The Pronunciation of Grammar

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It may come as a great surprise to many linguists and teachers to contemplate grammar as having a pronunciation. That it has to be spoken sounds much more acceptable, because we recognize that grammar is just as much a component of spoken language as lexis, phonology and discourse. *Pronunciation*, however, is usually thought of in terms of *words*, with their consonants, vowels and stress patterns, but hardly with reference to grammar. I would like to show you that just as words have to be pronounced, so do phrases, clauses, sentences and whole discourses. And just as there are patterns, or rules, in the pronunciation of words, there are patterns, rules, in the pronunciation of grammatical structures too.

Pronunciation of words and phrases

But let us begin with the familiar. When we talk, we need words; and words are pronounced. They are pronounced with a set of consonants and vowels and, at least in English, a set of degrees of stress. These sets are particular to English, or to be more precise, to the various accents of English. There is a set of consonants that can appear at the beginning of a word, or syllable, and another set that occurs at the end. There is a set of vowels that occur in stressed syllables, and another, smaller, set that are confined to unstressed syllables. These sets form systems of phonemes that operate in syllables. The syllables themselves are subject to systems of stress in English, and there is a finite set of syllables for the pronunciation of words. Notice that we cannot have *any* consonant with *any* vowel. There are rules, 'phonotactic' rules, of what can occur in the beginning of the word and what can occur in the end of the word. We can call all these features of pronunciation **word phonology**.

Now, words come together in phrases or groups. There is often a change in the pronunciation of a word in the company of other words. If I talk about

1   the test match in Pakistan

you might notice that the word *in* changes in pronunciation. When the sound /n/ comes against a bilingual closure as at the beginning of *Pakistan* the /n/ will change into /m/. This is the process of assimilation. It is a kind of simplification that takes place in the ordinary colloquial pronunciation of phrases. If I say

2   India are batting against the Pakistani bowlers

the word *against* changes in pronunciation. If a word ends with /st/ and the next word starts with a consonant (except for /h/), the /t/ will disappear. That is also a feature of the pronunciation of phrases in my own accent. Similarly, if I talk about

3   the test match against India and Pakistan

the final /t/ of *test* will go. This disappearance, or omission, of a phoneme, is known as elision. If I answer the question "Which two teams are playing in Faisalabad?" by saying

4   well India and Pakistan

in my own accent I have one pronunciation of *India* when it stands by itself but when I say *India and Pakistan* in my British accent, the pronunciation of the word adds /r/ at the end because the next word begins with a vowel. In other words, *India* in this phrase has a different pronunciation. This addition of the /r/ is often referred to as liaison; it is a feature of the pronunciation of phrases in British English. Here is a similar case: if you take a word like *warm* by itself, it has one form of pronunciation, but if I talk about

5   the warmth of the welcome I received

you might notice that /p/ has been inserted after the /m/ and before the <th>. This kind of addition, or transition between two consonants, is known as epenthesis. These processes of assimilation, elision, liaison and epenthesis are features of the ordinary colloquial pronunciation of phrases. Thus we can also talk about **phrase phonology**, as well as word phonology.

Another aspect of phrase phonology that is familiar to linguists and teachers is the phenomenon of weak forms of grammatical items in colloquial speech. You well know how structural items like determiners, prepositions, conjunctions, pronouns, operators in the verb group, and a few other items like *not, so, just* etc have special weak forms when they are unstressed in phrases. This aspect of phrase phonology is the consequence, in native speaker English, of the kind of rhythm that is based on stress timing. Units of rhythm bind the words of phrases together.

Halliday on intonation and grammar

In the same way that we can talk about the pronunciation of words and phrases with their systems and features, their rules and structures, we can also talk of systems and features, rules and structures, at the level of clauses. My aim is to give you an idea of how clauses are pronounced. I am not going to be advocating necessarily a British way of doing it or an Australian or American way. I want you to know how clauses possess pronunciation features as words and phrases do.

To talk about the structure of the clauses there are a couple of things to bear in mind. One is the function of clauses; here I feel greatly intended to Halliday. When we think of clauses, we think of processes, and people who participate in the processes, and the circumstances in which the process takes place. For instance, we can talk about *India batting against the Pakistani bowlers*: what is the process? The process is 'batting'; the participant is 'India'. What are the circumstances of India batting? 'Against the Pakistani bowlers'. The process, participants and circumstances indicate a happening, an event, or possibly a situation or state of things. The design of the clause is to represent our perception of the things that happen in life; this design is known as the experiential function of the clause. Each clause represents the way in which we perceive the things that happen in life, and different kinds of clause structure represent

different kinds of happenings and situations that are part of our experience. The design of the clause complies with its function. Just as words have a function, ie to represent things, or entities, and phrases have a function, ie to provide more specific reference, so clauses have a function. And just as words have their phonology, and phrases theirs, so also do clauses.

