Second-language speaker interpretations of intonational semantics in English

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Abstract

Research is reported on the way in which Finnish speakers of English interpret the semantic/pragmatic meaning of the fall-rise intonation in spoken English. A set of constructed mini-dialogues were used for listening tests in which the test subjects were to interpret the “meaning” of the fall-rise tone. To obtain baseline data, a group of native speakers of English listened to the same material, with the same interpretative task. The results indicate that the native speakers consistently interpreted the fall-rise pattern as conveying reservation (or irony), whereas the non-native speakers perceived a “reserved” meaning only if the lexical context explicitly supported such an interpretation.

Introduction

The semantic/pragmatic meaning of the fall-rise intonation contour has attracted a great deal of attention in the literature on English prosody (the fall-rise is transcribed with the diacritic V below). Basically, the tone is associated with reservations, implications and doubts. It can also be argued that the fall-rise conveys “uncertainty” or “in-completion” (as all rising tones do) but the fall-rise is apparently associated with especially delimiting open meanings; it has sometimes, and quite rightly, been referred to as the contingency tone in English intonation. That is, the fall-rise is often an indication that the proposition or argument is correct only under certain circumstances. Roach (1991) uses the terms “limited agreement” and “response with reservations” to describe the pragmatic meaning of the fall-rise. In the literature on the subject, the following meanings, for example, have been attributed to the tone: “implicatoriness”, “reservation” and “contradiction”, “lack of complete commitment”, and “strong implication”. The common denominator is, clearly, an indication of some concealed doubt or contrast: the speaker may say one thing and mean something else. That is, a subtle prosody-dependent pragmatic meaning is created.

From the viewpoint of second language acquisition, intonation can be seen as belonging to the pragmatic aspects of language. Pragmatics is probably one of the most difficult areas of second language acquisition in general. It seems likely that misunderstandings resulting from different ways of interpreting intonational meaning will interfere with a common discourse space between the native speaker and the non-native interlocutor – even if the non-native speech may be otherwise (e.g. grammatically) quite acceptable.

In this light, the study of the cross-linguistic interpretation of the semantic meaning of English intonation contours is a most profitable undertaking. For the purpose of this study, the meaning of the fall-rise pattern was chosen for scrutiny. On the one hand, this contour has a specific meaning in (British) English intonation; on the other hand, the fall-rise does not have a counterpart in Finnish intonation. As Iivonen (1998) points out, “a final rise is rare in Finnish and the rules found in French, English, and German associated with the use of final rise … do not exist in Finnish”.

Experiment

To obtain suitable test material, a native speaker of English, a professional phonetician, was asked to produce a declarative utterance with a falling-rising nuclear tone on the last word. The test utterance, by itself and combined with other utterances, constituted the material used in the listening test. All the speech material used in the experimental setup was tape-recorded with a high-quality microphone and a DAT recorder, and transferred onto hard disk (44.1 kHz, 16 bit). The test utterance was the following (with the nuclear tone on the latter syllable of degree):

She’s got a good V degree

The speaker also produced a number of other utterances to create coherent lines in the mini-dialogues: the speaker is referred to as “Bill”. Another native male speaker of English (“John”) was the interlocutor and produced the other lines in the dialogues (see the Notes section). Four mini-dialogues contained the test utterance; in three mini-dialogues the test utterance was accompanied by one or two additional
utterances to produce “Bill’s” line. Four additional mini-dialogues served as distractors: they did not contain the test utterance. Only the test utterance contained a falling-rising intonation: all the other utterances in the test dialogues ended on simple falls. The distractor dialogues contained both falls and rises but not fall-rises.

The listeners were all university students: the Britons majored in non-linguistic subjects, while the Finns were first-year university students of English. Ten Britons and ten Finns, all female speakers in their early twenties, participated in the listening test. The test was administered in a language laboratory; the listeners had written transcripts of the dialogues in front of them, and the line to which they were to pay attention was underlined (see the Notes section). The test subjects listened to each dialogue once and chose one of six descriptive labels for the line whose attitudinal/emotional content they were to judge. The labels describing the lines were the following: friendly, reserved, bored, joyful, casual, and ironical.

