

## Teaching Discourse Intonation

### What is Discourse Intonation?

The term discourse intonation is used in two ways: first, as a general approach to intonation in English that addresses its multi-functional role in discourse, as opposed to its traditional presentation at the utterance level. This is clearly described by Chun (2002) who outlines four functions of intonation in spoken discourse:

**A grammatical function** including the use of intonation as one way to distinguish between statements and questions or to disambiguate relative clauses

**An attitudinal function** that examines the role of intonation, among other variables, in communicating affective meaning

**A discourse function** that encompasses systematic uses of intonation to signal aspects of informational and interactional structure such as marking boundary strength or regulating turn-taking in conversation

**An indexical function** that focuses on the way that intonation patterns can mark a speaker's affiliation with a distinct group such as the high-rising tone that characterizes *Valley Girl speech* or *Uptalk*.

Second, it refers to a particular model of intonation in English described by Brazil (1985/1997) that comprises four basic systems and encompasses all these functions under an overall discourse-pragmatic approach. Below, we will describe each of these systems and look at the ways in which they might be described and taught in ESL/EFL.

#### (1) Dividing speech into units

Within Brazil's model, these are called 'tone units', but they are also commonly referred to as 'thought groups', 'tone groups' or 'intonation units' in the pedagogical literature. Speakers' creation of tone units is guided by their perception of complete semantic or syntactic chunks of language; for example, a question; a single clause (subject + predicate); or the division of complex clauses (independent + dependent clauses). The important thing to remember is that what constitutes a single unit in spoken discourse can be very flexible; for example, a single exclamation //Dude!// can be a tone unit. Tone units are also frequently separated by pauses, but that depends in large part on the speech genre in question. In the case of more measured speech, for example public speaking, pausing is often the most prominent cue to separating tone units. But in faster paced conversational speech there may be few or no intervening pauses marking unit division. The most salient cue to unit division is the use of pitch prominence.

#### (2) Highlighting prominent information

The feature of prominence is marked by increased pitch, length, and volume on the primary stressed syllable in any prominent word. It is important here to distinguish prominence from lexical or word stress. Every word in English spoken in citation form has lexical or word stress on one syllable, e.g. BOOK or PACKage. But in a discourse context, only *some* of those words

are made prominent. Those are the ones that the speaker chooses to emphasize because of his/her particular meaning. In the following example, speaker B makes PACKage prominent and de-emphasizes books as this is already clear from the ongoing interaction:

Speaker A: //was there a BOOK there//

Speaker B: //there was a PACKage of books there//

Although there may be more than one prominence in each tone unit, each complete tone unit will have at least one prominence termed the ‘tonic syllable’ (or focus word). This carries the critical information that the speaker wishes to highlight in that tone unit; for example, in the interaction above, BOOK and PACKage comprise the tonic syllables in each unit. Choices of tonic syllables mirror common informational functions such as highlighting new information (PACKage) or establishing a contrast, e.g., I said the LARGE umbrella (not the small one).

### (3) Choosing the pitch pattern on the focus word

This is often the system that is most familiar to ESL/EFL practitioners and students as it addresses whether the pitch on the tonic syllable falls (↘), rises (↗), or stays level (→). Choice of specific pitch movement or tone depends on how the common ground is assessed between speaker and hearer. For example, look at the tone units below:

A: //I can’t find my ↘ BOOK//

B: //what’s it ↘ CALLED//

*Or*

B: // what’s it ↗ CALLED//

In this example the speaker can choose to respond with either a rising or falling tone on the *wh*-question. Choice of a falling tone glosses as something like “*I don’t know what book you are talking about; tell me the title*”. It suggests that the speaker is requesting new information. Choice of a rising tone on the *wh*- question, however, glosses as something like “*I think I know what book you are looking for; confirm the title.*” In this case, there is an assumption on the part of the speaker that this information may already be shared between them. The next example shows a similar pragmatic distinction with *yes-no* questions. In this case, it is a query from a doctor that may commonly appear as part of a doctor-patient interview:

