A LIFETIME OF ENGLISH STUDIES

Essays in honour of Carol Taylor Torsello

edited by
Fiona Dalziel
Sara Gesuato
Maria Teresa Musacchio

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LITERATURE AND CULTURE

ENGLISH INTONATION REVISITED: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Annalisa Zanola[*]

ABSTRACT Speech sounds must have an "inflection": any monotone delivery of utterances would be perceived as uninteresting by the listener. In other words, intonation is inevitable in speech. By *intonation* I mean the manner of utterance of the tones of the voice in speaking, the modulation of the voice, the rise and fall in pitch of the voice in speech. It indicates the act of performing the movements of pitch. Every "intonational performance" is original and every intonational contour is unique, because the tones of intonation are relative, not absolute. The subject may sound "old" to any linguist, phonetician, rhetorician, or even to some actors and speakers; despite this, it has been underestimated for decades. While revisiting some of the most influential studies on English oral language of the past, my goal here is to re-evaluate intonation as one of the main components of "delivery". Intonation is a primary device for oral communication. It is high time that its pragmatic and linguistic value was emphasized.

1. INTRODUCTION

Intonation is a central part of each communicative oral performance, sometimes indicating grammatical, semantic, or functional distinctions. Each intonational realization should be studied in its three main components, that is:

1. *pitch*, the essence of intonation. When a syllable is accented by means of pitch, the pitch does two things at once. First, it signals an accent on that syllable. Second, its direction (up, down, or level) contributes to the melody. The particular pitch movement, which makes no difference to the location of the accent, does make a difference to the melody, or intonation in the broader sense;

2. *linguistic use*, that is, the use of pitch for verbal communication. We exclude other uses of pitch (such as singing) and any aesthetic evaluations about how "nice" or "pleasant" an accent's intonation is;

[*]   University of Brescia

3. *utterances* – i.e. continuous stretches of speech beginning and ending with a clear pause – expressed in their oral form, whose pitch variation contributes to the meaning of a text.

It is evident that one can't speak of English intonation without "rationalizing" the concept of intonation. As a result, the first step of this short contribution should be that of giving a definition of intonation: as an introduction to the topic, therefore, I have collected a list of definitions of the concept. The definitions have been divided into three parts:

1. Definitions from past works on English intonation;
2. Definitions from current monolingual English and American dictionaries;
3. The most recent trends in the field of intonational studies.

Nevertheless, the contribution is mainly based on an evolutionary and historical approach. By making this choice, I have given credence, it is hoped, to the notion that knowledge proceeds on a progressive plane. It follows, therefore, that in studying the theories of different centuries, it is important to know how these theories not only gave a new impulse to the study of intonation, but also how they drew on earlier works. Because of my strong interest in the sources, I explored some years ago British and American texts from the sixteenth century onwards (Zanola 2004), to investigate the origins of the major contemporary trends in the study of English intonation. At that time, following Crystal (1969), I theorized that the most recent intonational theories can be divided into two fundamental groups: those originating from the British linguistic approach to the study of the English language, and those born from the rhetorical, rather than linguistic, American tradition. My goal here, in brief, is to advance the notion that this division is by no means new. In other words, the nature of the opposition between the traditionally "British" description of intonation in terms of intonation contours against the "American" treatment of intonation levels should find its *raison d'être* in the first studies on English prosodic features.

Following a diachronic perspective, I have reconsidered the historical value of the earliest discussions on the subject, through the most authoritative scholars and researchers of English intonation (Pike 1945; Crystal 1969; Wells 2006; Tench 2011; Cruttenden 1997).

1.1 *Definitions from past works on English intonation*

The most common definitions of intonation found in the earliest discussions on the subject down to the works of early twentieth century on elocution are listed here. This historical overview helps us understand the development of the concept.

Furetière ([1690] 1979: **s.v. intonation**): Action par laquelle un choeur commence à chanter, à entonner un psaume. *Après que la procession fut rentrée dans l'église, on ouït les chantres qui firent l'intonation du TE DEUM.* Il ne se dit guère hors de cette phrase. (my italics.)

