

SOME REFLECTIONS ON SPONTANEOUS ENGLISH SPEECH, WITH SAMPLE

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This is one brief sample of a form of spontaneous English¹ I shall call the HESITANT, EXPLORATORY ACADEMIC STYLE. The speaker (British) was one of several I asked to comment on a well-known dialect-revealing text.² This version (Version 1) is by Speaker A, and the tape-recording is his comment in full (see Figure 1)

Speaker A has agreed that this is a fair paraphrase of what he might have said if he had used a different style (Version 2):

Very difficult to comment at all. It's an American text; it deals with American matters, cf. things like 'Oregon state line' and 'maple syrup'. The whole thing doesn't quite hang together. It is episodic, though to some extent coherent. Is it one of those texts which have been translated from, say, Danish into English? Possibly. There is a mistake in the third line from the bottom, 'the route map seemed to correspond with the one our road map'. I read that the first time and I re-taped it so that it now reads: 'the road map seemed to correspond with the one *on* our road map'. This might have been a typing error. A number of phrases stuck in my mind, such as 'Our clothes absorbed so much dampness'. Strange! This doesn't quite fit in. Also, there is the use of the word 'absurd' in 'this absurd scene', or rather, 'we watched this absurd scene'. And then, the writer talks of certain 'queer things'. I don't think that the scene is all that queer, because after all they are on a journey. It's all quite interesting, but I haven't the faintest idea what it might be for. Is it for translating back into Danish?

Very brief comments:

I. The reader is warned that the present writer claims no discovery procedure. When he had to decide what in his view was — for initial analysis — a sense group he assumed that this was a string of syllables held together (i.e., not broken) by stress-timed rhythm and possessing semantic cohesion.

(a) *Grammatical correction*: the speaker did not alter the verb form *has* in '— one of those questions that has been—'. SEMANTICALLY, the speaker never pedantically clarifies the sequence 'the word "absurd scene"' (a.s. = two words!).

¹ Quantitatively ambitious investigations have of course been made. Cf. for instance Bloomer 1968; with Bibliography.

² Thomas 1958. The text was presented to my speakers in orthographic form. The text is good for detecting dialectal differences, but has no literary pretensions whatsoever.

