

Toward a Bestiary of the Intonational Tunes of English

Michael Wagner

McGill University

(Reporting on joint work with Dan Goodhue, University of Maryland)

Abstract

What is the inventory of tunes of North American English? What do particular tunes contribute to the pragmatic and semantic import of an utterance? How reliably are certain conversational goals and intentions associated with the use of particular tunes? While English intonation is well-studied, the answers to these questions still remain preliminary. We present the results of scripted experiments that complement existing knowledge by providing some data on what tunes speakers use to accomplish particular conversational goals, and how likely particular choices are. This research complements studies of the meaning and form of individual contours, which often does not explore the alternative prosodic means to achieve a certain conversational goal; it also complements more exploratory research based on speech corpora, which offer a rich field for exploring which contours are generally out there, but since the context often underdetermines the real intentions of the speaker, they make it hard to come to firm conclusions with respect to the contribution of particular tunes. Our studies focus on three types of conversational goals, the goal to contradict (Intended Contradiction), to imply something indirectly (Intended Implication), or to express incredulity (Intended Incredulity). We looked at these three intents since their expression has been linked in the prior literature with the use of three particular rising contours: the Contradiction Contour (Lieberman & Sag, 1974; Ladd, 1980; Ward & Hirschberg, 1985; Goodhue & Wagner 2018)), the Rise-Fall-rise Contour (Ward & Hirschberg, 1985; Constant, 2012; Wagner, 2012), and the incredulity contour (Hirschberg & Ward, 1992). Our results show that participants indeed use the expected contours more frequently than others to achieve the respective conversational goals—except that they almost never used the Incredulity Contour. To convey incredulity, speakers almost always chose the Polar Question Rise (Pierrehumbert & Hirschberg, 1990, Bartels, 1999; Truckenbrodt 2012). In Contradictions, there was more variability in the choice of intonational tune than with the other two intents. When speakers did not use the Contradiction Contour, they often contradicted the interlocutor using a Declarative Fall with Polarity Focus, or a hitherto undescribed falling contour, which we label the Presumption Contour. Our results also show an interesting interaction between choice of tune and focus prominence (Goodhue & Wagner 2016; cf. Schloder 2018). We discuss the challenge such interactions pose for Rooth's alternatives theory of focus, and how one might go about addressing it.