

## **The Functional Relationship between Intonation and Punctuation and their Indispensable Roles in Spoken and Written language**

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### **Abstract**

Intonation and punctuation are complex and difficult areas where much depends on the correct interpretation of certain patterns and symbols. When we talk about intonation, we are actually referring to different features depending on whether we think in terms of production, perception or systematic use as a structuring device. On the other hand, when we refer to punctuation, we are referring to symbols that indicate the structure and organization of written language. This implies that both punctuation and intonation are vital tools that are vividly employed to disambiguate the meaning of sentences. Therefore, intonation and punctuation play similar roles in speech production and written language in their bid to enhance meaning, perception and comprehension. Unfortunately, the teaching and use of intonation and punctuation have often been neglected and this is probably responsible for as many serious failures in ESL performance. The main thrust of this paper therefore is to x-ray the relationship between intonation and punctuation in written and oral language, their features cum relative importance in the English language.

**Key Words:** Intonation, Punctuation, Language, Spoken English

### **Definition of Terms**

#### **Intonation:**

Intonation is the rise and fall in the pitch of the voice. It is variation in the pitch of voice. When one speaks, the voice pitch becomes either high or low depending on what one wishes to say or one's attitude towards the message.

#### **Punctuation:**

Punctuation marks are special symbols used in writing to clarify meaning and to separate sentences, words and parts of words. Such standard set of marks are equally used to convey information about a word.

#### **Relationship:**

The way in which the two terms are similar to each other in the role they play in English speech.

#### **Functional:**

This has to do with the idea of being practical and useful. The relevance of intonation and punctuation are equally incorporated.

**Indispensable:** The ability to have great value. Hence, intonation and punctuation marks play significant roles that one cannot do without them in both written and spoken communicative situations.

### **Introduction**

The term 'intonation' is somewhat difficult to delimit. Its teaching and use has often been neglected and this has contributed in no small measure towards many serious failures in ESL

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performance. Intonation, in particular, of all the prosodic aspects of English, appears to be a fertile area for language transfer. It is this area in which the teaching of English to non-native learners is least welcome. It is, therefore, not surprising that it is the area in which that enterprise is least successful, for while the average educated non-native learner of English can attain a very high standard of grammatical accuracy in the language and master the pronunciation of its sound segments and word stress, the speaker often cannot appropriately use its intonation with any reasonable degree of confidence. Despite the fact that English is an intonation language, many ESL users have failed to acknowledge the fact that the seemingly difficulties perceived to be associated with intonation can be surmounted with ease. Consequently, many ESL users tend to perform quite badly in the area of intonation. Similarly, in the area of punctuation, the same problem exists. Even among some budding writers, problems sometimes arise as to where to affix certain punctuation marks. When such standard marks are affixed wrongly, the result is usually, the construction of dangling modifiers and ambiguous sentences. As a result, readers of such texts are often perplexed and confused in their bid to get the author's intended meaning.

### **Syntactic Features of Intonation**

As pointed out earlier, intonation denotes variation in voice pitch. The changes of pitch are usually in two folds: rising pitch

and falling pitch. This rise and fall in speech is called intonation patterns. Intonation patterns are one out of the syntactic attributes of intonation. It must be stressed that pitch variations result from the varying tension of the vocal cords. The more tightly the vocal cords are stretched, the higher the pitch.

The rising tune and falling tune can also be combined in a variety of ways to bring out different nuances of meanings (even within the same sentence) to give any utterance its characteristic contour. For instance, the word 'yes' can be said using different tunes to convey different meanings:

Yes (falling tune –indicating certainty, finality)

Yes? (Rising tune –indicating a question, annoyance or embarrassment)

Yes (a fall-rise indicating confirmatory, reservation)

Yes (rise-fall showing surprise or disappointment)

The diagram below can be used to exemplify the above-mentioned points:

<b>Contour</b>	<b>Meaning/Function(s)</b>
Fall	finality; authority/certainty
Rise	unfinished; insinuating, tentative
Level	unfinished; unresponsive
fall-rise	reservation (→ "but"), contrast, calling
rise-fall	insistence/surprise, irony

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We can infer from the above that the falling tune depicts a note of certainty while the rising tune depicts uncertainty. The implication of the above is that intonation has a crucial impact on meaning. Little wonder the English language is regarded as an intonation language since the voice pitch can syntactically and semantically convey meanings of surprise, gratitude, statement etc. Pike (1972: 56) comments on the communicative importance of intonation in the following words: If one says something insulting, but smiles in face and voice, the utterance may be a great compliment; but if one says something very complimentary, but with an intonation of contempt, the result is an insult.

Another important feature of intonation is the relative prominence assigned to words. This prominence is referred to as stress. Stress is the prominence with which a word/syllable is pronounced. When a word/syllable is pronounced with greater muscular energy, such a word/syllable is said to be stressed. Generally speaking, the English language is a stress-timed language. Consequently, stress has meaning in English. Intonation and stress are supra-segmental features which are in 'complementary distribution'. They, therefore go hand in hand.