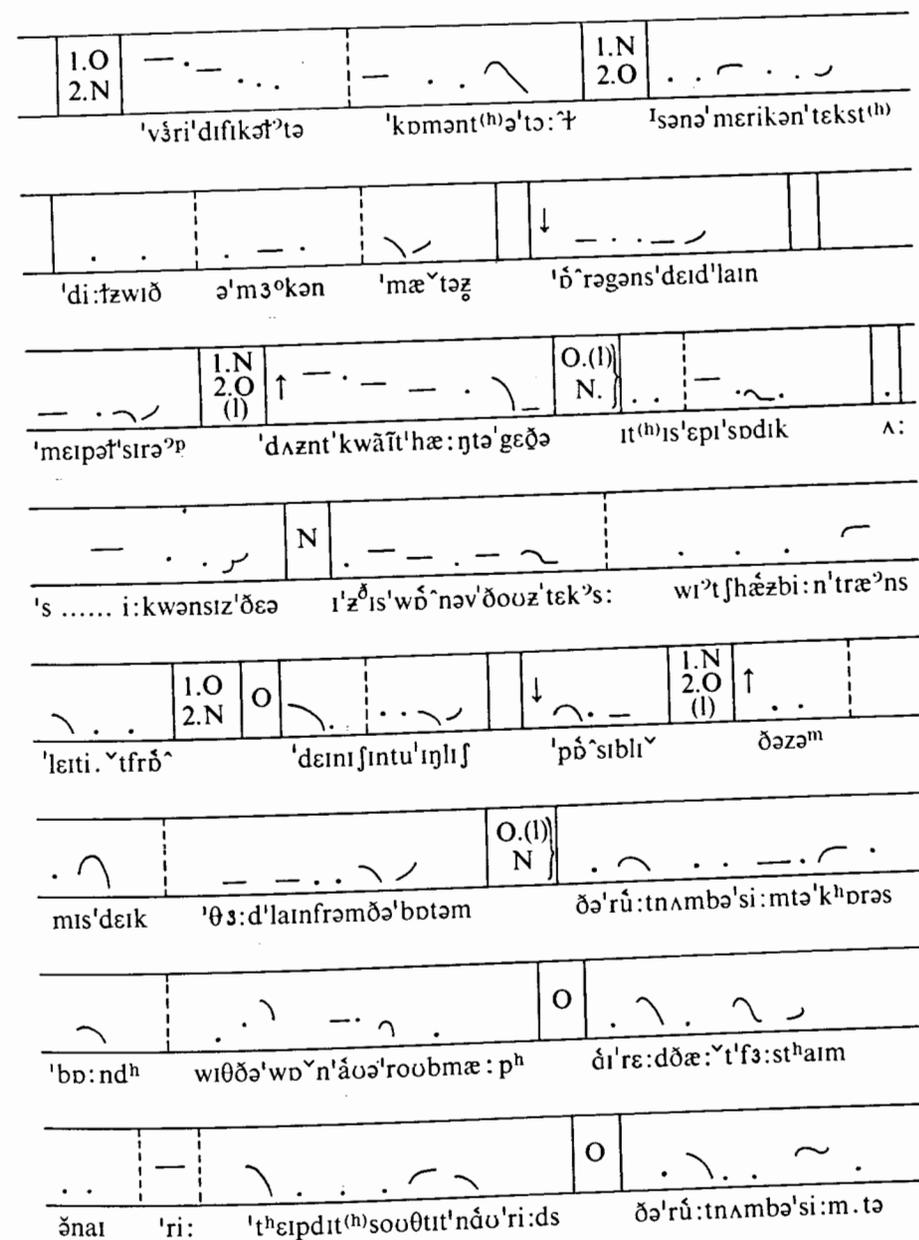


Fig. 1

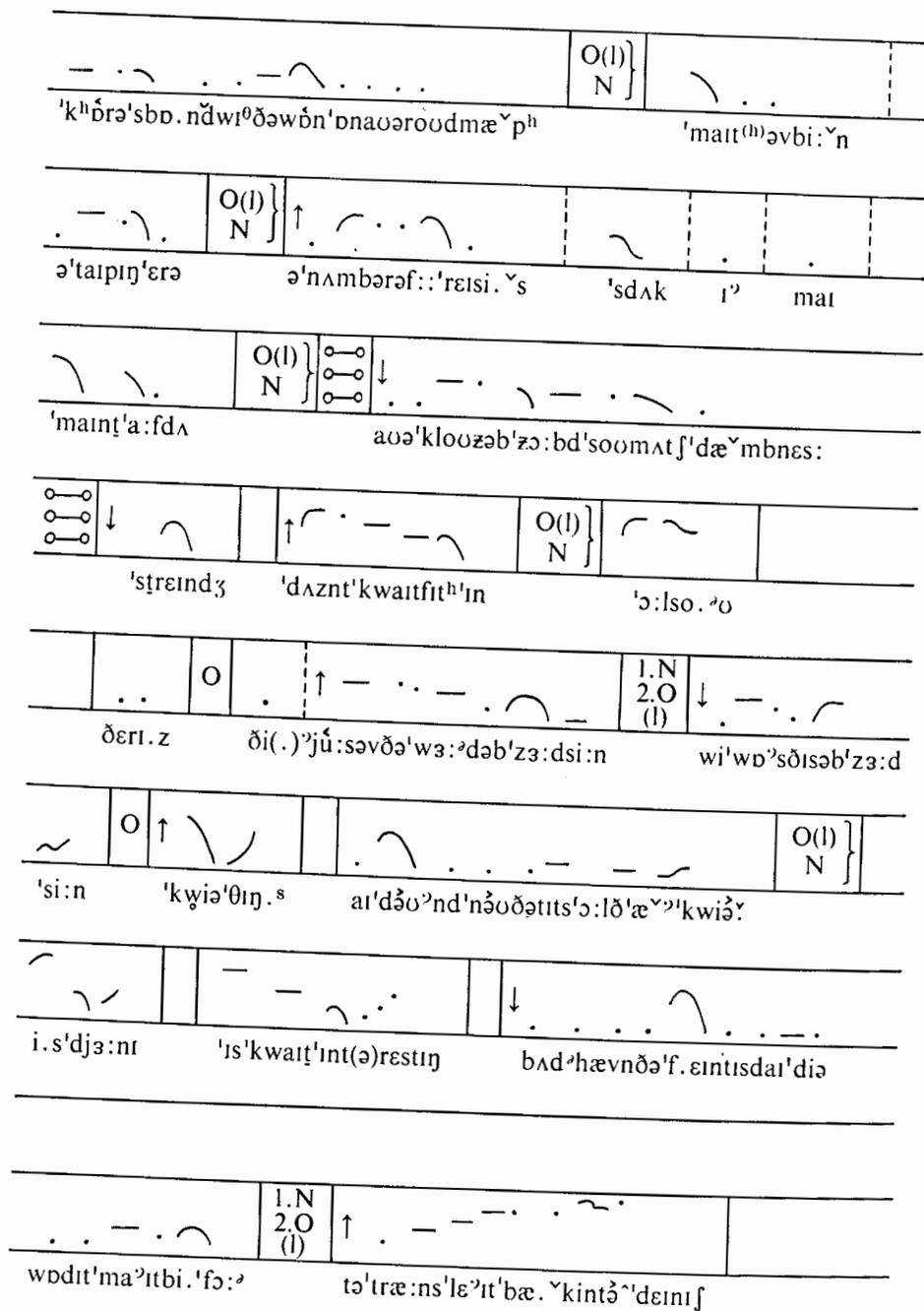


Fig. 2

- (1) O, between vertical lines, means 'oral intake of breath'. N, ditto, means 'nasal intake of breath'. An added (l) means 'accompanied by labial closure'. } indicates that oral and nasal intake of breath takes place simultaneously. If 1. and 2. are appended, the speaker uses intake of breath in the order indicated.
 - (2) ↑ means 'upward intonation jump'; ↓ indicates 'downward intonation jump'.
 - (3) o—o indicates that the tape has probably been tampered with.
 - (4) ʔ indicates glottal closure.
 - (5) ' preceding a syllable indicates that the syllable receives 'rhythmic stress'.
 - (6) If a voiceless plosive is underlined (e.g. t) this suggests that there is rather more voicing present than is normally the case in the given context.
 - (7) ʊ placed above a symbol means that the sound is very short.
- Though copies of this transcription were handed out to the people present, the audience, of course, heard the actual taped recording.

Number of words used: Version I, 164; Version II, 213.

(b) *Redundancy*: roughly, what has been ADDED in Version 2 might be said to be what I shall call, tentatively, above the redundancy line. 'Oregon state line' is above this line because it might mean: 'One of my reasons for saying so is that the text I am commenting on contains passages like "Oregon state line"'. Version 1 contains a number of ellipses (see below); they are normally below the redundancy line. The genre under consideration is of course to a large extent characterized by its very variable behaviour in relation to redundancy.

