

LESSON 5

Rising-Falling Intonation

I. What Intonation Is

Intonation is the tune of what we say. More specifically, it is the combination of musical tones on which we pronounce the syllables that make up our speech. It is closely related to sentence-stress. Often, but by no means always, a syllable with sentence-stress is spoken on a higher musical note than the unstressed syllables. In such cases, intonation is one of the elements of stress, the others being loudness and length. (Lesson 7 deals in some detail with cases in which sentence-stress does *not* coincide with a higher musical note.)

It is possible to identify on a piano or other musical instrument the note or notes on which any given syllable is pronounced. Expressive speakers sometimes use as many as twenty-five different notes to give variety and meaning to what they say. Others may use a much smaller range. We could, then, mark the intonation of sentences by writing them on something resembling a musical staff.

morn-

Good

ing.

I. What Intonation Is

Have you ever listened to the tune of your own voice? What tune do you use when you say "What time is it?" and "Good morning"? Can you identify any of the notes on a piano? Which word did you pronounce on the highest note? Which word or syllable on the lowest note? Can you draw a line that will show the tune of *What time is it?* by rising and falling at the proper places?

Each speaker has his or her own range of notes, and it is not necessary, in order to pronounce English well, for you to imitate someone else's intonation, note for note. What is important is not that a given syllable be pronounced on the note *do* and another on *re*, but the direction of the shift between syllables, the general movement of the voice up or down. Most native speakers of English, pronouncing the same words under similar circumstances, would make their voices rise or fall at approximately the same places. But it is hardly ever possible to say that a given intonation pattern is absolutely obligatory in a particular case. There are almost always alternate patterns that are also natural, and that you can sometimes hear if you listen closely to native speakers of English.

In marking intonation, we shall use a simplified system¹ that divides the tones into four types: normal, high, low, and extra-high. We can then show the movements of the voice up or down by drawing lines at four different levels over or under the passage we are explaining. A line drawn *at the base of the letters* of a word indicates that that word is pronounced on a *normal* tone, a line *above the word* marks a *high* tone, a line *some distance below the word* marks a *low* tone, and a line *some distance above the word* marks an *extra-high* tone. Can you make your voice follow the lines?

How are you?

I'll have cream and sugar.

I know more about it than he does.

¹Much of the material of Lessons 5, 6, and 7, as well as the system for marking intonation, is derived from Kenneth L. Pike's *The Intonation of American English* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1946). The chief weakness of this marking system (or of any marking system) appears to be that, unless it is well explained, it may give students the impression that English intonation is much less flexible than is really the case. One should always keep in mind that, in practice, the voice often does not rise and fall exactly at the place indicated by the markings; the change from one tone to another may be gradual and extended over several syllables. In spite of this weakness, it seems to us that the Pike system of markings is the most teachable yet devised because of its clarity, simplicity, and graphic quality.

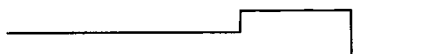
Usually the movement from one tone to another takes place *between syllables*, and is called a *shift*. A shift is indicated by a *straight vertical line*, as that between *how* and *are* in the first example above, or that between *are* and *you*. Sometimes, however, the voice slides from one tone to another while it is pronouncing a syllable; such movement *within a syllable* is marked by a *line curving up or down*, and we shall call it a *slide*.

all day | long

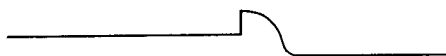
In this last example, we begin to pronounce *long* on a note higher than normal,² and then the voice slides down to a note lower than normal before the end of the syllable.

II. Rising-Falling Intonation

It is at the end of a sentence that native speakers of English use intonation most uniformly. In this position in certain types of sentences the voice often rises above normal, then falls below normal. This means that the rising-falling intonation pattern looks like this:



or this:



The key to such a pattern is the location of the high note: what comes immediately *before* this high note is spoken on a *normal* tone, and what comes *after* is spoken on a *low* tone. In a short sentence, if you know where to put the high note, the rest of the pattern falls mechanically into place.

²Care should be taken to avoid exaggeration: making the high tones too high and sliding up or down too slowly. Normally the slides are made quite rapidly and unobtrusively.

II. Rising-Falling Intonation

THE HIGH NOTE NORMALLY COINCIDES WITH THE LAST SENTENCE-STRESS.

Note these examples.

The situation is | difficult.

I said I couldn't | hear you.

In both sentences above there are, after the last sentence-stress and its high note, one or more unstressed syllables left to receive the low note. The downward movement of the voice is then a *shift*, shown by a vertical line between the syllable with the high note and the following syllable. In some cases, on the other hand, the last sentence-stress and its high note may come on the very last syllable, leaving no room for the low note that must follow, as in *The coffee is hot*. It is then that the voice makes a *slide*, shown by a curved line. Both the high and the low notes are heard as the last syllable is pronounced, and the voice descends from the high to the low note within the syllable (the phenomenon referred to at the end of Section I of this lesson).

The coffee is | hot.

What time did you | call?

