

Intonation: The Sound of Sense and Feelings

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ABSTRACT

In our utterances every day, every time there is an intense, undeniable presence of something other than the voluminous words. It is the constantly varying pitch of the voice that comes through every time we utter words. We call this varying pitch, this unmistakable tune intonation. The present article looks into the nature of intonation in order to throw light on how this constant change in the tone of our voice is caused and regulated by the innermost movements – our attitudes and emotions. The article also focuses on the difficulty in setting rules as to the usage of intonation in English – a fact which makes learning it an arduous procedure.

Keywords: Intonation; Voice and Pitch; Tonic syllable; Attitude and emotion.

Introduction

Sound evokes emotion. Why this is so – this question has led science, particularly neuroscience, into extensive research that concludes by attributing this phenomenon to the existing anatomical connection between the auditory cortex of our brain and the large array of limbic and Para limbic structures responsible for the generation of effective activity. A detailed understanding of this scientific exploration is provided by Cook (2002). But away from the methodical study of science, general observation of life around has always substantiated the allure of the sound among all the creatures on earth. Whether it is a dog listening to Beethoven, or a sea mammal eliciting sound to hunt, navigate and communicate, or a primitive man taking recourse to auditory signals – before he could learn to make use of the visual images – to express, and assert himself, sound has always been an elicitor of sense and emotion. And it continues to be so.

However, sound can be a burden too, a sensory overload. In our day-to-day life, there are numerous occasions when we find ourselves reduced to the receiver of so much noise and cacophony, struggling to find our way through it all into some sort of meaning, desperately trying to hang onto the sound of the words uttered, or as an even more earnest approach, leaning our ear in an effort to capture the vital, all important sound, the tone of the voice for a more nuanced appreciation of the meaning produced. That it is not only the sound of the words but the sound of the voice too that holds the key to meaning – phonologists have known it since ages and hence they on their part have insisted on the tone of the voice as an important generator of meanings, specifically the ones that arise from deep within, from our innermost recesses, that reflect our attitude and resonate the emotional content. In phonological parlance, this tone of the voice is known as intonation.

Compared to the phonemes which constitute segmental phonology, intonation is purely a supra-segmental or prosodic feature that is superimposed on syllables - made of consonants and vowels - that together make an utterance. It is what comes through every time we speak; it is normal for the pitch of our voice to vary constantly within a scale ranging from high to low or light to heavy in the course of every utterance. To recognize this intricate, ever changing passage of the pitch of the voice is to recognize the intonation which, to many, is nothing other than the melody of speech, a kind of melody that tells what mere words, many a time, find hard to reach. Like gestures – a frown, blushing cheeks, a smile etc. – this varying pitch projects deep lying feelings, the attitude of the speaker towards others, towards a situation. It is in this sense that intonation gets recognized as a paralinguistic feature.

This power of intonation is brought to the fore and discussed at length by Brown (1990). How significant a role intonation plays every time words are uttered, what a big difference it can make to the utterance can easily be gauged if we minutely observe even the simplest of verbal expressions in our everyday life. For example, the oft-used utterance ‘thank you’ can have different connotations depending on the tone of the voice, the way it is said. If the pitch of the voice rises and then descends, in other words, if it is a rise-fall intonation, the utterance expresses genuine sense of gratitude and if the pitch of the voice descends and then rises again, or in other words, if it is a fall-rise intonation, the utterance becomes a mere matter of fact, casual acknowledgement of something not so important. The same

powerful impact of intonation is noticeable when we say ‘yes.’ The fall-rise tone pattern here would mean affirmation, agreement with some kind of hesitation or reservation. And if the pitch has a rise-fall on the other hand, it would manifest an emphatic and intense feeling of approval.

These are the subtle changes in attitude that can dramatically change the whole sense of the utterance despite the words remaining intact. Such is the impact of intonation that sometimes a word may mean something but the way the word is said may lead to a totally opposite interpretation of what is said, thus making the whole expression ironic. Many a time it is not what one says but the way one says it that makes all the difference, that unlocks the door to our understanding, giving insight into the truth of the situation that words fail to bring forth.

In order to understand and analyse the application of intonation, it is imperative that one understands the structure of what is known as tone-unit. The smallest tone unit consists of a single syllable which implies that a tone unit can have one or more than one syllable. For example, in an expression such as ‘This is great!’, there are three syllables which, however, together form one tone unit. But it is not all the syllables in the tone unit that will carry the tone. The syllable ‘great’ – for the fact that it is stressed and at the same time the most important word in the utterance – is the one that carries the tone, is where the pitch of the voice can be made to rise and fall in order to show a strong, genuine feeling of appreciation, a kind of true excitement. Since the tone is carried by the syllable ‘great’ alone, the syllable is named

tonic syllable. The whole utterance as a tone unit with 'great' as the tonic syllable can be presented like this:

This is [^]great ([^]here is the symbolic representation of rise-fall intonation). Although there are myriad tone patterns with subtle variations that manage to distinguish one tune shape from the other, it is not impossible to arrive at a select few as the basic or fundamental ones. On the basis of the consensus reached by almost all the books in this regard, the following are the four basic pitch patterns:

1. Fall / The falling tune – the Glide-Down: This comprises fall in the voice from a high pitch to a very low one.
2. Rise / The rising tune – the Glide-Up: This consists of rising in the voice from a very low pitch to a fairly high one.
3. Fall – rise / the falling-rising tune: This consists of a fall in the voice from a high pitch to a low one and then a rise again to the middle of the voice.
4. Rise – fall / the rising-falling tune: This comprises a rise in the voice from a low pitch to a high one and then again a fall in the voice.

