



How English Intonation Shapes Meaning: Attitude, Emphasis, and Pragmatic Intent.

Asst.Lect. Abbas Mohammed Jasim

abbasm@sawauniversity.edu.iq

Department of English language, College of Education,
Sawa University, Al Muthanna, Iraq.

Abstract - This paper examines how English intonation contributes to meaning beyond the lexical content of an utterance, focusing on three core dimensions: speaker attitude, emphasis (prominence), and pragmatic intent in interaction. Drawing on a prosodic and intonational-phonological perspective, the study explains intonation as an integrated phenomenon shaped primarily by pitch modulation, but closely coordinated with stress, timing (duration), and intensity. It outlines key surface properties of English prosody—especially the steep prominence gradient between stressed and unstressed syllables—and shows how pitch landmarks cluster around accented syllables to form pitch accents that structure the “tune” of an utterance. The paper also reviews major models of intonation within phonological approaches, highlighting the use of discrete categories such as pitch accents and boundary tones, while acknowledging gradient, non-categorical components such as pitch range, span, and downtrend that vary with involvement and speaker commitment. Functionally, the study demonstrates that intonation operates as spoken “punctuation,” signaling grammatical groupings and boundaries; it organizes information structure by marking focus and enabling deaccenting; it supports discourse interpretation, including the distinction between statements and questions; and it regulates interactional flow through turn-taking cues. Overall, the study concludes that English intonation is a central resource for conveying linguistic and social meaning, combining phonological regularities with flexible, context-sensitive choices that speakers exploit to express attitudes, highlight information, and manage conversational goals.

Keywords - English intonation, Prosody, Suprasegmental meaning, Speaker attitude, Emphasis / prominence.

I. Introduction

English is the mother language of about 50 different countries and is used by around 300 million people in the world. Among the many English varieties spoken around the world, two of them, commonly referred to as (Standard) American English and (Standard) British English, are quite specific in that they are being considered as "separate standards for the teaching of English as a foreign language". Both varieties in both dialects of English are spoken with many other accents.

For British English, a single accent in particular – ‘Received Pronunciation’, or ‘RP’ – is often held up as an exemplary accent – for foreign learners to emulate and for BBC newsreaders to use. It's been suggested the percentage of English people who really



speak RP is as low as 3%. It has been proposed that RP today should be defined with a wider scope to cover anyone speaking “educated Southern English”. One does get the impression that the intonation system of RP is typical of at least a somewhat broader range of the native speakers of (Southern) (Cruttenden, 1997,p.56)

Intonation

Intonation is the manner of expressing information in speech that is not dependent on the words in a string or their phonetic sounds. At the heart of intonation is pitch control, and intonation is commonly treated as the modulation of pitch in a stretch of speech. But pitch in speech is so tightly coupled to temporal and intensity patterns in speech (and sometimes to aeriality), that one can not treat pitch as independent of these other dimensions of the speech signal. The relation between intonation and stress— the patterning of relative prominence that marks an utterance — is especially close in certain languages, English being a case in point. Intonation is the result of the co-operation of all these dimensions and it is employed to convey many different types of meaning. It is an indication of grammatical structure, but not always a one-to-one one; while the end of a full intonational pattern usually corresponds with the end of a grammatical structure — such as a sentence or a clause — even fairly substantial grammatical units may not be marked intonationally, especially in the case of fast speech. (Cruttenden, 1997,p.58)

The intonation can indicate the information value of an utterance, to pay attention to the important The values. Intonation can serve as a marker of discourse function; for example, most people know that the statement ‘This is the Leeds train’ can be distinguished from the question form by its intonation. A speaker may use intonation to express an attitude like friendliness, enthusiasm or hostility, and listeners can utilize intonation-related phenomena in the voice to infer the state of a speaker, such as excitement, depression, or tiredness. Intonation can also, for example, serve to control turn-taking in conversation, since there are intonal devices that speakers can employ to convey that they have made their point, or, conversely, that they are holding forth and don’t want to be interrupted. Pitch is used by not only intonation but other parts of language; many languages use pitch to differentiate words.

There have been various theories about how intonation can assist communication, including:

Intonation allows us to communicate our feelings and attitudes while speaking: the attitudinal role of intonation.

Stresses of intonation construct seekers of prominence: the accented use of intonation. Even the syntax and grammar of the sentence are perceived by intonation – 15an example of the grammatical function of intonation.

Intonation carries either the given-new information, or follows for turn taking: the pragmadiscourse function of intonation.

