



THE FOCUS OF INFORMATION IN A DIALOGUE AS READ BY CLASS IX STUDENTS: AN EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research article is to study the selection of the tonic syllable or the 'the focus of information' in a tone group by students of IX standard from two English medium schools. Generally, it is observed that in schools, students are neither trained nor encouraged to use the right patterns of intonation. Through this article, we hope to show the need for incorporating intonation into the syllabus, and also the need for training both the teachers and the students in this area.

Key Words: *conversation, intonation, tonality, tone, tonicity, segmental, supra-segmental*

INTRODUCTION

A conversation is approximates to a real life situation in which people communicate their ideas, opinions, and share feelings etc. V.V.Yardi(1970) defines in his book, *English Conversation for Indian Students*, conversation as informal talk in which people exchange news, views, thoughts and feelings. It is a free exchange of thoughts and feelings. They normally take place between persons who share the same social setting or context, for example students in classroom, neighbors or passengers in a train, etc. Good conversation requires resourcefulness, patience, tact, the ability to listen, a certain manner of expression and an awareness of social conventions.

According to Ifor Evans(1953) in his book, *'The use of English'*, conversation is not just putting words together in a sequence according to the rules of conversational grammar. It

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takes place in an active, dynamic context, and this context largely determines the language of any unit of conversation. Typically conversation is characterized by tentativeness, repetition, hesitation, backtracking, see-sawing, emphasis, pauses, inflections of the voice, gestures and other body language. What is left unsaid or incomplete often assumes significance in conversations.

The word 'intonation' can be defined as 'the variation of pitch in speech'. According to J.D.O'Connor(1980), in his book, *Better English Pronunciation*, says about importance intonation that, we can say a word group definitely or we can say it hesitantly, we can say it angrily or kindly, we can say it with interest or without interest, and these differences are largely made by the tunes we use: the words do not change their meaning but the tune we use adds something to the words, and what it adds is the speaker's feelings at that moment: this way of using tunes is called intonation.

For example:

- i. //sit ↘DOWN//
- ii. //sit ↗DOWN//

In the above examples, the first one is said with a falling tone. It has a neutral meaning. In the second with rising tone, indicates that the person is being polite. That is why pitch variation is very important in communication.

M.A.K. Halliday(1970), in his book, '*A Course in Spoken English: Intonation*' defines intonation as '*the melody of speech*' or '*intonation is the musical speech pattern*'. Halliday's intonation talks about three aspects of intonation they are tonality, tonicity and tone. They are as follows;

Tonality means division of sentence into the tone groups or meaningful unit in its own right. It can also be defined as 'unit of information'.

For example:

1. // My sister, / who lives in America / has come home.//
2. //My sister who lives in America,/ has come home.//

In the above sentences, the first one has three tone groups. Which means he/she has only one sister and she lives in America .Where as in the sentence with two tone groups the speaker has more than one sister. One of them who lives in America has come to home. With the help of these two examples we can understand how tone group boundaries determine meaning.



Tonicity means ‘location of the tonic action’ or ‘major change in the pitch direction’.

Let us look at two examples in order to understand its importance.

1. //I am going to **DELHI** tomorrow. //
2. //I am going to Delhi to**MO**rrow.//

In the above examples, the first one has focus on Delhi, which means he is going to Delhi not anywhere else. Whereas in the second example, the tonic accent is on ‘tomorrow’. The major pitch change is on the second syllable of ‘to**MO**rrow’, that means he is going tomorrow not ‘day after’ or not ‘today’. Thus the selection of the tonic syllable helps in conveying different meanings.

Tone: Tone means ‘a specific pitch or voice.’ Tones are four kinds, they are as follows;

1. Falling tone
2. Rising tone
3. Falling-rising tone
4. Rising-falling tone.

For this study, M.A.K. Halliday’s model of intonation has been taken as the reference model. The procedure adopted is as follows:

Data: For this study, a contextually rich dialogue has been selected, which is already marked for intonation. This dialogue has been taken from ‘A Course in Phonetics and Spoken English’ by Dhamija, PV and J. Sethi (New Delhi: Prentice-Hall of India Private limited, 2007).

