Book reviews

English intonation: An introduction


Reviewed by Stephanie Claire

English intonation: An introduction by J. C. Wells, Professor of Phonetics at University College, London, is written from a descriptive-linguistic and language-teaching perspective. Wells defines intonation as ’the melody of speech … how the pitch of the voice rises and falls, and how speakers use this pitch to convey linguistic and pragmatic meaning’ (p 1) in conversational English. The book is intended for native speakers and learners of English at university level and, as Wells explains in the preface, his aim is to ’help the reader to recognise and reproduce the important intonation patterns of English and to understand what they mean and how they are used’ (p ix).

Until comparatively recently, the prosodic (or suprasegmental) aspect of pronunciation has received less attention than the phonemic (or segmental) level. The reason for this, Wells suggests, is that while native speakers make allowances for learners’ segmental errors, they do not extend this tolerance to intonation errors because they do not realise that intonation can be erroneous. In other words, they assume that the speaker is meaning the utterance to sound the way it does. This, he believes, is the origin of many instances of miscommunication. Wells provides a number of examples to illustrate this point, including various permutations of you mustn’t worry (p 9) with tonal patterns indicated visually (by circles and lines) and aurally (on the accompanying CD).

As Wells points out, the intonation system of English constitutes the most important and complex part of English prosody, which is why (competent) spoken English is richer in informational content than written English. In any utterance, English speakers simultaneously face decisions in the three linguistic intonation systems of tone, tonality and tonicity, known colloquially as the three Ts. This well-organised and clearly written book examines the three Ts and explains how they function.

The book is divided into six chapters, each with clearly identified subsections that explore in considerable depth a number of facets of the topic under discussion. In Chapter 1, Introduction, the major arguments and theoretical perspectives are laid out. Wells defines the notion of intonation, introduces the three Ts, discusses the functions of intonation, and examines some aspects of transfer and interference. He points out that whereas German and Dutch have tonicity systems that are extremely similar to that of English (so enabling positive transfer to occur), other languages such as French have different systems, which can result in negative transfer. Wells warns that ’unchecked, the assumption that English is like your L1 thus leads to interference from the L1 as inappropriate elements are transferred’ (p 12).

Chapter 2, headed Tone: Going up and going down, discusses fall, rise and fall–rise intonation and their use in statements, questions and other types of utterances (such as exclamations, interjections, greetings and commands), sequences of tones and tone meanings. Wells dispels a commonly held belief that statements have a falling intonation and questions rise, saying ’[i]n general, there is no simple predictable relationship between sentence type and tone choice’ (p 15).

An important feature of this chapter, and indeed of the whole book, is the way observations are immediately supported by examples, such as this one on the various tonal properties (p 17):

A: Bill could ask a friend.

B1: \Who? (= Which friend could Bill ask?) – said with falling tone

A: Bill could ask a friend.


The focus of Chapter 3, Tonicity, is on how speakers stress or (as Wells terms it) accent important words in their messages. This chapter contains nine subsections, one of which, Nucleus on a function word, addresses narrow focus yes–no answers and tags, prepositions, wh + to be and other function words that attract the nucleus. Pragmatically, the primary stressed (or nuclear) syllable indicates the importance or relevance of the word for what is being said. In selecting an intonation pattern,
a speaker’s most important decision centres on which syllable will bear the nuclear tone. In an intonation phrase (IP), the general tendency is for the nuclear tone to be towards the end (for example, The bridge is about to col’lapse (p 95)). The nucleus is usually placed on content words (nouns, adjectives, most verbs and most adverbs) rather than on function words (pronouns, prepositions, articles, and auxiliary and modal verbs) (for example, I can’t hear you (p 97). Helpfully for non-grammarians, a box in the text contains examples of function word classes, and exercises with the audio provide practice in discerning and producing appropriate nuclear syllables in IPs.

