In this paper we examine in detail the two rules of intonation perhaps most commonly found in ELT textbooks, those concerning intonation in lists and intonation in questions. We begin by arguing that the rules given are inadequate as descriptions of what occurs in naturally-occurring speech. We then go on to offer alternative analyses of the various patterns of intonation found in lists and in questions, using the discourse intonation model (Brazil 1985, 1994). In conclusion we suggest that, as teachers and materials writers, we need to provide learners with descriptions of intonation which will allow them to understand the communicative significance of the patterns of intonation identified in such rules, and of the exceptions to those rules.

Introduction

It is a standard procedure in ELT to provide elementary learners with simple rules and to add layers of complexity as the learners progress. A rule about the grammar of the simple present tense at elementary level might concern repeated actions or permanent states; later it would concern future meaning; later still it might concern certain ‘performatives’ (e.g. ‘I declare this bridge open.’).

The situation with intonation is somewhat different. Most ELT textbooks confine themselves to presenting a small set of rules which are repeated at each stage of the learning process. Thus, with intonation, it is rare to find any attempt to refine or develop at a more advanced level, the rules that were taught to learners at an elementary or intermediate level. For example, it is often said (either as an explicit rule or implicitly through the presentation of examples) that in sentences with a main clause and a subordinate clause, a rising tone is used for the subordinate clause and a falling tone for the main clause, as in:

(1) //Before I read this **book**//
    //I thought stress was an executive disease//
    O'Connor and Fletcher (1989: 21)

However, when we observe speech we soon find instances that do not conform to this rule, for example:

(2) //even if it **rains**// we'll **come** //

where the falling tone occurs on the subordinate clause, and the rising tone on the main clause. Few post-elementary ELT textbooks draw attention to such exceptions, or attempt to give students guidance in
understanding them. Instead, both teachers and students are left facing the problem of reconciling 'rules' about language with the contradictory evidence they find in natural speech.

In the following sections we examine in detail two commonly occurring rules of intonation, those concerning intonation in lists and intonation in questions. We compare these rules with examples from authentic speech, and try to reconcile the clashes (where they exist) between rules and speech using discourse intonation (Brazil 1985, 1994).

**Intonation In lists**

Schiffrin (1994) has observed that lists represent the way in which a speaker organizes a category into items that are the same in some ways, but different in others. The following is a typical textbook example concerning the relationship between a list and its accompanying pattern of tones:

(3) I bought a /shirt, a /tie, and some \trousers

Bowler and Parminster (1992: 30)

The rule which underlies this example is given as follows:

the intonation always goes down on the last item (to show that the list is finished), and up on all the items that come before the last (to show that there is more to come).

Bowler and Parminster (ibid.: 30)

That is, in listing intonation, a deterministic relationship is implied between the place of items in the list and particular tones.

**Two examples from authentic speech**

Extracts from authentic recorded speech, however, show a more complex picture. The first example is taken from the introduction to a radio programme of poetry readings given by the poet Philip Larkin:

(4) // I like to see at a glance // the length //
    // the stanza-form // and the rhyme scheme //
    // and I want to pick up // things like punctuation //
    // and italics // that otherwise get lost//

(Larkin 1977)

The tone units in bold contain two lists. The first, including the items the length, the stanza-form, and the rhyme scheme, conforms to what is traditionally said about the intonation of lists. However, in the second list, the rules of listing intonation would lead us to expect a rise on 'punctuation', whereas in fact a falling tone is used.

The second is an example of spontaneous discourse, and comes from an interview with Philip Larkin. The interviewer begins by outlining the topic for his first question, and includes a list in the first three tone units:

(5) // criticism // jour nalism // reviewing // what I think you // very aptly // called in a letter to me once // the light industry of poetry //

(Larkin 1966)
There are two ways in which this list goes against the predictions of the listing rule: it ends with a rising tone rather than a falling tone, and the non-final items have level tone rather than the predicted rising tone.

