

ENGLISH INTONATION AND POLITENESS

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1. *Introductory remarks**

The title of this paper requires -- at the very outset -- some clarifications and delimitations with regard to our subject matter. *English intonation* encompasses a very large field, as anyone knows, and *politeness*, if not as diverse as intonation, may yet be so vague as to be useless for a linguistic investigation. We should like to analyse intonation into the central components of pause, stress or rhythm, and pitch (change), in accordance with many previous studies in this field, and into the marginal ones of voice quality, speed of delivery, etc., the so-called paralinguistic features. On the whole, we want to treat these various components of intonation as given. We would also agree with many writers that pauses, stress and pitch are the essential components, but paralinguistic features may become important especially with regard to our second notion, that of politeness. We shall return to this point later.

Polite is paraphrased in the *Oxford English dictionary* (20) as "Of refined manners; esp. showing courteous consideration for others; courteous, mannerly, urbane. (The chief current use.)" Politeness may be described as a concept referring to social matters, to an interpersonal relationship, and thus touches upon questions of norm and convention. It is impossible to pursue a lengthy, and perhaps even philosophical discussion of the nature of politeness. We would rather take the notion of politeness for granted and illustrate it subsequently by means of examples.

The aim of this paper is to investigate some of the intonational means a speaker has at his disposal if he wants to be polite.

* I am very grateful to Mr. P. Marsden, Ph. D., for improving the intelligibility of the text by correcting it from the native speaker's point of view.

2. Survey of previous studies

Reasons of space compel us to restrict our brief survey to three important contributions in this field of intonation studies. The first one is Pike's classical study on American English intonation (1945), which contains the following quotations:

- (1) Oftentimes rising contours are somewhat POLITE or CHEERFUL, and sound less brusque than falling ones. Notice the following samples:

Won't you sit down? *o.k., come on.* (1945: 51)
2— °2—1/ 2—°4—3/ 2—°4—3/

- (2) The °3—1 contour involves the SEQUENTIAL meaning of the °3—2, but adds (a) INTENSITY and (b) UNEXPECTEDNESS (i.e. surprise) or (c) POLITENESS to it....

a cheery little bird *You're going?* (1945: 54)
4—°3—1/ °3—1/ °3—4// 3— 3—1/

- (3) The rising contour °2—1, like other rising contours, has a meaning of INCOMPLETENESS. Like °3—2, it also implies a SEQUENCE. If °2—1 paralleled other contours which contain pitch one, it would mean unexpectedness. It seems to be more MILD in intensity or surprise than other contours rising to pitch one, however, and to emphasize POLITENESS instead. Hostesses use it a great deal for friendly welcome, or cheery inquiry, or to put people at ease; in fact, all of the rising contours are used occasionally in polite or cheerful contexts, but probably this one more so than the others.

Won't you come in? *Won't you sit down?* (1945: 59)
2— °2—1/ 2— °2—1/

O'Connor and Arnold (1973) do not employ the term *polite* at all in their list of adjectives describing speakers' attitudes. Perhaps it is safe to infer that their tone groups 2, 4, 7, and 9 are potentially applicable in expressing politeness; compare the following examples and the various circumscriptions of the attitude linked with a particular tone group:

- (4) I \like it /here. — \Do you? (1973:127)
"High Drop": "conveying a sense of involvement, light, airy. ...not unfriendly, lively, interested" (p. 125).
- (5) I'm \sorry to /trouble you. — It's \no /trouble. (p. 159)
"sympathetically interested ... genuinely interested ... casual, yet encouraging, often friendly..." (p. 158)
- (6) \Where's my \newspaper. — You \want it /back? (p. 209)
"tentative, casual.... light and casual.... querying ... with no critical intention" (p. 202).

- (7) I \haven't got a \knife. — Oh \here you /are. (p. 233)
"expressing gladness... gushing warmth ... intensely encouraging ..." (p. 232).

Leech and Svartvik (1975) list *polite* as one of their "variety labels", stating the following with regard to intonation:

- (8) Encouraging or <polite> denials, commands, invitations, greetings, farewells, etc. are generally spoken with a rising tone:

A |Are you *busy*?| B |No.| ('Please interrupt me if you wish')
|Do sit *down*.|

Here the finality of the falling tone would sound <impolite> (1975: 39, §42).

