

**PROSODY IN ELICITATIONS:
A STUDY OF INTONATION IN BBC TALK RADIO SHOWS**

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***Abstract:** The paper is concerned with the prosodic features of non-literal language use in indirect elicitations in radio talk. It will be demonstrated how intonation becomes mirror of some contextual factors, and how the prosodic features of elicitations can corroborate the speaker's meaning manifested through certain lexico-grammatical elements in the discourse.*

***Keywords:** context, discourse, indirectness, lexico-grammar, prosody*

1. Introduction

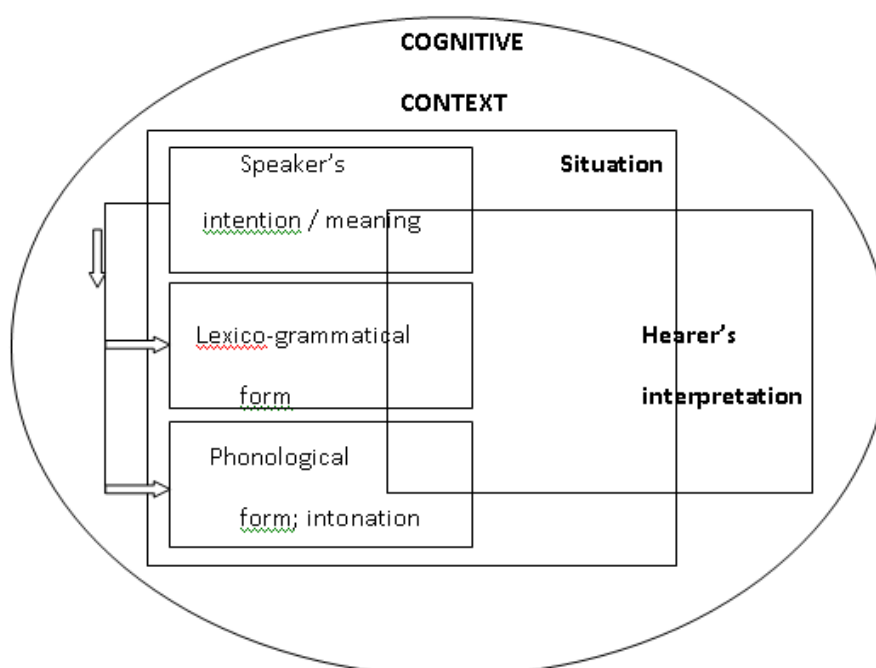
*“Every sign by itself seems dead. What gives it life? In use it is alive” (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §432).*

Croft and Cruse (2004:98-99) spell out Wittgenstein's message by highlighting the fact that although an isolated sign has semantically relevant properties, semantic potential, and “these properties have an influence on eventual interpretations”, “life” is breathed into a sign when it is given contextualized interpretation. The common view among cognitive linguists that meaning is construed in context and that non-linguistic knowledge plays a significant role in interpretation is justifiable when linguistic units are looked at in discourse. It is evident that even the same words in the same grammatical constructions may have different pragmatic effects (cf. e.g. Wells 2006:5). Indeed, if we think of the lexical meanings of the verbs *gather*, *understand*, *take*, *seem*, *must* or the conjunction *so*, we can hardly recall or instigate all possible interpretations. Discourse facts show that in natural conversations each of these lexical units occurs in Hypothetical acts, and, as a rule, the utterance in which they are selected by the speaker is typically understood by the addressee as elicitation for response.

There are some prevailing principles with regard to meaning in discourse: it evolves in the form – function correlation, hence it is contextually controlled, and the pragmatic effects of

utterance meaning can be achieved or enhanced by intonation. My view of discourse context is Relevance Theoretical. I assume that context is a mental phenomenon, it is a psychological construct controlled by *knowledge* involving shared assumptions about the world between the speaker and the hearer, selections from a variety of possible choices regarding appropriate interpretation, and as such, it is dynamic, changing from moment to moment in the discourse (cf. Sperber and Wilson:1995, 2002a, 2002b, Herczeg-Deli:2009a, 2009b among others). The hearer's understanding is correct if (s)he responds appropriately whether or not the speaker's linguistic form is straightforward, which signifies that the speaker's act has had a *positive cognitive effect*. One type of positive cognitive effects is *contextual implication* (see Sperber and Wilson 2002a:251), the interpretation of which requires the processing and selection of the possible assumptions regarding the speaker's meaning in the context.

The following figure is meant to illustrate the interdependence between the hearer's interpretation and the speaker's meaning and form – both lexico-grammatical and phonological – in the given cognitive context:



Prosodic features like prominence, pitch level and tone greatly contribute to the communicative value of an utterance. The speaker's intonation is spontaneously exploited by the hearer facilitating his selection from his assumptions about the speaker's intention and attitude towards him, albeit the interpretation of intonational cues may be subjective.

