

Intonation

It is not easy to define Intonation. We know that the basic feature of intonation is **pitch**, being high or low. The overall behaviour of the pitch is called **tone**. Tones can be static, level tones or moving tones, either rising or falling.

For the purpose of analysing intonation, a unit is normally used called the **tone-unit**. Tone-units consist of at least one tonic syllable (a tonic syllable being a syllable with tone and prominence). Tone-units also have a “head”, which is that part of the tone-unit that extends from the first stressed syllable up to (but not including) the tonic syllable. Before the head, there may be a pre-head, which includes all the unstressed syllables in a tone unit preceding the first stressed syllables. Sometimes there is even a “tail”, that is, some syllables following the tonic syllable up to the end of the tone-unit. So, the structure of a tone-unit is (pre-head) (head) tonic syllable (tail).

Intonation is very important for communication, as it helps the addressee interpret the message. There have been different proposals to explain how intonation can help communication, some of which are:

1. Intonation enables us to express emotions and attitudes as we speak: the attitudinal function of intonation.
2. Intonation helps to produce the effect of prominence on stressed syllables: the accentual function of intonation.
3. Intonation helps to recognise the grammar and syntactic structure of the utterance: the grammatical function of intonation.
4. Intonation conveys the given-new information, or provides information for turn-taking: the discourse function of intonation.

So, there are three simple possibilities for intonation: level, fall and rise. However, more complex tones are also used, such as fall-rise or rise-fall. Each of these tones are functionally distinct, that is, they convey different attitudes, intentions and meanings to the hearer, as it has been stated above. Thus, the fall tone is regarded as quite “neutral” and it conveys a certain sense of “finality” (so, it is normally used to yield the floor in turn-taking). The rise tone, on the other hand, conveys an impression that something more is to follow (so, it is frequently used to keep the floor in turn-taking). The fall-rise tone is quite

frequent and it conveys, among many other possibilities, “limited agreement” or “response with reservations”. The rise-fall tone is normally used to convey strong feelings of approval, disapproval or surprise.