The communicative value of intonation in English

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Acknowledgements

Foreword

When David Brazil died in 1995, the lasting influence of his work on intonation had become clear. Discourse Intonation was being cited frequently in scholarly studies and it had been adopted as the basis for teaching intonation in a growing number of English language teaching publications. Two of David Brazil's major books which sought to apply and extend his work were published shortly before his death: *Pronunciation for Advanced Learners of English* (Cambridge University Press, 1994) and *A Grammar of Speech* (Oxford University Press, 1995). As the most detailed statement of the theory of Discourse Intonation is to be found in *The Communicative Value of Intonation in English*, it is timely that this groundbreaking book should now be republished by Cambridge University Press.

David Brazil is perhaps best known for his association with the University of Birmingham, and this began in the mid nineteen sixties. A new degree of Bachelor of Education had been established, and John Sinclair, as Professor of Modern English Language, had insisted that courses on English Language should be a compulsory component of this new degree. This necessitated the retraining of teacher-trainers, and David, then a teacher-trainer, was one of the first to attend lectures on English Language given by John Sinclair and Malcolm Coulthard. There followed a fruitful period of collaboration between these three scholars and others engaged in discourse analysis at the University.

In the early seventies David was seconded to the School of English at the University of Birmingham to conduct research on discourse analysis in projects supported by the Social Science Research Council. It was his work on these projects which became the subject matter of his PhD, and resulted in a number of publications. These included *Discourse Intonation and Language Teaching* (Longman, 1980), co-authored with Malcolm Coulthard and Catherine Johns, and in 1985, *The Communicative Value of Intonation in English*, published as an 'English Language Research Monograph' by the University. By this time, the originality of his work on

intonation and the quality of his teaching both in Birmingham and around the world were well recognised.

When *The Communicative Value of Intonation in English* was first written, it was rejected by external publishers on the grounds that it did not 'contribute to the debate'. The debate in question concerned the relationships between intonation and grammar, and intonation and attitudinal meanings. As two of David's starting assumptions in his theory of Discourse Intonation were (a) that intonation choices are not related to grammatical or syntactic categories (rather, they depend on the speaker's contextually referenced perceptions), and (b) that there is no systematic link between intonation and attitude, one can easily see why it was rejected.

However, since its publication the monograph has been a source of inspiration to many students and researchers concerned with the analysis of discourse. This is not the place to list the work which has drawn on David Brazil's ideas. But to give some indication of its variety and breadth, here are some of the topics that students and visiting academics at the University of Birmingham have investigated: intonation in lectures; the English intonation of non-native speakers; the intonation of poems read aloud; intonation in German, Italian, Swedish and Japanese; the intonation of idioms; and the intonation of particular communicative events, such as stories read aloud, radio advertisements, and even shipping forecasts.

Discourse Intonation has also been welcomed by English language teachers as a framework within which they can understand better this complex area of language and develop teaching materials and techniques to convey this to learners. A number of textbooks for teachers have advocated a Discourse Intonation approach, and teaching materials have been published which draw extensively on the description provided in *The Communicative Value of Intonation in English*. These include David's own book, *Pronunciation for Advanced Learners of English*.

One of the attractions of Discourse Intonation to both teachers and researchers is that it provides a manageable tool for analysing and interpreting the intonation choices made by speakers in naturally occurring speech. It is manageable because the description recognises significant intonation choices as being made within a very small number of systems – four in all: *prominence*, *tone*, *key* and *termination*. These systems contain a total of thirteen choices, summarised in the following table:

System	Choices	Number
Prominence	prominent/non-prominent syllables	2
Tone	rise-fall, fall, level, rise, rise-fall	5
Key	high, mid, low	3
Termination	high, mid, low	3

The description thus contrasts with others which view intonation as conveying a very large number of attitudinal meanings, or different meanings depending on the grammatical system in which it occurs. Such approaches result in far greater complexity and a potentially open-ended list of meanings attributed to intonation.

For those who are already familiar with other work on intonation *The Communicative Value of Intonation in English* might be seen as presenting an unfamiliar and provocative account. Placed at the centre of the theory are those features of speech that in many other descriptions are seen as peripheral: performance factors and context. However, once the reader is convinced of the validity of David Brazil's starting point, the insights generated by the theory are considerable.

This edition is largely the same as the 1985 original with certain minor amendments. The recording has however been re-done: the original recordings were not made in ideal conditions, and the copying process had led to a deterioration in the masters.