Although these examples demonstrate that lists are not always as neat as the textbooks would have us suppose, we do not suggest that the textbook rules should be wholly abandoned. The fact that teachers and textbooks refer to, and can describe, listing intonation is evidence from intuition which, when investigated, might reveal a statistical relationship between listing and tone choice described in textbooks.

However, we are suggesting that the rules need reformulating. What is needed is some way of explaining both the occurrence of examples which conform to the textbook rules, and variations such as those illustrated above. We want to suggest that a discourse approach to intonation (as presented in Brazil 1985, 1994) offers a way of doing this.

In the discourse intonation approach, all intonation choices are seen as being related to the context in which they occur. The most important aspect of the context is the knowledge and expectations that speaker and hearer share. Speakers have the basic choice of saying something as if it is already known to their hearers, in which case they are likely to use a rising tone, or of saying something as if it is news to the hearers, in which case they are likely to use a falling tone.

In the case of the two lists in (4) above, this approach can provide a principled explanation for the use of rising tone in the non-final items in the first list, and for a falling tone in the non-final item in the second. By using rising tones in // the length // and // the stanza-form // the speaker projects them as shared expectations of what both he and the hearers will look for in a poem. In switching to falling tone in // things like punctuation // the speaker projects ‘punctuation’ as something which he needs to tell the hearers about.

This view suggests that if there is indeed statistical validity in the contention that non-final items are said with rising tone, then this is because these items are most likely to be already known. It may well be that the most common use of lists is to present routine categorizations that are in effect already part of our shared understanding. The sandwich salesperson, when asked about the range of fillings on offer might say:

(6) // We’ve got cheese // tuna // beef // or chicken //

where the decision to select rising tone marks the items as ‘what we always have’. A pupil, when asked for the capital cities of the four countries constituting the United Kingdom, might say:

(7) // Belfast // London // Cardiff // and Edinburgh //

presenting them as items of information that s/he, the teacher, and the rest of the class already share.
Even within the more contrived context of a language drill, the explanation for rising tone on non-final items given by the discourse intonation model seems valid. Here is an example in which students are required to remember what has been previously added to a list:

2b Play the memory game. Each person chooses something from 2a, and remembers what other people said. Notice the listing intonation.

Example:

1ST PERSON: Johnny has got to buy some coffee.
2ND PERSON: Johnny has got to buy some coffee, and wash the floor.
3RD PERSON: Johnny has got to buy some coffee, wash the floor, and wind the clock.
4TH PERSON: ........................................

(O’Connor and Fletcher 1989: 101)

Once items have been added at the end of the list, with the falling tone which signifies that a new item has been added (and that, in the context of this game, the turn is complete), they become part of what is already known by speaker and hearer alike, and are repeated with rising tone.

**Level tones**

The discourse intonation model also allows us to explain choice of level tone for items in lists. Level tone represents a decision by the speaker to opt out of assigning the significance of either rising tone (that something is ‘already known’) or falling tone (that it is ‘news’). The speaker has a focus on the words as linguistic forms rather than on communicating meanings: ‘these are the words I have to say’ rather than ‘I am communicating with you’. In lists this often occurs when routine categorizations have become ritualistic, because they have often been said in the same particular context by the same speaker. The station announcer who says:

(8) The train on platform three will call at Peterborough, Ely, March and Cambridge

has repeated the words so often that it becomes difficult for him/her to bother about relating them to perceptions of what is ‘already known’ or ‘news’. And by choosing level tone for the list items in (5) above:

// criticism // journalism //

the interviewer indicates that he is dissociating himself from these words as communication, either because he has rehearsed this opening so often, or because he wishes to project a dissociation from words which were not originally his: he is quoting Larkin’s words.

**Falling (and rising!) tones on final items**

We need also to account for the likelihood of final items in lists having falling tone. If we see choice of falling tone as marking something as informing, then we can suggest that what is normally informing about this choice could be characterized as ‘I’ve told you’. Where no more items are added, this ‘I’ve told you’ means that the list is complete. Where other items are added, this means ‘I’m telling you this, and this, etc’.

