Corrective Focus in Mandarin Chinese - A Question of Belief?

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The present study investigates the impact of constrastive focus (CF) on the prosody in Mandarin Chinese (MC), known as a tone language. CF in corrections – hence, corrective focus – has often been defined mainly in terms of semantic alternatives replacing a corrected item. In these frameworks, speaker-hearer, or mutual beliefs have been considered more or less (ir-)relevant. There is, however, an approach according to which the violation of speaker-hearer beliefs is the main factor for regarding an expression as contrastive, i.e., the Contrastive Focus Hypothesis (Zimmermann 2007). As a consequence, linguistic marking of CF would be restricted to those cases in which the propositional content of particular information is considered by the speaker to be highly unexpected for the addressee, assuming that a language reserves grammatical devices for marking contrastiveness at all. Apart from that, it has been proposed a counter-presuppositional focus type – correcting presupposed information (on the polarity of a proposition) – as distinct from corrective focus (Gussenhoven 2007). Several studies have found that MC marks (wh-)focus in terms of specific adjustments of the lexical tones, both on- and post-focally. However, few is known about corrective focus in comparison to wh-focus in this language – and there has been no empirical study on the impact of the violation of mutual beliefs on the realization of CF.

Both aspects are in the center of interest in the present study. To achieve this, two types of corrective foci (COR) have been investigated systematically by means of semi-spontaneous elicitation method. In the first type of COR foregrounded, or asserted material is to be corrected by the participants (A-COR), while the second type of COR applies to presupposed background information (P-COR). (A third type of focus is narrow wh-focus, or neutral information focus (NIF) serving as a baseline condition.) It can be shown that only P-COR has been consistently distinguished from NIF by the speakers, and that A-COR and P-COR differ considerably in their prosodic realizations. Thus, the results show that, first, MC allows for marking relatively subtle distinctions by means of prosody. Second, accounts such as the CFH are supported by the present data.