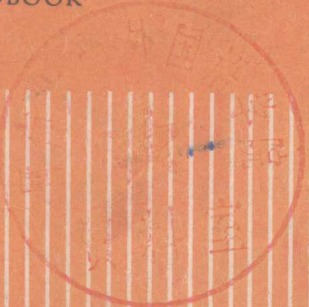


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J. D. O'CONNOR AND G. F. ARNOLD

Intonation of Colloquial English

A PRACTICAL HANDBOOK



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Intonation of Colloquial English

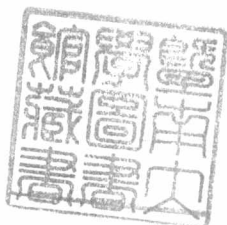
A PRACTICAL HANDBOOK

J. D. O'CONNOR, B.A.

AND

G. F. ARNOLD, B.A.

*Lecturers in Phonetics,
University College, London*



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First published 1961

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
WESTERN PRINTING SERVICES LTD BRISTOL

1664

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**INTONATION OF
COLLOQUIAL ENGLISH**



Preface

Though we hope that it will appeal to a more diverse circle of readers, this *Intonation of Colloquial English* is intended first and foremost for the foreign learner of English. It is essentially a practical text-book and it is designed to help the foreign learner to a more thorough and, eventually, more instinctive command of the intonation patterns which native Southern British English speakers commonly use in their everyday conversational speech. This general aim we have endeavoured to further in various ways. In the first place we have limited our discussion of intonation theory to an indispensable minimum, so as to be able to include the maximum amount of drill material. Secondly we have restricted this drill material to the kinds of sentences which the foreign learner is likely to find useful, and is certain to meet at some time or another, when conversing with English people. Consequently we have included no narrative or descriptive prose though, of course, the intonation patterns, appropriate for that kind of material, also occur in conversational speech and therefore find a place in this book. Thirdly we have emphasised this exclusively conversational approach to our subject by presenting every drill sentence with some indication of the speech situation in which it might be used. This we believe to be very important since, not only will the foreign student now be able to learn the tunes, he will also be able to learn at the same time *when* to use them.

Notwithstanding this bias towards the needs of the foreign learner, this book will, we hope, also offer something to those whose interest in English intonation is more academic. While the chapter dealing with the anatomy of English intonation will perhaps contain little that is new to readers already familiar with the writings of, for example, Dr. H. E. Palmer and Mr. R. Kingdon, our treatment of intonation and meaning will, we

believe, make some contribution towards the general understanding of the functions of intonation in English. In the past much has been written about English intonation in terms of sentence structure. If, in Chapter II, we appear to have emphasised the relation between intonation and speaker's attitude, it is merely that we have sought to redress the balance and to show that sentence structure and speaker's attitude both play a very important part in determining intonation pattern.

At the same time we freely and gratefully acknowledge the debt we owe to all those who have preceded us in the field of English intonation studies; their names are well-known but too numerous to list here. We must however record our special indebtedness to Mr. R. Kingdon whose system of tone-marks we have in some large measure adopted. There are however certain major differences between his system and the one used in this book. We must therefore emphasise that where we have departed from Mr. Kingdon's system we have done so on our own responsibility and that such changes as we have made should in no way be construed as representing Mr. Kingdon's views.

J. D. O'CONNOR
G. F. ARNOLD

University College, London
October, 1959

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I

The Anatomy of English Intonation

General characteristics of intonation

No language that we know of is spoken on a monotone; in all languages there are variations of pitch, though not all languages use these pitch variations in the same way. When we talk about English intonation we mean the pitch patterns of spoken English, the speech tunes or melodies, the musical features of English. All that is written here in this book—as indeed in any other book on intonation—is based on three major premises:

1. *Intonation is significant.* Utterances which are different only in respect to intonation may, as a result, differ from each other in meaning. The same phrase may be said in a downright, or a reserved, or a questioning tone of voice, amongst others.

2. *Intonation is systematic.* We do not invent the words that we use in speaking, nor do we invent the sounds of which they are composed; we learn them, mainly in childhood, and spend the rest of our lives using the same words and the same sounds. Similarly we do not invent tunes as we go along; we use tunes which we originally learned as children, and we do not choose them or use them at random. There is a limited number of pitch patterns in any one language, and we use them to produce definite meaningful effects. It is therefore possible to describe frequently recurring patterns of pitch and to give rules for their use.

