

INTONATION IN OVERALL UTTERANCE AND DISCOURSE INTERPRETATION

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Abstract

Language and Communication constitute the essential fulcrum on which this paper rests. The various aspects of language make it function as the ultimate communication tool for human beings. Communication in turn can be described as the appropriate use of language to facilitate effective interaction between people. Proper use of intonation in a language contributes to successful communication in the language. The view is that intonational miscues can cause breakdowns in communication between native and non-native speakers and between non-native speakers interacting with each other. Intonation, through its various elements like pitch, loudness, prominence and duration perform various functions. The intonation choices made by speakers carry linguistic information. Intonation is a vital contributor to the prosodic composition of a whole discourse and a means by which grammar is pronounced in spoken discourse. It exposes the relationship between one utterance and the other and that between the utterance and the discourse as a whole. Communication in English as a second language is difficult without proper knowledge and understanding of the intonation pattern. Speakers of English as a second language are ignorant about the English tune patterns and so the semantic suggestions of the tunes are minimally realized or are lost entirely. No wonder the difference between the language of the native speaker and that of the second language user. Therefore, examining intonation in the interpretation of meaning, this paper looks at the roles of intonation in the interpretation of syntactic, semantic and discourse phenomena and finds out that intonation is not additional but essential to the composition of texts. No language

can be adequately and properly acquired apart from its intonation. Lack of adequate knowledge of the intonation pattern of English is responsible for low level of competence in the language as a second language.

INTRODUCTION

Discussion on the role of language in communication is a common place for scholars in various disciplines. David Kilgour 1999, Helle Anderson & Erick, S. Rassmussen 2004 and Frazier 2013 worked on language in communication and maintain that they work hand in hand. Communication, is a two-way process of reaching mutual understanding in which participants not only exchange (encode-decode) information, news ideas and feelings but also create and share meaning". Hornby defines language as "a system of communication in speech and writing that is used by people of a particular country". No country, organization or management can function without communication among its members. The various aspects of language make it function as the ultimate communication tool for human beings. Kempson 1997 expresses that language functions as a vehicle of communication. Quoting Adler, Onuigbo 2006 expresses that "there is no doubt that language is a marvelous communication tool which conveys meanings about the content of a specific message and, of course, users but (after all said and done) in the final count, meaning rests in people and not in words."

In describing meaning, there is need to consider both the explicatures (Sperber, David and Wilson D. 1986) and the implicatures (Grice 1975). Explicatures are the propositional forms which carry what the speaker tends to mean by what he says while implicatures are further propositions which are implicated rather than stated explicitly. Natural language sentences tend to under specify propositions so that decoding the linguistic form alone is not enough for us to recover both the explicatures and the implicatures. Intonation is a viable tool of language which combines with the linguistic

forms to create comprehensible message and enhance proper interpretation of the message by the receiver. It is integrated with phonology, grammar and information structure. In fact, intonation is one of the ingredients of language which if properly applied, facilitates effective interaction between people. A historical survey of Nigerian spoken English shows that spoken English in Nigeria has not yet resembled the native speaker's variety. Following their survey, Ubong, E.J & Nkereke, M.E 2012 maintain that spoken English in Nigeria so far remains non-native in outlook and lacks international intelligibility. The problem is that the teaching of English suprasegmentals and the production of learning materials for it are not priorities in most schools in the country. There is rather more emphasis on segmental aspects of language. While the focus is on improving performance in communication and promoting perception of meaning, it is also of interest to emphasize the relevant paralinguistic features. Since the way we say something is as important as the words we use to say it in conveying a message, intonation is a crucial aspect of language that can never be over-investigated. Just as music has tune or melody, the intonation of a language produces the much needed melody or variations in tune in the course of communication. If we had no intonation, our speech would be, in the literal sense of the word, monotonous. It is, therefore, the onus of this paper to consider the extent to which intonation can contribute to utterance and discourse interpretation and subsequently to this wide disparity between standard British English (SBE) and Nigerian English (NE).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Linguistic area of the present study has a rich tradition of theories and studies but for the purpose of this paper, two of such works are used due to their relevance to the topic and wide use in several studies of intonation and discourse. The two theories are Discourse Intonation Theory and Conversational Implicatures.

Discourse Intonation Theory introduced by Halliday and developed into a complete theory by Brazil (1980) is used. The theory states that all intonation choices made by speakers are a function of the discourse developing between them. It provides satisfactory explanation for the intonation choices which speakers make. This theory of discourse intonation proposes that comparable relationship may exist between tone groups. According to the theory, the choice of tone marks the discourse status of the tone group as a whole. The point is that a falling or proclaiming tone marks the matter as “new” while the rising or referring tone marks the experiential content of the tone unit. This relates to the shared, already negotiated or common ground, occupied by the participants at a particular time in a particular interaction. The “new” vs. “given information” is alternatively referred to as foreground vs. background by House. Moreover, a stretch of continuous conversation will definitely consist of a number of tone groups usually delimited by the use of grammatical, semantic and phonetic criteria. The result is that tone groups tend to occur at major grammatical boundaries like those between phrases or between clauses.

