

# LESSON 6

## Rising Intonation

### I. The Use of Rising Intonation

At the end of a sentence, two types of intonation are most common: rising-falling and rising. In the preceding lesson we studied rising-falling intonation and learned that it is used for statements, commands, and *wh*-questions. In the present lesson we shall deal with rising intonation, the second common end-of-sentence type.

IN ENGLISH, RISING INTONATION IS NORMALLY USED AT THE END OF QUESTIONS WHICH DO NOT BEGIN WITH AN INTERROGATIVE WORD (that is to say, general questions that may be answered merely by *yes* or *no*).

Are you ready? Will you read it for me?

These yes-no questions are easy to identify grammatically because they begin with words such as the following:

1. *will, would, shall, should, can, could, may, might, and must*

Shall I answer the telephone?

### I. The Use of Rising Intonation

Can you help me?

2. *have, has, had*

Has he written to you?

Have they finished?

3. *am, is, are, was, were*

Is she at home?

Were they asleep?

4. *do, does, did*

Does he like it?

Did they see it?

The voice normally goes up to a high note *on the last sentence-stress*, just as in the rising-falling pattern. The difference between the two lies in the fact that, in the rising intonation, the syllables that follow the rise are pronounced on the high note too.

Does she expect to take a dictionary with her?

When we leave the voice high at the end of a sentence, we arouse in the listener a feeling of incompleteness, in contrast to the sense of completeness aroused by a lowered voice. Rising intonation suggests that something further must be said, either by the speaker or by the hearer.

Any statement may be made into a yes-no question by the use of rising intonation alone, without changing the words otherwise.

It's time for the class to end. (statement)

It's time for the class to end? (question)

We noted in Lesson 5 that questions beginning with an interrogative word, *wh*-questions, are normally given rising-falling intonation. What would be the effect of pronouncing such a question with rising intonation?

What's the day of the month?

It becomes an *echo question*, a question about what was previously said. A native speaker of English would normally interpret it as meaning something like "Is that really what you just said?" or "Will you please repeat what you said?" Thus the single word *what*, pronounced with rising intonation,

What?

means "I don't understand; please repeat".

Note that the meanings of the intonation patterns we have considered up to now may be thought of as *grammatical meanings*; these patterns help convey such concepts as affirmation, negation, special interrogation, general interrogation, imperative forms, compounding, contrasting, and so on. The most basic use of intonation is to signal these grammatical meanings. Students will therefore need to make every effort to master the use of these intonation patterns. They are an integral part of the grammatical system of English, as essential to the structure of the language as are other grammatical signals such as word order, inflectional endings, and function words. In Lesson 7, Section II, we will look briefly at other—less basic—intonation patterns, which may be said to have *lexical meanings*: surprise, incredulity, irony, and so on. These are similar to the meanings of content words such as nouns, adjectives, and adverbs.

## II. Nonfinal Intonation

What has been said up to this point applies to the raising or lowering of the voice *at the end of a sentence*, where suitable intonation is most necessary and easiest to predict. There is less that is definite to be said about the intonation of that part of the sentence that precedes the last important word. *Nonfinal intonation* may vary widely from speaker to speaker, with little corresponding variation in meaning.

Nevertheless, you should know that in any sentence we may pronounce on a note higher than normal the stressed syllable of any word or words to which we want to call the special attention of the listener. These may be specially stressed function words (see Lesson 4, Section II, paragraph beginning "If a native speaker of English . . .") or content words.

What do you know about politics? (Note *you*.)

There are lots of cigarettes in the box. (Note *lots*.)

He has an unusual number of friends. (Note *unusual*.)

With particular frequency special attention is thus called to *demonstrative* and *interrogative* words.

I think that is a good idea.

What do you want with a car?

In *contrasts* and *comparisons*, special attention is called to *both* ideas being contrasted or compared. This means that, if both ideas are included in a single thought group, one of them will be nonfinal. However, the two stressed elements are not pronounced on the same high note but on different notes, one high and one extra-high. This difference in level between the two notes serves to emphasize the idea of contrast. It is one of the few cases in which an extra-high note seems to be obligatory in an intonation pattern that has a grammatical

meaning. (Most often patterns with extra-high notes have an emotional, lexical meaning.)

Curiously, it appears to make no difference which element is given the extra-high note. Either sentence in each of the following pairs is equally natural.

Betty dances better than I do.

Betty dances better than I do.

The new team is as good as the old one.

The new team is as good as the old one.

If a sentence is divided by pauses into *two or more thought groups*, each thought group has its own separate intonation pattern. When the speaker comes to the end of the first thought group, he or she may do one of three things:

1. *End the group with the rising-falling pattern—up to a high note on the final stress, then down to a low note.* This is done before a long pause such as might be marked by a colon (: ) or semicolon (;).

I'll tell you the truth: / it can't be done.

I don't want to go; / it's dangerous.

I say he can; / he says he can't.