I must be careful here not to deviate too far, for I am talking about pronunciation. But I need to say a little bit more about the kinds of clauses that exist, at least in English. There are intransitive clauses. Why do we have intransitive clauses? Because we know that certain kinds of processes that have only one participant. So if, for example, I talk about *laughing*, I need only refer to one participant. 'Laughing' only involves one participant. If we have another kind of process in mind which requires two participants, then we will be dealing with transitive clauses. So when we say *the batsman hit the ball*, then we are talking about the process of 'hitting' and somebody who did the hitting and something that was hit – a process with two participants. The process of giving requires three participants: someone does the giving, something is given and someone takes the gift; we cannot conceive of the process of 'giving' without these three participants, and so there is a need of clauses with indirect objects as well as direct objects. The design of the clause is to represent our perception of the way in which we understand all the things that happen in life.

Another factor to bear in mind is Halliday's presentation of intonation as an integral part of the total phonological hierarchy. Phonemes have certain functions within syllables, and syllables have a structure composed of phonemes. Syllables function within feet, and feet have a structure of syllables. Feet, likewise, function within intonation units, or 'tone groups' as he called them, and intonation units have a structure of feet.

In 1967, when Halliday's first major book on intonation was published, there were indeed books about intonation, but the way in which intonation was presented was totally divorced from the rest of phonology. Pike too in US recognized that intonation belonged to phonology as a whole, but the older tradition in UK and US and the more recent transformational grammar failed to make the connection. Intonation is 'sound', pronunciation, but at a level higher than words and phrases, and is an integral component of the total phonology of a language.

The third thing that I am indebted to Halliday for is an understanding of the relationship between intonation and semantics, 'meaning'. The point about an intonation unit is not only that it typically coincides with clauses, it also represents a speaker's management of information.

I have a message. In order to convey my message I have to break it into small pieces, for if I did not, you would lose any kind of comprehension. What happens in our talk is that we have got pieces of information to give, and we do that by presenting those pieces of information in clauses. Clauses are designed to represent pieces of information, the kind of situation which involves some kind of process and their participants, some kind of circumstance, and so on. In my mind it is not surprising that the primary function of intonation is to represent the speaker's management of information, and so we talk about a unit of intonation representing a unit of information. This is what you do in any language; this is the design of intonation.

Very typically the intonation unit coincides with the clause. There is a very real reason why intonation units coincide with clauses. When you and I are engaged in talk, we have to break messages into small pieces of information. We do that in grammar by clauses and in phonology by intonation units. It is, therefore, a very legitimate thing to talk about the pronunciation of grammar and syntax.

Units of intonation

We talk about an intonation *unit*: it has a beginning and an end, and, therefore, a structure. The unit does not consist of random sounds and syllables. The structure has one word, or one syllable, with greater prominence than in the rest of a given intonation unit. For example

6   England beat Australia for the first time in seventeen <u>years</u>

There are stresses on *England, Australia, first, time, seventeen*, but the stress on *years* is greater; it carries greater prominence. Here is another example:

7   The first test finished in <u>draw</u>
8   and now they are playing the <u>sec</u>ond test

In the second piece of information I gave prominence to the word *second*. Usually the most prominent word comes at the end of the unit, but in the case of example 8, that is not true. The last lexical item is the word *test*, but I chose to highlight the word *second*. Now I have done that because some of the information in that unit has already been given. I talked about the India and Pakistan test match and now I am saying that they are playing the second test.

The first few words of example 8 represent the information that we have already talked about, information that is 'given'. The word at the end is *test*; we have also talked about that already - it is not new information either, but 'old'. So the only new piece of information in example 8 is *second*. The new piece of information is accompanied by the greatest stress, producing the greatest prominence. All the words and syllables that precede this prominence are known as the 'pretonic segment' of the intonation unit. The first stressed syllable is the head; the head leads up to the most prominent syllable, which is known as the 'tonic', which is itself followed, in this terminology, by the 'tail'. The tonic syllable and the tail are sometimes referred to as the 'tonic segment'. So you have an idea of the kind of structure of an intonation unit.

The importance of the *tonic* is that it tells you the focus of the information. At the same time it also indicates the place where some discernible change in the pitch of the voice takes place. When I say example 8, the pitch of my voice on the word *second* starts high and then it falls to low, a falling intonation. The tonic is there as the most prominent syllable, which indicates the new piece of information and provides the location of the beginning of a pitch movement which is going to indicate another feature of the message.

