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NP Intonation Units and Referent Identification*

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0. This paper deals with the discourse function of a particular type of intonation unit (IU) in conversational English, which I call NP intonation units. The notion of Intonation Unit refers to any piece of speech produced under a coherent intonation contour, typically though not always separated by pauses (Chafe 1987, Du Bois et al. 1992). What I mean by NP intonation units then is intonation units which consist of a nominal without a verbal predicate. The arrowed intonation units in (1) are examples of NP intonation units.^{1,2}

- (1) a G: 'How many 'people ^say that man.
 -> b ... ^Adam,
 c ... 'Adam is ^one of them,
 -> d ... (1.0) (H) ^Larry,
 -> e D: ... but ^Mike,
 -> f G: ... ^Mike,
 g ... (.9) (H) ^I don't 'know,
 -> h A- 'Alan ^McGovern,
 i D: ... M= - --
 j 'yea=h, (CARSALES)

1. From a structural point of view, NP intonation units are fragmentary, since they tend to be set off by pauses and appear in a separate IU; in many cases they are not integrated into any clause structure. They constitute a noticeably 'unusual' kind of intonation unit in spoken English, where clausal IUs are seen to be typical in this language (Chafe 1987, 1991).

In this paper I hope to show that NP intonation units in English conversations have an important discourse function: they can be used by both speakers and respondents to identify referents. And the way they are used is constrained by both cognitive and interactional motivations.

2. The NP intonation unit phenomenon can be partially associated with what has been called the Left Dislocation construction, as illustrated by (1)f-g. However, as a number of scholars have demonstrated, Left Dislocation cannot be understood in terms of syntactic processes; it has important interactional ramifications (e.g., Keenan and Schieffelin 1976, Geluykens 1988, and elsewhere). I agree with these discourse researchers, but in this study I will not limit my scope of discussion to the format of 'Referent + Proposition', nor will I limit it only to

those 'Propositions' that contain an element coreferring to the initial Referent (Geluykens 1988). Instead, I take, as an operating principle, the NP intonation unit as the only criterion without considering what follows the NP. This criterion enables me to include some new phenomena that have been neglected in prior studies. Thus in my study the 'Referent + Proposition' construction is only a part of a whole range of phenomena to be dealt with.

In a highly influential study on referent establishment in discourse, Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs (1986) argue that referent establishment is a collaborative activity of discourse participants. In my study I take their proposal as a starting point.

In the past several decades, many researchers have come to realize that a number of factors outside the language system, such as human cognition and social interaction, are crucial in understanding the working principles of human language. What is less clear, however, is how these factors interact with each other. In this paper I will take the NP intonation unit phenomenon as a case study to demonstrate how these factors interact to shape the way a particular type of intonation unit is used in conversational English.

3. Since, as Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs rightly pointed out, referent identification is a process which involves both speakers and addressees (or, in my terminology, respondents), crucial to my approach is looking at the issue from both the speaker's perspective and the respondent's.

The distinction I am making between the speaker and the respondent here is locally determined. That is, I take it that within a given time period, the person who is understood as holding the floor will be labelled 'speaker'; others will be designated 'respondent'.

Let's begin our discussion with the speaker. Speakers' contribution to referent identification by using NP intonation units is principally to introduce referents into the conversation (Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs 1986, Geluykens 1988). In so doing, however, they are not merely bringing a referent to the conversation. There are cognitive processing considerations and social interactional considerations associated with it. And these motivations manifest themselves in discrete prosodic and structural features of the NP intonation unit. This leads me to divide speaker NP intonation units into three types.

1) In the first type, the NP intonation unit consists of a simple noun with a continuing intonation contour, indicated by a comma. (2)b is an example of this type.

- (2) a A: There was one girl,
 -> b Jane ^Baker,³
 c I don't know if you knew [her].
 d B: [Oh ^yeah].
 e I remember [Jane].
 f A: [Okay].
 g .. She was ^behind 'Val. (AFRIKA)

The NP referent introduced in this type can be characterized as new and salient. It is new because it has not been talked about in the prior context. Notice that although the speaker has just mentioned 'a girl at work' in (2)a, it is an indefinite noun, thus is not to be taken the same as a person name; therefore the referent of 'Jane Baker' is still new. It is salient, because it is a human referent that the speaker wants to say something about, and wants the respondent to focus on. In addition, when the speaker introduces an NP referent of this kind into conversation, s/he does not know for sure whether the respondent can identify it or not.