Steele ([1775] 1969: 15): [The melody of speech] is not like the proclamation of a parish-clerk announcing the psalm, [...]. Neither is it like the *intonation of the chorostates*, or precentor in our cathedral [...]. (my italics.)

Rush (1893: 84): The term *intonation* signifies the act of performing the movements of pitch on any interval of the several scales, whether in speech, in song, or in instrumental use [...] Intonation is said to be correct or true, when the discrete steps, or concrete slides, over the intended intervals are made with exactness. True intonation in speech means further; the just use of its intervals, for denoting the states of the mind in thought and passion. Deviation from this precision is called singing, or playing, and it may be hereafter, 'Speaking out of tune'.

Behnke (1882: 98): The voice, with all its marvellous powers of intonation, inflection, modulation, and expression, should be made the interpreter of the noblest thoughts and deepest feelings. It can be made to convey the finest subtleties of the human mind, and can convert mere words into vivid vocal picture.

1.2 *Definitions from current monolingual English and American dictionaries*

The definitions reported below are taken from the most authoritative monolingual English and American dictionaries (a complete range of definitions is discussed in Zanola 2004: 19-30).

Oxford English Dictionary (http://dictionary.oed/com):

1. The opening phrase of a plain-song melody, preceding the reciting-note, and usually sung either by the priest alone, or by one or a few of the choristers; the recitation of this.
2. The action of intoning, or reciting in a singing voice: esp. the musical recitation of psalms, prayers, etc. in a liturgy, usually in monotone.
3. The utterance or production (by the voice, or an instrument, etc.) of musical tones: in reference to manner or style, esp. to exactitude of pitch or relation to the key or harmony.
4. Manner of utterance of the tones of the voice in speaking; modulation of the voice; accent.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary (http://www.merriam-webster.com): *Intonation.* Date: 1620. 1. The act of intoning and especially of chanting; 2. Something that is intoned, *specifically:* the opening tones of a Gregorian chant;

3. The ability to play or sing notes in tune; 4. Manner of utterance; *specifically:* the rise and fall in pitch of the voice in speech. (original italics)

1.3 *The field of intonational studies: twentieth century definitions*

Some definitions and schemes (figs. 1-3) of the main trends of intonational studies are also given, both from the British and the American schools (for further references, see Crystal 1969; Tench 1996; Cruttenden 1997). Some basic definitions are given here:

Deakin (1981: 28): For some linguists intonation is basically the pitch movement which is natural part of speech and is often used clearly 'meaningful'. However, the word 'intonation' is often used more loosely to indicate 'rhythm', 'loudness', 'tempo', 'syllable length', 'pause' and 'voice quality', all of which can clearly be 'meaningful' under the right conditions; that is, 'intonation' often refers to what some linguists would insist should be called 'suprasegmental phonology', 'non-segmental phonology', or 'prosodic features'.

Quirk et al. (1985: 1588): We speak of INTONATION when we associate relative prominence with pitch, the aspect of sound which we perceive in terms of 'high' or 'low', 'falling' or 'rising', broadly as these terms are used with reference to a scale of musical notes [...] We speak of STRESS when we are considering the prominence, usually perceived as greater loudness by the listener, with which one part of a word or longer utterance is distinguished from other parts [...] We speak of RHYTHM when we are considering the pattern formed by the stresses as peaks of prominence or beats. These occur at somewhat regular intervals of time, the recurring beats being regarded as completing a cycle or 'measure'.

Wales (1989: 260): In Phonetics *Intonation* describes the distinctive prosodic patterns or contours of rise and fall in pitch or tone in speech utterances. We rarely speak on one level continuously; that would be monotonous.

