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OF GRUNTS, HEMS AND HAWS

Melvin J. Luthy
Brigham Young University

As linguists and language teachers we often ignore some of the most interesting expressions of the languages we describe and teach because tradition has caused us to concentrate primarily on the expressions that have written correlates; although we frequently use other expressions, we do not consider them part of the productive system of English; we relegate them to a secondary role, and avoid writing them or describing them in dictionaries. One of the most frequent of these expressions is the hesitation signal an English speaker makes as he/she pauses to search for the next syllable (Maclay 1959, Blankenship 1964, 360-362). It is not uncommon to hear someone (especially if speaking officially or before a group) say something like, "I [Ô:] really can't [Ô:] speak [Ô:] for the majority [Ô:] but [Ô:]....." If one were to ask the speaker why he said [Ô:], he would probably reply that there is a natural tendency for everyone to say [Ô:] at a pause. What he may not realize is that although it may be "natural" for an English speaker, it is not "natural" for a Finnish speaker, who would say [tuota], or for a Japanese speaker who would say [aino], or even for a Spanish speaker, who would say [este], or for speakers of hundreds of other languages. That is, the pause [Ô:] is part of English. We cannot expect that speakers of other languages will use it, or that they will readily understand it when we use it.

English speakers use many such "wordless" intonation signals, but because they are not written, few speakers are consciously aware of them, and non-native speakers struggle to gain an intuitive grasp of them. One day I overheard a European lady who had studied English for eight years in her homeland complain of the rudeness of the checkout girl at the local supermarket. It appeared that the lady was accustomed to saying thank you at the end of each transaction. The checkout girl would reply simply [ha], or with the nasal variant [hm]. The rudeness of a girl who would only grunt at a customer was almost more than the sophisticated immigrant could bear. Of course, native speakers would feel nothing amiss in the exchange. After all, normal American English was "spoken."

Intrigued by the extent to which we communicate with such intonation signals, and by the possibility that foreign students were missing or misinterpreting significant information communicated by such signals, I decided to test how well various speakers understood some of the most common ones. I selected fourteen signals that seemed to occur frequently, recorded them void of context, and played them first to twenty-five native speakers* to determine if they understood them without visual or verbal clues, and then to forty-two foreign students.* Each signal was played.

*American students at BYU
*Matriculated foreign students at BYU taking ESL classes to improve their English

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in a classroom setting, and each student was asked to select from multiple-choice answers the intended meaning of the signal. Seventeen of the twenty-five native speakers correctly matched all of the signals with their intended messages. The remaining eight students made one error each, but no two native speakers made the same error. (See Table A).

The data for foreign speakers is shown in Table B. The average number of errors for foreign speakers was 3.14, compared with .32 for native speakers. Thus, the foreign speakers as a group made nearly 10 times more errors than the native speakers. The most errors made by a foreign student was 10, and the least was 0.

The signals used in the study, along with their intended meanings, are described below. The pitch contours given are approximations produced by a PDP 15 digital computer connected to an analog-to-digital converter to record fundamental frequency, intensity level, and duration. The pitches given are from my own speech. It is understood that these will vary somewhat from speaker to speaker and from time to time, but the basic contours and relative pitch contrasts are assumed to remain quite constant. An attempt has been made here to present the signals in a somewhat logical order. In the listening test, the order was mixed. The numerical notation (X/42) indicates how many of the forty-two foreign students selected a wrong answer for that signal.

### Signal 1

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Hz.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>200</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>?</td>
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<tr>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>120</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Gloss: A space-filling pause; a hesitation.

When this sustained schwa occurs utterance-initially, the glottal onset is present; otherwise, it generally occurs without glottalization. Its pitch is constant, and its duration seldom exceeds .5 sec. Three of the six speakers who chose incorrect glosses chose "What did you say?"
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NATIVE LANGUAGE</th>
<th>MONTHS OF ENGLISH STUDY IN HOMELAND</th>
<th>MONTHS OF ENGLISH STUDY IN U.S.</th>
<th>TOTAL ERRORS MADE</th>
<th>ERRORS PER INTONATION SIGNAL</th>
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<td>156</td>
<td>1 2</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
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<td>12 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>132</td>
<td>108 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>48 5</td>
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<td>72</td>
<td>4 3</td>
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<td>84 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>30 2</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>108 3</td>
<td></td>
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<td>48 2</td>
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<td>1 3</td>
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<td>Swedish</td>
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<td>2 4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>1 5</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Finnish</td>
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<td>36 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finnish</td>
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<td>1 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Polish</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>1 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Tongan</td>
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<td>72 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Thai</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>12 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE A
Gloss: What? What did you say?

