ENGLISH INTONATION AND POLITUDE

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1. Introductory remarks*

The title of this paper requires — at the very outset — some clarifications and delimitations with regard to our subject matter. English intonation encompasses a very large field, as anyone knows, and politeness, if not as diverse an intonation, may yet be so vague as to be useless for a linguistic investigation. We should like to analyse intonation into the central components of pause, stress or rhythm, and pitch (change), in accordance with many previous studies in this field, and into the marginal ones of voice quality, speed of delivery, etc., the so-called paralinguistic features. On the whole, we want to treat these various components of intonation as given. We would also agree with many writers that pauses, stress and pitch are the essential components, but paralinguistic features may become important especially with regard to our second notion, that of politeness. We shall return to this point later.

Polite is paraphrased in the Oxford English dictionary (2o) as "Of refined manners; esp. showing courteous consideration for others; courteous, mannerly, urbane. (The chief current use.)" Politeness may be described as a concept referring to social matters, to an interpersonal relationship, and thus touches upon questions of norm and convention. It is impossible to pursue a lengthy, and perhaps even philosophical discussion of the nature of politeness. We would rather take the notion of politeness for granted and illustrate it subsequently by means of examples.

The aim of this paper is to investigate some of the intonational means a speaker has at his disposal if he wants to be polite.

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2. Survey of previous studies

Reasons of space compel us to restrict our brief survey to three important contributions in this field of intonation studies. The first one is Pike's classical study on American English intonation (1945), which contains the following quotations:

(1) Oftentimes rising contours are somewhat POLITE or CHEERFUL, and sound less brusque than falling ones. Notice the following samples:

\[\text{ Won't you sit down? o.k., come on. (1945: 51) }\]

(2) The \#2-1 contour involves the SEQUENTIAL meaning of \#3-2, but adds (a) INTENSITY and (b) UNEXPECTEDNESS (i.e. surprise) or (c) POLITENESS to it...

\[\text{ a cheery little bird You're going! (1945: 54) }\]

(3) The rising contour \#2-1, like other rising contours, has a meaning of INCOMPLETENESS. Like \#3-2, it also implies a SEQUENCE. If \#2-1 paralleled other contours which contain pitch one, it would mean unexpectedness. It seems to be more MILD in intensity or surprise than other contours rising to pitch one, however, and to emphasize POLITENESS instead.

\[\text{ Won't you come in? Won't you sit down? (1945: 59) }\]

O'Connor and Arnold (1973) do not employ the term polite at all in their list of adjectives describing speakers' attitudes. Perhaps it is safe to infer that their tone groups 2, 4, 7, and 9 are potentially applicable in expressing politeness; compare the following examples and the various circumscriptions of the attitude linked with a particular tone group:

(4) I 'like it here. - Do you? (1973: 127)

“High Drop”: "conveying a sense of involvement, light, airy ... not unfriendly, lively, interested” (p. 125).

(5) I'm 'sorry to ,trouble you. - It's no ,trouble. (p. 169)

“sympathetically interested ... genuinely interested ... casual, yet encouraging, often friendly...” (p. 158)

(6) Where's my ,newspaper. - You 'want it ,back? (p. 209)

“tentative, casual... light and casual... querying... with no critical intention” (p. 202).

(7) I haven't got a \knife. - Oh 'here you are. (p. 233)

“expressing gladness... gushing warmth... intensely encouraging...” (p. 232).

Leech and Svartvik (1975) list polite as one of their “variety labels”, stating the following with regard to intonation:

(8) Encouraging or (polite) denials, commands, invitations, greetings, farewells, etc. are generally spoken with a rising tone:

\[\text{ A [Are you busy?] B [No.] (‘Please interrupt me if you wish’) \} \}

\[\text{ Do sit down. \} \]

Here the finality of the falling tone would sound (impolite) (1975: 39, §42).

The illustrations from the three different studies have to suffice to indicate that some type of rising intonation seems to be connected with the expression of politeness. On the whole, the respective statements are fairly vague, as no clear distinction with respect to the type of rise is given, no data illustrating other types of pitch change are added, and the factors of stress and pause are not explicitly taken into account, not to mention the lexical material.

Our next step will be in the direction of a fuller and more detailed look at the whole matter.

3. Investigation of intonational, lexical and situational factors

3.1. Pause

The pause, although it is in fact a segmental phenomenon and is employed to segment the speech continuum, appears normally among the supra-segmental components. The distribution of pauses does not seem to affect the politeness of an utterance except in the very general sense that an unusual position of a pause and the subsequent changes of the stress and pitch patterns may be interpreted as 'impolite', but the pause distribution alone would not seem to provide an instrument for the expression of politeness or impoliteness.

