

## INTONATION - THE MUSIC OF EVERYDAY SPEECH - AND ITS IMPACT ON SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION

*Giulia Suci*

*PhD, University of Oradea*

*Abstract: Intonation may be broadly defined as the rise and fall in the sound of our voice when we speak (Merriam Webster Dictionary); in other words - the music of everyday speech. Intonation plays a vital role in everyday communication and in interpreting speech. Besides conveying linguistic information, it also enables us to express our thoughts and feelings, as well as to understand the feelings and thoughts of our interlocutors. It goes without saying that poor pronunciation may hinder communication, but poor intonation skills may make conversation really frustrating and may lead to misunderstandings. The present paper aims at outlining the crucial role of intonation in successful communication and its importance in teaching/learning a foreign language.*

*Keywords: intonation, communication, misunderstandings, meaning, discourse*

### ASPECTS OF INTONATION

Once called the ‘Cinderella of the linguistic sciences’ by Alan Sharp<sup>1</sup>, intonation has started to claim its rightful place within the field of linguistics, as authors and teachers have become more and more interested in the different aspects of intonation and its impact on the effectiveness of everyday communication.

Since the field of twentieth-century linguistics was dominated by the written language, most linguists manifested no interest in intonation. As writing can be done perfectly well without intonation, most linguists claimed that linguistics can be done without much focus on it as well.

By the 1980s, it became obvious that intonation is closely linked to discourse and linguists (Halliday, Couper-Kuhlen, Seltin, Brazil, Coulthard and Johns etc.) have started to delve into the matter. It came as no surprise that language teachers, mainly those teaching English to foreign students, were among the first to point out the importance of intonation within the discourse framework. Nowadays, no linguist would deny the impact of intonation on discourse.

To the layman in the street, whose knowledge of Phonetics and intonation is mainly taken from ‘My Fair Lady’, intonation is the music of every day speech; it’s what makes the interlocutor sound friendly, kind, angry etc. Defined broadly, intonation refers to the rise and fall in the sound of our voice as we speak. But there is much more to intonation than that.

To realise how important intonation is, try to imagine how English would sound – or any other language for that matter - if every single syllable were pronounced with the same pitch level, with no pauses or no changes in speed or loudness.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sharp, Alan. 1958. “Falling-rising Intonation Pattern in English”, in *Phonetica* 2.p.151

<sup>2</sup> Suci, Giulia. 2014. *English Phonetics and Phonology Revisited*. Oradea: Editura Universitatii din Oradea, p.99

“Intonation is often referred to in everyday language as speech melody or sentence melody, terms that focus on pitch variations and modulations.”<sup>3</sup> It refers to the changes that occur in the pitch of our voice in connected speech – i.e. spoken language as it is used in a continuous, connected sequence. Its role is crucial in conveying our thoughts, attitudes and feelings, as well as in interpreting the thoughts, feelings and attitudes of our interlocutors. While giving us clues about the attitude of the speaker – whether he/she is interested, bored, angry etc., intonation also helps us grasp the meaning of the message being conveyed.

Most linguists perceive intonation as multi-functional, though different theories emphasize different aspects or functions of intonation. The next paragraphs will focus on the various interpretations of the meaning and functions of intonation, starting with the traditional grammatical and attitudinal functions and concluding with the presently accepted discourse function.

Perhaps the first acknowledged function of intonation was the grammatical function, that is to signal grammatical structures. David Crystal, in his book “*A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*”<sup>4</sup> considers that the most important function of intonation is to point out sentence, clause or other boundaries and to distinguish between various types of sentences, such as statements, questions or exclamations by using rising and falling contours. A falling contour is used for statements, special/wh-questions or imperatives, while a rising contour is used for general/yes-no questions or requests.

Besides signaling the above-mentioned grammatical structures, intonation is also closely linked to information structure. The term ‘information structure’ goes back to Halliday (1967) who first introduced the term that has been widely used ever since. In linguistics, the term ‘information structure’ refers to the way in which information is formally arranged within a sentence, an arrangement that optimizes the form of the message in such a way that it will be well understood by the addressee. During conversations, interlocutors have certain expectations as to the goals or outcomes of the exchange, about what information is new or already known and how it is likely to be signaled during the conversation.

To illustrate how intonation may signal the information structure of utterances, Couper Kuhlen<sup>5</sup> gives the following examples:

e.g. *I saw a MAN in the garden.*

*I SAW a man in the garden.*

The words in capital letters represent the most news-worthy pieces of information within the sentence. In the first example, the stress on the word ‘man’ may logically answer the question ‘*Who did you see in the garden?*’ while the second example, with the stress on ‘saw’ may logically answer a question like ‘*Did you hear a man in the garden?*’

Intonation also plays a crucial role in communicating the emotions and attitudes of the speaker towards the subject matter, that is attitudinal or affective meaning. This is the attitudinal function of intonation. One single sentence – for instance ‘*That would be great!*’ – may express a wide range of feelings and emotions by the use of the right intonation pattern – enthusiasm, sarcasm, relief, boredom etc. Emotions, just like facial expressions, make themselves obvious despite the speaker’s attempt to control them. Attitudes on the other hand are deliberately shown.

<sup>3</sup> Chun, Dorothy.M. 2002. *Discourse Intonation in L2 from theory and research to practice*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing company. p. 3

<sup>4</sup> Crystal, David. 1985. *A dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing

<sup>5</sup> Couper-Kuhlen, E. 1986. *An Introduction to English Prosody*. London and Tuebingen: Edward Arnold and Niemeyer.

In the past, this aspect of intonation was mainly focused on in teaching English to foreign students. They were taught that using the inappropriate or wrong pronunciation may lead to awkward or even offensive situations.