This signal has the same pitch contour as its interrogative word counterpart: what? Considered by many to be a rude substitution for the interrogative pronoun, it is nonetheless used extensively in informal speech. It also has the nasal variant [h~] with the same pitch contour.

Five of the six speakers who chose wrong glosses for this signal chose "Yes, I agree." This type of error suggests a possible confusion with the second syllable of signal number 3.
Gloss: Yes. I acknowledge what you have said.

This expression possibly occurs more frequently than any other. It is the unconscious signal of acknowledgement that speakers continually use in casual conversations. It is so much a part of the mutually accepted English code that if either party fails to express it at frequent and regular intervals while listening (particularly on the telephone), the speaker will interpret its absence as lack of interest or attention. This signal, too, occurs with the nasal variant.

The interesting features of this signal, aside from the two, short syllabic bursts at different pitches, are the glottal onset for the first syllable, and the voiceless glottal fricative onset for the second. We will observe in other affirmative expressions that the fricative onset for the second syllable is significant. Two of the four speakers who made errors chose "I think it tastes good."

Signal 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hz</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>200</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>170</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>150</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>130</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>120</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gloss: No.

This is another frequently occurring expression which is simply a negative answer: no. Again we observe two syllabic bursts at different pitches, but there are two differences: the pitches of the syllables are reversed from those in 3, and the [h] beginning the second syllable in the affirmative is replaced by [ʔ] in the negative. It is significant to note that the contrast between [h] and [ʔ] in affirmative and non-affirmative intonation signals respectively is consistent throughout all two-syllable signals. As with the former signals, this one also has a bilabial nasal variant. Two of the five mistaken glosses were "Something is not quite right."
Signal 5
Hz.
200 - 
- 
- 
170 - 
- 
150 - 
- 
130 - 
120 - 
0 .1 .2 .3 .4 .5 .6 .7 .8 Sec.

Gloss: Yes I (somebody) did!
Yes it is!
(contradictory)

Signal 6
Hz.
200 - 
- 
- 
170 - 
- 
150 - 
- 
130 - 
120 - 
0 .1 .2 .3 .4 .5 .6 .7 .8 Sec.

Gloss: No I (somebody) didn't!
No it isn't!
(contradictory)
Expressions 5 and 6 are shown together because they illustrate an interesting contrast in form and meaning. Both are heard frequently among children after someone has asserted something like, "Michael broke the window." Michael might deny breaking the window by uttering expression 6. His accuser could then be expected to counter with expression 5, only to have Michael counter with expression 6, to begin a long exchange of negative and affirmative contradictions until interrupted by a frustrated mediator.

The expressions have virtually identical pitch contours, but they differ in one significant aspect: the beginning of the second syllable the affirmative contradiction contains the [h], whereas the negative contradiction contains the [ʔ]. Both expressions occur with nasal variants. Seven of the 11 mistaken glosses for 5 were "Please don't do that;" there was no pattern of errors for 6.

Signal 7

Hz.

200 -

- p a:::

170 -

h a:::

150 -

130 -

120 -

.0 .1 .2 .3 .4 .5 .6 8 Sec.

Gloss: Oh yes, it definitely does?

This expression one would expect to hear on Thanksgiving Day when grandmother asks if the pie tastes good, and someone wants to let her know with no uncertainty that it surely does. The nasal variant would occur frequently in this context. Again we observe the glottal onset on the first syllable, and the affirmative [h] beginning the second. Nine of the 11 mistaken glosses were "I doubt it is true."
Gloss: No, definitely not! "No way!"

This expression is a firm negative reply. The same pitch contour is often shared by the current colloquial expression, "no way!" Again the non-affirmative glottal stop is present between first and second syllables. Of course, the nasal variant is also frequent. Seven of the 11 mistaken glosses were "I doubt it is true."

Signal 9
Hz.
200 -
-
-
170 -
   ——?
150 -
   ——?
130 -
120 -
.0 .1 .2 .3 .4 .5 .6 .7 .8 Sec.

5/42
Gloss: Something is not quite right.

Unlike the other expressions, this one and 10 are frequently written; the difference in meaning is subtle. This expression is heard in a variety of situations which have one thing in common: something unexpected has occurred and it is not desirable. For example, one might expect this expression from someone who had just noticed that the tire on his car was losing air, or from a student who just realized that the professor whose class he feigned illness to miss was unavoidably walking down the hall toward him. Although the vowel has changed from the ubiquitous [ə] to the back, rounded [o], the non-affirmative glottal stop is predictably present. Three of the five mistaken glosses were "I am pleasantly surprised."

Signal 10

Hz.

200 -

- wps ~ ups

150 -

130 -

120 -.0 .1 .2 .3 .4 .5 .6 .7 .8 Sec.

Gloss: I have just made a mistake.

