

ON INTONATION AND DIALECTOLOGY

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Introduction

The publication, in 1972, of William Labov's *Sociolinguistic Patterns*, marked a revolutionary moment in linguistics¹ Labov's creation of a *socio-linguistics* of phonology dramatically changed dialectology by inserting "politics" into the study of languages and their speakers Labov showed that dialectal form acquired meaning from the politics of identities and social relations in a given society, and that speakers were the creators of such meanings Thus centralized diphthongs on Martha's Vineyard indexed the politics of island/mainland (center/periphery) identities in Massachusetts (Labov 1963), and Black English Vernacular indexed exclusion and resistance among African-Americans (Labov 1972b)

This change held two important consequences for dialectology On the one hand, Labov introduced *causes* of historical sound change (and regional dialect difference) On the other hand, Labov shifted the locus of dialectological research from the conservative rural hinterlands to the dynamic urban cityscapes with their innovation, change, and cross-cultural contacts The stock-in-trade for traditional dialectology, the regional dialect, was shown to be an outgrowth of general social and linguistic processes occurring in the laboratory of the nation's large cities (cf. Trudgill 1972)

Labov's revolution depended in no small measure on the emergence of the tape recorder as a tool in linguistic research The quantitative approach to phonology, and Labov's focus on language as it is actually used, both depended upon the linguist's ability to record naturally occurring speech and to analyze minute details of its spectral qualities Interestingly, linguistics now stands at a very similar juncture, produced by a similar technological innovation The new generation of computers, digital storage media, and pitch-tracking algorithms hold the potential to enable linguists to study intonation now much as phonology has been studied before Yet just as Labov's revolution was based not just on the quantitative analysis of variation, but also on its link to a politics, so too with the blossoming study of intonation Revolutionary change will depend on linguists' ability to link the new descriptive material to a significant social theoretic foundation I will argue here that the often noted, but rarely theorized relationship between intonation and emotion provides just such a link The nexus of intonation, emotion, and identity is a privileged locus for the intersection of language and society, and its study can shed light on the exertion and resistance of social power

¹ I should note that Labov's *Language in the Inner City* also came out in 1972, and that it had a similar (and complementary) impact on the study of language and social life Seminal parts of Labov's work were published before 1972 (the Martha's Vineyard study came out in 1963, and the New York City study was finished in 1966), but his ideas first gained wide currency with the 1972 publication of his two great essay collections

Intonation in Public Discourse

Intonation provides a salient linguistic marker of identity, and three recent films prove it. The three films -- *Sliding Doors*, *Fargo*, and *Smoke Signals* -- share plots that focus on issues of identity and characters who use prosodically marked accents to construct social difference.

The film *Sliding Doors* takes place in England and follows two divergent scenarios in the central female character's life. The two scenarios diverge at the point where she either makes or misses a subway train, and this minor difference explodes with dramatic consequences for her life and identity. In the scenario in which she makes the train, she arrives home in time to catch her boyfriend deceiving her with another woman. This insight leads her to get out of the relationship and launch a new and more fulfilling life. In the alternate scenario, the heroine misses her train, thus arriving home after the boyfriend has every trace of his liaison, and she thus remains mired in a dead-end relationship.

As a symbol of her personal liberation in the first scenario, the heroine meets a new man, named James. James is a speaker of a Scots dialect (possibly Glaswegian), which is marked primarily by intonation -- specifically, the high rising terminal pitch-contours on declarative utterances typical of urban north British dialects (cf. Cruttenden 1994).

Fargo is an American film about small town people and small town values caught up in a horrific whirlwind of evil. The hero of the story is a simple, folksy, friendly woman who overcomes the evil of numerous wanton murders through wit, will, and moxie. Her portrayal as the repository of all that is good in America is almost superfluously expressed in her battling this evil while being extremely pregnant. Her speech instantiates a striking Northern Plains Scandinavian-tinged accent that delights in its nostalgic lilt.