The illustrations from the three different studies have to suffice to indicate that some type of rising intonation seems to be connected with the expression of politeness. On the whole, the respective statements are fairly vague, as no clear distinction with respect to the type of rise is given, no data illustrating other types of pitch change are added, and the factors of stress and pause are not explicitly taken into account, not to mention the lexical material.

Our next step will be in the direction of a fuller and more detailed look at the whole matter.

3. Investigation of intonational, lexical and situational factors

3.1. Pause

The pause, although it is in fact a segmental phenomenon and is employed to segment the speech continuum, appears normally among the suprasegmental components. The distribution of pauses does not seem to affect the politeness of an utterance except in the very general sense that an unusual position of a pause and the subsequent changes of the stress and pitch patterns may be interpreted as 'impolite', but the pause distribution alone would not seem to provide an instrument for the expression of politeness or impoliteness.

3.2. Stress

As regards stress, one can again note that a deviation from the norm may be interpreted as impolite, because it can produce a forceful or pushing utterance, such as:

(9) \You \should \come \here, /Jack¹
/ju: \jud \kam \hia /dʒæk/

¹ For the illustration of the stress and pitch patterns of our written examples the visual aids devised by O'Connor and Arnold (1973), slightly modified, seem to be quite useful: ● = stressed syllable; ○ = unstressed syllable; the two continuous lines = upper and lower pitch limit of voice; dotted line = approximate medium of pitch range; // = emphatic stress; \, \ = high and low fall; /, / = high and low rise.



Compare.

'You should come \here, /Jack
/ju ʃəd kʌm \hiə dʒæk/

Or:

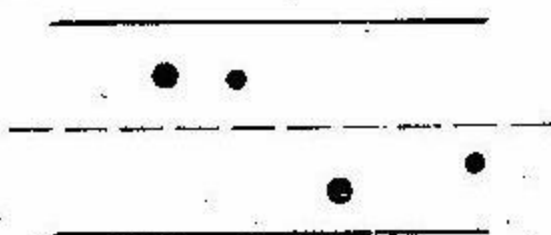
You should come \here, /Jack
/ju ʃd kʌm \hiə dʒæk/



According to the rule of thumb, the lexical items in a stretch of speech receive the heavy stresses (cf., e.g., Pike 1945: 27f.); if the function words are stressed as well, the result may be too forceful to be still polite. In other words, the number of the stresses and their position are important.

The degree of stress may also be a relevant factor, but only, it seems, in the range from strong to emphatic stress. If the following utterance is produced with emphatic stresses, it would be difficult to interpret it as an ordinary polite invitation:

(10) ¹¹Take a //seat, Jack



There are situations, however, in which emphasis is called for if the partner in a conversation wants to remain at least polite. Imagine, for instance, the subsequent dialogue which requires emphasis on the word *love*:

(11) She: You don't love me any more!

He: But I ¹¹love you, dear (though I may not say so often)

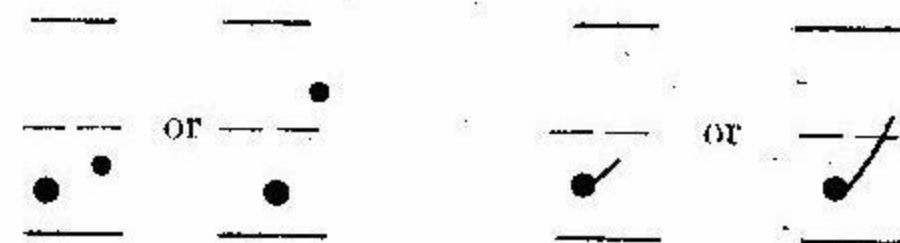
Emphasis is still a rather vague concept. An emphatic utterance may be created by a certain degree of stress, but this often implements changes in the pitch pattern as well, e.g. the selection of high pitches, high falls, etc. On the other side, an increase in the number of stressed syllables, or the placement of stress on syllables normally unstressed, as was mentioned above, may also result in emphatic statements.