My research into the prosodic features of indirect elicitations aimed at uncovering the relationship between the lexico-grammar and the intonation of the language of Initiation Moves

in natural radio talk. I am interested in the contextual implications of intonation, the ways in which those contribute to the lexico-grammatical meaning of an utterance and the modes that reflect the speaker's intention. The source of the data is non-edited discourse on BBC Radio; talks in the studio and phone-in programmes. The transcriptions follow David Brazil's transcription model: the tone units begin with the signal of the type of tone identifiable in that particular stretch of discourse, prominence is marked with capital letters, the tonic syllable is underlined, and relative pitch level is also indicated. The transcriptions are complemented with arrows on the tonic syllables to make the recognition of the tone types easier to identify.

2. Speaker's Meaning and Intonation

Intonation is inseparable from the utterance, and it projects several aspects of the context. Roach (2009:146) recapitulates four commonly proposed functions of intonation. It can add a special kind of "meaning" to spoken language by indicating some emotions, which is usually called the "attitudinal function". The "accentual function" helps to produce the effect of prominence and thus to focus attention on a particular lexical item, while it has some "grammatical function" and makes the listener able to better recognize the information contained in the utterance. The fourth function is the discourse function. It can signal to the listener what is considered "new" by the speaker and what should be taken as "given" information, it can suggest contrast or some kind of link with material in another tone unit, and what is more, discourse intonation can convey to the listener what kind of response is expected. Two more functions are identified by Wells (2006:11-12). He refers to a "psychological function", pointing out that intonation helps us to organize speech into units that are easy to perceive, memorize and perform, and he also distinguishes the "indexical function" which reflects the participants' social identity.

On the whole, we can say that intonation is a kind of reflection of the *cognitive environment* of the individual (for the concept see Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995:38-46, 58-60), and its *pragmatic effects* are determined by the hearer's knowledge and abilities to identify the speaker's meaning and intention.

2.1. David Brazil's Model

Brazil (1985) is concerned with the relationship between the intonational features of an utterance and the "context of interaction". His rationale to some essential characteristics of discourse seems somehow analogous to Sperber and Wilson's theory; Brazil also presupposes that some kind of understanding of the situation is previously established and that the speaker's assumption is part of the communicative value of the utterance. He emphasizes that "intonation

projects a certain context of interaction” (1985:47). Therefore Brazil takes it as a general linguistic principle that:

whenever a speaker has a choice of meaningfully different courses of action, he may exercise that choice to make his utterance mesh with some presumed state of affairs already existing: or he may exploit his opportunity to choose, and represent the state of affairs in the light he wishes his hearer to see it in (Brazil 1985:48).

The idea of choice and its relationship to meaning chimes in with Sperber and Wilson’s concept of selection from a variety of possible interpretations (cf. Sperber and Wilson 1986:14-7), thus Brazil’s stance – although never stated so by him – has to be considered cognitively based, too.

For the description of the communicative values of intonation Brazil established *three systems*: *prominence*, which accounts for sense selection, *pitch-level choices*, which describe relative pitch heights in the tone units to determine the key (the onset) and the termination of the tonic segment, and *tones*, which project a context of interaction. These systems reveal a specific functional view of meaning rather than a phonetic connotation.

Tones in Brazil’s view represent discourse values of the assumptions of who knows what. Falling tone - - signals something freshly introduced into the conversation, something not yet present in the common ground, something the speaker assumes the hearer didn’t know. In Brazil’s terminology this is a *proclaiming* tone. Fall-rise - -, on the other hand, is termed *referring* tone; it is used by the speaker when the constituent uttered with it is already “in play”; when it is based on some supposed common ground between speaker and hearer. Brazil presumes that this part of discourse represents speaker - hearer convergence. The system also handles role relationships, which can be projected by the speaker. To mark this Brazil introduces a + factor. The *p+* tone is rise-fall - -, while the *r+* is a rise: . An utterance said with a *p+* or an *r+* tone can be the signal of conversational dominance, Brazil points out, but he also notes that the choice of roles is a voluntary act, and his data show that *p+*, e.g. is relatively infrequent. The system also treats lack of pitch movement in a tone unit. Level tone - - is a zero tone, which means that in the given syllable there is no change in pitch level.

In David Brazil’s framework one utterance is not interpreted as one tone unit, nor do grammatical units predetermine the number of tone units in a real communicational situation. The groundbreaking model is especially appropriate for the capturing of the relevant, meaningful intonational cues of discourse, and can be used to discover how the speaker structures his message, and how the intonational composition of a stretch of speech reveals the speaker’s needs.