I am talking about the pronunciation of clauses and talking in terms of intonation units which typically coincide with clauses. The intonation unit is the unit of information. (How many bits of information have I used so far? Hundreds. Hundreds of

information units in hundreds of intonation units.) This division of discourse into the individual intonation units is known as *tonality*. Tonality is the dividing, or the segmentation, of the whole discourse into the individual intonation units. *Tonicity* is the location of the prominent syllable within each individual intonation unit. The tonality tells you how many *pieces* of information; the tonicity tells you what the *focus* of information is. These are the things Halliday explained in 1967.

Now a third factor:

9   the second test is taking place in /<u>Fai</u>salabad

Do you get the impression that I shall be going on to say some thing else? The rise at the end of the intonation unit indicated incomplete information. The pronunciation of clauses is beginning to get a kind of shape; there are patterns here. If I want to simply tell you in one piece of information that *the second test is taking place in Faisalabad*, the pitch of my voice would fall at the end of the intonation unit. But I can present the very same piece of information with a rise, and thus say something else. So there is a difference between the fall and the rise: the fall tells you that the information that I am giving you is complete in itself, and I am treating it as a major piece of information; the rise that the information by itself is not complete, but has to be understood in terms of another piece of information yet to be given. The fall or rise in the pitch of my voice has meaning; this pitch movement is known as *tone*.

Just as tonality tells you about the number of pieces of information, and tonicity tells you about the focus of information, tone tells you about the *status* of the information. The status of information can either be a major piece of information if indicated by a fall, or incomplete information if indicated by a rise; or it can be a minor piece of information if it is indicated by a rise after a fall.

In my English we have another possibility where we can have a fall and a rise at the same time. When I teach this to my students who are aged between 18 and 20, young men and women who are vulnerable to romance, I can use a very relevant example. Imagine a young man asking a girl to go out with him; and then his friends ask him what she is like. If the answer is positive, he might say

10   she is very \\<u>nice</u>

but if he uses a different tone, this fall-rise tone:

11   she is very \\/<u>nice</u>

that means that in addition to the 'overt' message, there is something else which he wants to indicate. The tone goes down and then it comes back up again; although she is very nice the response is not so positive. This fall-rise indicates that besides the one message, there is another unspoken message and very often there is some kind of negative thing intended - for example although she is very nice he does not want to go out with her again. The design of the fall-rise is that the fall element says that there is a major piece of information, but the rise element means that that information is incomplete in itself: there is some thing else that is meant. In our culture you can say

one thing and hint at a second unspoken piece of information, but you have to be sure then that the other person will be able to interpret what the unspoken message is.

The fall-rise can also indicate a contrast; if I give a message like this:
12 if England can beat Au\/stralia
   and Pakistan can beat \/England
   and if India could beat \/Pakistan
   which team is \best
   or which team is \worst

The fall-rise indicates that I wish to draw attention to the contrast between these three countries.

There is a structure, there are rules. So intonation is not random. Just as consonants and vowels operate at the level of words, and processes like assimilation and elision operate at the level of phrases, you will find that intonation, with its three major systems of tonality, tonicity and tone, operates at the level of syntax.

Communicative function

Intonation has other functions as well. Intonation also is the way in which we communicate a piece of information, i.e. whether I am making a statement or asking a question, and if it is a question, whether it is one kind of question or another kind. So, intonation has rules for expressing our communicative intent as well. Generally speaking, if one asks a question that requires the answer *yes* or *no*

13 do you think India can beat /Pakistan

there is a rising intonation. If you are very certain

14 oh \yes | India \is going to beat Pakistan

in that case the fall expresses a statement. You might have wondered how the rise can indicate incomplete information in one case and can indicate a question in the other. The answer is this: when a rise indicates incomplete information it is attached to another piece of information, usually accompanied by a fall; but when the rise indicates a question it is not attached, it is an independent unit of information.

We not only ask questions and supply answers; we are engaged in any number of speech acts. Sometimes I have to apologize, sometimes I am thanking, sometimes I am telling someone to do something if I am talking to my own children, sometimes I am asking you to do something. I have noticed that when the speaker has some degree of authority, then the discourse acts will usually have a fall. If, for example, you are in a position to command something, your command will be accomplished by a falling intonation; but if you are not in a position to command but you feel that you would like to make a request, then generally speaking, in our culture, the request will be accompanied by a rise. I think it is an indication that if you want to command somebody you have the authority and you decide what you want. If you have a request, you will have to leave the final decision to the other person. You will find that in questions you are assuming that the other person has superior knowledge than

your own - that is the purpose of the question. You are deferring to somebody else's superior knowledge; that's the whole point of the question. It is a similar thing with requests: you defer to the other person's right to make the final decision.