3.3. Pitch

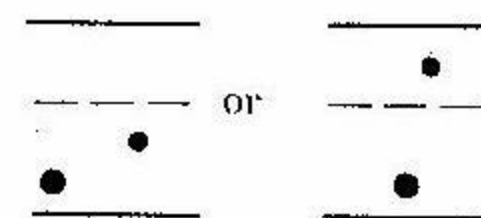
A rising intonation has commonly been linked with the expression of politeness. But the kind of rise deserves a little more attention. It would

appear that the rise has to be fairly wide, i.e. it will have to cover a wide interval or range, in order to be interpreted as polite. Compare the following examples:

(12) 'Are you /busy at the moment? — /No?



He has /lost his /voice. — /Has he ?



Only the slightly higher rises will occur in a polite atmosphere, whereas the very narrow ones signal a rather cool and even frosty attitude. From this one may conclude that a high or wide rise in such contexts will easily be understood as polite, which also appears to be the opinion of Pike and Leech-Svartvik (see above, §2). But one may also encounter texts and contexts in which a narrow rise seems to be required for a polite statement while the high one signals annoyance, reproach, etc.² Observe the following fraction of a dialogue:

(13) A: You are sitting on my hat!

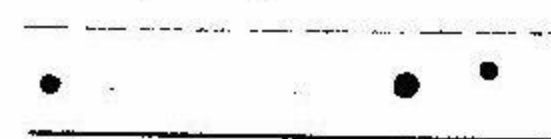
B: I /beg your /pardon

(low head, narrow low rise; 'frosty rejection')



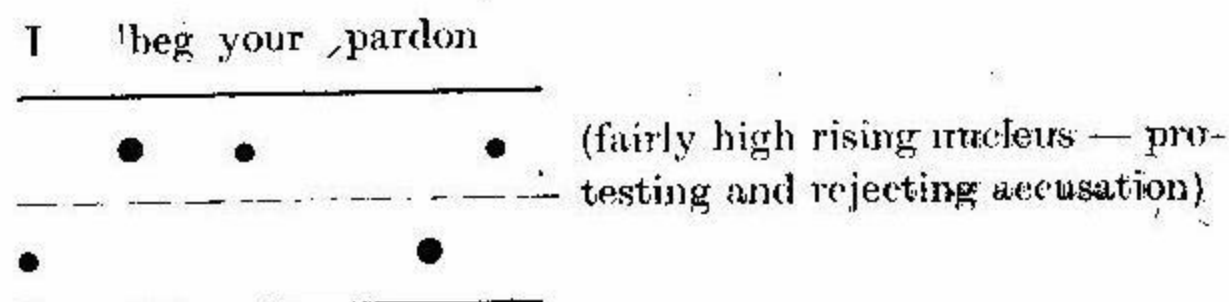
or: I /beg your /pardon

(sincere — and polite — apology taking the responsibility)

