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Intonation in the Teaching of English: Decorative Detail or Essential Working Part?

Hur viktig är intonationen i engelsk språkfärdighet? Vilken plats har den i engelskundervisningen? Vilken plats bör den ha? Hur skapar man en hanterlig struktur i intonationsundervisningen och hur går man praktiskt till väga? Dessa och närliggande frågor diskuteras här av Richard Goymer. Goymer är sedan 1973 engelsk lektor vid universitetet i Oulu i Finland. Han är f.n. i färd med att publicera en kurs i engelsk intonation för yrkesverksamma inom affärsliv och administration: *Hit the Right Note* (Pohjoinen förlag).

Introduction

A creditable degree of lip service is paid in English teaching circles to the idea that intonation is somehow "important": studies in discourse have yielded a whole new vocabulary with which to describe this "importance", and yet when it comes to providing actual material to help the student in this particular area of language competence, or to providing specific instruction and guidance, you will find both textbooks and teachers remarkably shy of doing so. There would appear to be a sort of consensus of evasion which consists usually of "it should be integrated into general oral practice" or "it cannot and should not be taught in isolation". But exactly what should (or, more pertinently, could) be taught is rarely discussed in any detail.

We should not be too surprised at this state of affairs, since there are many factors, both obvious and less so, which inhibit the generation of a pedagogic model of English intonation that could be realistically and effectively employed by teachers. It is my intention here to outline some of these factors, to suggest what is lost by ignoring or skimming over this aspect of verbal competence, and to suggest what tangible gains are made by fostering a convincing intonation in the learner's spoken English.

Can Intonation Be Taught?

If we asked first of all whether intonation can actually be taught, the answer would be more or less the same as it would be regarding segmental sounds; that is, it can certainly be acquired, in that certain learners of a foreign language succeed in acquiring a highly accurate pronunciation by the same largely unconscious process of listening and imitation that a young child employs to learn the sounds of its own mother tongue. Intonation is certainly capable of being learnt; witness the non-native-speaker of a language who surprises one with the authentic 'tune' he or she has acquired. We may consciously admire the carefully learnt vocabulary, the faultless grammar, the clear sounds; but it is the tune, what we more often refer to as the 'tone', that confers on the excellent non-native-speaker of a language the final significant convincingness. To use a piece of current cant, it is an accurate intonation that 'empowers' the speaker. Very often our admiration of this accomplishment is enhanced by a conviction that what has been acquired cannot actually be 'learnt' by diligent application; that it is a "je ne sais quoi" that actually lies outside and beyond systematizable language skills.

A great many of the problems connected with intonation as part of language teaching proceed from this very conviction, from assumptions that intonation is not capable of any effective systematic description on a graspable pedagogic level, because it is believed to relate to features of personality, to expressions of emotion which are essentially ultralinguistic, so to speak; matters which at any rate lie outside the language teacher's brief. Language teachers may acknowledge a duty in varying degrees to teach aspects of the culture of the language(s) they teach, but most would hesitate to enter an area where more personal and individual characteristics seem to be involved.

In other words, we encounter a view of intonation that does not see it as an integral part of the language, arbitrary and systematic, and therefore not within the responsibility of the language teacher. But even if this were not the case, and we produced a 'model' for use in the classroom, we would face many of the same problems that arise with other systematic aspects – for segmental sounds, grammar and vocabulary. Most obviously there would be the notion of 'correctness'. Segmental sounds vary from dialect to dialect, both geographical and social, and the social and political issues called into play by selecting and insisting on one 'correct' form are well-known to most present-day language teachers. Suprasegmentals vary from dialect to dialect no less than segmentals; the English of Scotland, North America and Australia are distinguishable one from another no less by their characteristic melodies than by their segmental sounds.

