

# The Role of Intonation in Spoken English

Dr. KOTTACHERUVU NAGENDRA

Assistant Professor

M.A.(Litt), M.Phil(L&P), Ph.D, PGDTE, B.Ed, APSET

Maulana Azad National Urdu University (MANUU)

Gachibowli, Hyderabad, Telangana State

## Abstract

*The aim of this research article is to know the importance and use of intonation in communicative English or spoken / day to day English. As it is well known fact that, knowing and using the right intonation patterns in day to day communicative English is a challenging and one of the most difficult tasks to non-native speakers and learners of English especially Indian speakers of English because we have many languages. Even though they are aware of theory, rules and regulations, when it comes to implementation and use they tend to make mistakes. In general, most of the schools and colleges, ESL learners are hardly ever trained and to use the right patterns of intonation. The problem is that, majority of the teachers of English are not confident in teaching intonation as it is difficult. Even though some of them are confident in teaching segmental features like consonants and vowel sounds when it comes to supra-segmental features; word stress, intonation and rhythm most of the English teachers dare not to attempt and teach. The reality is that, majority the teachers of English themselves feel difficulty in using right intonation patterns on right syllable.*

**Key Words:** *Intonation, segmental-features, word stress, tonicity, tone, tonality*

**Introduction:** As world is changing drastically and rapidly it is very important to know the use of right intonation patterns on right syllables. This is the need of the hour where teachers of English could concentrate and focus on English intonation patterns and motivate their students to use and know the right intonation in their communicative English. It is a fact that, English is spreading to every nook and the corner in the world. Moreover it became of international language or global language, further; it can be considered or called as language of job opportunities, library language and link language. It is high time to speak with intelligibility just not only in segmental features but also supra-segmental features. Intonation is one of the important supra-segmental features in communicative/spoken English. Since India has many languages, the question of a unifying language has been a constant problem in our country. After the achievement of independence, in India most of the states have been reorganized primarily on the linguistic basis. So, in a state the regional language

attains the most important place. However, the national language Hindi and English as an important foreign language cannot be ignored for they have got their own importance and utility.

**Significance of English:** From the time the English set their feet on the Indian soil the English Language has been holding a unique position in India. Its richness, flexibility, elegance and dignity made it universally popular. From every spear of our life the role of English has become noticeable. Therefore, highlighting the significance of English to India, the former Priminister Nehru said, “One hundred and fifty years of intimate contact has made English an integral part of our educational system and this cannot be changed without injury to the cause of education in India. In addition, English has today become one of the major languages of the world and Indians can neglect its study only at the risk of loss to themselves. I am convinced that in the future as well, the standard of teaching English should be maintained at as high a level as possible.

**Significance of Conversation:** According to V.V.Yardi (1970), a conversation approximates to a real life situation in which people communicate their ideas, opinions, feelings etc. He further defines “conversation as informal talk in which people exchange news, views, thoughts and feelings”. In a conversation, there is a free exchange of thoughts and feelings. Conversations normally take place between persons who share the same social setting or context, for example students in classroom, neighbors or passengers in a train, etc. Good conversation requires resourcefulness, patience, tact, the ability to listen, a certain manner of expression and an awareness of social conventions.

**Definition of Intonation:** The vocal cords are capable of vibrating at varying rates. Now, the number of cycles per second at which they vibrate is called the frequency of vibration, which determines the pitch of the voice. Further, intonation also can be defined as ‘the higher the frequency, the higher the pitch and vice versa’.

J.C.Wells (2006) describes ‘intonation is the melody of speech’. In studying intonation we study how the pitch of the voice rises and falls, and how speakers use this pitch variation to convey linguistic and pragmatic meaning. Further, it also involves the study of how the interplay of accented, stressed and unstressed syllables functions as a framework onto which the intonation patterns are attached.

**Halliday’s Intonation (1967):** A renowned phonetician and linguist defines intonation as ‘the melody of speech’ or ‘intonation is the musical speech pattern’. He further describes intonation in terms of tonality, tonicity and tone. He made a distinction between the normal and special cases of intonation patterns by using the terms ‘neutral’ and ‘marked’ while discussing actual occurrences of tonality, tonicity and tone. He is of the view that any description of a language is concerned with meaning and “all contrast in meaning can be stated

either in grammar or in lexis. His framework of tonality, tone and tonicity has been found to be very useful in the analysis of intonation.

**Tonality:** Tonality means ‘division of sentence into the tone groups’. Tonality also can be called as tone group which means ‘a meaningful unit in its own right’ or ‘one unit of information’. Let us discuss one sentence in detail which gives clear understanding of tonality so that we can understand the importance of tonality in spoken/day to day English.

My cousin who lives in Goa has come home

- Examples:**
- i. // My cousin, / who lives in Goa / has come home. //
  - ii. // My cousin who lives in Goa, / has come home. //

In the above sentences, the first one has three tone groups. Which means speaker has only one brother and lives in Goa. Where as in the sentence with two tone groups the speaker has more than one brother. One of them who live in Goa has come home. The above two examples showed how tone group boundaries determine meaning.