2. *End the group by a high note on its final stress, then a return to normal.* This is done when the speaker wishes to suggest that what follows is connected with what was just said.

You say it's easy, / but you won't try it.

If you want me to, / I'll call her.

3. *End the group with the rising pattern.* This occurs, in general, whenever the speaker wishes to create suspense.

When I come back, / I'll give you a present.

If you want to learn chemistry, / you've got to work.

It should be clearly understood that the choice between these three non-final patterns usually depends more on *the attitude of the speaker* than on the grammatical structure and meaning of the sentence. Patterns 1, 2, and 3 above indicate progressively closer degrees of connection: the higher the note at the end of the first thought group, the closer the connection to the second group. A speaker using Pattern 1 is treating the two groups almost as though they were separate sentences. Pattern 2 indicates a normally close relationship. Pattern 3 emphasizes the closeness of the relationship. It is therefore usually impossible to say that, before a nonfinal pause, one type of intonation is "right" and all others "wrong." As far as grammar and logic are concerned, the last example above might just as well be

If you want to learn chemistry, / you've got to work.

On the other hand, there are some *special constructions* of whose intonation we can be more certain.

1. *SERIES WITH and.* Rising intonation on all members of the series except the last; rising-falling intonation on the last member.

I went to the bank / and the post office.

He speaks English, / Italian, / and French.

2. ALTERNATIVES WITH *or*. Like a series—rising intonation followed by rising-falling intonation—if the speaker wishes the utterance to be heard merely as a sequence of items.

We eat at a drugstore, / a cafeteria, / or a restaurant.

However, *or* often carries a meaning of contrast or comparison. If the speaker wishes to emphasize this meaning of contrast, he or she will give an extra-high note to one of the alternatives (see pp. 61–62 of this lesson).

You can do it in writing / or orally.

You can do it in writing / or orally.

This contrastive extra-high note seems to be obligatory in questions with *or* where the speaker wishes the hearer to make a choice between two or more alternatives.

Do you prefer Los Angeles / or San Francisco?

Do you prefer Los Angeles / or San Francisco?

On the other hand, if *or* merely means that the utterance is to be interpreted as a *double question*, to be answered by *yes* or *no*, it is spoken with the intonation pattern of one, or two, yes-no questions.

Have you ever visited Los Angeles or San Francisco?

Have you ever visited Los Angeles / or San Francisco?

Serious confusions can result if a listener does not understand the difference between these two types of questions with *or*. (See Exercise F of this lesson.)

3. DIRECT ADDRESS. The safest pattern for a learner of English to use in pronouncing names (or words substituted for names) and titles addressed directly to the person to whom he or she is speaking is rising intonation. Normal politeness requires that the direct address begin on a low note and then rise to normal. Direct address may come at the end of the sentence or elsewhere, and it does not affect the intonation of the rest of the sentence.

I'm glad to see you, / my friend.

Mister Roberts, / how are you feeling?

If your voice does not rise at all, your hearer may think you are irritated with him.

Come here this minute, / Johnny.

In the following sentence, if your voice begins to rise on a *normal* note and then goes up to *high*, rather than beginning *low* and rising to *normal*, you may sound like a cannibal

What will we eat for breakfast, / Mother?

instead of like a loving daughter.

What will we eat for breakfast, / Mother?

4. TAG QUESTIONS, SUCH AS *aren't you*, *will he*. These show clearly the essential difference between rising-falling and rising intonation. *If the tag question is pronounced with the rising-falling pattern* (high to low in this case),

You're hungry, / aren't you?

*the whole sentence is to be interpreted as a statement of fact, and indicates that the speaker is confident that the hearer will agree. When the tag is pronounced with the rising pattern (normal to high),*

You're hungry, / aren't you?

*the sentence is a genuine question, which means that the speaker is not sure whether or not the hearer is hungry, and that the latter is asked to confirm or deny the idea, to answer yes or no. Note that the intonation of the part of the sentence that precedes the tag is not affected by the addition of the latter; though, in the examples above, you're hungry is nonfinal, it has the same intonation that it would be given if it came at the end of the sentence.*

Tag questions are introduced by the same kinds of words that are used in yes-no questions. (See Section I of this lesson.)

1. *will, would, shall, should, can, could, may, might, and must*

He won't help me, / will he?

I can go, / can't I?

2. *have, has, had*

He hasn't finished, / has he?

You've eaten, / haven't you?

3. *am, is, are, was, were*

I was right, / wasn't I?

He isn't here, / is he?

4. *do, does, did*

They don't agree, / do they?

He finally arrived, / didn't he?

### III. Exercises

- A. Pronounce each group of sentences in the following exercise several times so as to accustom yourself to the various intonation patterns. Your instructor will try to see that you do not fail to blend the words together smoothly.

1. Yes-no questions

a. Do you remember me?

b. Is there a room for me?

c. Do you have anything cheaper?

d. Will you keep it long?