PHILOLOGY

THE FUNCTION OF INTONATION IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

Intonation is a language universal. There are no languages which are spoken without any change of prosodic parameters but intonation functions in various languages in a different way. Intonation is about how we say things, rather than what we say. Without intonation, it's impossible to understand the expressions and thoughts that go with words. Intonation exists in every language, so the concept we're introducing isn't new. However, learners are often so busy finding their words that intonation suffers. Intonation is a feature of pronunciation and common to all languages. Other features of pronunciation include stress, rhythm, connected speech and accent.

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Introduction. Intonation is the melody of the sentence. Intonation is created by changes in the pitch of the voice (the voice goes higher and lower; remains on the same level; rises or falls), by sentence stress (strong stress on important words; weak stress or no stress on less important words), and by rhythm (stressed syllables occur at more or less equal intervals). The most important functions of intonation are to distinguish types of sentences (statements, questions, commands, requests) and to divide sentences into sense groups. Also, intonation allows speakers to express various emotions. The tone (rise, fall, etc.) is the most significant pitch change that takes place at the end of sense groups and at the end of the sentence. The terminal tone at the end of the sentence is the most important means for determining the type of sentence (statement, question, command, request).

Intonation patterns serve to actualize syntagms in oral speech. It may be well to remind you here that the syntagm is a group of words which is semantically and syntactically complete. In phonetics actualized syntagms are called intonation groups (sense-groups, tone-groups). Each intonation group may consist of one or more potential syntagms, e.g. the sentence *I think he is coming soon* has two potential syntagms: *I think* and *he is coming soon.* In oral speech it is normally actualized as one intonation group.

The function of intonation. The intonation group is a stretch of speech which may have the length of the whole phrase. But the phrase often contains more than one intonation group. The number of intonation groups depends on the length of the phrase and the degree of semantic importance or emphasis given to various parts of it:

This bed was not' slept, in - This be was not' slept in. An additional terminal tone on *this bed* expresses an emphasis on *this bed* in contrast to other *beds.*

Not all stressed syllables are of equal importance. One of the syllables has the greater prominence than the others and forms the nucleus, or focal point of an intonation pattern. Formally the

nucleus may be described as a strongly stressed syllable which is generally the last strongly accented syllable of an intonation pattern and which marks a significant change of pitch direction, that is where the pitch goes distinctly up or down. The nuclear tone is the most important part of the intonation pattern without which the latter cannot exist at all. On the other hand, an intonation pattern may consist of one syllable which is its nucleus. The tone of a nucleus determines the pitch of the rest of the intonation pattern following it which is called the tail. Thus after a falling tone, the rest of the intonation pattern is at a low pitch. After a rising tone the rest of the intonation pattern moves in an upward pitch direction:

No, Suzie — Well, Suzie.

The nucleus and the tail form what is called terminal tone. The two other sections of the intonation pattern are the head and the pre-head which form the pre-nuclear part of the intonation pattern and, like the tail, they may be looked upon as optional elements:

Lake District is one of the loveliest 'parts of, Britain.

The pre-nuclear part can take a variety of pitch patterns. Variation within the pre-nucleus does not usually affect the grammatical meaning of the utterance, though it often conveys meanings associated with attitude or phonetic styles. There are three common types of pre-nucleus: a descending type in which the pitch gradually descends (often in "steps") to the nucleus; *an* ascending type in which the syllables form an ascending sequence and a level type when all the syllables stay more or less on the same level.

Some intonation patterns may be completely colorless in meaning: they give to the listener no implication of the speaker's attitude or feeling. They serve a mechanical function — they provide a mold into which all sentences may be poured so that they achieve utterance. Such intonation patterns represent the intonational minimum of speech. The number of possible combinations is more than a hundred but not all of them are equally important. Some of them do not differ much in meaning, others are very rarely used. That is why in teaching it is necessary to deal only with a very limited number of intonation patterns, which are the result of a careful choice.

It is still impossible to classify, in any practical analysis of intonation, all the fine shades of feeling and attitude which can be conveyed by slight changes in pitch, by lengthening or shortening tones, by increasing or decreasing the loudness of the voice, by changing its quality, and in various other ways. On the other hand, it is quite possible to make a broad classification of intonation patterns which are so different in their nature that they materially: change the meaning of the utterance and to make different pitches and degrees of loudness in each of them. Such an analysis resembles the phonetic analysis of sounds of a language whereby phoneticians establish the number of significant sounds it uses.

