

## Introduction to Intonation

Remember that we can look at pronunciation on two different levels – sounds and patterns. Think about your name. When people say it, they use the same individual sounds to produce it, but it's a little bit different every time. Now imagine all the different ways that your family and friends have said it over the years, and how you can interpret different meanings each time you hear it by the way it is said. You can tell if someone is happy, mad, concerned, proud, etc. You can tell if they are warning you, telling you to come over, or getting ready to ask you a question all by the music embedded in those sounds. Intonation is extremely powerful!

The sounds of “John”: /dʒɑn/

The patterns of “John”: John, **John!**, *John?*, *Joohoooohn*, *Jo – ohn*, etc.

## The Music of Speech

When we talk about intonation we are talking about the music of speech, and as with music, there is an infinite variety of intonation patterns. We can try to represent these patterns in different ways, but in the end, we have to use our ears to master them. Think about the sounds of English as the notes on a keyboard. Now imagine how different these notes sound when they are played by different artists or in different styles.

## A Tale of Two Brains

In popular culture, people sometimes talk about being "right-brained" or "left-brained", but these are really abstractions. Nevertheless, there are clear indications that features of language are localized in different parts of our brains. When people have strokes in the right or left hemispheres, there tend to be different effects on language. Often people who have a stroke on the left side of their brains are unable to process language. Sometimes they are only able to produce sounds instead of words, but at times they have well-preserved intonation. On the other hand, people who have strokes on the right side, are often able to use language, but they often speak in a monotone and are unable to understand humor. Intonation appears to be primarily controlled by the right side of the brain.

## Intonation and Culture

Culture affects communication. We are all aware that languages are different, but we often focus on differences in grammar, vocabulary, and sound systems. Many people overlook differences in intonation, communication styles, gestures, and expressions. Non-native speakers often concentrate on producing the individual sounds of a language but forget to change their patterns of speech. Remember that your intonation will affect your meaning, so native speakers may misinterpret your message because of the way you say it. A speaker from a language with relatively flat intonation may sound bored or rude, while a speaker from a more melodic language might sound angry or overly excited.

## The Power of Intonation

Look at the following sentence.

it's a beautiful day

Without punctuation, we don't know if it's a question or a statement, but even if we add a period or a question mark, we really know very little about how to say this sentence if we don't have any context. Although we can say it in an infinite number of ways, let's just look at four main ways.

1. It's a beautiful day. Neutral intonation with focus word "day" = statement.
2. It's a beautiful day? With rising pitch we can make a question or express doubt
3. It's a beautiful day. Said sarcastically, we can change the meaning.
4. It's a beautiful day! We can express strong emotion.

Intonation can change:

- grammar**
- meaning**
- emotion**

## Intonation Patterns

### Overview

It should be clear to you now that intonation patterns are not easy to define or categorize. Even describing them is a difficult task. We can use arbitrary terms such as "up" or "down", but native speakers don't usually agree on how to explain what they hear, so any descriptive systems may not be of much value. This is also partly due to the fact that communication is a two-way street. We can measure someone's intonation acoustically, but the only way to measure how that intonation is perceived is by asking the listener, and that is entirely subjective. Nevertheless, there are some useful patterns to guide you. Keep in mind that there is no substitute for careful listening.