The fundamental representations of these approaches are summarized in the schemes which follow:
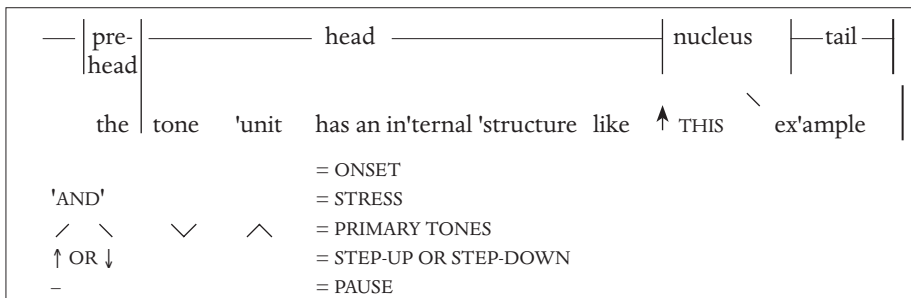
Fig. 1: *Crystal's Intonational System* (adapted from Crystal 1969)

	pre-tonic		tonic

// ɪ ^ the / tone / group / ^ has an in/ternal /structure like /<u>this</u> ex/ample //

//	= TONE-GROUP BOUNDARIES
/	= PROMINENT SYLLABLES (usually stressed)
___	= NUCLEUS
ɪ	= FALLING
^	= SILENT BEAT
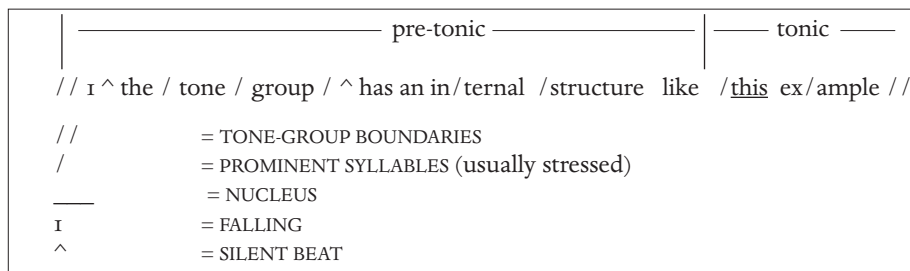
Fig. 2: *Hallyday's Intonational System* (adapted from Halliday 1970)

pre-contour primary contour	pre-contour primary contour	pre-contour primary contour
the utterance /	is di vided	into contours //
3- °2- -4	3- °2- 4	2- °ɪ- -4

°	= ONSET of a primary contour (always stressed)
'	= STRESS (redundant unless emphatic)
/	= TENTATIVE PAUSE
//	= FINAL PAUSE
ɪ,2,3,4	= LEVELS
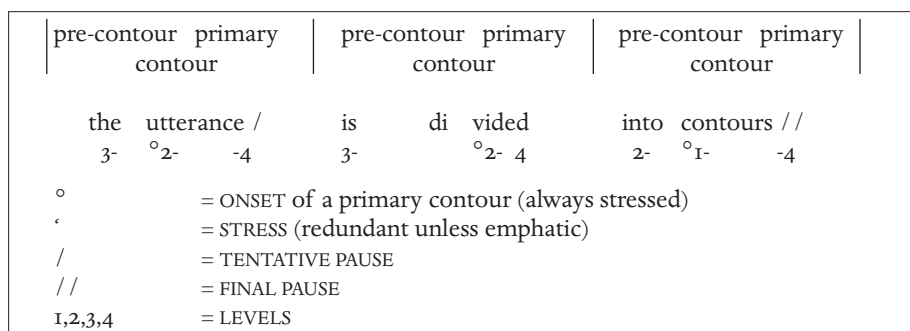
Fig. 3: *Pike's Intonational System* (adpted from: Pike 1945)

I will not go through these definitions and descriptions in detail, because they are only the necessary background of my contribution. This background has led us to realize that, unfortunately, no definition of 'intonation' is completely satisfactory. Nevertheless, there is a common core shared by the above definitions, namely the fundamental role played by the pitch of the voice.