The distinctive function of intonation is realized in the opposition of the same word sequences which differ in certain parameters of the intonation pattern. Intonation patterns make their distinctive contribution at intonation group, phrase and text levels. Thus in the phrases:

If Mary, comes let me $\rightarrow$ *know at once* (a few people are expected to come but it is Mary who interests the speaker)

If —>Mary comes let me $\rightarrow$ *know at once* (no one else but Mary is expected to come)

the intonation patterns of the first intonation groups are opposed. In the opposition *I enjoyed it - I enjoyed it* the pitch pattern operates over the whole phrase adding in the second phrase the notion that the speaker has reservations (implying a continuation something like 'but it could have been a lot better').

The most powerful phonological unit is the terminal tone. The opposition of terminal tones distinguishes different types of sentence. The same sequence of words may be interpreted as a different syntactical type, i.e. a statement or a question, a question or an exclamation being pronounced with different terminal tones, e.g.:

Tom saw it (statement) - *Tom saw it?* (general question)

Didn't you enjoy it? (general question) - *Didn't you enjoy it?* (exclamation)

Will you be quiet? (request) - *Will you be quiet?* (command).

The number of terminal tones indicates the number of intonation groups. Sometimes the number of intonation groups may be important for meaning. For example, the sentence *My sister, who lives in the South, has just arrived* may mean two different things. In oral speech it is marked by using two or three intonation groups. If the meaning is: 'my only sister who happens to live in the South', then the division would be into three intonation groups: *My sister, who lives in the South, has just arrived.* On the other hand, if the meaning is 'that one of my two sisters, who lives in the South', the division is into two intonation groups.

Together with the increase of loudness terminal tones serve to single out the semantic center of the utterance. By semantic center we mean the information center which may simultaneously concentrate the expression of attitudes and feelings. The words in an utterance do not necessarily all contribute an equal amount of information, some are more important to the meaning than others. This largely depends on the context or situation in which the intonation group or a phrase is said. Some words are predisposed by their function in the language to be stressed. In English lexical (content) words are generally accented while grammatical (form) words are more likely to be unaccented although words belonging to both of these groups may be unaccented or accented if the meaning requires it.

Let us consider the sentence *It was an unusually rainy day.* As the beginning of, say, a story told on the radio the last three words would be particularly important, they form the semantic center with the nucleus on the word *day.* The first three words play a minor part. The listener would get a pretty clear picture of the story's setting if the first three words were not heard and the last three were heard clearly. If the last three words which form the semantic center were lost there would be virtually no information gained at all.

The same sentences may be said in response to the question *What sort of day was it?* In this case the word *day* in the reply would lose some of its force because the questioner already possesses the information that it might otherwise have given him. In this situation there are only two important words - *unusually rainy* - and they would be sufficient as a complete answer to the question. The nucleus will be on the word *rainy.* Going further still, in reply to the question *Did it rain yesterday?* the single word *unusually* would bear the major part of the information, would be, in this sense, more important than all the others and consequently would be the nucleus of the intonation pattern.

Grammatical words may be also important to the meaning if the context makes them so. The word *was,* for instance, has had little value in the previous examples, but if the sentences were said as a contradiction in the reply to *It wasn 't a rainy day yesterday, was it,* then *was* would be the most important word of all and indeed, the reply might simply be *It was,* omitting the following words as no longer worth saying. In this phrase the word *was* is the nucleus of the semantic center.

These variations of the accentuation achieved by shifting the position of the terminal tone serve a striking example of how the opposition of the distribution of terminal tones is fulfilling the distinctive function.

If the phrase *I don't want you to read anything* has the low-falling terminal tone on the word *anything,* it means that for this or other reason the person should avoid reading. If the same word sequence is pronounced with the falling-rising tone on the same word, the phrase means that the person must have a careful choice in reading.

It should be pointed out here that the most important role of the opposition of terminal tones is that of differentiating the attitudes and emotions expressed by the speaker. The speaker must be particularly careful about the attitudes and emotions he expresses since the hearer is frequently more interested in the speaker's attitude or feeling than in his words - that is whether he speaks nicely or nastily. For instance, the special question *Why?* may be pronounced with the low falling tone sounding rather detached, sometimes even hostile. When pronounced with the low-rising tone it is sympathetic, friendly, interested.