Tonality, the chunking or division of material into IPs, is examined in Chapter 4. Wells starts by posing several rhetorical questions, such as, How does the speaker break the material up into IPs? and Where do the boundaries between successive IPs go? Reassuringly, he then goes on to say, ‘[t]o a large extent, the answers are a matter of common sense. Essentially, the intonation structure reflects the grammatical structure’ (p 187). Breaks generally correlate with a syntactic boundary (for example, Milk, | I believe, | comes from cows). According to Wells, the chunking that occurs between successive phrases and occasionally between successive words, ‘appears to function in much the same way in all languages and does not seem to give much difficulty to learners of EFL’ (p 187). Where a syntactic structure has a potential for ambiguity, chunking can clarify the speaker’s intention, as Wells amusingly demonstrates (p 188):

(i) What’s that in the road a’head?
(ii) What’s that in the road? | A’ head?

Chapter 5, Prenuclear patterns, looks beyond the three Ts to focus on any other stressed syllables that come before the nuclear accent in the IP. The first of these prenuclear accents is known as the onset, and forms the beginning of the head of the intonation pattern. The head, then, extends ‘from the onset up to the last syllable before the nucleus’ (p 207), as in:

‘why didn’t you ’tell me? Onset = Why; head = why didn’t you

The finer distinctions of tone, non-nuclear accenting and further considerations such as stylisation and key are also discussed, with a note that the term key is used somewhat differently by linguists such as Halliday (1967, 1970), who applies it to ‘the subvarieties of each tone’ (p 245) and Brazil (1985), for whom it denotes ‘the height of the first accent’ (p 245).

Finally, in Chapter 6, Putting it all together, Wells explains how ‘in many universities, in Britain and perhaps elsewhere, the practical oral examination in phonetics includes an intonation text’ (p 246). In this test, the candidate is presented with a short written sentence and is requested to say the sentence aloud and describe the intonation pattern used. The examiner then says the sentence aloud and the candidate’s task is to describe the pattern used by the examiner. Examples of texts used in such examinations are provided and discussed, with Wells advising candidates to ‘keep things simple and natural … avoid breaking material into several IPs … avoid theatrical, animated renditions of the test sentence … and to opt for an unemphatic, throwaway version’ (p 247).

English intonation contains exercises (drills and practice material) that are spread throughout each chapter with clear signposting and a CD icon. The sound quality of the CD is clear, with the actors using Received Pronunciation, which is defined in the glossary of the Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language (Crystal 1987: 429) as ‘the regionally neutral, prestige accent of British English’. The delivery, to Australian ears, sounds somewhat clipped and, together with English references to such things as the Northern Line, Selfridges and Worthing, as well as the fact that the sample utterances in the exercises are generally uncontextualised, could result in a negative effect on learners.

The CD is an essential part of the book, but teachers using it with students should carefully prepare the ground prior to listening, as the nuances of tone, tonality and tonicity are so subtle that many learners may feel overwhelmed and turn away from this extremely important aspect of pronunciation.

By explaining how intonation works and using accessible language with numerous examples, English intonation opens up this important aspect of English. With a fuller understanding of what intonation is all about, it is to be hoped that teachers will be less inclined to neglect this vitally important aspect of spoken language.

This volume is a valuable resource for teachers who are serious about increasing their understanding of intonation, and for advanced learners of English who want to explore the
shades of meaning that tone, tonality and tonicity convey. It is a paradox, however, that the amount of detail needed to explain and analyse the melody of speech could render the book inaccessible to teachers and students who are most in need of it.

References


Multimodality and genre: A foundation for the systematic analysis of multimodal documents


Reviewed by John Gaudin

Since the work of O’Toole (1994) and Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) in the early 1990s, systemic functional linguistic (SFL) approaches have been widely applied to non-textual forms of visual communication. Much of this work has focused on multimodal texts that integrate textual and graphic material. In 2000 Gunther Kress called for ‘a theory which deals adequately with the process of integration/composition of the various modes of multimodal texts’ (Kress 2000: 153). The work of John Bateman and his colleagues represents a significant response to this call. *Multimodality and genre* consolidates much of this work into a single structured argument.