Surface properties of English prosody

All languages have means of presenting particular linguistic items in the stream of speech so that they ‘stand out’ in one way or another. A word may contain more than



one stressed syllable (‘ diversification ’), some words in an utterance are “the most important” words. Languages vary in the ‘gradient of prominence’, i.e., the degree of salience of prominent and non-prominent elements. Focussing on the syllable we found English to have a high prominence gradient. (Fletcher et.. al., 2002, p.211) 341 gross motor abilities that contribute to walking and independence in the community (Dahlseng et al., 2008).

Stressed syllables contain full vowels (as opposed to schwa or unstressed /i/) and are long. Unaccented syllables have frequently short vowels (usually schwa). The steepness of the prominence gradient in English is crucial for its intonation. If there is one thing that intonation analysts have generally agreed about, it is that, to put that rather simplistic statement as a generalization, the pitch seems to do something interesting around accented syllables: these are labelled with a pitch after which the pitch falls precipitously over the entire range of the utterance, or with a pitch before which the pitch progressively rises to its high- est point. Could we then talk about prominence the other way round, namely say ‘these syllables are prominent because they are associated with pitch landmarks’? What breaks the circularity really is that the prosodic pattern of the word is pitch independent.

A word's stress pattern, or metrical prominence pattern, can generally be understood from its phonological and morphological context; and is also manifested, predominantly through relative timing relationships, even when spoken without a pitch accent. Indeed if we were to resynthesise this utterance on a monotone, the prominence relations would still be perfectly obvious. What is important in characterizing English intonation is that a pitch landmark, ‘associated’ with a particular stressed syllable, may be found; this is then labeled a pitch accent (or often simply accent). The tone of an utterance is largely determined by that of the sequence of tone, or pitch accents, and the characterization and labelling of these milestones is central in recent models of intonation. (fletcher et.. al., 2002, p. 215)

In the context of generative phonology, it has been claimed that English word stress can be described by a small set of quite general phonological rules with lexical idiosyncrasies reduced to the marking of the final syllables of a certain set of words as inherently stressed or extrametrical (in other words invisible to the stress rules). Types Just as easily as the Phrasal Stress rule can be applied to the above list of ten items in order to yield other possible stress positions, the rules below for assigning the penultimate form of stress can as easily be enumerated to enforce other fixed penultimate-stress stress positions on this list. Germanic suffixes (e.g. -ing, -ly) do not, however, have such an effect on stress, and as in English's Germanic cousin languages, compounding does not alter stress: they are headed by the initial element. Others recognize more than two levels of stress/accnt. The last or main pitch accent of an intonation unit is often called carrying primary stress; a syllable with a full rather than a reduced vowel is occasionally said to carry tertiary stress. The extent to which an accented syllable is characterized by pitch, or is not so characterized, is in some cases considered as a further degree of accentuation. (Schubiger, 1965:67)



Intonational phonology

Use of the word ‘phonology’ in association with intonation suggests that the continuously variable tune of speech has segmental elements, and that these elements have no meaning (any more than a phoneme) but, like a phoneme, can serve to convey meaning in context, singly or in combination. These implications are by now all received wisdom.

There are alternative phonological (or ‘intonological’) accounts of the intonation of the utterance in Figure 1, which is now shown here as a schematic pitch curve:

(1) But / \ MELanie’s • never been \ near the • manuscript

L* H+L * 0%

Also embedded in the string for the words (where ^ represents pitch accent in small caps) are symbols from an analysis in the so called British tradition. The contours are represented by the diacritics on the stressed syllable of a word (the shorthand varies by author but the ones used here reflect the general claim). Ahead of ‘near,’ for example, there is a downward slope, which signifies decline. More particularly the fall is the kernel, the accent which comes last, and is usually the most prominent feature in the expression. The first stressed syllable of ‘Melanie’ triggers a pre-nuclear rise (the diagonal up-arrow). The units of the system, now, are mostly pitch movements; the dits before ‘nev(er)4 and ‘man(uscript)’ are exceptions in that they represent a stressed syllable in an ongoing pitch trend (rising and low level respectively). (Deterding, 1994, p.66,72)

Non-phonological components of intonation

Not all intonational phenomena can be described in terms of discrete categories (e.g. pitch accent, boundary tone). Other intonational effects are from the communications perspective communicative, in the sense that the speaker has a choice, but are fundamentally gradient. E.g. each of the following variants of expressing an utterance involves an increasing degree of involvement (regardless if this is actually the case for the speaker) (Fletcher et al., 2002, p.231).

but there is no reason why identification of three of them (as opposed to four, or seven, or anything) need be arbitrary; the pitch ranges in question remain a continuum.