The accentual function of intonation, closely linked to stress, refers to the signaling out of the most important word in a sentence, by changing the pitch of voice on a syllable which the speaker wants to make prominent. Normally the accent falls on the last major word in a sentence, but by changing this focus, one may change the meaning conveyed.

e.g. He WALKS to school every day. (focus is on the action)

He walks TO SCHOOL every day. (focus on the place)

HE walks to school every day. (focus on the person)

Most recent theories have tended to focus on the discourse-level function of intonation. The term 'discourse' refers to any stretch of meaningful written or spoken communication. Intonation may be used to signal to the participants in a conversation what is considered shared knowledge and what is considered new information.

When the speaker is expressing information that is viewed as new to the conversation he will use a falling tone. Speakers will also use a falling tone when they are giving facts or expressing opinions they believe to be true.

On the contrary, when the information provided by the speaker is considered shared knowledge among the interlocutors, he/she will use a fall-rise intonation. It goes without saying that this new discourse perspective on intonation makes it possible to explain in much more detail the uses that speakers make of intonation. Actually, the grammatical, attitudinal and accentual function of intonation could all be viewed as different aspects of the discourse function.

## TEACHING INTONATION

Intonation is all about how we say things, rather than what we say. It is mainly an unconscious mechanism, which makes it such a complex aspect of pronunciation and which makes teachers reluctant when it comes to teaching it in the classroom. As Adrian Underhill rightly pointed out<sup>6</sup>, this happens because '...we are not in control of a practical, workable and trustworthy system through which we can make intonation comprehensible.'

It's true that poor pronunciation may hinder communication, but poor intonation can make communication quite a frustrating process leading to misunderstandings, to people taking offence or drawing the wrong conclusions. Our impression of the speaker's feelings, attitude, intention or disposition towards us is greatly derived from their use of intonation. Therefore, the effect of using inappropriate intonation should not be underestimated.

English teachers, teaching English as a second language, have long insisted on the correct pronunciation of words and phrases, leaving aside supra-segmental features like stress, intonation, linking and intrusion. But since the importance of intonation in communication has become undeniable, their focus has shifted towards the inclusion of supra-segmental features in their teaching.

Intonation is particularly difficult for learners of a second language to master and the main source of errors is the interference of L1 and L2 intonation systems. The question that arises is if there are universal patterns in acquiring the intonation system of a second language. Articles and studies on L2 production of intonation have come up with a list of

---

<sup>6</sup> Underhill, A. 1994. *Sound Foundations: Living Phonology*. Oxford: Heinemann. p. 75

similar errors to be found in the production of L2 English intonation by speakers with different language backgrounds<sup>7</sup>:

- a narrower pitch range
- problems with the correct placement of prominence
- replacements of rises with falls and vice-versa
- incorrect pitch on unstressed syllables
- differences in final pitch rise etc.

The first step for language teachers should be to identify the source of these errors. As mentioned in the first part of the article, intonation performs several linguistic and paralinguistic functions, ranging from the marking of grammatical categories, to expressing feelings, attitudes, to pointing out in longer stretches of language what is considered new information and what is considered shared knowledge. To avoid intonation errors, teachers should raise students' awareness to the differences in intonation across languages. Teachers should point out the ways in which the intonation in students' native language differs from the intonation patterns in the target language, English in our case. Being aware of these differences will not only help students to use the correct intonation pattern but it will also help them to interpret what they hear.

Speech without intonation is like a machine or a robot. Such a speech would not ensure effective communication, since it is not what you say, but how you say it that sheds light on the communicative situation. Therefore, the inclusion of intonational patterns of English in the curricula designed for teaching English as a foreign language is a must; mastering the correct intonation patterns of English is a requirement for an efficient communication with native or non-native speakers of the language.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY:

1. Brazil, D., Coulthard, M., and Johns, C. 1980. *Discourse Intonation and Language Teaching*. London: Longman.
2. Chun, Dorothy M. 2002. *Discourse Intonation in L2 from theory and research to practice*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
3. Couper-Kuhlen, E. 1986. *An Introduction to English Prosody*. London and Tuebingen: Edward Arnold and Niemeyer.
4. Crystal, David. 1976. *Prosodic Systems and Intonation in English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
5. Crystal, David. 1985. *A dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing
6. Mennen, Ineken. 2007. Phonological and Phonetic influences in non-native Intonation. In Trouvain, Jurgen et al (Ed.) *Trends in Linguistics. Non-Native Prosody: Phonetic Description and Teaching Practice*. Berlin: Mouton
7. Sharp, Alan. 1958. "Falling-rising Intonation Pattern in English", in *Phonetica* 2.
8. Suci, Giulia. 2014. *English Phonetics and Phonology Revisited*. Oradea: Editura Universitatii din Oradea
9. Underhill, A. 1994. *Sound Foundations: Living Phonology*. Oxford: Heinemann.

---

<sup>7</sup>Mennen, Ineken. 2007. Phonological and Phonetic influences in non-native Intonation. In Trouvain, Jurgen et al (Ed.) *Trends in Linguistics. Non-Native Prosody: Phonetic Description and Teaching Practice*. Berlin: Mouton p.55

Iulian Boldea, Dumitru-Mircea Buda (Editors)

***CONVERGENT DISCOURSES. Exploring the Contexts of Communication***

Arhipelag XXI Press, Tîrgu Mureş, 2016

ISBN: 978-606-8624-17-4

Section: Communication, Public Relations and Journalism

184

Yang, L.-C. 1995. *Prosodic Structures and Discourse Organization*. Proceedings of the XIIIth International Congress of Phonetic Sciences. Stockholm, Sweden. Vol. 2: 274-277.