

DIFFICULTIES IN COMPREHENSION OF L₂ INTONATION:
DIAGNOSIS AND PREDICTION IN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents a general test of intonational comprehension of English which may be used by learners of any language. It consists of sentences of English spoken with particular intonation patterns of tonality, tonicity and tone. Three alternative interpretations are provided for each sentence, the learner having to match each sentence with only one of the interpretations. It is proposed that the test may be enlarged and/or modified so as to be applicable in diagnosing and predicting difficulties with the intonation of any L₂.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a general test of intonational comprehension of English which, it is assumed, can be used by learners of English of any native tongue. It is an enlarged and more comprehensive version of an English and Portuguese test presented earlier to Portuguese and English speakers, respectively, in /3/. This is eminently a practical test, and theoretical discussion is reduced to a minimum. For discussion on the testing of non-native intonation see /1/, /5/, /7/, /8/ and /9/.

The reasons for the presentation of the test can be summarized in three main points:

- intonation is still the last stronghold of a foreign accent in speaking any L₂;
- intonation has only recently begun to be seriously and systematically taken into account both in the literature devoted to foreign language learning and in teaching itself;
- the test will not only help in detecting these difficulties but also, through the setting up of a typology of errors, help to correct them.

It is assumed that the first difficulty faced by non-natives with the intonation of L₂ lies in comprehension and not in production: in the first stages of learning, a faulty comprehension of intonation will determine difficulties in production, and not vice-versa. There is no point in trying to elicit a "correct" intonational form from a non-native, by imitation or otherwise, if he does not perceive it as *sui-generis* and specific to the foreign language. This paper presents therefore a comprehension test.

The test is proposed both as *diagnostic* and as *predictive*. *Diagnostic* in the sense that it enables the teacher to ascertain in a straightforward way the difficulties of the learners - what these are and where they are. For a more accurate evaluation of the results, the format of the test is such that statistical treatment of the replies of the learners is quite easy. The test is also meant to be *predictive*, in the sense that each sentence presented is *typical* of a range of other sentences where the same correspondence intonation pattern-meaning applies. One point needs explicit clarification: I do not believe that intonation works, that is, means, independently of the lexico-grammatical sentences it occurs or, rather, interacts with. I do not therefore believe that intonation can be profitably learned or taught independently of lexico-grammatical structures. This is the real sense in which I mean the word "predictive": difficulties in interpreting a sentence such as *she won't drink any coffee* as meaning "she drinks only some types of coffee" predicts difficulties in interpreting the meaning of any sentence with the structure "not...any" and a falling-rising intonation pattern on the quantifier "any".

BACKGROUND

The intonational devices by which the different meanings are conveyed are taken to correspond to three types of intonational choice (see /6/): *tonality*, the division of an utterance into intonation

groups; *tonicity*, the placement of the nucleus, or main accent, in each intonation group; and *tone*, the melodic shape of the nucleus, for example rising or falling.

Examples of meaning differences brought about by intonational devices in each of the three choices are:

tonality she dressed/and fed the baby
 she dressed and fed the baby

tonicity she gave her dog biscuits
 she gave her dog biscuits

tone she won't drink any coffee
 she won't drink any coffee

LAYOUT OF THE TEST

A more complete version of the test is presented in /4/. The test is composed of several sentences, each with a particular intonation of English. The sentences are colloquial in style and the vocabulary used is chosen to be as simple as possible, to avoid the possibility of lexico-semantic factors affecting the interpretation of the intonation patterns.

In each sentence, the intonation pattern presented is the one which gives the sentence the least probable interpretation, if only the strict lexico-grammatical meaning of the sentence is taken into account. For example, the written sentence *she won't drink any coffee*

will be given the interpretation associated with a high-falling tone rather than with the falling-rising (see /2/ for details on this).

The interpretation of the sentences as presented in the test is thus predicted to present the highest degree of difficulty for the learners. But it is also clear that this will depend to a large extent on the interactions of intonation and lexico-grammatical structure occurring in the native tongue of the learner. Knowledge of these interactions in L₁ will therefore enable the teacher to modify the test accordingly. For each test sentence, three possible interpretations are given:

- a. the correct one;
- b. a wrong one, but the most probable wrong answer, that is, the one corresponding most closely to the "written" form interpretation. A majority of b. replies will in principle mean that the intonation pattern of the sentence is *misunderstood*;

c. also a wrong interpretation but, besides, the least probable one, given mostly to ascertain the degree of randomness in the replies of the learners. In most cases c. is not in fact a possible interpretation of the sentence, and a majority of c. replies will in principle show that the intonation patterns of the sentence is *not* understood.

Example:

<u>sentence</u>	she won't drink any coffee
a.	she drinks coffee, but only special types
b.	she drinks no coffee at all
c.	she prefers tea to coffee

TEST PROCEDURE

The test sentences should be presented to the learners through listening only, ideally through headphones in a language laboratory. The learners are given answer sheets where only the sentence numbers and the interpretations a., b. and c., duly randomized and re-lettered, are written.

The learners should give one answer only for each sentence and should leave no blank answers. In other words, they are *forced* to make a decision and *one* decision *only* as regards the meaning of each sentence. The forced choice layout is important for the establishment, after analysis of the results, of a typology of learners' errors and difficulties.

APPLICATIONS AND USES OF THE TEST

The test has been designed to typically be used as an intonational *diagnosis* instrument, together with other tests (grammatical, lexical, phonetic) which may be part of regular teaching instruments of evaluation. It can furthermore be used in any situation where assessment of fluency and proficiency in any language is required, and it can be supplemented by intonational production tests.

The *predictive* component of the test will help the teacher in establishing a typology of errors and/or difficulties, and thereby help in the setting up of adequate correction procedures.

The analysis of the typical replies of the learners will hopefully give a clear picture of the following:

what are the difficulties - that is, what typology of errors has emerged from the results;

- where the difficulties lie - that is, where do the systematic mismatches in the interaction intonation/lexico-grammatical form appear;
- why are they difficulties - that is, are the mismatches due to interference of differently meaningful pairings of intonation/lexico-grammar in L₁;
- how to counteract the difficulties - that is, what is the best way of introducing and stabilising the specific pairings of intonation/lexico-grammat in L₂, having in mind the particular L₁ of the learners.

FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS

The design of the test is such as to be easily understood and used by both learners and teachers, and its design easily lends itself to statistical treatment of the results. Its format can also be easily modified, adapted or enlarged according to the proficiency level of the learners and to the purposes of the teaching.

In the version presented in this paper, the test is meant to be used by learners of English from any mother tongue. But it is also assumed that its underlying design is suitable for use in the assessment of learners of any other language. It is hoped that the results provided by the test can be profitably used in the setting up of a typology of intonational errors and difficulties according to the L₁ of the learners, and thereby provide insights into adequate and systematic correction procedures.

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