

Fall-rise intonation usage in Finnish English second language discourse

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Abstract

In this paper, the falling-rising tone in the English of very proficient non-native speakers is discussed. The speech data was collected in connection with MA thesis seminar sessions where the speakers, Finnish university students of English, discussed research methodology. Of the non-native speakers of English, only those who performed at high level of accuracy in a separate proficiency test were chosen for the study.

The fall-rise intonation was used on items mainly signalling feedback intonation, not on items indicating attitudinal contrast/reservation meanings or more specific semantic set-membership relationships. Apparently, the fall-rise intonation in the non-native English speech had a much more limited role than what has been associated with the tone in native British English speech. Thus even the most advanced Finnish speakers of English do not seem to master the full meaning potential of the fall-rise tone.

Introduction

Traditionally, in pedagogically oriented text books on English intonation, it has been argued that, particularly in RP English (Received Pronunciation), the fall-rise tone signals up-in-the-airness, reservation, or focus within a given set. Indeed, the semantic/pragmatic meaning of the fall-rise intonation contour has attracted a great deal of attention in the literature on English prosody.

Basically, the tone is associated with reservations, implications and doubts. It can also be argued that the fall-rise conveys “uncertainty” or “in-completion” (as all rising tones do) but the fall-rise is apparently associated with especially delimiting open meanings; it has sometimes, and quite rightly, been referred to as the contingency tone in English intonation. That is, the fall-rise is often an indication that the proposition or argument is correct only under certain circumstances. Roach (1991) uses the terms “limited agreement” and “response with reservations” to describe the pragmatic meaning of the fall-rise. In the literature on the subject, the following meanings, for example, have been attributed to the tone: “implicatoriness”, “reservation” and “contradiction”, “lack of complete commitment”, and “strong implication”. The common denominator is, clearly, an indication

of some concealed doubt or contrast: the speaker may say one thing and mean something else.

In more recent descriptions, the meaning of the fall-rise is seen as reflecting two conditions: the scalar relationship between an item and the context, and the uncertainty of the speaker with respect to the relevance of the item on the particular scale. Furthermore, focused lexical elements displaying set-membership relationships (e.g. inclusion or type/subtype relation) often carry falling-rising intonation. In other words, in spoken English, the fall-rise tone is a convenient prosodic ruse for conveying conversational implicatures of different kinds; this is possible at least in RP English, and in a speech situation where meanings can be negotiated (Ward & Hirschberg, 1985).

The following examples illustrate some of the main roles associated with the fall-rise in spoken English. In the tables, separate tone-groups (intonation-groups) are given on separate rows indicating tone-group boundaries. Basically, each tone-group is realized with a distinct intonation pattern, and the tone-groups are often, but not always, separated by pauses in speech. Each tone group contains, by definition, a nuclear tone (i.e. the most distinct intonation pattern). In these examples, only the falling-rising intonational nuclei are indicated, [fr]_ signaling the beginning of the tone and _[fr] signaling the end of the tone. The capital letters indicate speakers in a conversational situation;

the transcripts are given without punctuation as the focus in prosodic matters.

Table 1. Role of fall-rise in native English speech: example 1.

A
did
any linguists attend it
B
well
[fr]_ X_[fr] did
A
oh
that was interesting

Table 2. Role of fall-rise in native English speech: example 2.

A
you like him
B
mmm
A
I mean
the new boss
B
well I like his [fr]_wife_[fr]
A
ok
I don't know her at all
B
right

Table 3. Role of fall-rise in native English speech: example 3.

A
listen
I have a question
B
yes
ok
A
are you a doctor
B
I have a [fr]_PhD_[fr]
A
aha
a doctor of science
is that it

In example 1 (Ward & Hirschberg, 1985), the uncertainty is to do with the question of whether the item (X) is to be adequately described as a member of the evoked set

(*linguists*). The attitudinal overtone may, of course, be one of humor, irony, etc. but the scalar relationship is in any case the necessary condition for B's use of the fall-rise.

In example 2, the contrast implied by the fall-rise concerns an item that is explicitly mentioned and something that that needs to be inferred from the context (Cruttenden 1997). Here the contrast is apparently between the man and his wife.

What also seems to be typical of the fall-rise is the indication that the speaker is not sure whether his/her contribution to the discourse can be seen as relevant. In example 3, the speaker is not sure which group, medical doctors or people with doctorates, is actually being talked about (Ward & Hirschberg, 1985).

All in all, the fall-rise can effectively convey even mordant sarcasm or irony by subtly signaling that the relevance of something is very much in doubt. The fall-rise can be a handy strategy in conversation in that the speaker can surreptitiously indicate quite serious doubts and reservations without really committing himself/herself.

In the literature on second language acquisition (SLA), the role of intonation, or prosody in general, has rarely been discussed. This is, of course, *a fortiori* true for studies of the use of the fall-rise in second language English speech. As for Finnish English interlanguage intonation, Hirvonen (1970) and Toivanen (2001) are comprehensive studies of intonational skills but these investigations only deal with English elicited in a highly experimental situation. To date, the intonation of Finnish English, concerning the way in which Finns use English interactively, has not been studied systematically.

For the purpose of this study, the fall-rise pattern was chosen for scrutiny. On the one hand, this contour has a specific meaning in (British) English intonation; on the other hand, the fall-rise does not have a counterpart in Finnish intonation.

Highly proficient Finnish speakers of English (English majors) were chosen as test subjects since it can be assumed that they, if any group of non-native speakers, should master even the most advanced supra-segmental aspects of English.