Healthy theories should evolve in the light of what is learned in applying them to real data, and Discourse Intonation is no exception. Although David Brazil was very keen to preserve and promote the essentials of the description, evolution is reflected in his books and papers written since 1985. These, together with his earlier publications, are given in the bibliography at the end of this book.

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Preface

This book is about the way intonation affects the communicative value of an English utterance. More simply – and less irritatingly, no doubt – it could be said to be about the meaning of intonation. The problems attendant upon any careful use of the word 'meaning' are very well known, however, and I hope I may be excused for not wanting to engage with them as a preliminary to my main business. My intention in speaking in a loose, pre-theoretical way about something called 'communicative value' is to keep such problems at arm's length, as it were, and leave myself space to work outwards from certain observable facts towards a conceptual framework that brings the operational significance of intonation into a manageable focus.

The first two monographs in the Birmingham *Discourse Analysis* series gave me an opportunity to present some of the main features of an account of the intonation of English which differed from existing accounts in that I sought to make consistent reference to the way speech functions in interactive discourse. More than a decade of work in the area has resulted in considerable elaboration of the schema that was there proposed, and in what I hope I am right in thinking of as refinements of many of the details. What I have attempted here is to summarise the position to which the logic of the earlier work and the careful examination of naturally-occurring data seem both to lead. Much of what was in Monographs I and II will be found to be restated here in some form or other, but restated in a way which relates it to what I believe to be a more satisfactory overall view of intonational meaning.

The wish to display the working of the system *as a whole*, and to show how an appreciation of the workings of its several parts can be mutually illuminating, has, indeed, been one of the bases on which I have made necessary decisions about what to leave out. The other has been the precedence given to consideration of meaning or value of which the title gives warning. I start with the assumption that the first task of the

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student of intonation is to set up a framework within which the finite set of meaningful oppositions can be identified and characterised, and I seek to do no more than this in a single volume. The reader will find, therefore, that little attention is given to those matters of precise phonetic detail that a book about intonation might be expected to provide.

There are other things for which the reader might look in vain, but for the omission of which I have less clear-cut and principled excuses. They are left out largely to save space, but partly also because of the wish to give a concise and uncluttered statement of a particular view of the phenomenon. The conceptual pattern that informs that view turns out, I think, to be a remarkably simple one, but certain problems attend its explication. I hope my decision to avoid distractions will not be interpreted as ignorance of, or lack of interest in, alternative views.

One thing that is regrettably absent is any indication of how the intonation categories I postulate are *in extenso* in the very large amount of data from which they are, in fact, derived. I can find no more economical way of advancing the exposition than by the use of minimally contrasted pairs, and naturally-occurring speech is not usually a very rich source of these. In point of fact, I have come to realise that there is not quite the worrying incompatibility between research method and presentation method that I once supposed there was. For even when working on real data one is constantly asking what *does* happen and comparing its significance with what (in terms of the evolving description) might *alternatively* have happened. The process of invention seems to be an unavoidable concomitant of observation. The general use of rather short examples may seem to be at odds with my insistence upon the contextual significance of intonational meaning. The reason for using them is not merely that long extracts take up more space than short ones and make the whole organisation of the book more difficult. It is also that the contextual implications of a text become rapidly more complex as the length increases, permitting more and more alternatives. It has generally been thought more helpful to specify the relevant factors in the background to the utterance descriptively, even sometimes anecdotally.

If my method of exposition, which makes use of constructed – and perhaps fanciful – situations, is one of the things that strikes the reader as unusual in a work which has serious theoretical pretensions, another will be the absence of reference to the work of others. This will be noticed in two connections. In the first place there is the large, and

growing, body of literature covering the whole field of Discourse Analysis to which I am so obviously indebted. No one familiar with this field will fail to recognise that many of the principles and concepts I invoke in the course of my exposition have their origins somewhere in that literature, though their originators have not usually had intonation specifically in mind. If my book should chance to fall into the hands of the latter, I hope they will excuse my neglect of the normal courtesies. In most cases, I was driven to the decision that simple acknowledgment just would not do, for the genesis of a particular notion in the present description depends often upon an application of another's ideas to which they may well object, and the requisite discussion and justification would have resulted in an impossibly unwieldy book.

