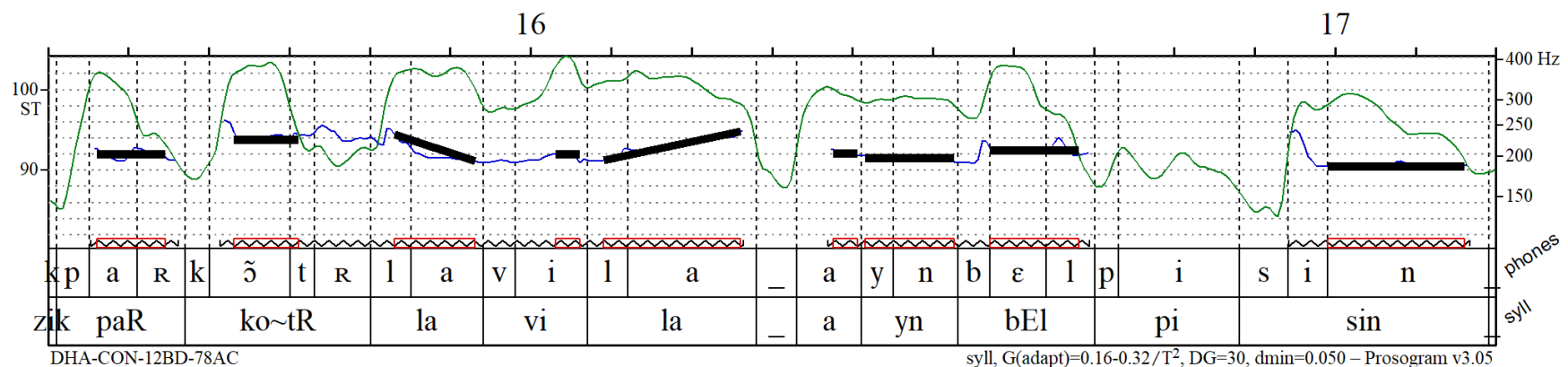
On y sera un peu éloignés de la plage, par contre la villa a une belle piscine