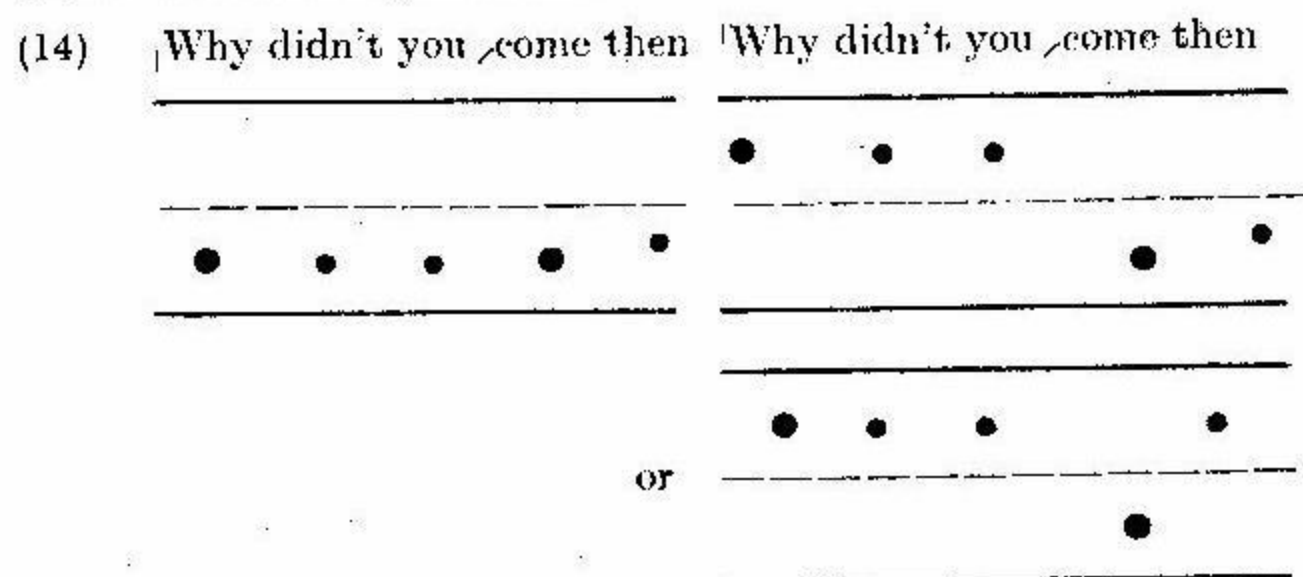


² My attention was drawn to this observation during a conversation with John Spencer, to whom I am most grateful for discussing various points of the paper with me and giving me the benefit of his experience.

or:

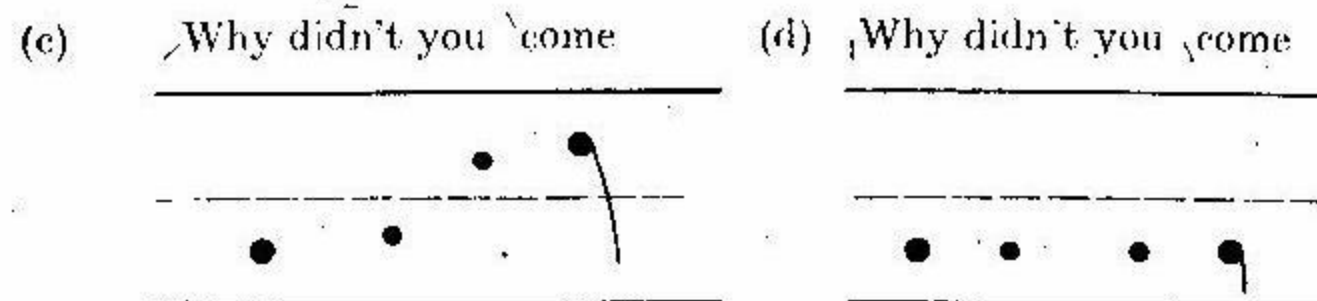
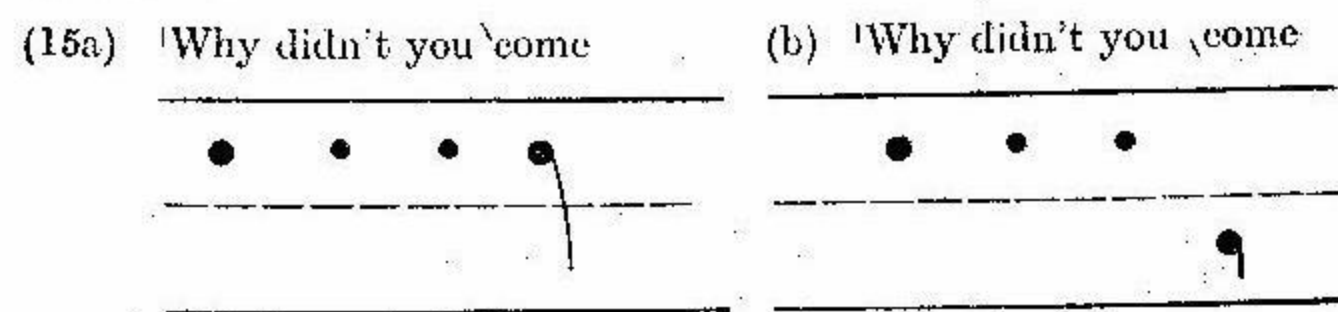