This non-categorical property of intonation presumably has a connection to the source of intonation in simple physical and physiological factors. There are three hypothetical biological codes: the frequency code, the effort code and the production code (or respiratory code). For example, small objects or animals make high frequencies, and so high-pitch is a natural way to signal submission in the animal world, and (metaphorically) politeness or uncertainty (among other things) in human interaction – the frequency code. More physical effort caused by arousal is half the equation for more energetic movement and pitch change (also ½ of why pitch rises when we are aroused: We use the less energy expensive body of language voice) and by inference filling up from full to less full can code naturally involvement and the most normal thing for pitch



to do is fall in a vocalizationist at the start of voicing your vocal folds are tense, nearing closing, near an etensthisiz your vocal folds, less taut than at the beginning – not quite vibrating, you speak, unferzolfing this sound IOS So, paradoxically, it's easier to code older than newer information with pitch – the respiratory code. Perhaps even the domains of intonational phonology are, in some sense, the grammaticalization of these codes. (Ladd,1996,p.98)

A helpful antecedent for studies of such dimensions as pitch range is a coherent terminological framework. Among features of pitch of an utterance that we can identify, there are the speaking tessitura that is a range of comfortable speaking pitch for a specific speaker and tonal level, the overall level of an utterance within a speaker's speaking tessitura, and tonal span, the average difference between the highest and lowest pitch in the utterance. pitch excursion and local high-low distance, which correspond to pitch accent, and downtrend, a pitch lowering of an utterance. In such terms, the degrees of commitment in (3) are indicated by variations in pitch range, and if the utterance were longer, those variations would pertain to the entirety of the utterance. (Gussenhoven et. al,1999, p. 76)

Functions of intonation

There are some functions that could be achieved using intonation which are as follow:

Grammatical structure

One key function of intonation is as the 'punctuation' of spoken languages, dividing up the stream of speech into grammatical units and more globally helping the listener to follow the chain of sense. The function comes sharply into focus from time to time when the words used happen to admit of more than one grammatical parse e.g. 'While eating my cat my dog and I watched television'. In writing we would put a comma; after 'dog' for the uglier interpretation, and after 'eating,' (and perhaps another comma between 'my dog' and 'my cat') for the nicer interpretation. An intonational counterpart of this comma in these two contexts is notated in (4) and (5) – a Fall pitch-accent followed, crucially, by a High boundary tone, with, crucially, slowing-down leading to the boundary: (Gussenhoven, 2004, p.

(4) EAT D O Gff A Ndwatchcat I TELEVISION my Wesekthe let the of Started Show as four Dowas canine Resu Itsand FIG.

(5) EATING my DOG my CAT my TV was WATCHING.

But the correspondence of grammatical units to intonational ones is not one to one. The following sentence can be intonationally realized in at least two ways:

without any accompanying change in grammar. We might consider the change as a certain 'process of connected speech' such as assimilation of segments related to speech rate, but not directly indexed by it. Overall, than, we might consider grammatical structure to be decisive for the position where intonational phrase boundaries can be placed, while production factors such as speech rate determine whether they actually are placed here or not. The slower and more attentive to speech cues, the more explicitly grammatical structure will be signaled by intonational phrase boundaries. And in a few



cases intonation is like a signpost leading the listener in a path which is not directly related to phrasing. (Gussenhoven, 2004, p.45)

II. Information structure

Intonation also has the function of pointing to areas of high information in the utterance. Every word in the lexicon has one stressed syllable, or rather, a 'stressable' syllable. This presents the possibility that this syllable is the locus of prosodic prominence in a given utterance. The prominence is predominantly realized by increased duration, intensity (the principal physical correlate of loudness), and most commonly a pitch accent. The stressed syllable in the word 'about' is the second.

Due to its 'full vowel' (a diphthong in this instance), rhythmical context. But if, as I said, the described time is already there in the discourse and the speaker prefers to highlight the approximation, so the speaker adjusts prominence based on features such as communicational need. Ohala, 1984,p.18)

We wouldn't say a sentence with a pitch accent on every word, and so we should expect, as a lazy first rule, that content words will have a pitch accent, and grammatical words won't. This sort of manipulation of prominence is a key process in English intonation which has been termed deaccenting. It appears that information structure conditions gradient prominence planes, and deaccenting might only be a grammaticalization of a highly global reflex of the effort code. Thus far, the use of IP pitch accents in English looks quite reasonable; some information is highlighted and other information deaccented. However it has long been observed that that it is not always so clear cut how information and accent relate, demonstrated by examples like: (Aufferbeck, 2003, p.221)

Look OUT! That CHAIR's broken

With the "sit down" scene, "chair" is contextually given (complement space), whereas "being broken" is new and unexpected (profile space). But, oddly-gratuitously on a surface glance, 'chair' gets the strong accent. This sort of stressing is undoubtedly the intonational equivalent of pointing: get the hearer to see the chair, and they will have discovered the problem for themselves. (Pierrehumbert,1980,p.55)

Discourse function

The most widely known piece of information about intonation is that questions go up. Like so many facts that are well known, it's a vast oversimplification. Counterexamples are easy to find. English 'Wh-' questions specifically more often falling rather than rising:

WHAT do you have going on SATurday? How OLD is he?