(c) *Addition/subtraction*: one might make the observation that in all forms of speech only ADDITION is possible; subtraction is not. The closest graphic parallel would be a *hastily written script without any erasures at all*. (This naturally also applies to the phonetic/tonetic level, cf. that my Speaker C says 'ton. to be noticing'. And this goes for previous points as well, except the has/have bit, and 'the word absurd scene' part).

II. Phonetic/tonetic features: very brief examples of assimilation: [i.s'dʒɜ:nɪ]; [ɪs'kwɔɪt—]; [sɔʊθɪt'náʊ]. Note [roubmæpʰ] vs. [roudmæʔpʰ] and [ɪsən] vs. [ɪtʰɪs].

Many shortened forms, but note exceptionally long initial [s] in 's...equence'.

For tonetic analysis the following groups might be assumed to occur:

- (1) Complete affirmative sentences (without appreciable breaks).
- (2) Ditto, with appreciable breaks.
- (3) Complete questions, with breaks.
- (4) Ellipses:
 - (a) No subject, sentence begins with verb.
 - (b) Ditto; sentence begins with predicative adjective.
 - (c₁) Implied before sentence fragment: 'And I am referring to this part of the text.'
 - (c₂) Sentence fragment consisting of one adverb.
 - (c₃) Incomplete question (i.e., 'free' infinitive construction).

Distribution of *Tune I/II* in these groups: 13 examples of Tune I, 14 examples of Tune II. Speaker A seems to some extent to be using Tune II as a hesitation signal. I consider the quantitative distribution of the two Tunes generally to be of some signi-

fiance in describing the different styles of English, cf. Jürgensen 1970, especially pp. 36-37.