All the other sections of the intonation pattern differentiate only attitudinal or emotional meaning, e.g.: being pronounced with the high pre-head, *Hello* sounds more friendly than when pronounced with the low pre-head, cf.:

He llo! - O He llo!

More commonly, however, different kinds of pre-heads, heads, the same as pitch ranges and levels fulfil their distinctive function not alone but in the combination with other prosodic constituents.

We have been concerned with the relationship between intonation, grammatical patterns and lexical composition. Usually the speaker's intonation is in balance with the words and structures he chooses. If he says something nice, his intonation usually reflects the same characteristic. All types of questions, for instance, express a certain amount of interest which is generally expressed in their grammatical structure and a special interrogative intonation. However, there are cases when intonation is in contradiction with the syntactic structure and the lexical content of the utterance neutralizing and compensating them, e.g.: a statement may sound questioning, interested. In this case intonation neutralizes its grammatical structure. It compensates the grammatical means of expressing this kind of meaning: *Do you know what I'm here for? — No* (questioning)

There are cases when intonation neutralizes or compensates the lexical content of the utterance as it happens, for instance, in the command *Phone him at once, please,* when the meaning of the word *please* is neutralized by intonation.

Lack of balance between intonation and word content, or intonation and the grammatical structure of the utterance may serve special speech effects. A highly forceful or exciting statement said with a very matter-of-fact intonation may, by its lack of balance, produce a type of irony; if one says something very complimentary, but with an intonation of contempt, the result is an insult.

Native speakers of English exploit intonation patterns in many subtle ways that are not obvious at first sight. If you speak English as a second or foreign language, these uses of intonation may have no parallel in your first language. This can lead to your breakdown in communication when a native speaker is interacting with a non-native speaker. In a conversation situation, many a non-native speaker may fail to understand some or all of the part of the native speaker's message that is conveyed by intonation patterns. The native speaker, unaware both of his or her own use of intonation and of the non-native's failure to pick up on it, wrongly assumes that the message has been fully understood. Later, it becomes evident that the message has not been fully understood, and neither participant in the conversation knows why.

It may well be the course that English makes more elaborate use of intonation to signal meaning than do most other languages. This is further reason why it should not be neglected by learners and teachers of English as a foreign language. Let's consider several functions of intonation in the English language:

– The *attitudinal* function. The most obvious role of intonation is to express our attitudes and emotions – to show shock or surprise, pleasure or anger, interest or boredom, seriousness or sarcasm, and many others. We do this by tone.

– The *grammatical* function. Intonation helps identify grammatical structures in speech, rather as punctuation does in writing. We use intonation to mark the beginning and of grammatical units such as clause and sentence. We do this by tonality. We also use intonation to distinguish clause types, such as question vs. statement, and to disambiguate various grammatically ambiguous structures (the syntactic function). We do this mainly by tone.

– The *focusing* (also called *accentual* or *informational*) function. Intonation helps to show what information in an utterance is new and what is already known. We use it to bring some parts of the message into focus, and leave other parts out of focus; to emphasis or highlight some parts and not others. We do this by tonicity and by the placement of other accents. This is one of the most important functions of English intonation, and perhaps the function most readily taught in the EFL classroom. We combine accentuation with the choice of tone to present some longer stretches of the message as constituting the foreground of the picture we paint, while leaving other stretches as background.

– The *discourse* (or *cohesive*) function. Intonation signals how sequences of clauses and sentences go together in spoken discourse, to contrast or to cohere. It functions like the division of writing text into sentences and paragraphs. It enables us to signal whether or not we have come to the end of the point we are making; whether we want to keep talking or are ready to give another speaker a turn.

– The *psychological* function. Intonation helps us organize speech into units that are easy to perceive, memorize and perform. We can all repeat and arbitrary string of three, four or five members, but not a string of ten – unless we split them into two units or five. This is why we need tonality.

Conclusions. One of the most difficult tasks for foreigners to learn is the intonation, i.e. the stress patterns and melody of English. Stress on words and in sentences can be inaccurate to the point of making the message completely unintelligible. One of the first language characteristic learned as a child is the intonation of the native tongue. Learning pitch patterns as a child is easier than learning new patterns as an adult. However, mastering intonation will greatly benefit the non-native speaker's intelligibility in conversation.

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