3.2. Stress

As regards stress, one can again note that a deviation from the norm may be interpreted as impolite, because it can produce a forceful or pushing utterance, such as:

(9) You 'should come \here, Jack\)

\[\text{ [ju:] [ʃud] [kɛm] [ʃiə] \dʒɪk]} \]

\[\text{ 1 For the illumination of the stress and pitch patterns of our written examples the visual aids devised by O'Connor and Arnold (1973), slightly modified, seem to be quite useful: }\]

\[\text{ - stressed syllable; }\]

\[\text{ - unstressed syllable; the two continuous lines }= \text{ upper and lower pitch limit of voice; dotted line }= \text{ approximate medium of pitch range}; \]

\[\text{ \textup{1} = emphatic stress; }\]

\[\text{ \textup{2} = high and low fall; }\]

\[\text{ \textup{3} = high and low rise.} \]
appear that the rise has to be fairly wide, i.e., it will have to cover a wide interval or range, in order to be interpreted as polite. Compare the following examples:

(12) Are you busy at the moment? — No?

He has lost his voice. — Has he?

Only the slightly higher rises will occur in a polite atmosphere, whereas the very narrow ones signal a rather cool and even frosty attitude. From this one may conclude that a high or wide rise in such contexts will easily be understood as polite, which also appears to be the opinion of Pike and Lecce-Swartvik (see above, §2). But one may also encounter texts and contexts in which a narrow rise seems to be required for a polite statement while the high one signals annoyance, reproach, etc.

Observe the following fraction of a dialogue:

(13) A: You are sitting on my hat!
B: I beg your pardon

(low head, narrow low rise; frosty rejection)

or:

I beg your pardon

(sincere and polite — apology taking the responsibility)

3.3. Pitch

A rising intonation has commonly been linked with the expression of politeness. But the kind of rise deserves a little more attention. It would...
or: "I beg your pardon"

(fairly high rising nucleus — protesting and rejecting accusation)

In the examples (12, 13) the range of the rise (narrow or wide), which again might be called a matter of degree, is directly linked with the intonation nucleus. But the expression of politeness is also connected with other parts of the whole pitch contour. If one assumes that a pitch contour may consist of the obligatory nucleus, an optional tail (which only continues the pitch movement of the nucleus), and an optional head (which allows various pitch patterns, at least partially independent of the nuclear pitch change) one can note that a low head and a narrow low rise may sound rather impolite, compared to a high-pitched head and a low rise, even if the latter is fairly narrow. Notice the following instances:

(14) Why didn't you come then

Why didn't you come then

This means that the interval between head and nucleus should also be fairly wide, if a polite utterance is intended.

It is a commonplace to relate rising pitch contours with politeness. Yet the high fall has to be considered as well. If some rich uncle were to give £50 to his niece and she were to say "thank you" (with a narrow low fall!), the uncle might not consider this reaction to be appropriate or even polite. A high fall would provide a more usual response: "thank you. Compare also the following utterances:

(15a) Why didn't you come

(b) Why didn't you come

The second utterance is most likely to be interpreted as 'grumbling'.

Further examples illustrating the relevance of pitch changes and of complex contours to the expression of politeness cannot be added here. But two other factors should be examined briefly.

3.4. Voice quality, tempo, etc.

The remark about the pitch range in the previous section was one step in the direction of voice quality in a more general sense. A creaky, husky, or breathy voice, if it is not the normal voice of an individual, may — precisely because it is not the normal voice — be interpreted as being outside the range of politeness. Often these qualities correlate with pitch, for instance, or speech tempo, or loudness and stress. A fast type of delivery acts against wide pitch ranges, for example:

(17) Why didn't you come

\[\text{(lento)}\]

The 'clipped' second nucleus is not likely to add politeness to the utterance.
3.5. Interdependence of lexical, situational and intonational factors

Although it is an obvious phenomenon, the interdependence of lexical, situational and intonational units has to be mentioned in our survey.

Usually, impolite vocabulary cannot be ameliorated or softened very much by intonational means. For instance:

(18) ‘Sit down, Jack’ but ‘Sit down, idiot’

But it is certainly possible to produce ironical, sarcastic or comical effects by means of a contradiction between word meanings and intonational factors. The same holds true if there is a contradiction between certain elements of situation and an utterance, as, for instance, when somebody is invited — at gunpoint:

(19) ‘Do open the safe’ for me

The norm in such cases would require the intonational components to be congruous with the lexical and situational ones.

4. Summary

After this outline of possible expressions of politeness with a view to intonation, the following points may serve as a summary:

a) With the exception of pauses, all other components of intonation, such as stress, pitch, voice quality, speed of delivery, etc. may play a role in the expression of politeness. (This indicates that pauses belong to a different category than pitch and stress.)

b) It seems necessary to assume that there is a norm for stress, pitch and the other factors, the violation of which may signal impoliteness, and other attitudes.

c) The greatest potential for polite expressions is offered by the pitch patterns.

It will have been noticed that the category of politeness, which some linguists would call a pragmatic category, has not been mentioned again. It seems to me that politeness is intimately connected with the norm of a particular linguistic system, and that politeness requires the application of the norm. The problem is that all the systems or subsystems mentioned above—from the stress distribution to lexical meanings and situational factors—are still rather unclear as regards their relation to intonation. I suppose one could gain some insight by experiments in which individual factors can be controlled and native and foreign speakers of English record their reactions to the differing variables. Linguists have discovered an intricate system of intonation and elsewhere in the language. The next step should be an investigation into the relevance of the systems and their parts to what might be called "communicative categories".

REFERENCES