2.   HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

Studying the varied aspects of voice has been a great concern for centuries. In fact, the study of English intonation started in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in manuals of pronunciation, became common in the eighteenth and nineteenth century manuals of elocution, and finally became an important part of twentieth century phonetics. A comprehensive chronological review of the progress of knowledge in the field of English intonation would be almost impossible; nevertheless, some partial analyses have been proposed (Zanola 2002, 2003, 2004), whose main points will be summarised here.

2.1 *The sixteenth century*

At first, the study of English phonetics, phonology and intonation went hand in hand with the study of spelling and orthography. The earliest mention of English intonation seems to have been made in connection with some discussions about punctuation marks or about rules for their usage. In sixteenth century books of grammar, rhetoric, and the art of reading the names *comma, colon* and *period* appear and are used to indicate parts of a sentence: the *period* is a complete sentence, the *colon* a member, the *comma* a small part of a short phrase. Starting from this use these names were later used in a wider sense: therefore, the word *period* meant not only a sentence, but also the point (.) indicating its end, *colon* became the name of the 'two pricks' (:) commonly used to separate the *cola* of a sentence, and *comma* (,) was used to separate the 'commata' or smaller parts of a sentence. No later than the second half of the sixteenth century a systematic description of all the possible punctuation marks was produced. In particular, Hart (1569) and Puttenham (1589) signalled the importance of reading aloud, and the fundamental role of punctuation in a written text in order to read aloud well: punctuation is described as a guarantee of correct "recording" for the oral version of a written text. Before them, Aldo Manuzio (in Pike 1945: 173) had anticipated the importance of punctuation in his *Orthographiae Ratio* (1561), where he described only its grammatical function. In his writing, the *semicircle* (comma) was to be used where the thought was not terminated, whereas the *single point* (period) was to be placed where the thought was concluded and terminated. *Semicolon and colon* gave intermediate degrees of grammatical and logical relationship. The use of the *interrogation point* was to be understood by the meaning of the word itself, with no other statement given which might contain the slightest hint of intonational meaning.

2.2 *The seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries*

In the first decade of the seventeenth century Butler's (1634) study on English punctuation enriched Hart's intuitions about prosody by providing the first thorough discussion of the two main English tones (rising and falling), and by linking them to punctuation and grammar contrasts:

> Tone is the natural and ordinary tune or tenor of the voice: *which is to rise, or fall, as the Primary points shall require* [...].
> Sound is the natural and ordinary force of each voice: which is to be strained, or slacked, according to the points (Butler 1634: 54; my italics).

Nevertheless, the problem of defining and transcribing the intonation and pauses of oral English was still very much felt. In the eighteenth century, schol-

ars started to be seriously interested in speech mechanisms and in English oral communication. This century saw the flourishing of "delivery". Speaking opportunities were developing rapidly everywhere: in parliament, at the bar, in the pulpit, in the theatre and in polite conversation. The demand for expressing ideas in oral English increased. The interest in private and public speech was matched by a corresponding concern for the study of the English language and pronunciation. It was the ideal period for the development of studies on intonation. At last, in 1775 the first impressive study on English intonation appeared, by Steele: this work opened up a number of important frontiers in the field of prosodic features as a whole. It was followed by Walker's *The Melody of Speaking* (1787), a markedly pedagogical treatise aimed at giving a guide to those who wanted to read and speak well: he developed a "theory of inflexions" involving five intonational contours, or slides (rising, falling, fall-rise, rise-fall, monotone) and he was the first to use some tone marks (´ for 'rising', ` for 'falling', ¯ for 'level', and ^ for 'rising/falling'). His description of intonation is astonishingly modern.

Further comments on intonation were occasionally found inside wider studies on the art of speaking and delivering a speech throughout the 18th century. One of them is *A Course of Lectures on Elocution* (1762) by Sheridan: the volume anticipated the modern distinction between "natural" tones, which are universals, and "instituted" tones, which are language-specific.