Example: He told me yesterday // that he bought a new house.

The tendency for tone groups to coincide with major grammatical boundaries results to specific grammatical and semantic coherence which greatly contributes to the overall understanding of the discourse. It (tone unit or tone group) is therefore part of the interactive activity known as communication.

Grice’s Conversational implicature which was started in 1975 is another theory of language on which the study anchors. According to Grice, what a speaker means by an utterance can be divided into what the speaker says and what the speaker thereby implicates. In this theory, Grice expresses that what a speaker conventionally implicates by uttering a sentence is part of what the speaker means in uttering it, and that it is also closely connected to what the sentence means. However, what a speaker conventionally

implicates is not a part of what the speaker says. With this theory, Grice says that to implicate is to mean something that goes beyond what one says in such a way that it must be inferred from non-linguistic features of a conversational situation together with general principles of communication and co-operation.

Conversational implicature theory holds that there are actual or possible derivations from sentences which are not associated with signs that have any original or primary intent of communication. The ways in which expressions or sentences are pronounced express much more than just the information that are lexically encoded in the words.

Both the Discourse Intonation Theory and Conversational Implicature emphasize the implication of intonation and other prosodic features in the perception and interpretation of meaning. Intonation is the colour or tone of voice in the production and comprehension of everyday oral communication and in special cases such as reading stories for children, stories broadcast by radio and TV and reading stories and texts in the classroom. The two theories form theoretical evidence for the importance of suprasegmental features in the production and comprehension of English as a foreign language.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Intonation

The phenomenon of intonation has attracted the interest of both scholars and linguists and has been variously defined. However, most of the definitions merely treated intonation as one or two of its components. Some the definitions are narrow expressions of what intonation really entails. They understood intonation as the variations which take in the pitch of voice. Ranalli defines intonation as “the movements or variations in pitch to which we attach familiar labels describing levels (e.g. high / low) and tones (e.g. falling / rising)”. Pointing out that prominence is also a relative value of intonation, he broadly

defines it (Intonation) as systematic variations in pitch level, pitch movement and prominence. This definition brings into focus the various elements of intonation which perform its variety of functions. The elements: pitch, loudness, prominence and duration are relative values in interpretation of the linguistic information given by the speaker.

However, this paper explores intonation as a complex unity of several acoustic components. The physical characteristics of intonation are the effective communicative tools with which it functions in language and communication. In G.P Torsuyey's definition of intonation as "a complex unity of pitch, intensity, timber and tempo of speech" there is the recognition that intonation is a complex unity of interdependent components which serve important functions in language and enhance effective communication. M. Halliday describes the components as follows:

- Tone or melody - the fluctuation of the voice in speech.
 - Intensity - energy of force of pronunciation resulting in the degree of sentence stress.
 - Duration - the speed of utterance or tempo and the distribution of pauses.
 - Timber - Voice quality.
- (M. Halliday et al 1954: 270)

The above description of M. Halliday et al represent the perceptual characteristics of intonation. These characteristics, based on the grammatical structure of the utterance and its vocabulary, enhance the expression of the speaker's thoughts, feelings, emotions and subsequent information is given or asked for. No wonder, Paul Tench exclaims "I think it is appropriate to think of intonation as the pronunciation of grammar" The intonation of the speaker carries the above four acoustic characteristics of intonation which are perceived by the receiver or hearers as four communicatively relevant subjective compounds of intonation.

According to Halliday and his group, the objective acoustic characteristic of pitch or tone gives rise to subjective perceived characteristic of melody. Objective acoustic characteristic of intensity results in subjective perceived characteristic of strength; objective acoustic characteristic of spectral frequencies gives the hearer subjective characteristic of voice quality on the level of perception; while that of duration produces perceived characteristic of length, tempo and pauses. The result, in a particular circumstance, is that the receiver understands the meaning of utterance and its connotations as well the feelings, emotions and volition of the speaker.

Terms Related to Intonation

Prosody: refers to all suprasegmental changes in the course of spoken utterance. (Didier et al 2006). In this case prosody is the umbrella word for intonation, amplitude, tempo, rhythm, and voice quality.

Amplitude is determined by the contour of acoustic energy variations over the utterance and is closely related to fundamental frequency.

Tempo: Consists of the number of phonemic segments per time unit.

Rhythm: Corresponds to the structure of fundamental frequency accents, amplitude peaks, and pausing distribution in the utterance.