3. *Intonation is characteristic.* The pitch patterns or tunes of English are not necessarily the same in form as those of other languages, nor do they necessarily produce the same effect as they would in other languages, though there may be resemblances here and there. This being so, the pitch patterns of any other language may, and very often do, sound wrong

if they are applied to English, and give rise to difficulties in communication. In the first place, the use of a tune which is not normally used in English will give a foreign accent to the speech and may make understanding difficult; secondly, and more serious, the use of a tune which is used in English but in different circumstances will lead to misunderstandings and possible embarrassment. As an example of this latter type of danger, the phrase *Thank you* may be said with one tune which makes it sound genuinely grateful, and with a different tune which makes it sound rather casual. Now if the foreign learner unintentionally uses the casual form when an English listener feels entitled to the other one, then the listener may get a very bad impression, since he will probably assume that the casual effect given by the tune was the one which the speaker deliberately set out to give. This is very important—English speakers are able to make a good deal of allowance for imperfect sound-making, but being for the most part unaware of the far-reaching effects of intonation in their own language, they are much less able to make the same allowance for mistakenly used tunes. The result is that they may hold the foreigner responsible for what his intonation *seems* to say—as they would rightly hold an Englishman responsible in a similar case—even though the tune does not faithfully reflect his intention.

The role of intonation

Having seen that utterances differing only in tune may produce quite different reactions in the listener we can fairly conclude that the tune contributes considerably to the total meaning of an utterance. Yet pitch patterns do not, in English, alter the basic meanings of words, the meanings we find defined in a dictionary. Whatever tune is used with the word *Yes* it remains the same affirmative. The contribution that intonation makes is to express, in addition to and beyond the bare words and grammatical constructions used, *the speaker's attitude to the situation in which he is placed*. Clearly this is what the words and the constructions are also trying to express; but without intonation, as for instance in writing,

they cannot do the whole job on their own; that is why different actors can give such widely varying interpretations of the same role in a play. We may regard the words as a rough guide to the meaning, and the intonation as giving greater precision and point, but this is not to say that intonation makes a greater contribution to the whole than does the verbal structure; indeed the intonation without words would give a very vague impression of the total meaning. Nevertheless, it does provide important information which is not contained in any of the other features of utterances, and without this additional information there would be many more imprecisions and ambiguities in English speech than in fact there are.

To describe exactly the attitude which a given pitch pattern expresses is not always easy, for the very good reason that such attitudes are more often conveyed in tunes than in words, so that the words are not readily available. It is this difficulty that writers are constantly facing, and one measure of a writer's success is his ability to solve the problem of suggesting the exact meaning he has in mind even though he has no direct method of conveying intonation. The English speaker learns by experience from earliest childhood what attitudes are linked with the various tunes he hears and uses, but he would be hard put to it to explain them. Our attempt to explain the attitudes, the meanings which the English tunes convey will be found in Chapter II, but first we must show how the tunes of English are constructed and a method of symbolising the pitch treatment of English utterances.

Sense groups

We neither think nor speak in single words; we express our thoughts in closely-knit groups of words which contribute to the situation in which we are placed at a given moment. Such groups of words are called *sense groups*. They are usually separated from each other by pauses, though on occasion these pauses may be suppressed; however, it will be simpler if we assume that the pauses are always present—as in most cases they are—and we shall mark them by means of a vertical bar.

E.g. Good morning. | How are you? |
 I'm very well, | thank you. | And you? |
 Fine. | The last time I saw you | you were just going to
 take your exam. |
 Yes. | I failed, unfortunately. |
 Oh, | bad luck. |

Sense groups may consist of a single word or a number of words. Their length may vary according to the situation and the kind of speech being used; for example, in reading aloud a piece of descriptive prose the sense groups will tend to be longer than those found in impromptu conversation. Also a slow rate of delivery will favour more and shorter sense groups as compared with a fast rate. Compare the following:

In April, | June, | September | and November | there are only thirty days. |

In April, June, September and November, | there are only thirty days. |

On the whole, however, there is very little choice of grouping in conversational speech, and students will have no difficulty in identifying sense groups and the possible variations relating to them. This is important because we shall be describing the tunes of English in relation, not to single words or sentences or paragraphs, but to sense groups.

Prominence and accent

We have said that the sense group affects the situation; it is equally true that the sense group is affected by the situation in which it occurs. The same words in the same order will not have the same value in different situations: some words will make a greater or smaller contribution to the whole according to the context in which the sense group is uttered.

Consider the sentence *It was an unusually dark night*. As the beginning of, say, a story told on the radio the last three words would all be particularly important. It is easy to show that the first three words play a minor part; suppose that the first three words were drowned by some outside noise and the last three heard clearly, "... unusually dark night". Then the

listener would still get a pretty clear picture of the story's setting. But suppose the reverse were the case and only the first three words were heard clearly and the remainder lost, "It was an . . .". In this case there would be virtually no information gained at all. So in the situation we have imagined the last three words all help to paint a picture and to this extent they are important.

