Chapter 2

A Discourse-Pragmatic Approach to Intonation: An Overview of Brazil's Model of Discourse Intonation

The discourse-pragmatic approach to intonation reconceptualizes traditional pedagogical descriptions of intonation and provides evidence to show that there is a fundamental flaw with presentations that equate intonation primarily with grammatical function or attitudinal expression. While intonation clearly correlates with these components in the discourse, the meaning of the intonation system is not located in the grammatical structure or emotive content of language; thus, it is not wholly predictable based on what is happening in these areas of the language system. Rather, by focusing on these areas, we are essentially picking out pieces of the intonation system and trying to make sense of them individually, rather than looking at the system as a whole.

At the heart of the approach presented here is that the intonation system is essentially **pragmatic** in nature; that is, it contributes independently to the discourse by using intonational cues to link the information to a world or context that the hearer can make sense of. As this context continually changes between speakers and hearers in naturally occurring discourse, this approach recognizes that intonation choices function within a context and lose their significance when this context is reduced or eradicated. This chapter provides an initial overview of the discourse model focusing on both the structure and function of intonation in English. Later chapters discuss each of the systems outlined in

more detail. The four basic systems of the model that will be introduced here are:

1. dividing speech into units
2. highlighting prominence information within speech units
3. choosing the pitch pattern on the unit's tonic syllable (or focus word)
4. choosing the pitch height on prominent syllables or the tonic syllable.

2.1. Dividing Speech into Units

In discourse intonation, units of speech are called **tone units**. In pedagogical texts they are also commonly called thought groups, tone groups, sense groups, or intonation units. In all cases, they refer to units of organization in speech that we recognize as having essentially an equivalent function to that of sentences or clauses in writing. Speakers' creation of tone units is guided by their perception of semantic or syntactic chunks of language such as:

◆ one idea or piece of information
◆ a question
◆ one clause (subject + predicate)
◆ division of complex clauses (independent + dependent clauses]
◆ items in a list
◆ adjuncts such as *however* or *finally.*

As an exercise in the processes underlying boundary recognition, read the text shown in Figure 2.1 and predict where you think intonation unit boundaries (or thought groups) might appear.

Figure 2.1.   A Sample Spoken Text without Tone Unit Boundaries

last time I was at an airport I was between planes and I had to make an important phone call I looked around and all the phones were busy so I waited in line and waited and waited finally I began to listen to the conversation of the guy who was talking on the phone I was waiting to use.

Adapted from *Listening in & Speaking Out* by Sharon Bode (1980, p. 10).

Figure 2.2. Sample Showing Pause Boundaries

// last time I was at an airport// I was between planes// and I had to make
an important phone call// I looked around// and all the phones were busy//
so I waited in line// and waited and waited// finally// I began to listen to the
conversation of the guy// who was talking on the phone// I was waiting to use//

Figure 2.3. Another Possible Division of the Text into Intonation Units

// Last time I was at an airport I was between planes and I had to make an
important phone call// I looked around and all the phones were busy// so I waited
in line and waited and waited// finally I began to listen to the conversation of the
guy// who was talking on the phone I was waiting to use//

Figure 2.2 shows one possible division of the text into units (// marks pause boundaries between units); Figure 2.3 shows yet another possibility.

In Figure 2.2, complex clauses are divided into separate units (e.g., // last time I was at an airport// I was between planes//), individual clauses are separated (e.g., // I looked around// all the phones were busy//), repeated items are separated (e.g., // so I waited in line// and waited and waited//), and the adjunct *finally* is separated from the main clause (// finally// I began to listen…).

In Figure 2.3, there are far fewer unit boundaries and syntactic units are much larger (e.g., // last time I was at an airport I was between planes and I had to make an important phone call//); however, each unit continues to make <u>semantic</u> sense as it contains several complete units of information. For example, unit boundaries between "// last time I was at an airport I was// between planes and I had//" would not occur as a possible choice of competent English speakers unless they were having some difficulty with online speech production.

Because there are no absolute rules regarding how a piece of spoken discourse may be divided, speakers do not necessarily always agree on exactly where every tone unit boundary will occur (or is likely to occur) in a piece of text. This happens for a number of reasons including speed of delivery, individual perceptions of how information is most likely to be organized, and other related factors. As with all the systems in the discourse intonation model, the decision lies with the speaker. However, there are unquestionably very likely or very unlikely choices

(i.e., expected norms) that unite intonation choice with other aspects of the discourse structure such as syntax or semantics. A given speaker's contributions are designed to be understood and over time, this creates the **conventions** or **norms** that we produce and interpret as speaker-hearers in our speech community. This means that speakers are likely to agree on where unit boundaries are unlikely to appear, such as in the middle of natural semantic and syntactic groupings. (For more detail, see Chapter 3.)

2.2. Highlighting Prominent Information within Tone Units

When we discuss the use of stress in English, the first crucial distinction is the difference between **prominence** (utterance or sentence stress) and **lexical stress** (word stress). The example utterance is taken from a university lecture on U.S. American culture[1] and is marked for word stress using CAPS to indicate each possible lexically stressed syllable (for example, the word *women* has two syllables and is marked for lexical stress on the first syllable *WOmen*).

> //WHAT I WANna DO toDAY IS GIVE YOU AN Overview OF WOmen AND WORK //

This is how the words would be spoken in citation form—that is, as they appear in the dictionary. However, when the utterance is placed in a discourse context (as part of a lecture, for example), the speaker marks only a few prominent syllables as shown in caps and boldface:

🎧 // What I wanna do to**DAY** // is give you an **O**verview of **WO**men
    and **WORK**//

SF 2.1

In other words, not all syllables that receive stress at the lexical level will also receive prominence at the level of the utterance. This is because not all words in a tone unit are given equal importance by the speaker. Let's look at a longer section of the lecture, shown in Figure 2.4.

---

[1]Title: History of the American Family Lecture; transcript ID: LEL105SU113, Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English.

Figure 2.4. Extract from a University Lecture Taken from MICASE (LEL105SU113)

1   // what i wanna do today//
2   // is give you an overview of women and work//…
3   // what i will be emphasizing//
4   // is how cultural notions of womanhood//
5   // determine women's work experience okay//….

Figure 2.5. Extract from a University Lecture (MICASE LEL105SU113) Marked for Prominent Syllables

1   // what i wanna do **toDAY**//
2   // is give you an **Overview** of **WOmen** and **WORK**//…
3   // what i will be **EMphasizing**//
4   // is how **CULtural** notions of **WOmanhood**//
5   // **deTERmine** women's **WORK** experience okay//….

SF 2.2

Now read aloud the lecture extract as it is shown in Figure 2.5, which has been divided into its naturally occurring tone units. The words that are emphasized in each unit have been highlighted in bold; these contain the prominent syllables in the unit, which have also been capped.

A speaker's choice of prominence derives from information structure; the more important information a given unit contains, the more prominences are likely to be present. In contrast, many function words (e.g., articles, prepositions, conjunctions) and "low-level" content words (e.g., pronouns, contractions such as *gonna*, or repeated items such as *women* in the lecture extract) that can be anticipated by the hearer are less likely to be emphasized with prominence by the speaker.

It can be useful to think of the typical structure of a tone unit in English as comprising three to seven words and containing one or two prominences. The notion of important information depends on the specific context in which the unit appears, but, in general, it means information that is considered important from the perspective of the speaker—that is, information that the speaker believes the hearer will need in order to understand the meaning and intention of the utterance. (See Chapter 3.)