Voice quality is defined by the distribution of energy in the spectrum as produced by different phonation modes. Voice quality can be modified in terms of roughness or sharpness during an emotional process. This is the information that can be used by the listener to infer the emotional state of the interlocutor. (Didier et al 2006: 138).

Intonation is a significant phonetic means that characterize sequence of speech sounds and is very important for communication as it helps the addressee to interpret the message.

Proper use of intonation in a language contributes to successful communication in the language. Although some linguists like Roach 1991 in Ranalli 2002 suggest that few occasions of misunderstandings caused by non-standard English are found to be intonational problems, many others like Wennerstron 1994, Clennel 1997 and Pickering 2001 maintain that intonational miscues cause problems between native and non-native speakers. Their view is that these intonational miscues can cause breakdowns in communication between native and non-native speakers and between non-native speakers interacting with each other. Intonation, to a very great extent, contributes to successful communication and miscues can cause problems between interlocutors. Clennel summarizes such problems as follows:

1. The propositional content (essential information of the message) may not be fully grasped.
2. The illocutionary force (pragmatic meaning of utterances) may be misunderstood.
3. Inter speaker cooperation and conversational management may be poorly controlled. (Clennel 1997: 118 in Ranalli 2002).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Ranalli (2002) expresses that intonation helps speakers to show how each of their utterances is related to other utterances and to the discourse as a whole. He concludes that all intonation choices are tied to the context in which they occur.

Grosz and Sidner (1986) in their model of discourse structure, as stated by Herman (1998), present three components of discourse structure.

1. The linguistic structure (the text itself, the actual sequence of utterances or discourse segments)
2. The intentional structure (the purpose of each discourse and how they are hierarchically related to each other).

3. the attentional structure (a model of conversational participants' focus of attention as the discourse unfolds)

(Herman 1998:18-19)

Grosz and Sidner's components of discourse structure are based on the three kinds of prominence conveyed in English. These are lexical stress, focus and pitch accent. The occurrence of focus in utterance and discourse is usually motivated by the discourse or pragmatic emphasis. It should be noted, that these intonational components sometimes occur concurrently to reveal the purpose of the discourse and the participants' focus of attention as the discourse progresses.

According to Herman, the text of a discourse made up of a series of utterances can be divided into segments and arranged hierarchically beginning with an indentation.

Below is her example.

- i. Sue won't go out with John unless he shaves off his beard and stops drinking.
- ii. He still had his beard this morning.
He hasn't bought a razor in three months.
- iii. Also, he was at a bar last night with his old college buddies. His friends had to drive him home at the end of the evening.

(Example of discourse segments with hierarchical arrangement. Herman 1998:22).

This text and its divisions into segments form the linguistic structure in Grosz and Sidner's model.

A close study of the discourse segments and the hierarchical arrangement reveals a perfect paragraph construction in which the sentences work together to achieve the purpose of the discourse structure, that is looking at the conditions under which Sue can go out with John and ascertaining whether the conditions have been met.

One of the linguistic cues to information structure in discourse

along with pronominalization, word order and connectives is intonation, which is itself structured such that there is a phonological level at which there are categorical distinctions and a phonetic level at which the implementation of the categories can differ. (Herman 1998).

Sentences are normally grouped together in a meaningful way to create larger units. Speakers are able to signal by means of intonation, the organization of units of discourse round a single topic. This observation makes Yule (1980) to propose the existence of the “paratone” in speech, roughly equivalent to a paragraph in writing. A paratone, according to him, is a prosodic unit which spans a topic or sub-topic in speech.

In her doctoral dissertation, Herman explores how the different aspects of intonational structure help to convey the information structure in American English, and which aspects of the intonational structure conveys which aspects of information structure.

She points out that “undoubtedly, one of the functions of intonation is to mark structure at the discourse level. Using the TOBI system of intonational analysis, she states the predictions for using intonation to mark discourse.

Intonation is often used as a cue by listeners to identify the start of a new topic. The high initial pitch signals the beginning of a new paragraph while low pitch signals the closure of the paragraph. Thus high fundamental frequency is often associated with the beginning of discourse units.

“Research on intonation and discourse has found phonetic correlates of hierarchical discourse structure such as prosodic paragraphs or discourse segments”. Herman 1998:5).

Also a lot of phonetic factors, through these researches and experiments seem to correlate with discourse structures. Some of these factors include:

- High fundamental frequency on the first peak in the sentence in a paragraph
- Pause length such that pauses are longer at paragraph boundaries than at sentence boundaries.
- Low terminal fundamental frequency and.
- Laryngealization at the end of discourse units. There is also the presence of a non-level intonational contour where discourse segment initial phrases are marked by higher maximum and average fundamental frequency while segment final phrases are marked by lower fundamental frequency.