For these reasons, the respondent needs to identify the referent before the conversation continues. Speaker's pauses, which set off the NP referent, address this need: they provide time for the respondent to process the referent.

In terms of interaction, on the other hand, the speaker's holding-off of the on-going talk provides an opportunity to negotiate with the respondent as well. Two issues can be involved in the negotiation. One is whether the intended referent is identifiable to the respondent, the issue of what I call referent identifiability; the other is whether the respondent accepts the referent as a potential topic for further discussion, the issue of what I call referent topicality. It could be said that both issues are important for interaction: participants need to negotiate both. But in reality, as Grice's collaboration principle predicts, conversation participants are maximally cooperative (Grice 1975), and the issue of referent topicality is often reduced to secondary importance. Thus speakers tend to be concerned primarily with the identifiability, rather than the topicality, of the referent. This is demonstrated by the fact that further exchanges between conversation participants after the referent has been introduced are often centered around whether the respondent knows the NP referent or not, as is the case in (2), intonation units (c) through (f).

2) The second type of speaker NP intonation unit consists of a simple noun with a yes-no question

intonation contour, which is called 'try-marker' in Sacks and Schegloff (1979)⁴. This is illustrated by (3)b and c. In both cases the intonation units end with a question intonation, indicated by a question mark.

- (3) a R: I was talking to ...(.7) a 'gal at ^work,
-> b ...'Lisa .. ^Green?
-> c ...(.9) 'Lisa ^Smith 'Green?
d ... (1.3) who's going to have a ^baby.
e ... (1.3) % [Sh-] --
f L: [Does she have] 'many ^already?
g R: ... ^M- m. (LUNCH)

(4)e is another example.

- (4) a B: .. There is a ^guy that comes ^out.
b .. a 'guy that 'works ... (.8) with ^her.
c ... (1.4) [that] she 'works ^for at --
d A: [Hm],
-> e B: ... uh ... ^Sports Shack?
f A: ... (.8) ^O=h. (FARMTALK)

The referents introduced in this case are also new, but not necessarily salient ((4)e)). Note that NP referents of this kind are assumed by the speaker as very likely to be identifiable by the respondent. This is their major difference from NP referents of the first type.

When speakers introduce such referents, they also provide time for the respondent to process them. However, in this case they also invite the respondent to acknowledge the proposed referent, by the use of the rising question intonation contour.

Thus for this kind of NP referent the speaker condenses the 'introduction' and the 'invitation' in a single intonation unit, whereas in the first type of NP intonation unit, the 'invitation' work is done separately, by other forms, e.g, by a syntactic embedded question form, as 'I don't know if you knew her' in (2)c.

In connection with the positive assumption about the identifiability of the referent to the respondent, the speaker in this situation typically keeps adding further information to enable the respondent to identify it. For example in (3)d, (and presumably (3)e too,) after introducing 'Lisa Smith Green', speaker R mentions 'who is going to have a baby' to help her respondent identify Lisa Green. Notice that the fact that this woman is going to have a baby is not really what speaker R wants to tell L about; this is just a piece of helping information. In contrast, in the first case speakers do not have such an assumption, therefore they do not use the strategy of

simply supplying helping information to facilitate the respondent's referent-identification; all they can do is to ask first whether the respondent can identify the NP referent or not.

3) The third type of NP intonation units used by speakers is a head noun modified by a relative clause construction in the same intonation unit. Consider (5)c and (6)f.

- (5) a B: ... (1.1) ^No,
 b .. 'We ^rented one.
 -> c .. 'The 'ones you ^rent,
 d .. boy ^they're 'high --
 e ... ^they're 'heavy ^duty, (FARMTALK)
- (6) a A: on my 'first 'time on 'Capitol ^Hill.
 b ... (.8) and just--
 c ... (.8) just ... was ^astounded,
 d .. at how ^pleasant things 'were,
 e and 'as I was 'out for a ^stroll,
 -> f ... a 'man 'watering his .. ^lawn.
 g .. ^turned to 'me,
 h .. as I was 'walking ^past,
 i .. and said,
 j ... (.9) <Q 'Good ^evening Q>, (DINNER)

In these cases, the speaker introduces a very different kind of NP referent from those we saw in the first two types. The difference lies in that the referents introduced here are cognitively less demanding, whereas those in the first two types require more effort on the part of the respondent.