One or two things should be pointed out at this stage. Firstly, dialogues 1 and 3 are basically comparable to the examples given in the intonation literature: the most typical semantic meaning of an intonation contour is often discussed out of context – or in a lexical context which clearly supports the supposed meaning of the contour. In dialogue 3, the “reservation” conveyed by the fall-rise is very much in agreement with the lexical content of the line. The examples given by Cruttenden (1997), for example, are rather similar to the test utterance in dialogues 1 and 3:

You won’t V like it
Be careful you don’t V fall
I like V John (‘but...’)

In dialogues 5 and 7, by contrast, the “implication” or “doubt” expressed by the fall-rise conflicts with the “positive” ideas expressed verbally. The interesting question is, of course, whether the pragmatic force of the fall-rise is strong enough to counteract the lexical meaning of the lines – a point rarely discussed in the literature.

All the other utterances in the test dialogues ended on a tone which could be described as a “high-fall” (i.e. a relatively wide unidirectional f0 movement). This tone is often assumed to represent the most typical intonation contour with declaratives (Cruttenden 1997). The high-fall is common even with polar questions, at least in informational conversation. Thus it can be claimed that the test dialogues were intonationally neutral apart from the utterance with the fall-rise, i.e. the fall-rise is clearly a deviation from the general falling trend and should thus attract some special attention. However, since the distractor dialogues contained rising tones, the test sentence did not stand out as the only utterance ending on a rising contour.

**Results**

In dialogue 1, nine native speakers of English chose the attitudinal label “reserved”, and one chose the term “ironical”. It seems clear, then, that, to the native ear, even a largely decontextualized utterance with the fall-rise sounds predominantly negative. The responses of the Finnish informants, by contrast, were much more heterogeneous. The label “friendly” had the most votes (4), the other interpretations were “casual” (3), “reserved” (2) and “joyful” (1). The Finns apparently paid attention mainly to the lexical content of the utterance. On the other hand, it might be the case that the Finnish informants associated the falling-rising intonation with “friendliness”. After all, (low) rising intonation often accompanies conventionally polite declarative utterances in spoken English. The small amount of data, of course, prevents one from making any far-reaching conclusions.

An interesting question is whether the test utterance, produced with a simple falling intonation, might still convey “implications” or “reservations” in dialogue 1. That is, could the utterance (She’s got a good degree), as a response to the question (What do you think of her?) convey a conversational implicature of some kind? It might be possible that the speaker deliberately flouts the maxims of quantity and relevance in saying far too little. The situation might resemble the famous (and extremely concise) critique of a book:

The book is well-bound and free of typographic errors

The review flouts the maxim of quantity, and the implicature is, clearly, that the book is terrible. In dialogue 1, even without the fall-rise, the implicature might be something like “the lady is well-educated but is a difficult person”. However, it must be emphasized that this is basically only speculation.

Brown and Yule (1983) describe the dilemma of the hearer and discourse analyst as follows: “since the analyst has only limited access to what a speaker intended, or how sincerely he was behaving, in the production of a discourse segment, any claims regarding the
implicatures identified will have the status of interpretations”. This latitude of interpretation would probably obtain in dialogue 1 if the test utterance were spoken with a falling tone. Naturally, the semantic interpretation of the utterance produced with vs. without a fall-rise should be investigated in a separate study.

Dialogue 3 is very different from dialogue 1: here the reservations and doubts are expressed both verbally and prosodically. Here, as in dialogue 1, nine native speakers heard “reservations”, while one interpreted the speaker as “ironical”. Eight Finns chose the label “reserved”, one chose “bored” and one “ironical”. The situation seems rather straightforward: as the lexical content is in harmony with the intonation contour, the “reserved” meaning was readily perceivable. However, it is likely that the Finns again regarded the lexical content as the major factor contributing to the attitudinal/pragmatic meaning of the line. That is, even without a falling-rising intonation, the attitude might have been obvious (the same probably goes for the British test subjects). In any case, in this dialogue, the lexical meaning prejudices the listener much more than in dialogue 1.

Dialogues 5 and 7 can be discussed together. In both of them, the lexical meaning of the test line is apparently very positive while the tone is, again, the fall-rise conveying possible doubts or implications: the written version of the line could easily be interpreted as friendly or even joyful. Indeed, this predisposition was clear in the responses of the Finnish test subjects: in dialogue 5, nine speakers interpreted the speaker as “friendly” (one chose the label “joyful”), and in dialogue 7, eight informants chose “friendly”, one “joyful” and one “casual”. The British informants’ reactions differ markedly from those of the Finnish listeners. In dialogue 5, an “ironical” attitude was detected by six informants, a “reserved” attitude by three, and a “casual” attitude by one. In dialogue 7, most of the informants (seven listeners) heard an “ironical” attitude, while the rest interpreted the speaker as “reserved”.