Choosing a Model

Our choice of intonation model will inevitably run us into certain sociolinguistic dilemmas. It is currently the vogue among TEFL teaching circles in Europe to speak of a certain form of 'European' English, which is (notionally) purged of the often divisive and hierarchical overtones inherent in the native dialects, a form of English which is 'functional' and 'international' in the way we may suppose European medieval Latin was. But this 'functional' European English is inevitably a derivative in significant ways of native models, and the criterion of 'clarity' among the speakers of this form of English (if we accord it some sort of tangible existence) rests without doubt on its correspondence to some 'model' with which English-speakers are familiar. In the spoken form of the language, 'familiarity' in the ear of the English-speaking listener will refer in significant part to familiarity of tone or tune. Just as our ear is attuned to phrases rather than to each individual word, so it is attuned to suprasegmentals (tune contours) rather than to each individual sound (these latter only when a blemish or failure is habitual or is making comprehension difficult at a particular point). I would hazard the assertion that even linguistic sophisticates would underestimate the degree to which 'familiarity of tune' influences their estimation of the quality of another person's spoken English. The modern mass-media give us the opportunity of listening to English of outstanding quality spoken by non-native-speakers, and whether the speaker is using a generally southern English model (as is the case with Hans van den Broek, the Dutch Foreign Minister) or a north American one (as is the case with Vitaly Churkin, Russian special envoy in former Yugoslavia) these speakers are distinguished by a complete command of English intonation.

So it is there, it is acquirable, and it distinguishes the most effective users of English. But the teacher of English wishes to know whether it must be left to chance, as it were, that the learner 'picks up the tune' or whether there can be developed a reliable model which could be used within a syllabus for non-native learners.

The Problem of Systematization

What part of the intonation system in English can be reliably systematized, related regularly to the other systems within the language – to grammar, to morphology, to semantics, to pragmatic strategies? Which aspects of English suprasegmental phonology can be reliably isolated, treated as arbitrary and fixed, as with segmentals, and which will permit the reliable generation of examples?

A considerable amount of what would nominally be considered under the heading of intonation would indeed probably fall outside these categories, would be identified as idiosyncratic, reflecting the speaker's personality and the emotions or attitudes he or she happens to be expressing in any situation, rather than a linguistic system to which he or she could be said to be conforming in some way. This is significant, because it is at this point that the teacher attempting to instil a 'natural' intonation will most likely meet resistance, particularly from students other than very young children. There would appear to be some sort of invisible line of tolerance in pronunciation learning running down between segmentals and suprasegmentals, as regards what adult learners in particular are prepared to conform to. Sounds, yes; it is accepted that they may vary from language to language. Tunes, no; that is something (as adumbrated above) to do with personality rather than language. It does not help here to argue in those familiar general terms that a foreign language always invites one into and involves one in 'different ways of being'. In particular, such notions as 'European' English, however beneficial they may be otherwise, tend to encourage learners to think that they can ignore details and peripheral matters, in which latter intonation will more or less certainly be included.

However, an identifiable proportion of intonation features in the major world dialects of English would appear to be capable of some systematization. Syntactic patterns and pragmatic strategies (different kinds of question, invitations, elicitations, polite refusals, for example) are perhaps the most rewarding areas in which to search for reliably generative forms.

Native-Language Interference

It is not possible here to raise the question as to whether we should assume that there is automatic native-speaker competence in intonation (most of us are familiar with the instance in which a native-speaker of English is said to jeopardize his or her amicable dealings with others through an 'unfortunate tone of voice' – but this would still appear to refer to that area outside language) but obviously the non-native learner will be impeded above all by interference, which will operate here as in other aspects of language; more so, in fact, for the very reasons discussed above, that intonation is generally conceived as lying outside language. While some learners acquire the tune, most import into the language they are learning, more or less unmodified, the characteristic patterns of their own native language attached to the corresponding syntactic and pragmatic strategies of that language. These, of course, will vary from language to language. Suprasegmentals of cognate languages may appear to bear significant similarities, and although certain 'universals' have been proposed (e.g. higher average pitch in questions [Bolinger 1989:39]) these are by no means to be relied upon to obviate misunderstandings and communication breakdowns which result from the unconscious imposition on a foreign language of intonation 'norms' which are not transferable. Sometimes, indeed, the intonation conventions of the speaker's native language will cause a specific error in coding when transferred. The use of a vocative in Finnish, calling someone by name to attract their attention, is not a very widespread habit in that language, but when it is used, it is used with a simple falling tone. In English, where the vocative is more frequent, the corresponding 'standard' tone is the fall-rise. The simple fall in an English vocative would appear 'marked' to most English-speakers (Paul! Stop that! Come here at once!) as indicating a certain acerbity or severity on the speaker's part. It is often the signal for attack or criticism of some kind. This is the kind of situation which can be created by an ingenuous transference of native-language tune patterns; the unintentional communication of certain attitudes.