By 'cognitively less demanding' I mean essentially two things. (1) The referent of the noun is not treated by the speaker as salient in the discourse, therefore interlocutors do not need to pay much attention to precisely identify the referent. This is illustrated by (6), where the mentioning of the man who was watering his lawn is incidental, for the speaker could well have talked about something else to illustrate his point. (2) The information conveyed by the head noun has been mentioned in the prior context, thus requires less cognitive effort to process; the purpose in mentioning the same noun referent is to provide a contrastive or alternative referent to others in the context (Keenan and Schieffelin 1976).

Because the NP referent is cognitively less demanding, speakers do not expect to get the respondent's acknowledgement, as they do for the first two types of referents. No syntactic questions and no try-markers are used for this type of NP referents. What speakers do

instead is to specify the referent by supplying minimally needed information to help the respondent identify it.

Note that for referents of both type two and type three, speakers add some information to help the respondent identify them. However, since they differ in cognitive status, the way speakers add information to them and the kind of information added are quite different in the two situations. For type two NP referents, when speakers add information to them, they do it typically in a separate intonation unit (e.g. (2d)), whereas for this third type, they do it by putting the information (conveyed by the relative clause) in the same intonation unit as the head noun. And the nature of the information differs too. For example, the relative clause in (2)d, 'who is going to have a baby', is a characterization of the referent 'Lisa Smith Green'; whereas that in (6)f, 'watering his lawn', is not to characterize the referent 'a man'.

4. Summary. Speakers use NP intonation units to introduce referents into the conversation, with discrete prosodic and morphosyntactic forms, according to (1) the cognitive status of the NP referent in the discourse; (2) assumptions about the identifiability of the referent to the respondent; and (3) the amount of interactional work needed to negotiate with the respondent based on (1) and (2).

5. But referent identification cannot be considered complete without the collaboration of the respondent. In connection with the referent introduced by the speaker and associated cognitive and interactional implications, respondents must make appropriate responses to participate. One way of doing this is to use the NP intonation unit form. Respondents' NP intonation units, as we will see next, have quite different functions from those of the speaker's for referent identification. Respondent's NP intonation units can also be classified into three types.

1). The respondent's NP intonation unit is a partial or full repetition of the speaker's. This typically occurs when the speaker has just used a try-marker, i.e., a question intonation. In (7), for example, speaker R uses two try-markers in the second and the third IUs, and respondent L then echoes the name at the arrow (in the next page) to acknowledge to speaker R that she has identified the referent.

- (7) R: I was talking to ...(.7) a 'gal at ^work,
 ...'Lisa .. ^Green?
 ...(.9) 'Lisa ^Smith 'Green?

- ... (1.3) who's going to have a ^baby.
 ... (1.3) % [Sh-] --
 L: [Does she have] 'many ^already?
 R: ... ^M- m.
 ... But 'she's ^my 'age,
 L: .. 'Yeah,
 I ^know,
 I ^remember 'Lisa.
 M: 'Her 'husband the one [that had th%-] --
 L: [I --
 -> ^Smith],
 I 'remember Smith, (LUNCH)

The respondent's echoing of the speaker's referent can be seen as a display of the respondent's processing of the referent introduced by the speaker. To the speaker it thus constitutes a signal that the respondent is taking up the invitation, is actively engaged in the process of referent identification, and is acknowledging it to the speaker. (For a discussion of the function of repetitions in conversational English, see Tannen 1987.)

2). The respondent's second type of NP intonation unit is characterized by a question intonation contour. Respondents use the question intonation to request verification of a referent proposed earlier by the speaker. (8)f gives an example of this.

- (8) a B: There is a ... 'Livermore ^radiation 'lab,
 ((Ten Intervening Intonation Units Omitted))
 b S: Wait,
 c is that uh% ... ^Lawrence?
 d .. or 'Liver--
 e 'No.
 -> f .. 'Lawrence ^Livermore? (DINNER)

S is requesting verification that 'Lawrence Livermore' is what B meant by 'Livermore' in (8)a.