**Tone:** The tone refers to the kinetic tone carried by the tonic syllable, or the nucleus, in a tone group. Unlike static or level tones, it is a major change in pitch direction. An accented syllable in a tone group is said on a level pitch, high or low, but the most prominent syllable in it (i.e. the nucleus) is said with a changing pitch. This changing pitch, or tone, is several different kinds, the most important of which are called fall, rise, fall-rise, rise-fall and level tone. The fall, rise and level tone can be subdivided into high fall and low fall, high rise and low rise and high level and low level respectively.

**Tonicity:** Tonicity means ‘location of the tonic action’ or ‘major change in the pitch direction’.

- Examples:**
- i. // I am going to \Goa tomorrow.//
  - ii. // I am going to Goa to \morrow.//

In the above examples, the first one has focus on **Goa**. Which means the speaker is going to **Goa** not anywhere else. In example two, the location of the tonic accent is on ‘**tomorrow**’. The major pitch change is on the second syllable of ‘**tomorrow**’, that means speaker is going tomorrow not ‘day after’ or not ‘today’. Hence, the location of the tonic syllable helps in conveying different meanings.

**The Function of Intonation:** Intonation does not play a mere decorative role, but performs a linguistic function. The function or role of intonation can further divided into three functions they are; grammatical function, attitudinal function and accentual function. Let us discuss one by one in order understand clearly.

**Grammatical Function:** Intonation distinguishes different types of sentences.

- Examples:**
- i. // Virat is arriving \late. // (Statement)
  - ii. // Virat is arriving □late? // (Question)

In the example one, the use of a falling tone makes it a statement. Whereas, in the example two, the rising tone turn it into a question. Similarly the examples below also change their meaning because of their intonation.

- Examples:**
- i. // Close the \window. // (Command)
  - ii. // Close the □window. // (Request)

Just because, the shift of intonation marks in these two examples the whole meaning is changed. In the first example speaker said with falling tone which means command. In other words, second example said with rising tone which means polite. The above examples explain clearly the role and importance of intonation in spoken English.

**Attitudinal Function:** Attitude plays prominent role in intonation. Particularly while we are speaking to native speakers of English, one should be very careful about one's intonation. Let us see the following examples demonstrate the importance of attitudinal function.

1. (a) // When can you \come? // (Falling tone)
- (b) // When can you □come? // (Rising tone)
2. (a) // Dhoni is very \good. // (Falling tone)
- (b) // Dhoni is very <good. // (Fall-Rise)

Example 1(a) when speaker said with a falling tone, it is a normal question; it is neither polite nor impolite. When it is said with a rising tone, on the other hand, as in 1 (b), it expresses politeness, even deference. In the second set of examples, 2(a), which is said with a falling tone, is a plain statement, where as in 2(b), which is said with a falling – rising tone, expresses reservation on the part of the speaker. It means something like 'but you don't know the other side of the picture'.

**Accentual Function:** It will focus mainly on the location of the tonic syllable. The speaker can change the meaning of a sentence by shifting the focus. The role of accentual function of intonation can be shown by shifting the focus in the following sentence.

**Examples:** Sunaina goes shopping to town every Sunday.

1. // Sunaina goes shopping to town \every Sunday.//

In the above statement, the tonic syllable is on the first syllable of 'every'. This can be the answer to a question like, which Sunday does Sunaina go shopping to town? The above statement with focus on 'ev' of 'every' indicates that Sunaina goes shopping each and every Sunday.

2. // Sunaina goes shopping to \town every Sunday.//

In the second example, tonic syllable is shifted to **town**. It can be the answer to a question like which means where does Sunaina go shopping every Sunday? Sunaina goes shopping to **town** not market, not school and not anywhere else.

3. // Sunaina goes \shopping to town every Sunday.//

In third example the tonic syllable is on the first syllable of **shopping** this statement can be the answer to a question like what does Sunaina do in town every Sunday? Sunaina goes to town just to 'shop' but not to 'visit' or *sightseeing* or just *time pass*.

4. // \Sunaina goes shopping to town every Sunday.//

In example four, the tonic syllable is on **Sunaina**. This statement can be the answer to a question like, who goes to the town every Sunday. It is '**Sunaina**' who goes to town not someone else.

As we have seen in the above examples location of the tonic accent will change the meaning. The same sentence can acquire a different meanings based upon which syllable gets the focus. This shows how a speaker can exploit a sentence by shifting the focus.

**Conclusion:** It must be admitted that the learning of intonation patterns of a second language is difficult. It needs a constant practice to use the total system with the same facility as that of mother tongue. But as that of a particular language, learning the patterns of that particular language would enable the learner to avoid wrong intonation patterns. Therefore, the teachers of English can help their students master the difficulties of the intonation patterns of English, which are crucial in intelligibility. A systematic study and constant practice only can enable the teachers of English and learners internalize the rules of the language so that their speech is not only effective but also intelligible and clear, avoiding all possibilities of being misunderstood due to certain absolutely unintended expressions.

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