Therefore it is well to incorporate instruction in intonation into language-teaching programmes to protect the learner from marking his speech with inappropriate emotional overtones. It is perhaps even more important to guide intonation in learners to prevent unwanted expressions of emotion than (as is often thought in connection with intonation) to facilitate expression of emotion.

In an ideal situation, intonation training would be an integral part of language teaching from the very start; ideally there would be no such thing as pronunciation teaching beyond elementary or early intermediate level. Pronunciation, like handwriting, is largely formed for better or worse early on; habits become ingrained which are then difficult to alter, if not impossible. But there is no such thing as an ideal situation in language teaching, and there exist in large numbers students of English with more or less formed habits of pronunciation, who no longer possess the child's finer sense of hearing and uninhibited willingness to mimic and to internalize by sheer mimicry, but who are anxious to improve their verbal delivery, and who require some sort of systematic guidance in achieving this improvement.

The Situation in Finland

My own experience of training and re-training students of English in matters of pronunciation and intonation has been with first-year university students of English whose native language is Finnish, a non-Indo-European language whose phonology and prosody is remote from that of English. It has to be said that the situation has changed noticeably over the twenty years since I first started teaching in Finland; the mass media exposure of the English language in Finland has increased markedly so that the students of the present day no longer, as did their predecessors of twenty years ago, relate to English entirely as a foreign language. Nevertheless, the problems in pronunciation remain the same in kind if not degree. An otherwise fluent delivery, with accurate grammar and clear segmentals in fact only serves to draw attention, in the case of the native Finnish speaker of English, to the often alien and inappropriate intonation patterns employed.

This stems more or less entirely from the importation of Finnish tune patterns into English phrases and sentences. Certain key features of Finnish suprasegmental phonology – universal first-syllable tonal stress at word level, an evenly-distributed falling tone contour through the phrase, and the almost total lack of any rising tone – contradict entirely certain key features of English suprasegmental phonology, and produce the disconcerting effect familiar to all native English-speaking teachers who have taught in Finland for any length of time.

The published material available at the time I started teaching in Finland – this comprised largely the courses in English intonation by O'Connor and Arnold (1973), and by Halliday (1970) – was of very limited assistance to me for two reasons. Firstly, these studies, although they provided exercises, were descriptive rather than pedagogic in emphasis; they sought to account for all possible tune patterns one may be likely to hear among native speakers. The model they offered was far too complex to be of direct pedagogic assistance. Secondly, much of the classification at least in O'Connor and Arnold was based upon emotion and attitude on the part of the speaker, and the material was in many cases insufficiently contextualized. When used as teaching material, the students could be fairly successfully trained to parrot the models, but it led them no further in being able to extrapolate reliable generative patterns for use in free conversation. The very detailed body of information given as to which pattern should be used when might be learnt up by heart for an examination, but the model was not as a whole sufficiently economical to facilitate the development of an accurate basic tune in English.

Developing a Simplified Model

What was required was a simplified model that did not necessarily attempt to account for more 'delicate' (in the linguistic sense) distinctions of emotion and attitude, but which would act as a sort of 'melodic brace' to help correct the tune contour being imported by interference from the native language; a model which would accommodate a series of key contrasts reflecting essential syntactic and pragmatic distinctions – questions of various types, commands, invitations, negatives, foregrounded adverbials, other dependent clauses and so on; a model that would provide also a basic tune contour.