Attitudes, discourse structure and genres

Intonation will also tell how you are feeling. It expresses the attitude or the emotion of a speaker. If I say *India could beat Pakistan*, somebody might say *yes*. However, somebody with much enthusiasm may say *yes* with a higher fall and somebody who is supremely confident that India will always win might say *oh yes* with a low fall. You notice that in each case you have a fall; whether it is a high fall or a low fall tells you something about the attitude of the speakers. Intonation in a clause not only relates to the management of information and the communicative intention of the speaker, it will always also relate to the feeling or the attitude of the speakers.

But there is something else intonation does. It has been about 40 minutes since I began speaking. You will notice that every now and again the pitch of my voice will go to a higher level and then it will descend. When I start something new, the pitch of my voice is high and intonation is the primary means by which we indicate the structure of a whole discourse. The easiest illustration is to listen to the news this will be true in Indian radio as it is in British radio too. A news item will begin on a fairly high pitch and the first intonation unit will maintain a fairly high pitch. The second intonation unit will get lower. The third one will be even lower and so on, until the news item comes to an end. Just as you have paragraphs in writing, you have phonological paragraphs in talking. As a speaker will know the end of one topic and the beginning of the next topic, they do not necessarily say *now I am moving to a new topic*, we indicate it with intonation, by raising the level of the voice. This constant changing of the general pitch of the voice is often referred to as *key*. Key thus plays a role in a kind of discourse structure function of intonation.

Finally, different kinds or genres of spoken discourse have a distinctive sound to them; that is they have distinctive kinds of *prosodic composition*. For example, if you switch on the radio you will immediately know that it is the news rather than any other language event; and even if the radio is switched on in an adjoining room and you can't hear the actual words but you can hear the intonation, again you will know whether the programme is the news. This is because the news sounds quite different from anything else, such as a football commentary.

Each kind of discourse has its own prosodic composition. There are particular characteristics of how to identify, for example, the sound of prayer like *Our Father | which art in heaven …*; there is a particular type of intonation, with typically mid level tones, which is part of the prosodic composition of prayer in my culture. In my culture if I want to tell a ghost story it will take a particular prosodic composition; you would not read the news like a ghost story! There is a different kind of intonation for different kinds of genres.

Innovations in intonation

In thinking about pronunciation of grammar there is one other matter that I want to draw your attention to. Just as new words are coined which have to be pronounced,

there are also new intonations to be pronounced. Language changes; some items become obsolete, while other items are invented. Here are two examples in intonation.

We held an experiment in Cardiff in which we asked if somebody won a huge amount of money, what 5 things they would do with it. It was very interesting: the women showed wonderful imagination in what they would do with the money; but the men showed much less imagination and they would say things like

15   _I would get a new -<u>car</u> | _a nice –<u>house</u> | _a good -<u>holi</u>day

There is an intonation pattern here that is relatively new. In this kind of routine list, we use a low pitch in the pretonic, /_/, as for given information and a rise to a mid level, /-/, for items in a list that is not complete, and then a level pitch to express an idea of routineness; the whole pattern expresses a sense of listing items that are considered typical or routine in their culture. This pattern is new. When you listen to older recordings, you do not find this pattern at all. Linguists did not describe any such pattern, presumably because it was not there to be described. What seems to have happened is that people have taken one element of intonation with its meaning (given information) plus another element of intonation with its meaning (incomplete information, such as an unfinished list) and a third (expressing routineness) and have re-assembled them and produced a new intonation pattern, to express a new kind of message – routine listing!

Finally, if you ask me where I come from, I could reply

                          /<u>Wales</u>
16   I come from \<u>Cardi</u>ff | in

Now there is a raised rise tone (or, high rising terminal) on *Wales*. I think it is a very clever innovation. At the same time as giving some information – it is a declarative clause, you can ask the other person whether they have understood the information or appreciated the significance of it – the rise indicates a question; but the pitch of *Wales* has been raised as if for a new topic. In this case, three features have again been re-assembled to create a new intonation pattern to express a new kind of meaning – providing new information and simultaneously checking on the hearer's appreciation of its significance. In this example, I am telling you that Cardiff is in Wales, but asking you at the same time whether you know about Wales (and its separate identity, say, from England).

Conclusion

Intonation is the primary means for the pronunciation of grammar. Because syntax is an inevitable component in spoken discourse, it gets pronounced. Tonality, tonicity and tone are the main systems for the pronunciation of clauses, expressing choices in both the experiential and interpersonal functions of clauses. Intonation also contributes in other ways to the pronunciation of whole discourses, with dimensions in attitudinal expression, textual structure and the typology of genres.

I have only briefly touched on all these matters, but I hope that I have shown you that pronunciation relates to the transmission of the whole of language, including phrases

and clauses, and even discourse, as well as words. Further, more detailed, descriptions of the forms and functions of intonation can be found in the accompanying bibliography.

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