There are specific instructions and guidelines, unanimously agreed upon, for using these tone patterns. The following are the usages of the intonation patterns as per the situations, as catalogued in the two books: *Better English Pronunciation* by J. D. O'Connor and *English Phonetics and Phonology* by Peter Roach.

1. Fall / The falling tune – the Glide-Down: to be used

- a) For statements expressing finality, definiteness:

This will be ,done

This is ,good

- b) In a tag question seeking agreement, confirmation and assurance of what is uttered:

It tastes good, ,doesn't it?

2. Rise / The rising tune – the Glide-up: to be used

- a) For a statement meant to be encouraging, soothing:

I will see you ,soon

We will ,meet

- b) To ask a question:

Will you ,come?

Where are ,you?

- c) For a statement that raises the expectation of something more to follow:

I have informed them about ,that

(and they have assured me they will look into the matter)

- d) For greetings and for saying goodbye:

Good ,morning

Good ,bye

3. Fall – rise / the falling-rising tune: to be used

- a) For a statement expressing uncertainty, doubt:

- It ˘may rain
- This is ˘possible
- b) For making a request:
- Will you ˘wait for me?
- c) To warn:
- You will ˘suffer
- He will˘fail
4. Rise – fall / the rising-falling tune: to be used
- a) To express surprise, to show how impressed one is:
- That team^won
- This is^nice

[Symbols used: Fall=,; Rise=˘; Fall–rise=˘; Rise-fall= ^]

Intonation is innate and hence it is more natural than even the words that one can only learn in order to respond to one's situation. It is the resonance, the throbbing, vibrating spirit that lends sense to our everyday speech. And literature as an art form exults in imitating life, explores this potency of intonation to elicit the tacit, underlying layer of meaning.

Such is the powerful contribution of intonation towards the totality of understanding that it comes to operate as an all-important, riveting subtext to a literary text. For instance, the plays of Anton Chekhov or Harold Pinter can only be truly realized, a reader can be said to have done

justice to them, if only these works are interpreted the way they should be, the way they demand – not only by paying attention to the words that the characters in the plays utter, much as important they are but also by paying equal if not more attention to the sound of the voice that each utterance carries. It is the sound of the voice, the intonation of the utterance that makes the vital addition of what is called sense which makes meaning rounded and full-fledged.

The same is true about the plays of John Osborne, especially his *Look Back in Anger*, the 1956 kitchen sink drama which many a critic considers to be his magnum opus. The backdrop of the play is a chaotic and dazed Britain after World War II. Awash with strong emotions, with an unemployed, idealistic youth as the protagonist who takes vituperation to a different level, hurling abusive words at everyone around, it is a drama that can be easily misinterpreted if not dealt with carefully. It is so very tempting to dismiss Jimmy Porter, the protagonist, from our heart, from every corner of our mind, every time we come to hear him vituperating – a temptation which can only be quelled if we not only concentrate on the utterances but at the same time listen to the sound, the tone of the voice which makes us realize that these expressions of his are inverted, are as much directed at his own self as they are at others. It is our exploration of the intonation pattern embedded in the text that allows us that kind of insight.

One further illustration of intonation being the subtext is 'The Road Not Taken,' one of the most famous works of Robert Frost. Critics and readers alike have brooded over this

modern text with multiple layers of meaning that Frost is always known for, that make his works so obscure and at the same time so rich. The poem talks about the predicament of making a choice as it mulls over the human limitation – the agony of not knowing the future consequences of a choice made. As the traveller in the poem makes the choice and muses helplessly over what the future holds in store for him, the poet remains totally noncommittal, refusing to favour any particular possibility. And this leaves the text open-ended for the readers to come up with their own preferred understandings as per the way they read and capture the tone of the utterances within. Testament to this is the pivotal first line of the final stanza of the poem.

I shall be telling this with a sigh.

If a reader chooses to utter the word ‘sigh’ with a rising tune, it would come to mean something soothing, a sigh of relief, thus transforming the understanding of the whole poem into something optimistic and positive; and if the word is uttered with a falling tone, the sigh would then be a sigh of sadness that would leave the poem bleak.

Conclusion

Important as it is to have a nuanced understanding of intonation, English phoneticians over the years have striven to come up with a set of rules that would act as comprehensive guidelines on the usage of English intonation for foreign learners. Although some rules are formulated – and they have already been cited here – they are hardly enough to encompass the dynamic nature of English intonation which is why phoneticians are now convinced that the best way for a

foreign learner to grasp intonation is through the hard and honest way, through active and purposeful listening. As Roach (2000) observes, it is through the rigorous drill of listening to colloquial English spoken by the native speakers and then assiduously reproducing the received tone patterns that a learner can assimilate intonation in English. A teacher’s role as a facilitator is crucial here. He has to make tireless efforts to create a conducive environment – not only to arrange for all the facilities that a learner can have access to and benefit from but also to motivate and supervise the learner at each stage of his learning. And there is no doubt, today’s teacher would find it just that little bit easier to pull this off, operates as he does in an age that has already welcomed and embraced the idea of the digital classroom as a valuable addition to the teaching-learning process.

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