Finally, *Smoke Signals* tells the story of a young man, Victor, who journeys across the country to see to the remains of his recently deceased, but long-estranged father. The film unfolds as a classic American road picture, as the literal journey is paralleled symbolically by a psychic journey (Ebert 1998), in which the father's legacy symbolizes the legacy of Native American heritage in general.

A second character, Thomas, plays foil to Victor. Victor is tall, handsome, and athletic, for example, while Thomas is short, ungainly, and bookish. Victor is quiet, almost brooding, while Thomas is chatty, a master storyteller. Fate ties these two opposites together, though, and when Victor hears of his father's death, Thomas must go along on the journey.

Speech plays a central symbolic role in *Smoke Signals*. The opposition between traditional Indian and mainstream Anglo identities, so central to the encounter between Thomas and Victor, is constructed in part through language use. In particular, Thomas represents the nostalgic identity of the Indian storyteller, and this symbolic role is inscribed onto his language through a distinctive intonational style (Lefkowitz 2000).

Intonation, Emotion, and Social Life

While the semiotics of language style in narrative cinema is very complex (Shohat 1991), it is noteworthy that intonation figures prominently as a symbol of social difference, of alterity, in these popular films. This observation leads to two intriguing paradoxes.

- Intonation is central to the differentiation of dialects, and especially the subaltern social dialects of marginalized social groups, yet intonation is rarely studied in dialectology, and
- Emotion is central to the construction of cultural boundaries, and especially those boundaries that separate dominant from subaltern groups, yet emotion is rarely the focus of studies of identity politics

Many students of the speech ways of subaltern groups in the US have remarked on the role played by intonation. William Leap, writing on American Indian English, notes that “suprasegmental features of Indian English contribute substantially to contrasts with standard English” (Leap 1993: 50). In a similar vein, Joyce Penfield writes of Chicano English that “intonation is a clear marker of ethnic identity for Chicanos – it is perhaps the last vestige of Chicano identity as far as English speaking is concerned” (Penfield 1984: 49). Robin Lakoff (1975), Susan McConnell-Ginet (1978), Cynthia McLemore (1991), and Rudi Gaudio (1994) are some of the linguists who have written on intonation in gendered varieties of English.

Yet despite the clear importance of intonation, so little research has been done that Alan Cruttenden begins the “Comparative Intonation” chapter of his 1997 textbook by lamenting “Regrettably – in many of the areas covered, our knowledge of basic descriptive facts is either minimal or disputed” (Cruttenden 1997: 128)²

To be sure, this situation is being corrected, as there is now a great deal of attention being paid to the intonation of social and regional dialects. Researchers have looked at the intonation of African American Vernacular English (Tarone 1976, Queen 1992, Jun and Foreman 1996), bilingual children of Turkish Gastarbeiter in Germany (Queen 1996), and non-standard dialects of Hebrew in Israel (Lefkowitz 1995).

While a comprehensive survey of this work has yet to be published, and would be a great addition to our literature, my main goal here is to discuss underlying reasons for this neglect. I see five main reasons:

First, linguists have neglected intonation, as para-language, because it is epi-phenomenal to language proper. Second, intonational phenomena are widely assumed to be “universal.” Indeed, the cross-language similarities do seem to overwhelm the differences. As such, interest in describing particular systems has been minimal. Third, no orthography systematically encodes intonational phenomena, and the ideological commitment to writing has effected even linguists – otherwise so sensitive to prescriptivism. Fourth, intonation has been difficult to study as a component of dialect because contours – as opposed to allophones – are meaningful. And, finally, intonation has been marginalized because of its connection to the complex field of emotion – to which I turn now.

The role of emotion in cultural description parallels what has been said about intonation in linguistic description. Genders are described with different regimes of emotion – women as repositories of, and subject to affect, and men as controllers thereof. Yet so strong was the naturalization of this cultural difference that it failed to gain significant theoretical interest – until recently.

² Indeed, examination of an even more recent text devoted to comparative intonation, Hirst and Di Cristo 1998, which specifically set out to document cross-dialectal as well cross-linguistic patterns, reveals the very same dearth of information and research.