The simplified version I developed, based on the four-phase tone unit found in most intonation studies (pre-head, head, nucleus, and tail) included the following key features:

1) jump upwards in pitch from unstressed pre-head to first stressed syllable
2) relatively constant height of stressed syllables in the head
3) the 'slide' through the voice range from top to bottom (or vice versa in the case of rising tone) on the nuclear syllable
4) the behaviour of the unstressed tail syllables following the nucleus
5) three basic nuclear patterns (fall, rise and fall-rise)

This basic tune pattern for any utterance in English represents the 'bridge' pattern (where the voice begins and ends low, with a 'raised' section in the middle) formed the 'melodic brace' for the Finnish students to use as a guide, a corrective to the different basic tune of Finnish, a 'base-tune' to internalize and generate from.

Strategic Speech-Acts

Then from this skeletal model, certain strategic 'speech acts' were selected to illustrate and distinguish the three main tunes one from another. The selection was aimed towards finding patterns and features of intonation which could be related clearly to some grammatical or communicative structure, and from which the student could then generate his/her own examples by analogy. A classification on purely syntactic criteria was clearly inadequate; it seems more or less accepted that intonation in English is very clearly pragmatic; a speech act which is by syntax a statement ('You told him') becomes a question when the direction of the nucleus is reversed, and a speech act which would syntactically be identified as an imperative ('Come in') could be interpreted variously as a command or an encouraging invitation, depending largely on the direction of the nucleus selected by the speaker. Then there are wide areas where classification would straddle syntactic and pragmatic boundaries, and of course context will limit the speaker's choice of pattern (i.e. what has already been introduced or is understood between two speakers). So classification will always be a kind of comprimise, the criterion being whether a particular pattern will generate reliably beyond the examples the student is given.

It is important that as soon as examples of the key patterns have been practised for articulation, they be contextualized; that is, presented in some representative dialogue situation so that the student can observe how the pattern would occur naturally, when it is needed. This is necessary so as to avoid the rather unhelpful demands of some published material to 'say this in a surprised way' or 'be angry with the other speaker'. The intonation patterns selected must be pragmatically clear and sufficiently contextualized as to appear the inevitable choice, an integral part rather than mere decorative detail.

In this connection, a great advantage for the teacher of non-beginners, of students who have been exposed in one way or another fairly extensively to English, is that such students often have an ear for what they may call 'the natural native sound'. A suitably simplified pedagogic model of English should aim at showing the student what this 'sound' mainly consists of, and how it can be acquired.

It is clear that the selection of key patterns made will be very directly influenced by likely interference problems, and would seek to avoid 'redundant' instruction in features duplicated from the native language. Since falling tone is a more or less universal neutral or unmarked pitch direction (and as stated before, virtually universal in all utterances in Finnish) the forms and patterns illustrating this tone (statements, information-seeking WH-? questions and so on) would be used to practise other key features (pre-head to head jump in pitch, or maintenance of pitch height through the head) which do require remoulding. Taking once again the example of my Finnish speaking students, rising tone requires more thorough and extensive practice by them than by speakers of languages cognate to English. A polar (yes-no) question in English, when a genuine information-seeker, is marked by a rising tone of some sort. The same question posed with a falling tone can easily become some other sort of speech act altogether (a rhetorical gesture, a proposal of some kind, or even some sort of hectoring interrogation). In addition to warning students off this sort of unintended choice, there are several uses of the rising tone (in grammatical imperatives which are uttered as invitations or polite requests ('sit down, please', 'don't worry, take your time') acquiring which can extend the student's range of 'delicacy'; or, as in the case of the repetition-seeking WH-? question ('When did you tell me he was leaving?') which enlarge the pragmatic moves available. It is such competence with tune that subtly transforms the speaker's 'image'. In all events, the almost total lack of rising tone robs native Finnish-speaking speakers of English of a whole set of communicative tools, the result of which can be to damage initial approaches in a conversation. Systematic guidance in how the system generally functions will alert the student to the benefits of using its resources.