Richard Cauldwell and Martin Hewings
In (5) there is an example of a final item with rising tone which goes against the rule, and so needs explaining. The choice of rising tone for the final item (reviewing) suggests that the speaker wishes to project this item as common ground, has not yet ‘told’ the hearer anything, but is going to do so. He goes on to tell the hearer that the list is intended to represent ‘the light industry of poetry’.

Intonation in questions

The following rules about question intonation appear in many ELT textbooks:

- **yes/no** questions: questions requiring the answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ end with a rising tone, as in:

  (9) // Shall we go tomorrow //

- **wh-questions**: questions beginning with *What, Where, When, How*, etc. end with a falling tone, as in:

  (10) // Where shall we go tomorrow //

It is not difficult, however, to find instances of these two question types combining with the non-predicted tone choice. The following examples come from authentic speech:

(11) // Are they significantly different //

(12) // What’s a bidet //

Studies of yes/no questions in authentic speech support the view that the relationship between intonation and question form is more complex than that suggested in textbook rules. For example, Fries (1964: 250–1) analysed the intonation of yes/no questions used by American English panellists in the TV quiz game ‘What’s My Line?’, and concluded that:

there seem to be no intonation sequences on questions that are not also found on other types of utterances, and no intonation sequences on other types of utterances that are not found on questions.

Similarly, in a study of a collection of conversational data, Geluykens (1987, 1988) found that, while a rising tone for yes/no questions having an inverted form (for example, ‘Is this a question?’) does occur, falling tone is more frequent in absolute terms.

Such evidence suggests that the textbook rules are not necessarily valid as generalizations. Nevertheless, it might turn out to be the case that an analysis of a greater amount of data might verify these rules. As we discussed with reference to lists, it is possible, given their general acceptance, that the yes/no rising and the wh-falling rules reflect intuitions about frequency which may well (but might not) turn out to be accurate. Nevertheless, teachers and students need explanations of why the ‘non-expected’ choice (however frequent or infrequent) occurs. Simply to say that it is ‘marked’ or ‘exceptional’ is not helpful.
In our discussion of lists, we suggested that in selecting a falling tone a speaker presents what is being said as ‘news’, and in choosing a rising tone a speaker presents what is said as ‘already known’. Let us consider how this might help account for tone choices at the ends of questions. Said with a falling tone:

(13) // \Are you hungry //

will be heard simply as an attempt to elicit information, and might be likely in:

‘Are you hungry?’ Because I was thinking of going shopping before we have dinner and you’ll have to wait ...

On the other hand, if it is said with a rising tone, the speaker will perhaps be heard as trying to confirm something that he or she already suspects. It might, for example, be said to someone sneaking a biscuit out of the kitchen just before dinner time.

The following question was asked by the passenger/navigator in a car driving along a British motorway. She had checked on the map the number of the junction at which they were to leave the motorway and then, some time later, said to the driver:

(14) // \Which junction did I say it was //

checking on what she had herself said earlier. Similarly, with a falling tone:

(15) // \Where are you from //

will be heard as a request to be told previously unknown information, while with rising tone it will be heard as checking something that is already known. As Brazil (1994) states, falling tones in questions indicate that the speaker is ‘finding out’, rising tone indicates that the speaker is ‘making sure’. It needs to be remembered that his choice (as, indeed, all other intonation choices) is open to exploitation by speakers. For example, speakers might find themselves in a situation where they feel they really ought to know where someone is from, but don’t. In this case it would perhaps be more diplomatic to use a rising tone, as if to check, rather than a falling tone which suggests that they don’t know.

A statistical tendency for yes/no questions to end with a rising tone and for wh- questions to end with falling tone (if there is one), does not justify framing textbook rules which imply a deterministic relationship between question type and tone choice. If it is indeed the case that yes/no questions occur more frequently with rising tones, this may be because yes/no questions occur more frequently in situations where the speaker is already aware (or wishes to appear to be aware) of the likely answer. If it is the case that wh- questions occur more frequently with falling tones, this may be because such questions occur more frequently when the speaker needs to elicit previously unknown information.