But if the same sentence were said in response to the question *What sort of night was it?* the word *night* in the reply would lose some of its force because the questioner is already in possession of the information that it might otherwise have given him. In this situation there are only two important words—*unusually dark*—and they could be used alone as a complete answer to the question. Going further still, in reply to the question *Was it dark last night?* the single word *unusually* would bear the major part of the information, and would in this sense be more important than all the others. The situation, then, largely decides which word or words of a sense group are important, and any word in any sense group may be important if the context makes it so.

In the written language the reader is generally left to make up his own mind which are the important words, helped to a greater or lesser extent by the style of the author and by such devices as italicisation, spacing and the like; but in speech these words are specifically pointed out, they are made *prominent*, so that the listener shall be left in no doubt. This prominence is achieved by means of what we shall call *accent*. The workings of accent, what it is and how it brings important words into prominence, will become clearer as we go on to analyse tunes.

The tunes of single-syllable sense groups

Up to this point we have used the term *tune* in a very general way; we shall now define it as the complete pitch treatment of a sense group. Tunes, like sense groups, may therefore be long or short, but we shall start by dealing with the shortest possible tunes, those found in sense groups consisting of a single, monosyllabic word. Below are six examples

showing different tunes for the word *Two* in different contexts. The changes of pitch are shown graphically between two horizontal lines representing the normal high and low limits of the voice.

1. PETER: Would you like one packet, or two?

JOHN: Two.



2. PETER: How many shoes in a pair?

JOHN: Two.



3. PETER: Did you know Richard has two wives?

JOHN: Two!



4. PETER: How many cigarettes have you got?

JOHN: Two.



5. PETER: I've only got two pounds.

JOHN: Two?



6. PETER: You've got one brother, haven't you?

JOHN: Two.



The six tunes are:

- Low Fall:* the voice falls during the word from a medium to a very low pitch.
- High Fall:* the voice falls during the word from a high to a very low pitch.
- Rise-Fall:* the voice first rises from a fairly low to a high pitch, and then quickly falls to a very low pitch.
- Low Rise:* the voice rises during the word from a low to a medium pitch or a little above.
- High Rise:* the voice rises during the word from a medium to a high pitch.
- Fall-Rise:* the voice first falls from a fairly high to a rather low pitch, and then, still within the word, rises to a medium pitch.

The tunes of longer sense groups containing only one important word

In the examples above, the word *Two*, being the only word in the sense group, must naturally be important (otherwise there would be no point in saying it) and therefore prominent. Now suppose that John's response was not *Two* but *Twenty*. This is still a sense group of a single prominent word, but there are now two syllables instead of one. The first of these syllables is stressed, i.e. said with a greater general effort than the second, which is unstressed. Our six tunes will now be as follows (and here we use large dots to represent the stressed syllable and smaller dots to represent the unstressed syllable):

Low Fall:

Twenty,



High Fall:

Twenty.



Rise-Fall:

Twenty.



or

Twenty.

*Low Rise:*

Twenty.

*High Rise:*

Twenty.

*Fall-Rise:*

Twenty.



The similarities with the treatment of *Two* are obvious, but there are some differences which must be noticed. In the two rising tunes the stressed syllable is level in pitch and there is no upward glide as there was in *Two*, but rather a jump from the pitch of the stressed to that of the unstressed syllable; in other words the rise is not complete before the end of the sense group. In the same way the Fall-Rise is spread over the two syllables and not completed on the first. Whether or not, in the falling tunes, the fall is completed within the stressed syllable depends on the structure of that syllable: if the stressed vowel is short and followed by a voiceless sound (having no vocal cord vibration and therefore no pitch) there is often not time to complete the fall within the stressed syllable, and the effect is of a jump from the higher to the lower pitch level.

E.g.

Fifty.



Sixty.



If, on the other hand, the stressed syllable contains a long vowel or diphthong, or a short vowel followed by a voiced sound, then the fall is usually completed within that syllable.

E.g.

Forty.



Eighty.



'Twenty.



The Rise-Fall may be said in either of the two ways shown above.

Below are six more examples, this time of sense groups containing one prominent word followed by other words which are *not* prominent:

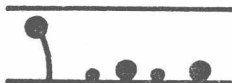
1. PETER: Will you have one packet, or two?

JOHN: Two, Peter.



2. PETER: How many shoes in a pair?

JOHN: Two, you silly chap.



3. PETER: Did you know Richard has two wives?

JOHN: Two, indeed!

Two, indeed!



or



4. PETER: How many cigarettes have you got?

JOHN: Two, I think.