Data

The speech data was collected in connection

with MA thesis seminar sessions where the speakers, Finnish university students of English, discussed research methodology. The speech data was collected in four consecutive sessions; altogether there were eleven participants (all females). The speech data was digitally recorded with DAT and a high-quality microphone to produce a 44.1-kHz, 16-bit CD-format recording.

All the eleven participants were asked to read out the *Rainbow Passage* in a language laboratory. The recorded passages were independently judged for “nativeness” by two linguistically naïve native speaker listeners: the score ranged from 1 (“definitely non-native”) to 5 (“definitely native”).

In addition, a specially constructed proficiency test consisting of a cloze passage and a multiple choice vocabulary test was used to assess the Finns’ proficiency in English. Of the non-native speakers of English, only those who performed at a level of at least 90 % accuracy in the proficiency test and whose score in the evaluation of nativeness was at least 4 were chosen for the study; eventually, six female speakers acted as test subjects.

Analysis

The speech material from the academic debate was first analyzed auditorily for tone-group boundaries, and a preliminary tone choice analysis was also carried out. The acoustic analysis was subsequently carried out with the CSL speech analysis system.

The data was annotated in accordance with the following principles. For intonation, the ToBI model was used. ToBI (*Tones and Break Indices*) is a framework for developing generally agreed-upon conventions for transcribing the intonation and prosodic structure of spoken utterances in a language variety.

To augment the ToBI analysis, “British school” type of intonation analysis was carried out (see e.g. Roach, 1991). The tone unit (or TCU) was assumed to have a fairly clearly-defined internal structure, containing at least the tonic/nuclear syllable, with optional proclitic and enclitic elements. The nuclear pitch patterns were analyzed acoustically to complement the initial auditory analysis.

In the analysis of the data, the following tones were possible: fall, rise-fall, rise, fall-rise, and level tone. Using the framework developed by Brazil (e.g. 1997), the tones were thus the

following: proclaiming p tone (fall), proclaiming p+ tone (rise-fall), referring r tone (fall-rise), referring r+ tone (rise), and oblique o tone (level).

In the prosodic analysis, the tone group final tone choices were investigated in detail. That is, the aim was to study the most salient pitch pattern at the end of each tone group. Thus, the focus was on nuclear tones (as defined in the British school framework of intonation analysis) and on nuclear accents occurring near the end of the intonation phrase (as defined in the ToBI framework).

Finally, auditory features of voice quality were included in the annotation. For each tone group, a categorization of voice quality was chosen. The descriptors include “modal voice”, “falsetto”, “creak”, “whisper”, “tense” and “rough”; these labels are basically those suggested by Laver (1994) for the description of different phonation types. Features of rhythm were also annotated. The following labels, in addition to “neutral”, were used to describe the rhythm of speech: “fast”, “slow”, “accelerating”, “decelerating”, “clipped”, “drawled”, “precise”, and “slurred”.

Results, examples and discussion

In the non-native speech data, there were altogether some seventy tokens of the fall-rise. In this paper, the focus is exclusively on this tone; the results of the other aspects of the prosodic analysis will be reported elsewhere. All in all, no speaker uncertainty with respect to the scalar value of an item could be detected in the non-native speech data. Focused lexical items displaying clear set-membership relationships contained falling tones instead of rises. The informants mainly used the fall-rise on discourse markers (*yeah, OK, right*, etc.) for the purposes of phatic (back-channel) communication. The following examples illustrate the situation; the dialogues are presented in an extended context to enable the reader to evaluate the possibility of implicatures in the conversation. Fall-rises are marked with `_[fr]`, creak with `/.../`.

Table 4. Role of fall-rise in non-native English speech: example 1*.

A
you have done all the
pro gradu studies now

B
only the theoretical studies
/but not the thesis/

A
you need to write the /whole thing/

B
yeah
/yeah/

The examples above give negative evidence because the absence of the fall-rise on focused items indicating contrast or type/subtype relations is highlighted (*statistical analysis* vs. *t-test* and *all the pro gradu studies* vs. *only the theoretical studies*). In the following examples, the fall-rise does occur, and that happens on items signaling feedback.

Table 5. Role of fall-rise in non-native English speech: example 2*.

A
I need to finish the literature review
most part of it

B
[fr]_yeah_[fr]

A
so the schedule is
/mmm/

B
yeah
seems fine

Table 6. Role of fall-rise in non-native English speech: example 3*.

A
the references are a problem
/to manage data/

B
[fr]_right_[fr]

A
I need to use
the Linda /database/

The examples above contain the falling-rising intonation in contexts where the main function is to indicate that the communication channel is open and that the interlocutor is

listening. It is difficult to find any meanings of contrast, reservation, etc. with these dialogues. It seems plausible that the fall-used in these utterances principally has the same role as the response *mmm* or *joo* in spoken Finnish with falling-rising intonation: the other speaker is actively listening and encourages the partner to continue. It could be argued that the fall-rise is here an intonational loan from Finnish, as far as the discursal function is concerned. In any case, the fall-rise observable in the non-native speech data does not signal the typical attitudinal/semantic nuances commonly associated with the tone in native English speech.

Conclusion

The Finnish speakers of English investigated in this study do not use the fall-rise tone in ways that are assumed to be typical of spoken RP English. It is noticeable that this difference characterizes the English speech of very advanced non-native speakers. While this feature of the second language speech studied here does not necessarily interfere with the intelligibility (or even acceptability) of the speech, it is likely to create a somewhat foreign idiosyncrasy, which may be an undesirable feature at a very high level of proficiency in a second language.

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