With the third main tune in English, the fall-rise, it would be well once again to begin with something of a communicative 'sine qua non' that is not duplicated in the native language – in the case of my Finnish students, the vocative alluded to earlier – calling out someone's name to get their attention. This is easy to teach, universal of application and communicatively of vital importance. Other reliably generative uses of the fall-rise tone would include the initial adverbial or other dependent clauses. Here, of course, its use cannot be claimed to be universal among native speakers, or its omission to jeopardize in any significant way communicative efficiency. It is rather a question of putting finish or polish on the student's delivery. But at the same time it can be linked to a pragmatic usage that is closely related – that is, warning the listener that although the particular phrase or clause to which it is attached may be syntactically complete, the speaker has not finished what he or she has to say. This would shade into the expression of hesitation or reservation in general (where the next clause is likely to be opened with the word 'but') and thus a whole area of pragmatic competence is opened up by a technical grasp of the function of the fall-rise in English.

It would, as I have already stated, be absurd to attempt to present anything that is self-evident because replicated in the student's own mother tongue, and I am conscious that what is worthwhile for Finnish students to concentrate on in English intonation may be superfluous for students whose mother tongue is less remote from English. The teacher must necessarily have some grasp of how intonation functions in the learner's native language, as well as skills in presentation that cannot be enumerated here. Nevertheless, all attempts on the part of whatever student of whatever language to 'block' the importation of mother tongue tune patterns, and to acquire the tune conventions of the target language are laudable; as are all attempts to dispel the global superstition that 'we sound normal' and that 'foreigners sing'.

The Practical Application

As for actual teaching format and methods, it may be helpful to outline what sort of material I have myself used, and how I present it with my own students. Our basic course consists of a brief introduction to terminology followed by a graded series of study units, each one based on some key pattern or feature of English intonation (say, pitch jump from pre-head to head, or various directions of nucleus) which is in each unit related to some essential and clearly identifiable grammatical or pragmatic structure (say, information-seeking or rhetorical polar or WH? questions, polite invitations, initial dependent clauses and so on). For each pattern or feature, the student gets first of all a number of individual isolated examples for mechanical drill practice. The language laboratory is of course more or less indispensible here, as the aim is to attune the student's ear to a particular melodic feature which s/he may not otherwise notice or consider significant. A traditional (booth-layout) language laboratory also offers a degree of privacy for initial practice; students vary in this respect, but at least Finnish adult students, who tend towards an almost nurtured lack of self-confidence and to a hampering self-consciousness, respond well to having the opportunity of preparing in private before being called upon to 'perform'.

Once the tune feature is recognized and reproduced accurately in this mechanical stage, the student then passes on to the second part of the unit, in which the pattern is presented occurring in a more or less natural dialogue situation. The grammatical or pragmatic structure is illustrated performing 'in situ'. The dialogue consists of parts for two speakers, and the student has the opportunity of first repeating the lines, then of 'replying' to A's speeches with B's replies, so that s/he ends up 'conversing' with the master track. Finally, the students are asked to read aloud the dialogue, with correct intonation patterns, in pairs.

So the process is one of moving from mere mechanical repetition of a tune to studying it in context, as an integral part of spoken language strategies. Of course, this training is aimed at techniques of reading aloud, rather than at transforming the student's intonation in free spoken English; and this limitation is made clear to the students right from the start. Adult students who have already studied and been exposed in one way or another to the target language (and this is almost always the case with English nowadays) will have already formed habits of intonation as of grammar, morphology and lexicon. To pretend that a course is going to transform their free spoken English overnight is fatuous. On the other hand, techniques of effective reading aloud can be taught with a considerable degree of success, and an acquaintance with the intonation system which has been imparted with some degree of systematic practice is an enormous help to the student.

Our aim, therefore, with our students is to help them gain confidence, clarity and accuracy when they convert a piece of written English (whether it be discursive or dramatic, monologue or dialogue) into spoken form. Again, we must remember that other skills than those associated strictly with foreign-language instruction are involved here; being a native speaker does not per se mean that one is a competent or effective reader aloud. We consider this skill important not only because many or most of our students will become teachers (and as such must be competent to provide a clear model for their pupils) but also because the skill of reading aloud inevitably involves developing intellectual skills of comprehension and interpretation, and it is here that the pronunciation courses in our department are seen as relating to other parts of the English syllabus.