In the examples (12, 13) the range of the rise (narrow or wide), which again might be called a matter of degree, is directly linked with the intonation nucleus. But the expression of politeness is also connected with other parts of the whole pitch contour. If one assumes that a pitch contour may consist of the obligatory nucleus, an optional tail (which only continues the pitch movement of the nucleus), and an optional head (which allows various pitch patterns, at least partially independent of the nuclear pitch change) one can note that a low head and a narrow low rise may sound rather impolite, compared to a high-pitched head and a low rise, even if the latter is fairly narrow. Notice the following instances:



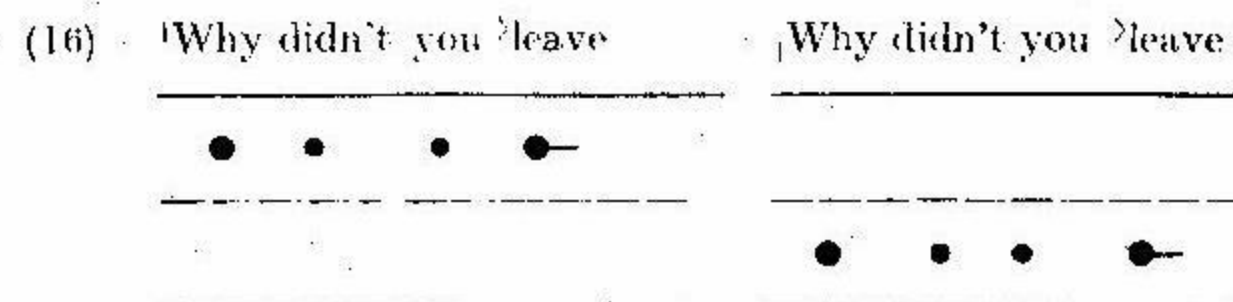
This means that the interval between head and nucleus should also be fairly wide, if a polite utterance is intended.

It is a commonplace to relate rising pitch contours with politeness. Yet the high fall has to be considered as well. If some rich uncle were to give £50 to his niece and she were to say 'thank you (with a narrow low fall), the uncle might not consider this reaction to be appropriate or even polite. A high fall would provide a more usual response: 'thank you. Compare also the following utterances:



The first one seems to be the most polite inquiry, whereas the others imply some kind of reproach.

The observations related to the wide rise and the wide interval between head and nucleus seem to indicate that generally it is the higher pitch range of the voice that is activated in polite conversation. This point could be further illustrated with the level nuclear tone:

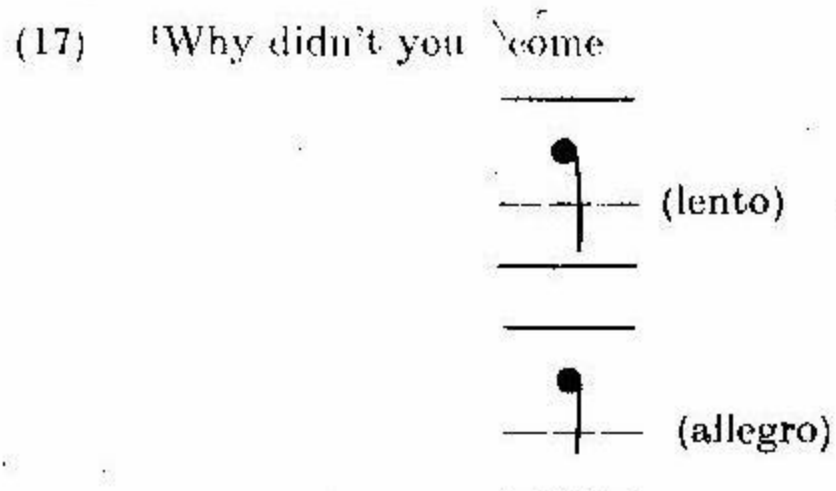


The second utterance is most likely to be interpreted as 'grumbling'.

Further examples illustrating the relevance of pitch changes and of complex contours to the expression of politeness cannot be added here. But two other factors should be examined briefly.