Richard Cauldwell and Martin Hewings
This explanation of tone choice also allows us to begin to account for some of the other rules about intonation in questions that are found widely in ELT materials. For example, it is often said that ‘echo questions’ (questions which repeat part of what has been previously said) end with a rising tone:

(16) A: I think his name’s Zarem  
   B: // What’s his name //</

This kind of question represents a request to repeat something that has already been said in order to check that it has been heard or understood correctly. Given this, the above explanation of tone choice would suggest that it would be surprising if a rising tone was not selected.

Textbook rules focus attention on tone choice at the ends of questions. However, in many naturally-occurring questions, speakers make pre-final tone choices. Here is an example from a radio chat-show in which there are three tone choices (on confine, to, and er) before the final tone choice at the end of the question on life:

(17) // Why did you want to confine it // to // er // the first thirteen years of your life //</

It is important to account for the tones which precede the final (falling) tone, and this can be done using the explanations provided by discourse intonation: the level tones on ‘to’ and ‘er’ reflect the speaker’s momentary focus on the language as he is deciding what to say next; and the rising tone on ‘confine’ projects the proposition ‘wanting to confine it’ as being part of shared knowledge between speaker and hearer.

Conclusions

The approach to intonation exemplified in many textbooks is to provide a series of rules of the type discussed in this paper. A number of limitations of such rules have been suggested, exemplified by a detailed study of intonation in lists and questions. In conclusion, it is necessary to make three further general points about the deficiencies of textbook rules on intonation.

First, the rules deal with only a very limited part of the language. If we were to pool all the rules commonly found in textbooks (in lists, at the end of questions, at the ends of subordinate and main clauses, and so on) they would together allow us to describe only a fraction of intonation choices made in the language as a whole. Second, it is often hard to see how the rules interrelate: the rules fail, for example, to provide any link between the rising tone predicted at the end of yes/no questions and the rising tones predicted for non-final items in lists. Third, the rules fail to give learners any principles through which they might understand why the tendencies represented in the rules might exist, why speakers deviate from them in naturally-occurring speech, and, more generally, how these tone choices relate to the same choices made in other syntactic environments.
What is needed, then, is a systematic framework within which teachers and students can study intonation, and we argue that the discourse intonation model provides us with such a framework. Attempts to use the model in the production of specific pronunciation materials and advice to teachers have appeared in recent years (e.g. Bradford 1988; Hewings 1993 (Part 6); Brazil 1994; Dalton and Seidlhofer 1994 (Chapters 4 and 7); Underhill 1994: 74ff). However, we feel that it is also necessary to give teachers alternative, and more productive, ways of explaining to students the rules of intonation in mainstream textbooks. We have illustrated our position in an analysis of only two such rules, and we have dealt only with tone choice, nevertheless we contend that a more complete account of the model (see Brazil 1985, 1994) discussing tone, prominence, and relative pitch height, allows a similarly systematic explanation to be given of other textbook rules.

Received June 1995

Note

\[ / \] = tone unit boundary; \( \uparrow \) = a rising tone beginning on the underlined syllable (either a rise or a fall-rise); \( \downarrow \) = falling tone beginning on the underlined syllable; underlined syllables are therefore tonic. Prominence, key, and termination are not indicated.

References


The authors

Richard Cauldwell is a lecturer in the English for Overseas Students Unit at the University of Birmingham. He has taught English in France, Hong Kong, and Japan, and is currently involved in teacher education courses at diploma and MA level. He has recently completed a PhD on the intonation of Philip Larkin’s poetry readings.

Martin Hewings is a lecturer in the English for Overseas Students Unit at the University of Birmingham. He has taught English in Sweden, Italy, and Malaysia. His research interests are in the area of learner intonation, in which he has a PhD. He has recently published Pronunciation Tasks (Cambridge University Press).