Integration with Other Courses

In order to bind our intonation course more closely to the rest of the syllabus, and to edge intonation studies ever nearer to the use of 'real' language, this course is followed by a play-reading course in which students tackle extracts from plays originally written in English, using their knowledge of intonation in conjunction with literary and discourse analysis to 'reconstruct' how they think the extracts would sound actually performed. The students also find this course useful as a reminder of what is involved when one claims to have 'understood' what one has read. The extracts in this course are arranged in reverse historical order, beginning with modern plays influenced by the theatre of the absurd, then running back through the 19th and 18th centuries and ending with extracts from Shakespeare. Different kinds of 'difficulty' are experienced; the modern plays very often have extremely 'simple' language, but the dramatic meaning is often very hard to grasp. On the other hand, once the intimidating 'antiquity' of Shakespeare's language has been overcome, the students often find the dramatic meaning of his scenes much easier to grasp (and therefore to recreate when reading aloud).

Throughout these courses, the language laboratory is used as and when it is required (for mechanical practice of a tune, or for 'polishing' a reading) but all exercises move towards strengthening the student's performance before an actual audience. And while limiting the aims of these courses to reading aloud from various texts, we always try to emphasise intonation, as being an integral part of all spoken performance, and not simply a peripheral detail reflecting mere idiosyncracies of the particular speaker's personality.

Concluding Remarks

It has been my attempt here to survey briefly the issues influencing the teaching of intonation, and to suggest from my own experience that it is indeed possible to develop this area of linguistic competence in learners at all stages if there is available teaching material which is clear, reliable and realistically limited in its targets. There is no 'mystique' about acquiring a convincing intonation, contrary to the assumption I described at the beginning of this piece; it requires simply patience and attention to detail on the part of both teacher and learners.

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ROWENA JANSSON

What Means *Do*?

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Over the years many a student has asked me, "What means *do*" and I have replied that it does not mean anything. Puzzlement has induced the next question, "Why we need?" And, in my ignorance, I have replied that we need it because that is the way English works. Well, of course, there is a more comprehensive answer than this and, in the catch phrase of a famous English radio comedy show, "The answer lies in the soil." Neither God nor the grammarians suddenly said, "Let there be *do*!". No, *do* demonstrates a process of language evolution. It arose to fill a need created by the changing phonological, morphological and syntactic patterns of English which at the end of the Middle Ages were developing and evolving at a much faster rate than at any time in the history of the English language. To find the answer we must go back into the history, back to the roots, into the soil of English.

Old English is characterized as the period of full endings, Middle English as that of levelled endings and Modern English as that of lost endings. The inflectional systems of Old and Middle English had allowed a flexible word order in the syntactic system but once the inflections began to disappear, without a more rigid word order, meanings were no longer clear. In the interests of efficient communication other means were adopted to fill the gaps. *Do* represents one of these fillers.

If we look at the functions of *do* in Present-day English we can then go back in time and see when it was first used in these functions (as far as there are records to show this) and examine why.

Setting aside the function of *do* as a main verb, its functions as an auxiliary or operative are: as a pro-verb, either as a substitute for a main verb or on its own; as a 'dummy' in Yes-No questions and WH-questions both positive and negative where no other auxiliary or operator exists in the main verb; in directives in front of a negative; and for emphasis to deny a negative statement or implication or to express purely emotive force.

According to Ellegård's graph (1953:162) it appears that *do* indicating a grammatical function began to be active in a small way through the fifteenth century but rather suddenly at the turn of the century it became much more common in negative questions (from 10% to 60% over a period of twenty years) and this increase was soon followed by an increase in affirmative questions using the 'empty' *do* function. For example, subject-verb inversion, *Seest thou these things?* (Translation of Virgil, 1540) could alternate with, *or do we fear in vain Thy boasted Thunder?* (Translation of Vir-