3.4. Voice quality, tempo, etc.

The remark about the pitch range in the previous section was one step in the direction of voice quality in a more general sense. A creaky, husky, or breathy voice, if it is not the normal voice of an individual, may — precisely because it is not the normal voice — be interpreted as being outside the range of politeness. Often these qualities correlate with pitch, for instance, or speech tempo, or loudness and stress. A fast type of delivery acts against wide pitch ranges, for example:



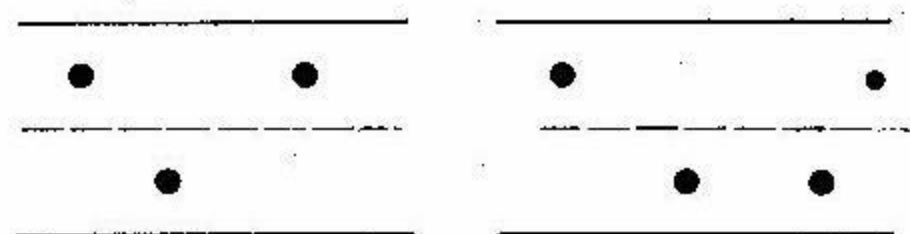
The 'clipped' second nucleus is not likely to add politeness to the utterance.

3.5. *Interdependence of lexical, situational and suprasegmental factors*

Although it is an obvious phenomenon, the interdependence of lexical, situational and intonational units has to be mentioned in our survey.

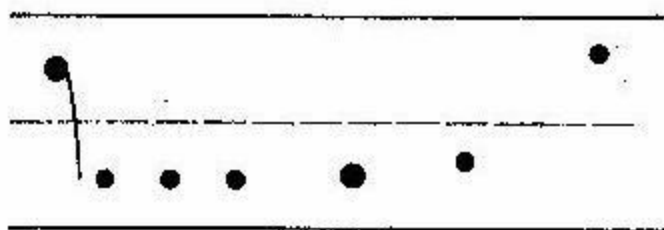
Usually, impolite vocabulary cannot be ameliorated or softened very much by intonational means. For instance:

(18) 'Sit ↓down, Jack but 'Sit ↓down, 'idiot



But it is certainly possible to produce ironical, sarcastic or comical effects by means of a contradiction between word meanings and intonational factors. The same holds true if there is a contradiction between certain elements of situation and an utterance, as, for instance, when somebody is invited — at gunpoint:

(19) 'Do open the ↓safe for me



The norm in such cases would require the intonational components to be congruous with the lexical and situational ones.

4. *Summary*

After this outline of possible expressions of politeness with a view to intonation, the following points may serve as a summary:

- With the exception of pauses, all other components of intonation, such as stress, pitch, voice quality, speed of delivery, etc. may play a role in the expression of politeness. (This indicates that pauses belong to a different category than pitch and stress.)
- It seems necessary to assume that there is a norm for stress, pitch and the other factors, the violation of which may signal impoliteness, and other attitudes.
- The greatest potential for polite expressions is offered by the pitch patterns.

- Rises and falls, if they are wide or high, are typical of polite utterances, given the appropriate context.
- The higher pitch range generally seems to be employed to signal politeness.
- The combination of head plus nucleus may influence the degree of politeness (on the scale between polite and impolite).
- Lexical and situational factors have to be congruous with the intonational ones; otherwise the contradiction will be interpreted as ironical, etc., i.e. other attitudes that override politeness.
- The majority of notational systems available for intonation is not sufficiently specific to express the necessary details (types of rise, etc.).

It will have been noticed that the category of politeness, which some linguists would call a pragmatic category, has not been mentioned again. It seems to me that politeness is intimately connected with the norm of a particular linguistic system, and that politeness requires the application of the norm. The problem is that all the systems or subsystems mentioned above — from the stress distribution to lexical meanings and situational factors — are still rather unclear as regards their relation to intonation. I suppose one could gain some insight by experiments in which individual factors can be controlled and native and foreign speakers of English record their reactions to the differing variables. Linguists have discovered an intricate system of systems in intonation and elsewhere in the language. The next step should be an investigation into the relevance of the systems and their parts to what might be called "communicative categories".

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