This sliding from one note to another *within* a single stressed syllable means that the vowel of the syllable will be so lengthened that it may break into two slightly different vowels—a diphthong. If we were trying to represent the sounds as closely as possible, the above examples might be transcribed as

ðə kɔfɪ ɪz hɑt (rather than /hɑt/)

hwát táym díd yuw kɔl (rather than /kɔl/)

These two-toned syllables and the resultant diphthongization constitute one of the important differences between English and many other languages. Here intonation and vowel formation meet. The proper use of slides will make it

much easier to give normal diphthongal quality to the right vowels and thus to make English sound like English.

The fact that the high note usually coincides with the last sentence-stress in speaking, helps us to distinguish between such grammatically different sequences as the following:

1. Nominal compounds and sequences of independent words

bláckbird I sáw a bláckbird.

(a certain species of bird)

bláck bírd I sáw a bláck bírd.

(any bird black in color)

2. Nominal compounds and sequences in which the first component tells the material of which the second component is made. (See Lesson 4, Footnote 2.)

stéak knife I'd líke a stéak knife.

stéak dínnér I'd líke a stéak dínnér.

3. Nominal compounds and verbs followed by objects

chécking accounts They're chécking accounts.

chécking accóunts They're chécking accóunts.

4. Two-word verbs and verbs followed by prepositions

look úp What are you looking úp?

lóok at

What are you looking at?

III. The Use of Rising-Falling Intonation

IN ENGLISH, RISING-FALLING INTONATION IS NORMALLY USED AT THE END OF

1. SIMPLE STATEMENTS OF FACT (DECLARATIVE SENTENCES)

This is my wife.

He hasn't said a word.

2. COMMANDS

Cóme to see me.

3. QUESTIONS THAT BEGIN WITH AN INTERROGATIVE WORD, such as *what, who, which, why, when, where, how*, and so on. Hereafter these will be referred to as "wh-questions."³

What is the matter?

How are you feeling?

Why is he angry?

³Some grammarians call these "special questions," and distinguish them from "general questions," which do not begin with an interrogative word. General questions (such as *Are you coming?*) may be answered by *yes* or *no*; thus they are often called "yes-no questions." Special questions (such as *What time is it?*) require more specific information as an answer.

Persons whose native language is not English may have considerable difficulty at first in pronouncing questions of the type just described with the proper rising-falling intonation. The tendency to use a rising intonation in such cases must be strongly resisted.

The fall of your voice to a low tone at the end of a sentence is a sort of vocal punctuation mark, a vocal period, indicating that the thought is completed. A listener feels that there is more to be added until he hears your voice drop. A disagreeable and puzzling impression of inconclusiveness may be given the listener when a speaker's voice falls only a little or not at all at the end of a statement, command, or question beginning with an interrogative word. Clear rising-falling intonation establishes a mood of certainty and completeness.

IV. Exercises

- A. 1. Listen carefully as your instructor pronounces some of the material below. Can you hear the high and low notes in his or her voice? Then, in order to fix the rising-falling intonation pattern in your mind, ear, and speech habits, repeat these short sentences yourself until they sound perfectly natural to you. Make your voice follow the intonation line, and do not forget to weaken unstressed vowels and to blend words together.

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| a. I'd like an <u>apple</u> . | g. I'd like to <u>hear</u> it. |
| b. I'd like a <u>sandwich</u> . | h. I'd like to <u>forget</u> them. |
| c. I'd like a <u>soda</u> . | i. I'd like to <u>believe</u> it. |
| d. I'd like some <u>coffee</u> . | j. I'd like to <u>come</u> over. |
| e. I'd like a <u>hot dog</u> . | k. I'd like a <u>newspaper</u> . |
| f. I'd like a <u>wristwatch</u> . | l. I'd like to <u>answer</u> him. |

IV. Exercises

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| m. I'd like to <u>speak</u> to you. | t. I'd like a <u>know</u> . |
| n. I'd like to <u>look</u> at it. | u. I'd like a <u>cigarette</u> . |
| o. I'd like a <u>balcony</u> seat. | v. I'd like to <u>find</u> out. |
| p. I'd like a <u>ring</u> . | w. I'd like to <u>finish</u> up. |
| q. I'd like an <u>"A"</u> . | x. I'd like a <u>new</u> car. |
| r. I'd like to <u>see</u> . | y. I'd like a <u>bowl</u> of <u>soup</u> . |
| s. I'd like to <u>leave</u> . | z. I'd like a <u>piece</u> of <u>cake</u> . |

2. Your instructor will ask you or one of the other students the question

What would you like?

Answer by using one of the sentences above. You, in turn, ask someone else this same question, and he or she also will answer, using one of the sentences above. Continue the exercise until everyone has had an opportunity to ask the question and receive an answer.

- B. 1. Repeat these *wh*-questions after your instructor. Be sure to use the rising-falling intonation.

- | | |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| a. <u>What did you bring?</u> | d. <u>What did you find?</u> |
| b. <u>What did you want?</u> | e. <u>What did you ask?</u> |
| c. <u>What did you forget?</u> | f. <u>What did you think up?</u> |