2.3 *The nineteenth century*

Nineteenth-century studies on English intonation did not generate new – or at least original – ideas in the field. Nevertheless, it is in this century that the interest in intonation and prosody increased enormously both in England and in America. In Great Britain linguists concentrated on the debate between supporters and accusers of Steele's theories, whereas in the U.S. the first studies on the functions of intonation in oral communication took root. In this period the elocutionary manuals burgeoned both in America, where the most influential work was that of Rush (1893), and in Great Britain, where a vast quantity of books was written on this subject (Odell 1806; Ellis 1871).

2.4 *The twentieth century*

In the early part of the twentieth century Jones (1909, 1918) dominated the studies of English phonetics in Great Britain. He was the first to use the newly-invented phonograph to listen to short excerpts that he then transcribed on a sheet. His interlinear transcriptions (continuous intonation curves between two lines) recorded two basic patterns, known as Tune 1 and Tune 2. This sort

of analysis was fully codified by Armstrong and Ward (1926) and continued to be used especially in pedagogical works on English for many years afterwards. During the same decades, Sweet (1907) theorized the existence for the English language of three "primary intonations" (level, rising, and falling) and two "compound intonations" (compound rising and compound falling), while Palmer (1933) introduced the terms *nucleus*, *head*, and *tail*. Half-way through the century the first modern and systematic intonational study was published by Pike (1945), who gave birth to a new approach to the analysis of prosodic features: after his publication, we can speak of two different trends of English intonational studies, later on called the British and the American schools of intonation (Zanola 2004: 59-136). By the middle of the twentieth century, the major issues about intonation had been identified, as summarized by Pike (1945: 4-5):

> *Is intonation important to communication*, or is it something which can safely be ignored? [...] Can the intonation be divided up into two or more general pitch schemes, or is a more complicated system necessary for description? [...] Is pitch unimportant and practically non-existent in English because it is not lexical as in Greek or is nevertheless highly significant? Does the pitch act primarily on syllables or is it spread over words and sentences? Should the pitch be represented like music, or by a few marks for the general trend of the voice? Does the pitch of English function like mere animal cries, or like the dull beating of a drum, or like extremely intricate music, or in extremely simple tunes slightly modifiable? Is intonation independent of grammar or caused by it or accompany it in some specific relationship? Should the attention be placed upon a full analysis, regardless of practicability of writing, or should an attempt be made to a full analysis to indicate a few pitch curves, only, by a limited number of symbols for use by students, or left as punctuation? Finally, *should the analysis of English intonation be prepared for the native or for the foreigner*? (my emphasis)

In Pike's study, each question found its answer in the writings of one particular author of the history of the discipline, from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth.

3. ENGLISH INTONATION 2012: THE "EMOTIONAL" CHALLENGE

During the development of modern phonetics in the twentieth century it was for a long time hoped that scientific study of intonation would make it possible to state what the function of each different aspect of intonation was, and that foreign learners could then be taught rules to enable them to use intonation in the way the native speakers use it. Only a few people now believe this to be possible. It is certainly possible to produce a few general rules, and

some may be given – or are given, as a matter of fact, in our academic courses. Unfortunately, though, these rules are no longer exhaustive if they are not supported by excellent practice and training:[1] non-native speakers of English – especially at advanced levels – should be given training to make them better able to (O'Connor, Arnold 1973; Windsor Lewis 1995):

a)   *recognise* and
b)   *copy* English intonation.

The really efficient way to learn the intonation of a language is, in my opinion, the way a child acquires the intonation of his/her first language: firstly he/she acquires the ability of recognising it (perception and listening), then he/she feels a strong need of communicating (production). The training should help the learner of English to acquire English intonation through listening to and then talking to English speakers in a way which is similar to the one which a child would adopt in learning intonation, though much slower. It is high time for the slow process of learning intonation to be considered part of the wider and more complex process of learning a foreign language. It is a slow process because it requires an important period of "sensitization" to intonational features and a following period of effort in production, which will bring to a natural "habit of production". It is a process which is quite similar to any form of training: it requires time and exercise.