Apparently, in dialogues 5 and 7, the Finns did not perceive any potential conflict with the lexical meaning and the tone choice: the fall-rise did not detract from the general positive attitude expressed verbally. By contrast, the native speakers were obviously aware of the clash between lexical meaning and the attitude conveyed by intonation. Interestingly, many of the informants thought that the line was meant to be ironical: the fall-rise was probably perceived as being out of place in an otherwise “positive” part of dialogue, and the mismatch was attributed to an ironical attitude. The situation here may be partly similar to the example given by Watt (1994). If the following utterance is accompanied by a “smiling” voice quality and a gentle low rising intonation, a mordant effect of sarcasm or irony is probably created:

Put that goddam pipe away

Incongruous linguistic content and intonation conspire to produce a stylistic effect which is likely to irritate or even unsettle the listener. As Watt points out, intonation has an “interpersonal metafunction” by serving as a channel for linguistic expression of attitude. Lexicon and (stylistic) register are other channels, and the interaction of these modes creates attitudinal meanings of different kinds.

Discussion

The investigation has revealed some interesting differences in the semantic interpretation of the fall-rise contour between native and non-native speakers of English. The results support the common view that the general pragmatic/semantic meaning of the fall-rise can be described in terms of such attitudinal labels as “reserved” and “doubtful”: the native speakers systematically associated reservations with the tone when the lexical content was either “neutral” or congruous with such an interpretation. If there was a mismatch between words and the tone, the clash was mainly interpreted as irony. The British informants apparently had a very clear idea about where the fall-rise fits in properly and where it is used for a deliberate phonostylistic effect. The British informants could thus analyze the meaning of the fall-rise also at a metalinguistic level.

The Finnish informants mainly resorted to the so-called lexico-syntactic strategy (see e.g. Cruz-Ferreira 1986): speakers of a second language analyze the (semantic/pragmatic) meaning of an utterance as corresponding to the most immediate interpretation of the lexical and grammatical content of the sentence.

The conclusions drawn on the basis of this investigation are supported by a study of the productive English intonation skills of Finns: Toivanen (2001) offers empirical evidence that Finnish speakers of English very rarely use the falling-rising tone in conversation. Thus, although Finns can make, phonetically and phonologically, a distinction between falling and rising intonation, Finns are very hesitant about
associating rising tones with informational and/or pragmatic “openness”. In the colloquial English speech of Finns, “reserved” or “incomplete” statements are typically accompanied by falling tones – in contradistinction to the English spoken by native speakers.

Conclusion
This investigation, although based on limited and somewhat artificial material, suggests that even very advanced Finnish speakers of English do not fully master the intonational lexicon of English. Finns are largely unaware of the pragmatic meaning of the fall-rise intonation contour, and analyze the tone as conveying “reservations” only when the lexical meaning allows for such an interpretation. The British informants readily perceive the reserved meaning of the fall-rise. However, if the context suggests an entirely different semantic interpretation, the native speakers are likely to conclude that the contrast between the lexical meaning and the fall-rise indicates irony of some kind.

Notes
1. John: What do you think of her?
   Bill: She’s got a good degree.
   Bill sounds a) friendly, b) reserved, c) bored, d) joyful, e) casual, f) ironical.

2. John: What are you doing here?
   Bill: Just waiting for Tim. He seems to be late for the meeting.
   Bill sounds a) friendly, b) reserved, c) bored, d) joyful, e) casual, f) ironical.

3. John: Do you think she’s qualified for the job?
   Bill: I don’t know. She’s got a good degree. But she hasn’t got much experience.
   Bill sounds a) friendly, b) reserved, c) bored, d) joyful, e) casual, f) ironical.

4. John: Excuse me, how much is this magazine. There’s no price tag on it.
   Bill: But there must be a price tag.
   Bill sounds a) friendly, b) reserved, c) bored, d) joyful, e) casual, f) ironical.

5. John: My daughter has just graduated from university. She’s a lawyer now.
   Bill: I’m glad to hear that. She’s got a good degree.
   Bill sounds a) friendly, b) reserved, c) bored, d) joyful, e) casual, f) ironical.

References