Sometimes the respondent may just want to pick up a specific aspect of the referent for confirmation, as in (9)d.

- (9) a A: ... (1.1) (TSK) Then one ^afternoon,
 b .. (1.4) this ^van pulls 'in 'there,
 c B: .. [Yeah,
 -> d a white ^van]?
 e A: [Sally wasn't ^home].
 f .. ^Yeah. (FARMTALK)

The respondent's question intonation is obviously different from what we said about the 'try-marker': the try-marker is used in cases where the speaker has a

definite referent in mind and assumes that the respondent can also identify it, whereas in this respondent's case, the respondent is uncertain about the referent in question; this use of question intonation is to ask for verification or confirmation.

3). The respondent's third type of NP intonation unit is an addition of new referents, as illustrated in (10)d.

- (10) a D: .. A 'lot of 'places to 'go if I want to= ..
 ^socialize,
 b .. they have a 'lot of uh ...()^restaurants,
 c .. [u=h],
-> d G: [Clubs],
 e D: .. ^Nightclubs,
 f [uh],
 g G: ['yeah],
 h D: ^Hotels, (CARSALES)

Here the respondent also introduces a new referent 'club' into the conversation. The respondent's referent-introducing differs from the speaker's in that this is a responsive or participatory action. The new referent mentioned by the respondent adds an example of a set named by the speaker, in this case, it pertains to the idea of 'places I want to go for socializing' set up by the speaker. Essentially this shows involvement by proposing additional similar referents.

6. Summary of respondent's NP intonation units. Respondents use NP intonation units to display the processing of referent identification and to acknowledge referent identification to the speaker. They also use NP IUs to request verification or confirmation, and to show involvement by introducing further relevant referents.

7. It is clear that NP intonation units can be used by both speakers and respondents for referent identification. In both cases, they are focussing on a referent alone, and not on an event or state.

For both participant roles, these NP intonation units have a clear interactional function. At the same time, there are also cognitive motivations that are at work. In many cases the speaker's interactional concern to negotiate with the respondent is constrained by the cognitive status of the referent in discourse. On the other hand, the cognitive status of the referent can be influenced by the social relationship between the speaker and the respondent, for example, what they share with respect to a third party. Further, the cognitive status of the referent is dynamic and changes as the interaction proceeds: this is another way that interaction and

cognition influence each other.

8. Conclusions. My examination of NP intonation units in conversational English has shown that the apparently fragmentary intonation unit, the NP intonation unit, is in fact an important device which participants of both conversation roles, that is, speaker and respondent, manipulate to identify referents. Identifying referents with NP intonation units is seen to involve both interactional motivations and cognitive motivations. These two motivations influence each other, and jointly constrain the prosodic and morphosyntactic complexity of the NP intonation unit in conversational English.

Notes:

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1. The transcription conventions used in this paper follow Du Bois et al. 1992. Below are some of the key conventions.

- └: Continuing intonation contour
- ⌋: Final intonation contour
- ? : Question intonation contour
- ^: Primary stress
- ': Secondary stress
- 'Dots': Pauses
- ...(): Longer pauses
- []: Overlap
- : Truncation

2. The data used in this paper come from the Corpus of Spoken American English of the Linguistics Department at the University of California, Santa Barbara. I am grateful to all the contributors to the Corpus.

3. Some of the names in the transcripts used in this paper have been changed for anonymity.

4. The yes-no question contour here refers to one which 'is realized by a marked high rise in pitch at the end of the intonation unit' (Du Bois et al. 1992). Several people in the audience at the Annual Meeting pointed out to me that in contemporary American English rising question intonation is pervasively used, for example, with many different types of clauses, with interesting functional implications, especially among younger people. (See also Guy and Vonwiller 1984 and K. Allan 1984 for similar observations on Australian English, and S. Allan 1990 on New Zealand English.) While acknowledging this point, I will not discuss other cases of question intonation here, as my focus in this paper is the NP form which makes up an intonation unit. A more detailed study of rising question intonation in American English discourse may be found in McLemore (1991).

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