Differences in orientation toward emotion characterized dominant constructions of class- and race-based identities in both fiction and film. Working class men, for example, are often characterized as being subject to intense emotions, as Eugene O'Neill does in his play *Streetcar Named Desire*. Racial others, such as African-Americans and Native Americans, are often stereotypically represented in film as rhythmic and stoic, respectively.

Yet while awareness of these associations was high, their theorization lagged behind. Indeed, the recent explosion of interest in the anthropology of affect merely serves to highlight the earlier neglect. The reasons for the neglect of affect in sociocultural studies of identity parallel those given above for intonation. First, emotion – because subjectively and individually experienced – is constructed as epiphenomenal to social processes proper. Moreover, as a primarily female domain it suffered the same neglect in early anthropological writing as did household production and child rearing.³

Second, affect is assumed to be universal because it is biological. As such, it lies beyond the domain of culture. The scientific study of emotion has been left primarily to the fields of psychology and biology, which paid little attention to the relation of affect to social and political power. Third, emotional experience is not encoded directly in Western languages, but, as George Lakoff has shown for English, expressed indirectly through metaphor (Lakoff 1987). Finally, emotions have been powerfully medicalized, and the development of specialized emotional meta-discourses, through therapy, further removed them from the social and cultural analysis.

Recent work, however, has revolutionized our view of emotion and its relation to society. Historians have shown how certain emotions – like melancholy, or depression – have emerged or faded at particular socio-historical junctures within a particular cultural tradition (e.g. Harre and Finlay-Jones 1986). Historicizing emotion has given renewed authority to ethnographic accounts that relativize emotions by showing how cultures differ in the labels and effects they attribute to particular feelings (e.g. Briggs 1970, Lutz 1988). These trends have culminated in recent work locating emotion in discursive and conversational performance (cf. Lutz & Abu-Lughod 1990).

Intonation -- Tame and Wild

The integrated study of intonation, emotion, and (social) dialects is crucial for such a project. Dwight Bolinger, for example, argues that intonation is, at essence, an iconic expression of emotion, and he argues strongly that linguists should pay closer attention to the iconic and emotional nature of intonation. As he puts it, “intonation is a half-tamed savage. To understand the tamed or linguistically harnessed half of him one has to make friends with the wild half” (Bolinger 1978: 475).

Bolinger is playfully alluding to the fact that intonation is both a structural feature of language and a para-linguistic aspect of human communicative practice more broadly. Intonation is ‘tame’ when it is categorical, and ‘wild’ when it is gradient. Intonation is ‘tame’ when bi-uniquely related to a linguistic phenomenon, and ‘wild’ when related to emotional phenomena, such as speaker stance, or “footing” (cf. Goffman 1983).

In English, for example, a word in a sentence either bears an accent or it does not – this is ‘tame’. But the absolute pitch realized on an accented word is gradient, depending, for example, upon the degree of the speaker’s anger or excitement – this is ‘wild’.

³ It is interesting to note that it was Hilda Geertz, the wife of a famous anthropologist (Clifford Geertz) who first wrote about emotion systematically (Geertz 1959).

Bolinger acknowledges that intonation has been conventionalized into arbitrary uses, but he emphasizes research that challenges our assumptions along these lines. Bolinger reports, for example, on research that has shown that young children can produce adult accentuation patterns in focus sentences, such as (1), below,

- (1) The nurse brought a **clean** towel and took away the **dirty** one

at an age when they fail to recognize the same distinctions made by others (Cutler and Swinney, cited in Bolinger 1986:196). This finding goes against expectations. In phonology, for example, children may perceive adult phonological distinctions before they can produce them themselves. Thus a child who fails to distinguish the phonemes /s/ and /sh/ in his/her own speech, may reject a parent's teasing mispronunciations of words like "fish"⁴

Bolinger also points to research on the production of intonation by patients with laterally specific brain-damage as evidence of the tight relationship between intonation and emotion. In one study, for example, right-brain damaged patients were asked to do a reading task involving vocal expression of 'statement,' 'question,' 'happiness,' and 'sadness.' The experimenters anticipated a difference between the "grammatical" task of distinguishing statements from questions and the "emotional" task of distinguishing happy from sad. In fact, however, right-brain damage patients showed no difference on these tasks, producing flat intonation in all cases (Shapiro and Danly 1985, cited in Bolinger 1989).

