

MEANING IN TERMS OF INTONATION

P. Jesenská

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The learners of English language tend to think that using “magical words“ such as *please*, *can/could*, *may/might*, *would* (e.g. in the phrase *would you mind...?*), *thank you* etc. are sufficient enough to sound polite. English learners usually forget that language does not consist of mere words and that there is something “behind“ that makes us seem polite, fair-spoken, and mannerable. Spolsky [1998: 19,124] characterises politeness as recognition of others' people rights in a certain social situation and we add that we can express it by the means of lexis, gestures, mimics and, last but not least, intonation. Certainly, when talking about intonation we have to take into account also other suprasegmental features besides intonation but we have decided to deal primarily with intonation and the way it can change the meaning of a discourse.

It is obvious that the most significant part in intonation is played by pitch [compare with Jones, 1992: 149 and Jesenská, 2001: 25] which can be described in terms of high and low referring to the end points of the pitch scale. It would also be perfectly reasonable to think of pitch as ranging instead from light to heavy, for instance, from left to right, and people who have difficulty in hearing intonation patterns are generally only having difficulty in relating what they hear. However, the range of intonation is extensive – when people speak their intonation often touches notes both higher and lower than they can sing. The range is usually wider in the declamatory style of speech than in conversation.

Intonation bears relevant information which is not carried by any other means and therefore has several significant functions in interaction (not only) with other interlocutors. Antipova et al. [1974: 9] state four main functions of intonation:

1) **Sentence/utterance forming function** or we could say **grammatical function** is important because intonation becomes important part of grammatical realisation of an utterance. Antipova et al. [ibid.] set the example of a simple sentence showing necessity of unambiguity with plain communicative goal without distinguishing in pitch and stress. So the following sentence (utterance) can be taken for a statement, a question, an exclamation, or an implication of one's attitude depending on intonation:

He's 'passed his e↘xam. – a (pure) statement

He's 'passed his e↗xam? – a question

He's 'passed his e↘xam? – a question as an expression of surprise /it is unbelievable that he has passed his exam because he had not been studying a lot)

He's ↘passed his e↘xam. – an exclamation

He's ↘passed his e↘↗xam. – a statement suggesting that he must know something, he may not be so lazy and now he deserves to take a rest after all.

2) **Sentence-delimiting function** helps to recognise the end of a sentence/utterance by means of pauses of different length together with an emphasis on the most prominent word/part of an utterance. This is nowadays called also accentual function. Look at the following example sentence: *When danger threatens your children call the police*. Two different sorts of intonation change the semantics of the whole sentence. Compare case a) and case b).

a) *When danger threatens your children call the police*.

b) *When danger threatens your children call the police.*¹

Italics highlight the intonation phrase boundary (delimitation of syntactic constituents).

3) **Distinctive function** of intonation is obvious from the fact that communicatively different types of sentences/utterances are distinguished by intonation alone: for instance the following sentence can express a polite request (a) or a categoric order (b) depending on its intonation:

(a) a rising tone – 'Wait ↗here!

(b) a falling tone – 'Wait ↘here!

This function may be also named **discourse function** because this one looks at the act of speaking in a broader way in a sense that intonation can signal the listener what is to be taken as new information and what is already given; it may indicate a contrast, convey to the listener what kind of response is expected and so forth. [Jesenská, 2001]

By means of intonation various ranges of meaning can be seen uttering such a simple monosyllabic word as *yes*:

(a) ↘yes – meaning: That is so.

(b) ↘yes (but starting from the higher point of pitch) – meaning: Of course it is so.

(c) ↗yes↘ – meaning: Most certainly.

(d) →yes↗ – meaning: Is it really so?

(e) →yes↗ (but lower than in case d) – meaning: Yes, I understand what you have said. / Please, go on (in the telephone conversation).

(f) ↘yes↗ – meaning: It may be so.

[Jones, 1992: 151]

4) **Attitudinal function** of intonation expresses the mood and emotions of a speaker, their attitude to the certain situation and also to the listener or other interlocutor. This function is expressed only by intonation as well.

A single sentence can be pronounced in a number of different ways depending on intonation of the utterance. For instance, *What a beautiful day!* may be interpreted in the following ways:

(a) *What a beautiful day!* Simple fall pattern of intonation – meaning: when said perfunctorily;

(b) *What a beautiful day!* Rising intonation – meaning: when said enthusiastically;

(c) *What a beautiful day!* Rising-fall intonation – meaning: when said sarcastically.