Nevertheless, common wisdom that the voice goes up in a question isn't all wrong.

Yes-no (or general) questions can ascend. These two forms are both general: the first ends on a falling-rising motive on the last word, while the second moves to the final word but then soars up to the end. The speaker metaphorically defers to the hearer's



superior knowledge and leaves completive information for the listener to fill in. One might nevertheless expect that the phonological realization of a high bound ary tone would be forced in such cases if the words provide no explicit cues about the sentential status of the utter ance (a ‘morphosyntactically unmarked question’), yet the second utterance in (12) is interpreted as a ques tion (Grabe, 1998, p.31)

Discourse regulation

In a fluent interaction the participants take turns to speak without difficulty. Yes, depending on how informal/formal/formal-but-casual things get, people may interrupt, but they’ll know they’re interrupting people, and they might be interrupted in turn, and if you’re speaking/performing/what have you, you can tell with a little bit of judgment when somebody’s actually done with what they’ve got to say. These “traffic signals” that govern a well-formed interaction are predominantly intonational. End-of-turn cues include low pitch, quieted volume, rallentando (slowing down of turn-final elements). The final dipping down and stretching out (marked by the stretched spacing of the type). This isn't to say one can't still comment on such a topic (like if the listener had a question about it,) but it is rolling the floor to a new speaker. The absence of slowing (to say nothing of accelerando) in the second utterance, compound-final high pitch and its long duration characteristic of a listing item, suggest that there's more to come, and that the speaker is not yielding the floor. (Beckman, 1999, p.89)

III. Conclusions

The present study concludes that intonation is closely connected to several suprasegmental features, particularly stress, pitch, and tone. It also shows that intonation appears in different forms and performs multiple functions in spoken English. In addition, the study indicates that some dimensions of intonation can be explained within phonological frameworks, whereas other dimensions are better understood as non-phonological and gradient in nature. Although certain constraints may guide speakers toward particular intonation patterns, speakers still retain flexibility to choose intonational forms that best express specific ideas, emotions, or attitudes in context. Finally, the study confirms that intonation is employed to achieve both linguistic goals (such as marking grammatical structure and information focus) and social goals (such as signaling interpersonal stance and managing interaction).

References

1. Aufterbeck, M. (2003). Scottish English intonation: a phonetic analysis of a Fife dialect. Doctoral dissertation, University in Cambridge.
2. Beckman, M. (1999). ToBI. <http://www.ling.ohio-state.edu/~tobi/>
3. Crystal, D. (1969). Prosodic systems and intonation in English. London: Cambridge University Press.
4. Cruttenden, A. (1997). Intonation (2nd edition). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
5. Deterding, D. (1994). The intonation of Singapore English. *Journal of the International Phonetic Association*



6. Fletcher, J., Wales, R., Stirling, L. and Mushin, I. (2002). A dialogue act analysis of rises in Australian English map task dialogues. *Proceedings of Speech Prosody 2002, Aix-en- Provence*, 299-302.
7. Grabe, E. (1998). *Comparative Intonational Phonology: English and German*. Doctoral dissertation, MPI Series in Psycholinguistics 7. Nijmegen: Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics.
8. Gussenhoven, C. (2004). *The phonology of tone and intonation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
9. Gussenhoven, C., Rietveld, T., and Terken, J. (1999). ToDI: transcription of Dutch intonation. <http://lands.let.kun.nl/todi/todi/home.htm>.
10. Ladd, D.R. (1996). *Intonational phonology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
11. Ohala, J.J. (1984). An ethological perspective on common cross-language utilization of F0 in voice. *Phonetica*
12. Pierrehumbert, J.B. (1980). *The phonology and phonetics of English intonation*. PhD dissertation, MIT. Published 1988 by Indiana University Linguistics Club.
- Scherer, K. (2001). *Vocal communication of emotion: a review of research paradigms*. *Speech Communication*
13. Schubiger, M. (1965). *English intonation and German modal particles: a comparative study*.