Bolinger notes that both sets of finding can be explained if one assumes that intonation is primarily about affect, and only secondarily harnessed to conventionalized uses (Bolinger 1989:2). Bolinger thus sees the essence of intonation as its wildness: "We constantly poach the forest of wild meanings in order to improve the strain of domestic ones" (Bolinger 1989:2-3).

The Wild Side

So, let me turn to wild intonation for a moment. A teenager who is watching TV instead of doing homework one night might hear a parent ask (with steadily rising intonation)

- (2) **Have you finished your homework yet?**

This teenager subsequently chatting on the phone with a commiserating friend might report the parent's question by repeating (with whiny falling intonation)

- (3) **Have you finished your homework yet?**

⁴ This example is taken from Gene Searchinger's video, *The Human Language Series*

At first take this example shows how emotion is expressed by intonation. In transforming the parent's utterance from a rising question tune to a whiny falling tune, the teenager added various emotional meanings having to do with the speaker's footing with respect to a complex range of sites of enunciation.

At a second take, however, this example demonstrates a conventionalized use of intonation to mark reported speech. Use of a whiny falling intonation to express not the speaker's own emotions at the moment of speaking, but rather someone else's (putative) emotions at their moment of utterance, the teenager is drawing on a conventionalized understanding. Here the semiotic function is indexical, not iconic.

A third take, however, focuses on the specifics of the emotion expressed. In this example it is difficult, if not impossible, to define the emotion expressed, much less correlate this emotion with particular elements of the intonational signal. The intonation simultaneously represents the parent's impatience, the teenager's annoyance, his/her consequent shame (for s/he is, after all, choosing to tell this story to the friend), some tongue-in-cheek humor (it falls, of course, under the familiar category of nagging parent tale), etc. The contour overflows with meaning – it is hyper-meaningful — but it is meaningful in a way that is very different from the semantics and syntax model of generative grammar. Any 'emotion morphemes' would have to be both non-determinate and highly context dependent (cf McLemore 1991). The project of isolating bi-unique relationships between intonational elements and emotional meanings is bound to fail, for it misses the essence of both intonational function and emotional source. On the other hand, if we associate intonation with a highly abstract affectivity, we do justice to the "wildness" both of intonation and emotion.

Intonation, Emotion, and Identity: An Example

To give an example of this abstract affectivity, let me take up "identity," the third element in my nexus. In a brief article about the construction of identity in Grenada, George Mentore puts his finger to the pulse of the issue in a refreshingly concise way (Mentore 1993).

Mentore argues that literacy -- and not race -- determines social position in post-colonial Grenada, a small Caribbean island. Literacy and school-based knowledge generate power and position in very concrete and material ways, but, drawing on Shirley Heath's notion of 'literacy events' (Heath 1983), Mentore argues that elite identities are produced and reinforced in culturally elaborated performances of literacy in everyday speech.

The primary dimension of Grenadan identity is a distinction between what Mentore calls *Townee* (elite) and *Country Bookie* (subaltern). Literacy is inscribed in the speech of the *Townees* through the use of "low moderate tones [that] connote a reduction of expressive emotion" (Mentore 1993: 276). The symbolic/cultural power of this speech style stems from its evocation of textual authority. The absence of emotion on the written page is correlated to an absence of pitch contrasts in speech. In contrast, *Country Bookie* ideals of speech emphasize emotionality as guarantors of sincerity, and thereby legitimacy and authority. These subaltern ideals are instantiated most effectively through an "emotionally expressive orality" (Mentore 1993: 277).