In other words, the description of English intonation as a system has always tried to demonstrate that intonation is as systematic as other parts of the phonology (Crystal 1969; Tench 1996; Cruttenden 1997), and since it is systematic, it can be presented in terms of differences of meaning, which in turn implies that intonation can be taught and learned. This would imply that there is therefore no need to think of intonation as a nebulous phenomenon that can only be appreciated in subjective, emotional terms, as a prosodic feature that is so personal to defy careful analysis, even if there *is* a strong personal, subjective, emotional element to it.

At the beginning of the third millennium, a historical overview of the topic may still be useful in order to show that it is the subjective, or irrational, side of intonation which makes the entire intonational phenomenon so difficult to describe (Barth-Wingarten, Reber, Selting 2010; Bonvillain 2011; Celce-Murcia et al. 2010; Tench 2011; Topintzi 2010). Intonation has been described for centuries as the expression of *the language of passions (or emotions)*, the "true sign of passion" (Sheridan 1762: 101). Thomas Sheridan (1719-1788) described the English tones, in particular, as "expressive of sorrow, lamentation, mirth,

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[1]   An important contribution in this field in Italy was given by Taylor Torsello (1992).

joy, hatred, anger, love, pity, &c."; according to him, they were the same "in all nations, and consequently can excite emotions in us analogous to those passions, when accompanying words which we do not understand" (1762: 102). The power of tones could be so strong that "the very tones themselves, independent of words, will produce the same effects, as has been amply proved by the power of musical imitation. And tho' these tones are usually accompanied with words [...], yet the whole energy, or power of exciting analogous emotions in others, lies in the tones themselves" (1762: 108). According to many other scholars after him (Walker 1787; Steele 1775; Odell 1806; Rush 1893), tones may express feelings and emotion, whereas words express contents and ideas. Tones are even more important than words, because "words are limited to their peculiar office, and never can supply the place of tones; yet tones, on the other hand, are not confined to their province, but often supply the place of words, as marks of ideas" (Sheridan 1762: 109).

More recently, some scholars have reinterpreted intonation as the *musical sign of emotions* (Fónagy, Magdics 1963). According to them, similar emotions or attitudes are bound to analogous melodies in languages not interrelated: "The musical signs of emotions may be considered as panchronic tendencies standing above languages and ages, which are realized according to the prevailing structure of the different languages" (302).

The dichotomy systemic side *vs* emotional side of intonation has always been one of the distinctive marks of English intonational studies. Daniel Jones, who dignified intonation by defining it as a "branch of the phonetic science"(Jones 1909: 11, in *An Outline of English Phonetics*, 1918) insisted on the fact that "to get good results in practical teaching it is necessary to have continual regard to the intonation *aimed at*, i.e. the intonations which are *subjectively* present to the speaker. These often differ considerably from the objective intonations actually employed" (326; original italics). By *objective intonation* the author meant the pure physical qualities of this prosodic feature, whereas by *subjective intonation* he intended the speaker's performance at the intonational level.

4. CONCLUSION

The great tradition of grammar and phonology which is behind the different approaches to intonational studies has been always an aid and a handicap at the same time: an aid because it has demanded rigor and consistency, a handicap in that it may lead one to see distinctions that could be even too sharp. In segmental phonology learners can easily accept minimal pairs where they find them: when they have to distinguish *tip/dip*, *ban/pan/van*, a high level of agreement on the distinction is attainable. Nothing of the sort hap-

pens to intonation. Fortunately, a certain consensus exists that one can look at such parameters as *high/low*, *up/down* to describe intonation, and that melodic shapes (contours, or levels) may be grouped around certain forms associated with the prominent syllable of an utterance.

From our point of view, intonation seems to have more in common with *gesture* than with grammar, though both intonation and gesture are tremendously important *to* grammar, as their lines intersect. But let this be a little food for thought.

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