2.2. Investigations of Intonation in Elicitations

The data are Elicitation acts, i.e. utterances that realize stylistic varieties of questions in exchanges in BBC Radio talk. The grammatical form in each case is declarative, and has any of the following features: the speaker's utterance comprises a linguistic sign of the elicitation function, a hypothetical component, an unspecific linguistic unit or some combination of these.

There is a prevalent view of the relationship between sentence type and tone, viz. that tone choice is not predictable (Brazil:1985, Wells:2006, Roach:2009, among others). What is very probable, on the other hand, is that prominence and high pitch add to the implication of the speaker's meaning and thus can signify the communicative function of an utterance.

2.2.1. High Pitch

My examinations of the data show that high pitch can reveal both some mental and attitudinal factors of the speaker's mental context. Complementing the meaning of a lexical unit high pitch is "tagged on" to implicate a niche in the speaker's knowledge regarding the addressee's personal world or to signal some contrast with his knowledge of reality. High pitch can also be a signal of certain emotions such as surprise, or of particular interest in the content of the addressee's response. All in all, it can function as an indicator of certain aspects of the speaker's *total cognitive environment*.

In radio talk the speaker's indirect inquiries about the addressee's world are frequently communicated via Hypothetical acts. Hypotheses involve the sense of some Unreal – the Unknown or Unspecific – or imply the Uncertainty of the speaker about his proposition, which generates a certain U-factor (for the concept see Deli (2004), Herczeg-Deli (2009b) in the context. The presence of this U-factor in the communicational situation may be signalled by the speaker with high pitch, as it happens in the following examples:

(1) *I must ask you about the spelling of your name, incidentally.*

(1a) // *p* i MUST ASK you //
// *r* about the SPELling of your NAME incidentally //
// *p* 'ts a LONG WAY ROUND //
// *p* 'ts a LONG WAY

High pitch occurs on three prominent syllables in the utterance: once on the elicitation marker ASK, once on the main topic of the inquiry: your NAME, and on the termination of the last chunk of the utterance: ROUND. The implication is double: the speaker needs specification, and as the high termination suggests, he faces something unusual and perhaps surprising. The

following example is the result of the speaker's inference of some supposed reality. It's a checking move marked with *so*:

2. *So there are no drums in there at all.*

2a // **θ** so there are NO DRUMS // **p** in THERE at ALL //

This is another example of the frequent cases when the termination is uttered with high pitch. It seems to be the signal of strong interest and surprise. The effect is that the addressee gives explanation and further details of the situation discussed in the conversation.

High pitch is commonly selected with falling tone (see examples (1) and (2) above, and also (3) below):

(3) *Presumably, the the sort of glamour of films, and and how you create an effect on films [w] got itself into your brain in those very early days.*

(3a) // **p** pre ably // **θ** THE // **r** the SORT of GLAmour of films //

// **θ** AND // **θ** and HOW you // **r** creATE an ef FECT on films //

// [w] // **r** GOT itself into your BRAIN //

DAYS //

The Hypothesis marker *presumably* receives high pitch indicating contrast with what the speaker knows as reality, and high pitch is on three more syllables including the termination, which emphasizes the speaker's interest. In extract (4) the Hypothetical verb *seems*, which becomes the onset syllable, the key of the second tone unit, similarly to the hypothetical adverb in the previous example, is also pronounced with high pitch:

(4) *But it seems to me you're looking for tolerance rather than unity.*

(4a) // **θ** BUT it // **θ** it SEEMS to ME // **θ** YOU're //

// **p** you're LOOKing for TOLerance // **p** RAther than UNity //

The topic of the Elicitation, *tolerance* receives high key, too; this is what the speaker infers from their previous conversation; something he considers a possible reality. The utterance implies interest and also some surprise, the intended function is asking for some explanation, the effect is that the addressee gives some reasons for not looking for unity in religion. The concept of *tolerance* here emerges as an unspecific element of the discourse and requires specification by the addressee in the response move.

As examples (1), (2), (3) above, in (5a), and (6a), below too, the last tonic segment – the termination – is pronounced with high pitch:

(5) *...so women must have a real commitment to these careers which,*

clearly, you have.

(5a) // *p* so W^Omen MUST have // *p* a REAL comMITment //

// *θ* to THESE carREERS //

→ YOU
// *θ* WHICH // *p* CLEARly have //

(6) *I gather you had problems getting # getting back into the country*
last night.

(6a) // *θ* i GAther you had PROBlems // *θ* GETting // *θ* GETting //

COUNtry
// *p* BACK into the last night //

High pitch is not an essential condition for the utterance to have an elicitive force, but its occurrence in the termination of a declarative is very common in the data when the utterance is interpreted by the speaker's partner as a call for details of or reasons for the current topic of discussion. Such examples underline Brazil's observation that with high key choice the speaker expresses expectation for an active response (1985:181).

