

PROSODIC ITALICS: FUNCTIONS AND PHONETIC REALIZATION

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ABSTRACT

A phonetic study of italics in English language literary texts has shown that this graphical means of expressing emphasis is very useful in making intonationally unambiguous those utterances which may have more than one interpretation in respect of the nucleus placement and type of tone used.

Traditionally, studies of graphical means of emphasis used in a given language have not been included into the field of phonetics, but rather regarded as part of stylistics [15,18,19,23]. Since graphical means, such as italics, carry a lot of valuable information about the intonational structure of an utterance, they may be as well regarded as subject matter of intonology, a branch of phonetics dealing both with the sound form and the semantic load of speech utterances.

It is not surprising that the English language which makes enormous use of intonation in rendering various meanings should favour the use of italics much more than any other language. It was Maria Schubiger who first pointed out that italics are often found in English sentences (in literary texts) where the placement of nuclear stress is determined only by context and is not signalled either by the syntactical construction or by a modal particle, as is the case in French and German [16].

Despite their frequent use by

authors of novels and stories, italics are not approved of by many stylists. For example, in "The King's English" by H.W.Fowler and F.G.Fowler we come across a point of view that "italics are a confession of weakness" and are employed mostly by those writers "who, regarding the reader's case as desperate, assist him with punctuation, italics and the like" [6]. A more realistic opinion of italicization is found in "The ABC of Style" by R.Fleisch who states that "if you don't use italics, you're missing one of the best resources of writing; if you use too many, you spoil the effect you're after. The basic rule is to underline (for italics in print) the words that would get heavy natural stress in speaking - and not to shy away from the colloquial sentence pattern that calls for such stress" [5].

It seems to be worth mentioning that not only scholars stress the intonational significance of this graphical means of emphasis but creative writers themselves, who make practical use of italics, often comment on this subject. In "1984" by G.Orwell we find such a commentary: "... Meanwhile I shall send you a copy of the book." even O'Brien, Winston noticed, seemed to pronounce the words as though they were in italics" [14,p.146].

Another author, L.M.Montgomery, describing her heroine as a sweet-souled lass, states that " she could instil some venom into innocent italics when

occasion required" [12,p.88].

From the given above examples we can see that italics are used for emphasizing a particular word which has a special meaning in the context as well as for showing that a special kind of intonation is to be chosen when pronouncing the sentence.

Thus, italics may be said to possess two prosodic functions, namely, the function of indicating an unusual position of the sentence stress, and that of showing that the nucleus (even though in its predicted position) is to be realised with an unusual (emphatic) intonation. In most cases, however, both functions are combined and the italicized word is located in an unpredicted position and marks an unusual tone.

Very often, the use of italics is accompanied by an author's remark on the unusual position of stress, e.g. "There was the unusual mellifluous murmur from the loudspeaker about seatbelts, emergency exits, oxygen masks. He wondered why stewardesses accented such unlikely words: "On our flight this evening we will be offering..." [17,p.31].

Another example of the author's commentary on the use of a "special tone" italics is given below. "In tones of loud and hearty excitement Miss Pilchester, who had forgotten to close the door, confesses that she literally didn't know. It was all such a thrill, so absolutely unexpected. Had she been an age?" [1,p.70].

Sometimes, capital letters are employed in place of italics: "Lenore talked haut-American, a fast anglicized gabble which lit on one word now and then for emphasis. In the Brompton house she'd said to me: "It's so PEACEFUL here. D'you know, Peeder, for many years we stayed at Brown's Hotel because it's so ENGLISH" [13,p.174].

Unusual placement of an italicized word often points to a contrast between

two or more elements within the nearest verbal or situational context. Contrastive italics may be placed on a normally unstressed word (function words), or even a prefix, or any other word which is capable of carrying a contrastive meaning. Consider the following example: "I thought you said it was all very formal." "Yes. She's not usually formal. Why should she be like that? She's so direct as a rule: not exactly informal, ever, but absolutely direct" [9,p.82].

Here a complex contrast is made possible with the help of italicization.

Much more often, however, italics are used with function words, such as auxiliary verbs, pronouns, etc. In order to find out parallels to this phenomenon in other languages, we analyzed a number of translations into English and selected those sentences which contained italicized auxiliaries (in the English version).

The following example has been taken from "Lillebror och Karlsson på Taket" by Astrid Lindgren and its English translation.

"Mellanmal forstor aptiten" sa hon. "Har blir inga bullar". Och ändå hade hon bakat bullar. Det stod ett helt fat i det öppna fönstret för att svalna. [10,p.48].

"Snacks between meals ruin your appetite," she said. "There will be no buns here". She had baked buns. There was a whole dish of them on the window-sill. [11,p.38].

