Radio reporters covering football games have to describe the events on the field as well as convey the drama and suspense of the game to their listeners [1]. Drawing on previous research on prosodic cues to signal suspense [2,3,4], our semi-experimental study aims at describing the acoustic cues listeners rely on to assign the beginning of suspenseful narration during live football commentaries. In a perception experiment, participants were asked to evaluate goal scenes broadcasted on British and German public radio, German private radio, and German public television, and to determine the point at which they felt that the suspense began. To disentangle textual from prosodic cues, we subdivided British and German participants into three groups each. The first of the respective groups was presented with the original audio files, while the second was given delexicalized audio files that had been processed through a low-pass filter to eliminate textual information. The third group based their decisions on orthographic transcripts alone. Whereas groups (1) and (2) were confronted with both English and German data, group (3) evaluated only transcripts in their native language.

The results indicate that British and German participants alike regard a steep increase in fundamental frequency as a clear signal for suspense beginning. Duration and voice quality as well as the verbal content played a comparatively subordinate role. Auditory impressions of accelerated speech during the suspenseful stretches of talk may be due to reduced amounts of silence and an occasional lack of final lengthening. The study also revealed a number of differences in the ways German and British listeners relied on prosodic cues to determine suspense beginnings. In particular, British participants showed more variability than German participants when interpreting delexicalized files, but were able to gain consistency through the additional (verbal) information presented in the original files.