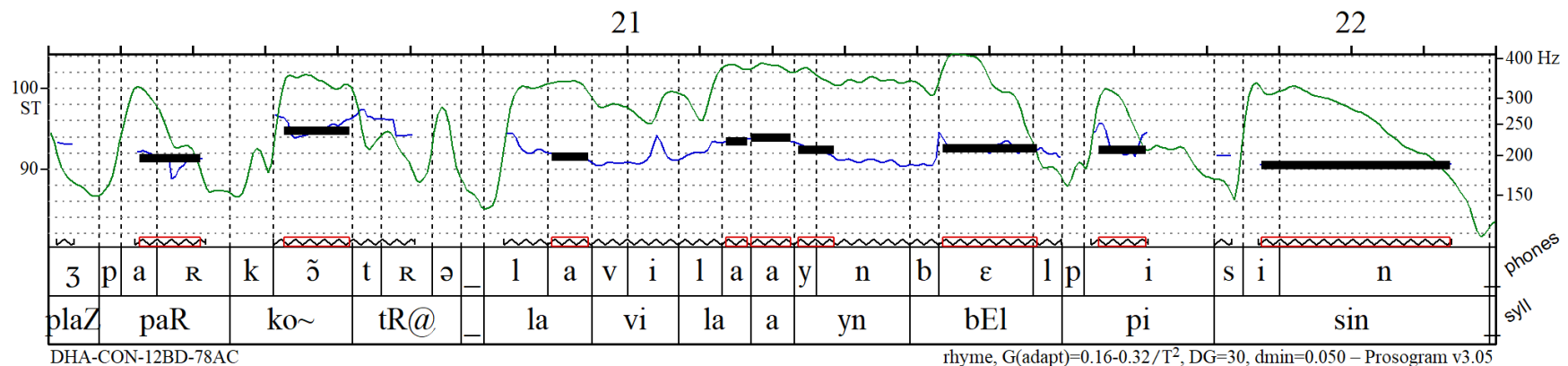
Toi

Production experiment – illustration 1

Condition A:
contrastive
subject

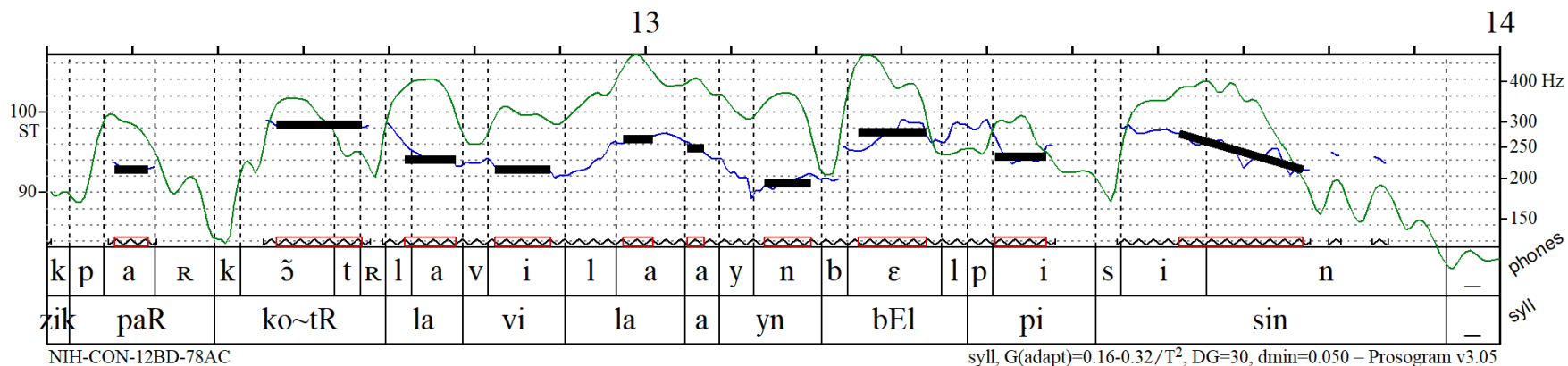


Condition B:
non-contrastive
subject

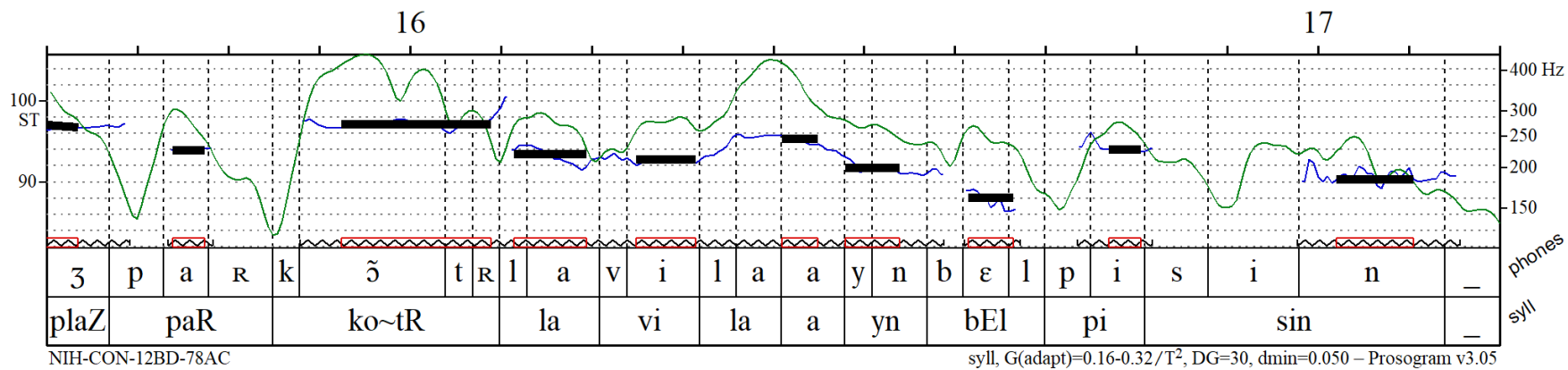


Production experiment – illustration 2

Condition A:
contrastive
subject



Condition B:
non-contrastive
subject



Thank you!

jorina.brysbaert@uclouvain.be

<https://jorinabrysbaert.com/>

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