The difference between this expression (oops) and 9 (oh, oh), appears to be the degree of immediate personal control over the situation. For example, if one were to spill a drink in a restaurant, he may be expected to say oops, because he was immediately in control, but someone observing the accident from a nearby table would more likely say oh, oh. Five of the eight mistaken glosses were "Something is not quite right;" apparently these subjects missed the subtle difference with number 9.
Signal 11

Hz.

200 -

170 -

150 -

130 -

120 -

.0 .1 .2 .3 .4 .5 .6 .7 .8 CS

Gloss: I am surprised at that!

This is a very short exclamation with moderately high pitch that quickly fades. It registers affirmative surprise over something that the speaker has just learned. It could be expected from someone who had just been shown how a piece of a picture puzzle fits with the rest. Eight of the 12 mistaken glosses were "I am very sorry."

Signal 12

Hz.

200 -

170 -

150 -

130 -

120 -

.0 .1 .2 .3 .4 .5 .6 .7 .8 Sec.
Gloss: I am disappointed at that.

The dramatically falling pitch over a relatively long time appears to signal disappointment. Since this signal is monosyllabic it cannot contain the medial glottal stop that is present in dissyllabic non-affirmative expressions. This expression could be anticipated from a basketball fan whose team had just missed a critical free throw. Fifteen of the 20 mistaken glosses were "I am surprised at that." Although there is an element of surprise in disappointment, these subjects failed to grasp the element of regret implicit in this signal.

Signal 13

Hz.

220 -
200 -
170 -
150 -
130 -
120 -

.0 .1 .2 .3 .4 .5 .6 .7 .8 Sec.

Gloss: I am pleasantly surprised (strong, affirmative surprise).

The onset at a much higher pitch before the dramatic decline appears to be the significant feature distinguishing "pleasant surprise" intonation from the "disappointment." One could expect this expression from a lady who had just been given an unexpected, expensive gift. Four of the eight mistaken glosses were "I am very sorry."
This signal, although similar to 3, differs in that it means only "yes"; it is not used as a monitoring signal of acknowledgement. The pitches of both syllables are the same, and somewhat higher than the second syllable of 3, which tends to give the answer a nonchalant connotation. Such an answer might be given to a question of no great moment such as, "Did you bring the napkins?" The nasal variant also occurs. Four of the six mistaken glosses were "What did you say?"

A statistical study of the Table of foreign errors including an analysis of covariance, reveals a significant negative correlation between length of English study and number of errors made. That is, the longer the student had studied English the fewer errors he made. Interestingly, this is the only significant correlation to be drawn from the data. None of the language groups appears to have any advantage or disadvantage compared with others in understanding the signals. There is as much variance within language groups as there is between them. In fact, the variance is so great that it leads one to conclude that unmeasured idiosyncratic variables play a very important role in learning the signals. Although the data is limited, it does not suggest that additional data might show otherwise.

What we can conclude is that many foreign students do have difficulty understanding the intended meanings of some English intonation signals, and that residence in the United States is not a rapid cure for the problem.

With respect to English pedagogy, it is clear from a perusal of modern textbooks that this aspect of communication is not taught explicitly.
One can only assume that the reason teachers neglect it is either that they do not consider it important, or that they consider it too difficult to handle in a systematic way. It is apparent from my discussions with many foreign students that the first reason is part of the problem. In fact, many of them express the feeling that surely this part of English is to be avoided because it is rude. One can only conjecture how much "rudeness" they encounter every day on our campuses. In addition to considering it of secondary importance, some of us would likely claim that this part of our language is too difficult to teach in a systematic way. Those of us who feel this way have great faith that students will intuit it the way children do.

I believe this study suggests responses to these probable reasons for neglect. First of all, we must admit that these signals are pervasive in our language, and that the conversational use of them is not necessarily rude. Second, the data shows that these signals are not learned quickly without explicit instruction. As aids to learning, perhaps the use of the visual image of the signal, accompanied by a simple prose description, presented and practiced in contexts such as those given might be considered for use in helping students gain confidence in understanding and even using the signals.

Third, most of the foreign subjects in this study were matriculated university students. Additional testing of elementary and intermediate students may reveal more significant correlations than this study did. Finally, it may be interesting to study whether this type of testing might be used to assess overall English proficiency the way reduced redundancy testing has been used (Gradman 1973, 41-48; Gradman and Spolsky 1975, 59-70; Gaies, et al., 1977, 51-56). Another possibility for further study may also be in the more theoretical studies of English intonation, particularly those dealing with the question of intonation levels vs. intonation configurations, pursued early by Bolinger (1951, 199-210), as well as studies dealing with "stylized" vs. "non-stylized" intonations studied more recently by Ladd (1978, 517-540).
REFERENCES


