

How we knew the football results before we knew the score

Many of us do indeed mourn the death of James Alexander Gordon; he used to be the focus of our Saturday afternoons. He was the one who read the classified football results on BBC radio, and the way in which he did so became an established UK national institution.

Tributes have been made to his “mellifluous tones” and “wonderful inflections and stresses”; he certainly had a good voice, rich and resonant, and pleasant to listen to. But I was glad to see that John Rawling in his obituary notice in the *Guardian* newspaper (20 August 2014; he had died on 18 August) drew our attention to the intonations that he mastered for expressing the classified football results. What ‘JAG’ did was simply apply to the results basic principles of the intonation system that we use in all our talk. He might well have had “a smile in his voice”, but he managed to exploit a few characteristics of our intonation system to very great effect.

Intonation is the linguistic use of pitch in talk. All our talk is characterized by features of intonation. Every kind of spoken discourse carries units of intonation; each unit bears one piece of information. So, in giving out the football results, each score requires two intonation units, one for the home team and the other for the away team. From last weekend’s results, we have, for instance:

| Arsenal 2 | Crystal Palace 1 |

Then, each intonation unit has one word that is made prominent by carrying a significant movement of pitch (known technically as the ‘tonic’ word or syllable); typically, a falling-rising movement when the information is contrasted with another piece of information, and a falling movement when all the information is completed. In this example, the number of goals in each unit is highlighted (underlined in print) and is accompanied by a mark showing the direction of the pitch movement (known technically as the ‘tone’):

| Arsenal 2 | Crystal Palace 1 |

As a rule, the general pitch level of each unit in succession drops until the end of a ‘block’ of information; so in this case, the second of the two units is pitched lower than the first, marked by a low line in print:

| Arsenal 2 | Crystal Palace 1 |

That lower pitch is not a mark of sadness as has been claimed; but simply a mark that all the information is coming to an end. It was certainly *not* sad for Arsenal! However, if the away team wins, which is a rarer achievement than a home win, then the pitch level of the second unit is raised:

| Manchester United 1 | Swansea City 2 |

So you know by the pitch level at the beginning of the second unit whether the home team have won or lost **before** you hear the complete score. Just like the pitch level, hearts rose or sank if you supported the away team!

What about draws? A different part of the intonation system is invoked for this. If a bit of information is repeated, you don’t make that particular word prominent; the ‘tonic’ prominence is typically shifted to the preceding word. This is how it works: first of all two intonation units as before:

| West Bromwich Albion 2 | Sunderland 2 |

The pitch movement ('tone') in the first unit is not contrastive this time; it is typically held steady at a mid pitch, marked by a line at mid level:

| West Bromwich Albion -2 |

The number in the second unit is to be repeated, so the 'tonic' prominence shifts forward to *Sunderland*, with the falling tone accompanying it to mark the end of the information:

| West Bromwich Albion -2 | \Sunderland 2 |

So you knew by the pitch ('tone') of the number in the first unit already that the result was a draw, again **before** you had the whole score.

These are simply common features of common intonation systems that we use in all our talk. John Rawling refers to JAG's realization of this while he was still young; he obviously had a good ear as well as a good voice; he was in fact a great actor, with a great sense of timing and rhythm!

How we wish he had had the opportunity to annunciate

| East Fife \4 | -Forfar \5 |

Did he in fact announce in October 2011

| East Fife \4 | -Forfar \3 |?

Of course, JAG did not *invent* the intonation of football scores, but his legacy is that he established a spoken genre that is recognized throughout Britain, even by people who have no interest in football scores at all.

Dr Paul Tench, retired Senior Lecturer, Centre for Language and Communication Research, Cardiff University. Author of *Transcribing the Sound of English*, Cambridge University Press, 2011; *The Intonation Systems of English*, Cassell, 1996.
21 August 2014