Much the same applies to the work of others labouring in the more circumscribed field of intonation. Apart from acknowledging my indebtedness – which I hereby sincerely do – I ought ideally to have shown how my own categories relate to those in other treatments and said why, in each case, I think my own treatment provides the more satisfactory ones. It soon became apparent that the chapter which was to have attempted this would take on the proportions of another book if I was to avoid being overselective or insultingly cursory. Perhaps a brief statement of my position might be acceptable in lieu. There must be a strong expectation that the specific assertions others have made about the 'meaning' of items they use for exemplification will, on the whole, be compatible with any new account. Such assertions represent the considered judgments of scholars and teachers who have acquired an unusual level of sensitivity to the operational significance of intonational phenomena, and one would need seriously to question one's own intuitions if they were very much at odds with theirs. In a sense, they represent a body of informants whom one ignores at one's peril. I count it as evidence in support of the present approach that, provided their judgments are thought of as statements of *local meaning*, there is usually no problem in agreeing to their validity by appeal to the formal oppositions I postulate. There must, after all, be a fair measure of agreement among competent language users about local values: differences lie in the apparatus we need to set up to give generalised expression to the agreement.

Here again, though, a great deal more is involved than a simple point-by-point comparison of different descriptive models. A difficulty facing anyone who undertakes a comparative exercise is the fact that

phonologists differ in the assumptions they make about how intonation relates to the other variables language users exploit in pursuit of their manifold communicative ends. Once more a brief statement of my position will have to do duty for the argument I should have liked space to develop. Firstly, I see everything in this book as support for the belief that the conceptual framework we need to capture intonational meaning is freestanding. This is to say that it can be explicated without reference to such other features of the utterance as syntactic descriptions seek to identify. A description which handles intonation properly must, indeed, seek to answer questions of quite a different kind from those which sentence grammars are set up to answer. The latter can be said to start from the assumption that parties to a verbal interaction have available for their use a system for classifying experience which, in theory if not in fact, they share with the whole speech community and which, for most practical purposes, remains constant through time. But to make sense of intonation we need to think of speakers as classifying experience along lines that are valid for themselves and their interactants, and in the here-and-now of the utterance. Each of the oppositions in the meaning system is to be thought of as an occasion for setting up *ad hoc* categories in the light of the speaker's apprehensions of how things presently stand between them and a putative hearer.

To follow this line of thinking further would lead to our asking about the consequences of viewing other aspects of linguistic organisation in the same way. There is certainly reason to think that much of what now gets separated out for special attention under such headings as Syntax, Intonation and Discourse Analysis might be brought to a single focus more satisfactorily than existing sentence-based models have so far achieved. Current orthodoxy postulates a distinction between 'semantics' and 'pragmatics', and is much concerned with where the boundary between them should be drawn. If pragmatics covers that part of the meaning of an utterance that can be explicated only by reference to the including situation, then one option that is certainly open to us is to regard *all* the meaning of normally-used language as a manifestation of pragmatic behaviour. To say this, of course, is to adopt the common-usage sense of the epithet to signify spur-of-the-moment decisions, made in the light of a running assessment of what is desirable to be done and what is the most effective way of achieving it. This is precisely the view of the matter that an examination of intonational phenomena powerfully

suggests we should take. And since it seems to be an eminently tenable view of what ordinary conversational practice is like, there must surely be a case for focusing linguistic enquiry upon the mechanisms that make it possible.

I must content myself with simply making this very large claim about the wider implications of what is presented here. Consciousness of those implications has, however, affected my method of exposition in a way which will be obvious to the reader, and which needs a word of explanation. I have tried to be as explicit and precise as possible about the conceptual and theoretical foundations on which each stage of the presentation rests. It may seem perverse to go back to first principles when received terminology and commonly accepted practices are apparently available as shortcuts. If I am guilty of keeping the would-be traveller waiting while I re-invent the wheel, it is because I think the enterprise I have in hand exemplifies in a particularly striking way the general truth that concepts and categories depend for their significance on the model from which they are derived. It is partly to emphasise this that I have adopted the practice of using asterisks to distinguish my own technical terms. These are attached to the first occurrence of the word in the text, the place at which its particular significance is usually stated. For ease of reference, they are then collected into a glossary in Appendix C.

I am indebted to many people for support, help, encouragement and properly critical interest in all that has gone into the genesis and writing of this book. I gratefully plead lack of space once again, this time to excuse myself from trying to name names. Firstly, there are my immediate colleagues in the English Department, and specifically in English Language Research at Birmingham. Then there are the many people who have worked with us in some capacity or other over the last decade. Finally I want to acknowledge the very great profit I have derived from talking about intonation with individuals and groups in so many places in the United Kingdom and abroad. I am aware that much of the original interest that led to these discussions can be traced to the publication of the early monographs. And the generous invitation to once more use this means of disseminating work that is still very much in progress is not the least cause I have to be grateful.