Reasons for the selecting this dialogue: The following are the reasons for selecting this dialogue:

- *Simplicity in theme:* it is a typical domestic situation.
- *Rich in context:* this will enable the speaker to shift the focus of information.
- *The cues for placing the tone group boundaries are very clear.*
- *Use of simple tones:* Since the dialogue requires the use of simple tones, one can concentrate on the context and see where the focus of information is.



Selection of informants: Initially, 16 speakers were selected from the following two schools for reading the dialogue:

- a. **School 1:** Parijatha Grammar High School, Hyderabad.
- b. **School 2:** Sacred Heart High School, Secunderabad.

Later, some informants had to be omitted because they were either too fast in their speech or fumbled and hesitated a lot. Therefore, this article is based on the recordings of 10 students from both the schools.

Reading of the dialogue: Informants were handed over the dialogue and asked to read it as naturally as possible. Once they were comfortable enough, they were asked to read it out before a microphone. No cues, in any form, were provided to them regarding the intonation patterns.

Recording: For the recording, good quality equipments were used. Recordings were done in the school environment, which can never be noise free. But, in order to reduce noise, a good room in the corner of the school was chosen.

Analysis: After listening to the performance of the informants, the intonation patterns were marked on the text and then analyzed. Though brief comments have been made on the tone groups and the tones, the main focus of this study is on the tonic syllable. Analysis was done based on the intonation patterns used by the informants with the major focus on the tonicity aspect of intonation. As stated earlier, a dialogue, which is marked for intonation has been selected as a reference text to compare the students' performance with. It is true that the sentences in any given passage can be read with varied patterns of tonality, tonicity and tone depending on the context and speakers' choice. However, in this study, the patterns of the sample were taken as the reference to note the deviances, if any. Also, if there are deviances, whether they are justified considering the context of the dialogue?

CONCLUSION:

Finally, it discussed the overall findings of the study and comments on the pedagogical implications. It is fact that, many Telugu speakers of English are not exposed to the standard variety of English and even they are not aware of their mistakes. The few people who are familiar with the Standard English tend to concentrate on the segmental rather than the supra-segmental aspect of English language to improve their speech.



Since English is a global language, it has become quite essential for us to speak in the right way. This problem is not only for Telugu speakers but also for all the speakers of English in India. In India it has become most essential language so that people realized that it has become extremely essential for us to acquire good English in all its complexities - grammar, accurate articulation of the sounds and correct use of segmental and supra-segmental features. However, it is unfortunate that the present system of education in India lays greater emphasis on writing rather than on speaking. Students are also tested on their written skills rather than on their spoken skills. There must be a change in the educational system, where emphasis is laid on the training and testing of the segmental and supra-segmental features of English language.

Further, teachers of English too must be trained in both the segmental and supra-segmental features of English. Schools should provide the foundation, so that students can become effective speakers.

This research article has been aimed with the hope that the finding of this study will be helpful to the students and teachers of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. The teachers can make the learners aware of their mistakes, which in turn helps in the correction and improvement of their speech.

Pedagogical implications: In the context of teaching and learning a language, one has to begin from the fact that each language has a different system. When one begins to learn a second language, s/he is very likely to be influenced by the mother tongue. Since the patterns of the first language are carried over to the second language and the influence of the first language on the second language is vast in the realm of intonation, this study will change the pedagogic implications.

In this observation, the most noticeable thing is all the informants tend to select a last word of the sentence as tonic syllable this is due to lack of exposure to the target language. If they would have a good conversations related to the intonation patterns in their text books there would be a possibility to learn the intonation. Conversation is an exchange of information between the speaker and listener. Unless the speaker conveys his/her information intelligibly conversation may not be effective. For an intelligible and fruitful conversation, speaker should pay attention to the use of patterns of intonation along with grammar and vocabulary.

An analysis of the data revealed that the informants have no idea regarding intonation. A cursive look at the prescribed textbooks for IX standard revealed that intonation is not incorporated into the texts through exercises or tips on pronunciation. In such cases, the



teacher could use some supplementary material from some popular books like *Pronunciation Activities* by Martin Hewings and 'English Pronunciation in use' by Mark Hancock.

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