However, intonation can create differences in meaning that go further beyond attitudinal information. The sentence *I didn't get the job because of my husband.* can be understood from two points of view depending on intonation.

1 The sentence *I didn't get the job because of my husband.* pronounced with the falling intonation means that the speaker did not get the job because her husband messed things up.

2 The same sentence *I didn't get the job because of my husband.* pronounced with the rising intonation at the end of the utterance means that the speaker did get the job but her husband could not claim any credit for the achievement [Lier,1995:25].

Besides we should also bear in mind the conversational maxims. The success of a conversation depends upon the various speakers' approach to the interaction. The way in which people try to make conversations work is sometimes called a co-operative principle.

¹ The above-mentioned example has been taken from the following web site
<http://ufal.ms.mff.cuni.cz/~ess2001/doc/grabe/Grabe1.ppt#38>.

This can be explained by four underlying rules or maxims. (They are also named Grice's maxims, after the language philosopher, H.P. Grice.) They are the maxims of quality, quantity, relevance and manner.

- a) Quality – speakers should tell the truth. They should not say what they think is false, or make statements for which they lack evidence.
- b) Quantity – a contribution should be as informative as is required for the conversation to proceed. It should be neither too little, nor too much. (It is not clear how one can decide what quantity of information satisfies the maxim in a given case.)
- c) Relevance – speakers' contributions should relate clearly to the purpose of the exchange.
- d) Manner – speakers' contributions should be perspicuous: clear, orderly and brief, avoiding obscurity and ambiguity.

Taking turns

Conversations are based on speakers taking turns to make an utterance. Ideally, these come in adjacency pairs – an initiation or request for information meets an immediate response. There may also be feedback to express satisfaction or thanks.

Line 1: Pupil: *Will you look at my personal statement, sir?*

Line 2: Teacher: *I'm teaching now, but come at lunchtime.*

Line 3: Pupil: *Oh, thanks.*

Line 4: Teacher: *Do you know what courses you want to apply for?*

Line 5: Pupil: *Most of them, well I think so.*

Line 6: Teacher: *Yes, and we're only in December.*

The adjacency pairs are in the first two lines, and lines four and five. The feedback is in lines three and six. You can see how this simple model might be complicated by all sorts of interruptions. For example, another pupil arrives and asks (after Oh, thanks) for the teacher to fetch a colleague from the staffroom; the teacher looks in, tells the second pupil the other teacher is on the telephone, and so on.

There are various devices for claiming and keeping a turn. **Dropping intonation** may signal that a point is made, so a response is in order. Pauses for breath may also be taken as an opening (<http://www.universalteacher.org.uk/lang/speech.htm>).

Conclusion

When a person speaks, intonation (pitch) of their voice keeps changing and so it can be high or low. Without changing intonation any spoken utterance would have sounded extremely monotonous and it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to recognise the most important part of a speech. Pitch is used in all languages to add special significance to what is said, but it is not the same in all languages. No words are distinguished only by their intonation in English language [compare Christophersen 1970: 179]. In fact, any English word may have almost any intonation depending on the context or the situation. English intonation is something that is added to the utterance due to a special personal colouring and/or meaning regardless whether a single word or a whole sentence is spoken.

Perfect example can be a single word *yes* used as a separate utterance in reply to a question: if uttered in a falling tone (a glide from a high to a low note) it means a definite affirmative and there are no doubts or uncertainties from the side of a speaker, but if a tone of

a speaker is rising it may suggest that there is some hesitation or reservation on the interlocutor's side. These tones (rising or falling) can be added to other utterances (such as *no* or *maybe*) to express the same shades of meaning. Thus, English intonation forms part of the whole utterance because it suggests the interlocutor's attitudes, opinions, moods, and emotions to what they are saying.

Summary

Autorka článku MEANING IN TERMS OF INTONATION rozoberá štyri základné druhy funkcií intonácie, pomocou ktorých dochádza aj k zmene sémantiky celej sentence. Všíma sa aj tzv. *taking turns* (striedanie interlokútorov v prehovore), ktoré sú pre priebeh komunikácie nevyhnutné.

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