Intonation range: the two examples 'Queer things' and '— (comment) et all' both have the same intonational range though one is a quotation from the Thomas text, the other is a personal comment. As was to be expected, the speaker's use of range does not present a well ordered picture — as in so many features the choice is UNPREDICTABLE.

The incidence of BREAKS is not reliable (i.e., predictable) either. Thus, the longest break occurs after 'Also—' four or five seconds) though this is certainly not the most important semantic break.

If the speaker's locations of oral and/or nasal INTAKE OF BREATH are taken down they do not fall at the most 'logical' points.

Descriptive/prescriptive: as compared with other speakers in my collection, Speaker A seems to under-use [ɜ:], [ʌ:], [ɪm], actual repetition (cf. my Speaker B's 'it's it's') whereas he over-uses intake of breath. Difficult to say to what extent the foreign (or even native) learner should imitate one particular speaker.

Acquisition: our genre has not yet been studied by a sufficient number of writers and not yet become fully 'respectable'. This is one of the reasons why foreign learners of English, at the stage where they wish to acquire a native-like command of English, face difficult choices: they have to learn to get English 'thoughts' and an enormous amount of practice is required to learn to use the form in which to express these in an overwhelming number of situations. This explains why only one in a half-million ever attains this goal.

Even native users of English have similar problems; ordinary conversational speech may well sound SPURIOUS if wrongly used by, say, a clergyman (pulpit style), a BBC announcer (too well groomed, solemn); and in a stage play our Version 1 would not be permitted by the producer. Further study of a very large number of registers is required and may be of help in laying bare the register's relation to the 'thought' behind the words, and in the field of applied linguistics it should be seriously considered at what stage and in what way our genre should be studied and, possibly, imitated.

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DISCUSSION

COLLIER (Belgium)

If I understood you well, you have found thirty realisations of Tune I versus only fourteen of Tune II. Did you have any particular expectation as to this distribution, and if so, on what grounds?

JÜRGENSEN

Actually, the figures quoted were thirteen instances of Tune I as against fourteen examples of Tune II. Apart from this I do think that in different styles one expects significant distributions of the two Tunes. In footnote 3 you will find that I am referring to an article of mine in which I tried to investigate the intonation used in British TV commercials. It was found that these commercials use a high percentage of Tune I's, presumably because categorical STATEMENTS are so frequent. cf. ʔ. ʔ. ʔ.

It was also found that in a given style (DIDACTIC: English lawyer explaining the English legal system to foreigners) there was a remarkably high percentage of Tune III's (in my definition this means that the last stressed syllable before a pause is level and so are subsequent unaccented syllables, if any: . . . - . . . |).

A BBC news reader will frequently use a characteristically large proportion of Tune II's; the usual sequence is a number of Tune II's for 'incomplete' utterances followed by a Tune I before the "full stop".

So, in conclusion, allowing for individual, personal differences, I do consider that the distribution of Tunes in different styles differs significantly.

RUDNYČKYJ (Winnipeg)

Question *re* sandhi-phenomenon in colloquial English.

JÜRGENSEN

I am certainly, as indicated by my transcription, interested in such phenomena, cf. the fact that my transcription is NARROW. Nevertheless, my chief interest in this context might perhaps be said to be that of the orderliness, or possibly non-orderliness of INTONATION in the genre described in my paper. That is to say, do speakers in similar situations CLARIFY by means of intonational devices, or do they confuse the issue.

WELLS (London)

I hear the tone of the last phrase but one in Figure 1 (... *might be for*) as a fall-rise, not as a fall.

JÜRGENSEN

This, in my terminology, I classify as Tune II.

BREND (Ann Arbor)

Could you please clarify what you mean by addition being possible, but not subtraction?

JÜRGENSEN

By this I mean that in SPEECH you have to do with an unbroken, unbreakable even, string of words. Thus, a speaker may start by saying "I realized that before I —" and then if he wants to amend this, he would have to *add* the sentence he now considers correct so that what he ends up by producing might be something like "I realized that before I — I discovered that until I—". (Note that in the hand-out Speaker B says: "give the impression — give the reader the impression that —").

In WRITING, the two above sequences might have come out, simply, as 'I realized that until I —' and 'give the reader the impression that —' where ERASURES (i.e., subtractions) would have been made.