It is clear from the above discussion that intonation signals how sequences of clauses and sentences go together in spoken discourse to contrast or to cohere. It functions like the division of writing text into paragraphs and sentences and enables the listener to know when a speech is coming to an end. With his intonation also, a speaker signals when he wants to continue or give another speaker a turn. Intonation is used by possibly all languages to signal pragmatic and sentences level meanings. It is a vocal, non-verbal, part of language which uses pitch changes in patterns recognized by all speakers of the language to impart meaning. It can give different meanings to otherwise identical utterances. Intonation tunes contribute to how speech carries meaning. Variations in intonational tunes are integral part of language fluency, competence and proficiency. They should be recognized and used as meaningful choices to enhance communication.

METHOD

A corpus of sentences was created for the study. The sentences were used to study the functions of intonation in declaratives, questions and discourse.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Intonation in Utterance Interpretation

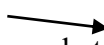
Intonation is a great contributor to the explicatures and implicatures of an utterance. This is so because, in addition to other grammatical functions:

- A. Specific intonation patterns reflect and communicate specific emotional states of the speaker.
- B. Continuous variation of pitch features (such as pitch level or pitch range) reflect and communicate features of emotional reaction such as emotional arousal.

The tone of a speech expresses the attitudes and emotions of the speaker exposing his surprise, pleasure, anger, interest, boredom, seriousness or sarcasm and many others. However, the relevance of intonation in communication does not end in attitudinal functions. Intonation is a component of grammar rather than just a way to convey emotions or feelings. Intonation is a linguistic phenomenon and hence must be modeled as a part of grammar because the form function mapping between intonation tones and their pragmatic functions is arbitrary". The full meaning of an utterance cannot be realized in isolation from the context of use and intonational cues relate an utterance to its context. The major function of intonation is to link an utterance to its context. Intonation is the linguistic cue to the identification of the context and the conditions at sentence level.

The use of Intonation in Declaratives

Echo and incredulous questions can be distinguished by intonation alone in English since they contain the same linguistic forms with declaratives. The difference is made by the use of different intonation tones. In declarative sentences, the falling tone is applied while in the echo / incredulous question there is the use of the rising intonation as in the following examples.

1. She's going to the market (declarative) 
2. She's going to the market (echo / incredulous question) 

Difference in the intonational tone gives rise to the functional difference in the pragmatics. Some sort of raised pitch (final or non-final) can be used in contrast with lower pitch to indicate that an utterance is intended as a question rather than as a statement. The implication is that intonation can turn an utterance whose structure could have certain interpretation into another one the speaker actually intends to convey. It determines the illocutionary function of an utterance when there are no illocutionary marking words.

Use of Intonations in Questions (Interrogatives)

In WH – questions the pattern is similar to that of statement (falling intonation). Repeat questions are asked with a rising intonation. These examples illustrate it.

- When did Mary finish her examinations
- She finished last week
- When?
- Last week



The question calls for a repetition of all or part of what was said.

Tag questions constitute an intonation unit separate from its tag statement and identifies with the normal intonation for a yes or no question to have a rising intonation.

Are you going home today



Also unfinished utterances or continuatives are commonly pronounced with rising intonation. Command makes use of falling intonation while requests are made in the rising tone.



Close the door (command)

Can I use your pen (request)



Moreover, intonation units constitute information or sense units and there is a tendency for intonation units to correspond to clauses. Intonation is used to organize speech into units that are easy to perceive and memorize.

Finally, this study of intonation in utterance interpretation maintains that a speaker makes ample use of intonation by producing patterns which sometimes conflict with the content of the message. Such conflicts generate their own implicatures and are often blamed for misunderstandings in the course of communication. They, however, enrich the communicative possibilities of spoken language if the receiver shares adequate knowledge of the intonation patterns of the language with the speaker. The point here is that the balance of intonation and word content, or intonation and grammatical structure of an utterance may result to special effects.

Examples

You can eat it raw, cooked, **roasted** or fried


 The diagram shows four arrows pointing upwards from the words 'raw', 'cooked', 'roasted', and 'fried' in the sentence. The arrows for 'raw', 'cooked', and 'roasted' are slanted upwards to the right, while the arrow for 'fried' is slanted downwards to the right.

It is more difficult to understand and remember the same utterance without the intonation tones. Also the absence of the tones makes the utterance to be prone to other different interpretations.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The intonation of a language is the tool with which the language conveys meanings about the content of a specific message. The words of a message alone cannot give the full meaning. The way sentences are pronounced expresses much more than just the information that are lexically encoded in the words. Intonation signals the structure of spoken language.

For mastery of a target language, learners should be instructed on both the segmental and suprasegmental features of the language so as to achieve effective spontaneous production of the features for effective communication. Teaching suprasegmental

features should be one of the priorities of the language teaching curriculum and teachers need to be familiar with prosodic means for structuring sentence and paragraphs. The solution is addition of immersion programmes for teacher trainees of English as a second language.

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