2.2.2. Tone Choice

The data show a variety of tone choice. Referring (fall-rise) tone on a discourse unit projects some common ground between the speaker and the hearer, while proclaiming (falling) tone, in general, signals what the speaker introduces as new for the hearer. Not quite so, however in Elicitation acts. In such discourse units *p* tone tends towards the removal of the speaker's uncertainty or seeks to elicit new information.

The function of the caller's move in the following example is to check her inference from the current situation and some common knowledge about the reward callers can get in this phone-in programme. Falling tone on the termination here indicates that she wants information / confirmation:

(7) *I understand I can have a photograph.*
 (7a) // **θ** i UNderSTAND // **p** i can HAVE a PHOtograph //

Level (zero) tone on the Hypothetical may be accidental here, or it may be a reflection of the speaker's reserved attitude, i.e. of her showing distance between herself and the host of the programme.

In example 1a above the speaker knows his conversational partner's name, but he is uncertain about the spelling; the prominent word NAME articulately receives *r* tone, while the *p* tone on the termination implies that the speaker expects specification of the correct spelling of the hearer's name.

The recurring fall-rise in 3a above seems to signal some kind of convergence in the knowledge of the participants; the host of the programme has a strong assumption but it has to be checked and accepted by the addressee as truth, hence the falling tone on the termination.

Brazil (1985) suggests that the *r+* tone can imply some kind of leading role on the part of the speaker, and can also project an assumption that he actually knows the answer. It occurs on the Hypothetical lexical unit *I gather* in 8a below and on a 'false start' in an Elicitation act in (9a):

(8) *You just have been made redundant, I gather, talking of other things.*
 (8a) // **p** you JUST have been made reDUNdant // **r+** I GATHER //
 // **r** talking of OTher THINGS //

(9) *It's that... so, you specialized totally in African violets*
 (9a) // **r+** it's THAT // **p** so you SPEcialized TotaLly //
 // **p** in AFrican VIOlets //

The following is an extract from a telephone call, where tone choices reflect a negotiated situation – “*I know you are there*” – on the one hand, and the projection that the caller, i.e. the

host has the leading role. He also seems to assume that he knows the answer and expects the answer *yes*:

(10) *Judith, I take it that, broadly speaking, women get paid between two thirds and three quarters of the income of their male counterparts.*

(10a) // **r**+ JUdith // **θ** I TAKE it that // **r**+ BROADly
 // **θ** WOMEN get PAID // **p** between TWO THIRDS //
 // **p** and THREE QUARTERS // **θ** of the INcome of their //
 // **p** MALE
 // COUNterparts //

This Elicitation ends with a tone unit pronounced with low termination. Brazil (1985:79) notes that his informants who were asked to comment on the significance of the low-key choice – after a tone unit with mid-key – feel that it has the effect of some kind foregone conclusion. In my view the low termination with falling tone in the above utterance represents exactly that; the context suggests a predictable ending to this utterance, “*male counterparts*” is a foreseeable, logically emerging concept; probably this is why it is pronounced with low key. The falling tone is a signal of the speaker’s expectation that some explanation should be given by the addressee.

2.2.3. Prominence: a Focusing Device

My data show that Hypothesis Markers in declarative Elicitations are almost exclusively prominent. The inference marker *so* which is more often non-prominent seems to be an exception (see examples (2a) and (5a)). Prominence on contextually non-specific linguistic units – the SPElling of your NAME (1a), TOLeRance (4a), a REAL comMITment to THESE CAREers (5a), PROBLEms (6a) – typically focuses the hearer’s attention on the topic of the discourse exchange and realizes the onset syllable or the tonic for the pitch movement.

3. Conclusions

The communicative value of an utterance accrues in the linguistic form, but it is neither alone the sentence type nor the intonation pattern of the utterance that assigns meaning to it. Meaning is controlled by the cognitive context, and intonation has to be looked at as its projection.

Tone choice is influenced by several contextual factors. It is affected by the speaker's knowledge, by his assumptions about reality and about his conversational partner's knowledge, and also by the nature of the intended discourse act.

In the declarative Elicitations of talk radio shows proclaiming (falling) tone is very frequent. The data show that Brazil's conclusion (1985:154) about the discourse function of falling tone is situationally conditioned: a discourse stretch pronounced with it can "proclaim" or "impose the addressee to proclaim". This paper also provides evidence that with declarative elicitation "the world-changing element is not the assertion, but the *yes* or *no* that it seeks to elicit" (Brazil 1985:154) and that declarative elicitation typically seek for confirmation, information and/or explanation from the addressee. The elicitive effect is frequently lexically enhanced via some contextually non-specific discourse unit, which, as a rule, is pronounced with prominence, and occasionally with high pitch. The latter quality on the onset (the key) or on the tonic syllable (the termination) in a cognitive pragmatic sense involves some kind of contrast. The speaker's special interest, and/or surprise is commonly implied by high pitch.

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