Bateman voices a familiar criticism that much recent writing on visual communication, particularly that which adopts a semiotic approach, lacks empirical rigour (Rose 2001: 97). With the immense variety of images to draw on, it is comparatively easy to select examples to support the arguments one is trying to make about how images function. This text proposes an approach that is empirically informed and capable of being used to predict and verify propositions about multimodal texts. However, Bateman goes to some lengths to stress that the model he has presented in this work still needs a great deal of further work before it can be seen to adequately fulfil this function.

While basing his approach on linguistics, Bateman incorporates a much wider range of methodologies that have been used to analyse documents. Chapter 2 introduces these different methodologies. These include graphic design including rhetorical design theory, mark-up language applications used in publishing and webpage design, and computerised document recognition, which has developed out of early work on optical character recognition and eye tracking. Insights from all these fields contribute to the overall framework, and attention is also given to the production process of multimodal texts.

The centrepiece of the work is the *Genre in*
Multimodality (GeM) model,\textsuperscript{1} developed by Bateman and his colleagues between 1998 and 2004 and presented in Chapter 3 and subsequent chapters. This model appears to have been further refined since it was described in an earlier paper (Bateman, Delin and Henschel 2004). It proposes a layered approach to the identification and arrangement of the different identifiable features of a multimodal text, such as blocks of text, schematic arrangements, white space and graphic material. Chapter 3 presents the two most elementary layers, the base layer that de-composes the multimodal page into its most basic recognisable physical units and a series of presentational or layout layers that identify features more commonly associated with design. Chapter 4 introduces rhetorical structural theory as a tool for clarifying how spatial organisation conveys meaning, and uses it to construct a third rhetorical structure layer.

In Chapter 5 Bateman introduces genre as a means of comparing different kinds of multimodal texts and testing the effectiveness of the model as a tool for prediction and description. Genres can perform this function because of the way they are structured according to different conventions so as to raise specific expectations in their readers. However, to serve this purpose, Bateman proposes an approach to the definition of multimodal genres that can be verified empirically and that will allow for fine-grained specification of generic features in specific examples. For this purpose he appears to prefer a looser definition of genre (derived from new rhetoric approaches) to the more prescriptive definition often found in SFL genre theory.

In Chapter 6 Bateman offers the GeM model as a means of classifying material for inclusion in multimodal corpuses, which in turn can provide material for testing and further elaborating the model. Here the argument turns full circle in proposing a strategy and methodology for accumulating the empirical material that can be used to refine the analysis proposed in the previous chapters.

Readers who are looking for a ready-made framework that can be applied to multimodal texts without further refinement may not find what they need in Bateman’s densely argued theoretical approach with its stress on the amount of work still necessary to develop a fully scientific model. However, Bateman’s commitment to an empirically testable model leads him to offer a set of analytical schemas and several instructive analyses of specific texts, including field guides on ornithology and tourist guides, which readers may find useful. In Part 5.5 there is a persuasive application of the model to examine how the presentation of popular reference material has changed over the recent past from material dominated by text flow to more dynamic interactions between text and graphics.

Yet there is a price to be paid for the book’s commitment to a rigorous theoretical approach. Bateman deliberately restricts his model to the single page at the level where text, graphics and hybrid forms such as tables or diagrams combine. His analysis of graphic materials is limited to identifying them as photographs, paintings, drawings or schematic diagrams. There is no real analysis of the images themselves.

The lessons Bateman draws from established fields such as design often seem to predispose him to select examples that conform to established standards of acceptable design, and to offer the model as a means of demonstrating the difference between effective and ineffective design. While I welcome the attempt to draw serious lessons from a range of different methodologies, I found myself questioning how readily the resulting model could be expanded to encompass newer forms of multimodality that have been made possible by new printing and production technologies, such as the graphic novel or the computer game in which purely visual media assume more prominence than text. For example, the model would need to be further adapted for the analysis of contemporary children’s picture books in which text is absorbed into the pictorial space, and where the combinations of text and graphics often vary markedly from page to page.

This is a valuable addition to the literature on multimodality, but it remains to be seen how fertile it will prove to be.

\textbf{Note}

\textsuperscript{1} For more information on the GeM project, see the GeM homepage:
http://www.fb10.uni-bremen.de/anglistik/langpro/projects/gem/
References