My own work in Israel shows a remarkably similar dynamic involving elite and working-class varieties of Hebrew (Lefkowitz 1995). Indeed, I have argued that many subaltern dialects can be described in these terms (Lefkowitz 1996). Why, then, are intonational dialects – linked to emotion –

such good markers of these subaltern and emergent identities? In what follows I will outline three components to a provisional answer

A) Intonation, Emotion, and the Semiotic Rupture

Intonation is central to the social message of subaltern dialects in part because it introduces into speech an unavoidable rupture. Intonation functions in everyday speech, the way that poetic language functions in literature. In her book, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Julia Kristeva sets out a theory of the speaking subject which links Lacanian psychoanalytic theory with Bakhtinian linguistic theory. As with other psychoanalytic theories that social theorists find useful, Kristeva's account of child development can be taken as a metaphorical explanation for the structure and working of society.

Kristeva's account revolves around a split between what she calls the "semiotic" and the "symbolic," that occurs at the so-called "mirror stage" of development. The mirror stage is that abstract point at which an infant recognizes his own image in a mirror⁵. This recognition sets in motion a complex and fateful trajectory. Recognition of alterity implies a construction of Self, of subjecthood, and the bounding off of Self implies a separation from the mother. It is this division that both enables human communication and alienates the Self, but the lure of communication is very powerful. The mirror image generates a new form of pleasure, since the infant quickly learns that he can manipulate the object: by moving its own arm, the baby can cause its object to move an arm.

The semiotic, then, is Kristeva's term for inchoate meanings and feelings that the infant experiences before the mirror stage. The symbolic, in contrast, refers to language, the set of rules and restrictions that both enable human communication and channel that communication along arbitrary lines that ultimately construct and reinforce social power. Adapting Saussurian notions of signification, Kristeva argues that the Symbolic works according to structuralist principles of the arbitrary-but-motivated correspondence between signifier and signified. "Car" means what it means because it is not 'truck,' 'bike,' 'bus,' etc. The subject is thus constituted in language just as the speaker is constituted in society: speakers enjoy sociality, but to do so they must allow a positioning within a hierarchy of power.

The Semiotic, however, does not disappear. Rather, it makes its presence known irregularly, through ruptures in the smooth functioning of the Symbolic. The semiotic returns most prominently in spoken intonation and in forms of artistic expression. Kristeva describes the semiotic as "analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm", a "phonetic, lexical, and syntactic disturbance", "vocalic and intonational differentiation" (Kristeva 1986).

One interpretation of Kristeva's *rupture* in poetic language comes close to Roman Jakobson's work on the aesthetic function in language. What is poetic about poetry is that the language calls attention to itself through parallelisms of repetition, of symmetry, of metaphor, etc. Jakobson takes a stunningly simple and powerful example from Edgar Allan Poe's poem, *The Raven*. The poem is famous for the haunting repetition of the verse "Quoth the Raven, Nevermore." Jakobson points out that the poetic rupture, the disruption of semanticity is cleverly produced by a symmetry of consonantal sounds, such that the r v n of "raven" and the n v r of "never" reflect each other, thereby projecting onto time (as the utterance unfolds) a second 'repetition' (Jakobson 1960).

⁵ Note that we can assume that something like this moment does in fact exist, since it is widely observed that children begin to show an interest in, and to play with mirrors at a particular point of their development, while chimpanzees, for example generally do not.

The disturbance of symbolic language involves the intrusion of the poetic meaning – everything that might be considered the broader meaning of Poe’s poem – into the lexical and grammatical meaning of the words and sentences. The vehicle for the intrusion, Jacobson argues, is the rhythm, the melody, the assonance, the disturbing of rule-governed syntax. A poem can be said to **denote** something simple while **meaning** something complex. We can talk (and write) about a poem’s meaning, but in some important sense a good poem means something transcendentally – which Kristeva would call semiotic.

Adapting Dwight Bolinger’s clever turn of phrase, which I cited earlier, we might suggest that ‘the semiotic is mined in improving the symbolic.’