Doctor: //do you feel ↗ ANxious?//

*Or*

Doctor: //do you feel ↘ ANxious?//

In the first case, the rising tone glosses as something like “*based on your other responses, I think this seems like a reasonable perspective, and I can assume it is shared. Please confirm that this is a correct assumption*”. In the second case, the falling tone glosses rather as: “*This is one question in a list of questions that I want to ask you. I am asking you for this new piece of information, and I have no specific expectations.*”

Finer communicative nuances may be carried by fall-rise (↘↗) and rise-fall (↗↘) tone choices, and interested readers can find these discussed in detail in Pickering (2018). A final level tone (→) realized with either a sustained level pitch or a slightly rising pitch is described as a “neutral” tone. This is often used in routinized utterances such as giving directives, e.g., //close your →BOOKS// take out your →PENS//...; or service encounter interactions, e.g., //→THANKS//, //my →PLEAsure// (Cheng, Greaves, & Warren, 2008, p. 134).

In summary, by choosing certain tones, speakers project a context in which they expect to be understood by co-operative hearers.

#### (4) Choosing pitch height on prominent syllables

In addition to choices of pitch movement, speakers make systematic use of pitch range by choosing low (↘), mid (⇒) or high (↗) pitch choices on prominent syllables. These choices, called ‘Key’ on any onset prominent syllable and ‘Termination’ on the tonic syllable, play an important role in cueing the opening and closing of interactions among other functions. Consider the common classroom interaction pattern shown below which is often called an Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) exchange:

Teacher: //⇒WHAT’s the final ⇒ANSwer//  
Student: //⇒TWELVE//  
Teacher: //⇒TWELVE ↘GOOD//

The teacher’s first key and termination choices on WHAT and ANSwer are given in a mid or neutral pitch. The student responds with a similar mid termination choice which projects agreement with the teacher and glosses as something like “*I think it’s twelve; and I think you’ll agree with me?*” In the final turn of the interaction, the teacher uses a mid key to repeat the student’s answer (“*I agree with you; the answer is twelve*”), followed by a low termination on the tonic syllable GOOD which marks the exchange as complete as in this context, the final third move is the teacher’s prerogative.

These pitch level choices are also used by speakers to mark the boundaries of “pitch paragraphs”, and by hearers to interpret these boundaries. As long as we remain flexible with the analogy, we can think of pitch or speech paragraphs as analogous to written paragraphs in the sense that both typically deal with a single topic or idea. Speech paragraphs typically begin with a high key onset often accompanied by an accelerated speech rate, and close with a low termination accompanied by a drop in volume.

#### Teaching Discourse Intonation

An important first step in teaching the discourse intonation system is to focus on developing the four systems independently to avoid overwhelming instructors or students who both may be new to focused intonation training. Some examples of useful activities are given below:

**Tone unit structure and prominence:**

Reading aloud short passages from authentic discourse can be used to promote thought group fluency and prominence patterns for low-proficiency learners. Practicing and giving spoken presentations of any length improves thought group fluency for intermediate and advanced learners. Scripted or read-aloud speech is not advocated at these proficiency levels because it can encourage memorization rather than real-time production, and this will significantly alter intonation choices.

**Tone choice:** Information gap tasks can be designed for any proficiency level to focus both on the use of tone for informational purposes and to highlight the role of tone choice in establishing friendly cooperation. At higher proficiency levels, roleplays can be very productive, particularly if the roles incorporate asymmetrical interaction, e.g., manager and employee.

**Key and Termination choice:** Narratives or picture stories can be used to highlight the role of pitch paragraphing as speakers transition from one part of the story to the next. Use of recorded conversational interactions can also be used to encourage higher proficiency learners to examine the role of key and termination in turn-taking.

**Final thoughts**

The intonation system of English works in a discourse context and is most productively approached that way. Intonation choices interact with each other, the specific context of the interaction and the perceived relationship between speaker and hearer. When these choices are isolated from one another, such as by teaching intonation through individual utterances without context, it becomes much more complicated to understand the system as a whole.

(**NOTE:** This *Key Concepts* entry is based on the 2018 publication *Discourse Intonation: A discourse-pragmatic approach to teaching the pronunciation of English* which contains many more examples and teaching tips.)

## References

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