

# The role of prosody in the pragmatic meaning of ‘whatever’

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In this paper, I investigate the role of prosody in cueing negative pragmatic meaning associated with the use of ‘whatever’. I suggest that the degree of pragmatic negativity of ‘whatever’ correlates directly with the strength of the prosodic boundary between the first two syllables (what#ever).

Following Blake et al. (1999), B’s response in (1) can have a range of meanings, from a) a completely neutral ‘Yes, I don’t care, do it whenever you can’, to b) a very negative ‘absolutely not, do it now’.

- (1) A: Can’t I do it tomorrow?  
B: Whatever.

The meaning in a) is consistent with the semantic/referential meaning of ‘whatever’ (von Fintel 2000). I claim that the meaning in b) is conveyed through contextual and prosodic linguistic channels.

To investigate prosodic correlates of pragmatic meaning, I carried out production and perception experiments. The results of the former show that the more negative the token, the more likely it has additional pitch accent, extended duration, and expanded pitch range on the first syllable (what.). As this phonetic variation is consistent with the increase of the prosodic boundary strength between the first two syllables, I draw the link between pragmatic meaning and the strength of this prosodic boundary.

The results of the perception experiment show that prosody, although a sufficient and systematic cue in itself, does not function as the sole indicator of the degree of negativity of ‘whatever’ in real life discourse. The larger context in which ‘whatever’ occurs is also important and may leave prosodic cues only a secondary role in conveying pragmatic meaning.

This paper also provides evidence that the distribution of prosodic phrases smaller than Intonational Phrases, such as prosodic words, is relevant for pragmatic meaning.

## References.

Blake, R., M.Bakht-Rofheart, S. Benus, S. Cooper, M. Josey and E. Solyom (1999). “I have three words for you...”: Whatever as a discourse marker. Paper presented at NWAV XXVIII, Toronto.

Von Fintel, K. (2000). Whatever. Ms. To appear in SALT 10 Proceedings.