In the Swedish sentence italics are on the meaningful part of the predicate (participle). Additionally, there is an intensifying particle and the inverted word order which contribute to the strengthening of emphasis on "bakat". The corresponding English sentence lacks any other means but italics on the auxiliary to bring forth the contrast between the actual existence of buns and their unavailability for the boy.

Another example is from the Russian book "The Golden Calf" by I. Ilf and E. Petrov. -Вы не читали Блейлера? - спросил Кай Юлий удивленно. - Позвольте, по каким же материалам вы готовились? [20, 362].

"You haven't read Bleyler?" asked Caius Julius in surprise. "Excuse me, but with what material did you prepare yourself?" [8, p.189].

As can be seen, there are no italics in the original Russian text. The logic stress is on the word "материалам". This position of the stress is determined by the presence of the particle "же". In the English variant, there is a shift of the nucleus onto the auxiliary "did", which is an equivalent to the Russian particle.

Putting italics on pronouns is also quite frequent. We'd like to give here an illustration from "Alice in Wonderland" by Lewis Carroll, an author who is known to have used italics abundantly. The following example contains contrastive italics on a personal pronoun: "I can't help it," said Alice very meekly: "I'm growing". "You've no right to grow here," said the Dormouse. "Don't talk nonsense," said Alice boldly: "You know you're growing too". "Yes, but I grow at a reasonable pace," said the Dormouse. [2, p.144].

We've analysed the translations of this book into a number of languages, including French, Russian, and Estonian.

In the French translation, the sentence in question has no italics, but it contains a stressed pronoun "moi" preceding the unstressed one: -Oui, mais moi, je grandis a une vitesse raisonnable... [4, p.168].

The translation into Estonian gives evidence to a similar tendency, i.e., a stressed form of pronoun is used (which is normally omitted). Additionally, the final word, an adverb of manner, is in italics: "Seda küll, aga mina kasvan mõistlikult" [3, p.91].

The two Russian translations analysed

reveal two different tendencies. In the translation by V. Nabokov the pronoun is omitted altogether. In the translation by N.M. Demurova the place of italics is preserved.

-Да, но разумным образом, возразил Соня, - не раздуваюсь, как вы. [22, 186]. -Да, но я расту с приличной скоростью, - возразила Соня, - не то что некоторые... [21, с.90].

Perceptual and acoustic analysis of English sentences containing italicized words which were spoken by English speakers has shown that in most cases they had an emphatic tone, either a Rise-Fall or a High Fall. Such words were easily identified by trained Russian phoneticians as nuclei carrying one of these tones. The intonogram in Fig.1 is an illustration of a well perceived emphatic tone on the italicized word

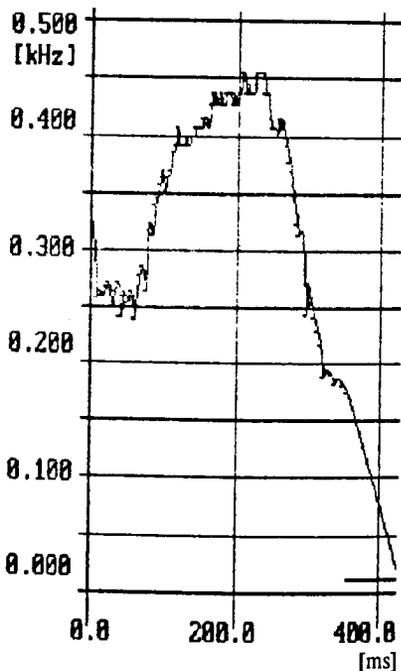


Fig.1 Intonogram of the word "there"

"there" from the sentence "What lies over there?" [7].

There are some cases, however, when the italicized word is not perceived as a nuclear one. For example, the word "only" in the sentence "It's the only thing" (see Fig.2) is perceived by all listeners as stressed while the final word "thing" is identified with the nucleus.

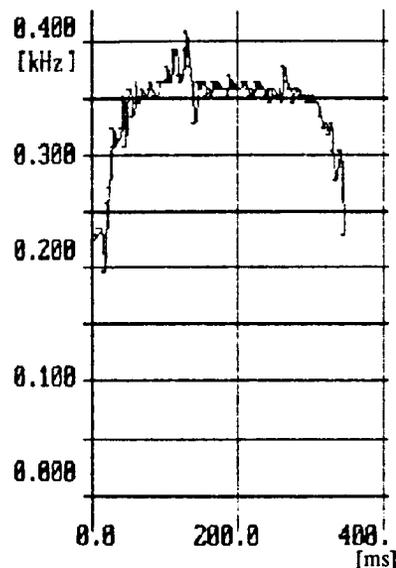


Fig.2 Intonogram of the word "only"

In conclusion, it should be said that use of italics reflects a very complicated system of accentuation which is characteristic of the English language. Italics are effective means of signalling a shift of the sentence stress which otherwise may be overlooked by the reader.

An extensive study of italicization may be very valuable in understanding the semantic functions of intonation.

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