B) Intonation, Emotion, and Structures of Feeling

My second component of a provisional answer to the question posed takes up the notion of change. Intonation is central to the social message of subaltern dialects because it introduces into speech an unavoidable *presence*.

In his book, *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams argues for an analysis of culture by way of its articulations of *presence*. Cultural descriptions, he says, too often rely on a *past tense*, describing cultural phenomena through beliefs, institutions, practices that have precipitated out into already-existing entities. “The strongest barrier to the recognition of human cultural activity is its immediate and regular conversion of experience into finished products” (Williams 1977 128).

Here Williams distinguishes between official and practical consciousness. Identity is the site of contestation between official and subaltern representations. As such it is a provisional and emergent quality that draws on prior precipitations, but that also inflects, or deflects, them into new articulations. Williams writes “the actual alternative to the received and produced fixed forms is not silence – not the absence, the unconscious, which bourgeois culture has mythicized. It is a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange” (Williams 1977 131). Social consciousness coalesces around such emergent *structures of feeling*, to emphasize the lived experience. This is a social experience that is still in process, not yet recognized as social and therefore taken to be private and idiosyncratic. Emotion and intonation are both central to the perception and articulation of *presence* in everyday practice.

C) Intonation, Emotion, and “Junk” Languages

Finally, intonation is central to the social message of subaltern dialects because the message it bears constitutes a deniable utterance. Subaltern messages are, after all, messages to and about power.

In a recent article entitled “Junk Spanish, Covert Racism, and the (Leaky) Boundary between Public and Private Spheres,” Jane Hill argues that Spanish words and phrases often appear in American media in a way that covertly encodes racism (Hill 1995). Hill defines *Junk Spanish* as “a set of strategies for the incorporation of Spanish loan words into English in order to produce a jocular or pejorative key” (Hill 1995 205). Typical of Hill’s numerous examples is *adios*, the normal Spanish word for “goodbye”,

which is inserted into English contexts implying a negative and pejorative connotation, akin to the slang English phrase, “kiss off”⁶

Hill’s main point, however, is that *Junk Spanish* covertly encodes anti-Black racist sentiments. *Junk Spanish* proliferated in public discourse at precisely the time when the linguistic nationalism that fueled the *Ebomcs* crisis became popular (Hill 1995: 209). Hill writes, “to produce obvious parodies of African American speech of the type that are apparent in *Junk Spanish* is simply too dangerous” (Hill 1995: 210). *Junk Spanish* is thus a complex effect of power.

Ironically, the very same power that deflects racist discourse from African American Vernacular English onto *Junk Spanish* constrains the kinds of dialect differences that can be represented in American public discourse. These constraints favor (representation of) dialects that are intonational, rather than phonological or syntactic. Western ideologies of language attribute core value to syntax, and marginalize intonation as para-linguistic, and thus ‘off-the-record’. It is for this reason, I would argue, that dialects of subaltern groups (in Granada, in Native America, and elsewhere) have found it useful to differentiate in terms of intonation.

Returning to the films I discussed at the beginning of this paper, it is interesting to note that the hit film, *Fargo*, came out in 1996, the year of the great *Ebomcs* crisis. *Fargo* was popular in part because of the folksiness of the white ethnic American family values epitomized and personified by the pregnant woman police officer. This down-home, apple-pie character is constructed in part through an accent that is distinctive in its intonational lift. At precisely the time when America was hysterically castigating a California school district for using Black English, America was captivated by the sounds of a non-standard white dialect.

Conclusion

It is the argument of this paper that intonation and emotion are crucial elements in the construction of resistant discourses characteristic of subaltern dialects. Therefore, the study of the nexus of emotion, intonation, and identity is of primary interest for an understanding of the social uses of language and the linguistic exertions of power.

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⁶ What Hill observes of Spanish in America is, I would argue, a common phenomenon. Arabic, for example, is used in elite Jewish Israeli slang Hebrew in much the same way.

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