### **Syntactic Features of Punctuation**

As stated earlier, punctuation marks are standard set of marks that are

used in written and printed texts to clarify meaning and to separate sentences, words and parts of words. These marks have got some distinctive features and their roles are quite similar to the roles assigned to intonation. In the English language, the features of stress, pausing and tonal changes interlock in a set of patterns commonly called intonations and these are represented in writing by punctuation. Punctuation marks therefore, are symbols that indicate the structure and organization of written language.

Punctuation has got many distinctive symbols among which are: comma (,) which is used to separate clauses, phrases, or items in a series. The colon (:) that often introduces an explanation, the period (.) which marks the end of a sentence or an abbreviation, the question mark (?) which signals a question and a host of other symbols. It must be stated that certain aspects of punctuation are stylistic in nature and as such depends on the author's choice. This is likened to English literature where a poet has got some poetic licence which permits him to choose words as he likes. The poet can equally choose to deviate from the normal conventions of writing and this may involve his use of punctuation marks. The conventional forms of using punctuation rules can therefore be different from those used in online and text messages.

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### **Relationship cum Roles of Intonation and Punctuation**

Despite the fact that the prosodic feature 'intonation' is used in spoken language while punctuation is applied in written language, they perform similar roles in speech (whether spoken or written speech). We must point out that the conventions we apply when writing a text are simply codified attempts to reflect intonation (including stress) in spoken language. One of the functional roles of the features of intonation and punctuation is disambiguation. In written and spoken language, punctuation and intonation are indispensable tools used to disambiguate the meaning of sentences. When a word, phrase, clause or sentence has two or more possible meanings, it is said to be ambiguous. Intonation and punctuation have a great role to play in disambiguation. Punctuation has been found to play a role in potential intonational boundaries (whether major or minor). Some of the symbols that have the highest potential for producing major intonational boundaries are full stop, question mark, colon etc. They are usually such signs that signal the terminal point of sentences. In the same vein, intonation patterns equally play the same role through long pauses, pitch resets and emphasis laying.

On the other hand, there are some signs that signal minor intonational patterns. Symbols like comma, parentheses, hyphens, and quotation marks are in this category. For instance, the comma can be used to list out items.

Intonation equally performs the same role of being used in listing out items. However, in intonation, the last item listed is usually said with a falling tune to indicate finality.

Again, intonation performs the role of attitudinal marking. Intonation usually goes with attitude. This functional aspect of intonation is somehow difficult to achieve in written text because we have few orthographical means of expressing attitude. However, the writer's attitude towards something can be expressed through the use of quotation marks. While the rising or the falling tune can be used to show our attitude towards the interlocutor or message in written speech, we can depict our attitude through the use of quotes. One can deduce from the above that attitude is not conveyed by pitch alone, there is much more to context than just pitch.

As pointed out earlier, the English language is a stress-timed language. Consequently, intonation has been found to perform accentuation roles. In like manner, the conventions we apply when writing a text (punctuation) equally reflect stress and intonation in spoken language. This is indeed another functional relationship which exists between intonation and punctuation. During accentuation, strokes or capital letters are used to signal this in writing, or the writer may decide to use italics to depict accentuation. Similarly, in spoken English, content words (not grammatical words) are stressed. The reason is that content words have meanings embedded

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in them, while grammatical words according to Oluikpe are like zippers which are important, but are best kept out of sight. A stressed item is that which has the greatest amount of pitch movement on it. Therefore, one function of intonation and punctuation is seen through accentuation/stress.

Aside punctuation, one other vital function of intonation is turn-taking. The two tunes used in intonation are used as a signal for when to speak and when not to speak. Consider the question:

Is the wine sweet?

With the use of tune in the sentence above, the addressee is aware that an answer is needed and that the speaker has concluded his question. It then becomes his turn to speak. Note that when a high pitch is retained in the course of a conversation, the speaker continues in his statement but a fall in the voice pitch, signifies that the sentence has been completed.

### **Conclusion**

Intonation and punctuation are very closely intertwined as a result of the similar roles they play in spoken and written English respectively. In English speech, rhythmic variations of voice which occur at fairly equal intervals invest our speech with a melodious contour. Similarly, a well punctuated text is a manifestation that the writer has taken cognizance of the indispensable signs that are affixed to written speech thereby making the reader to savour delightedly the contents of the message. Therefore,

this paper has examined the relationship between intonation and punctuation. Their syntactic features and functional roles have equally been x-rayed. The *raison d'être* is to re-awaken our linguistic consciousness in the area of intonation and punctuation so as to provide the learners and users of English with the desired skills needed to achieve accuracy and proficiency in oral and written English.

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