

Power to the Utterance

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Power to the Utterance
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I was looking for an apt quotation to begin this exercise, and found what I needed in a still unpublished article by Deborah Tannen on the poetics of talk. She says, 'conversational and literary discourse both seek not merely to convince audiences (a logical process) but to move them (an emotional one)'. I would go a step farther and claim that even the process of convincing is as much a product of coaxing, which uses signals of affect, as it is of logical organization. This simply means that in order to persuade, you have to sound persuasive.

The same question is put in the form of a puzzle by 't Hart and Gibbon (1984, 198). They say that 'one of the functions of the intonation pattern' is 'to help reduce the number of possible interpretations that can be given to what is said...'. But--they add--'it is hard to see how the speaker intentionally chooses his pattern precisely for this purpose'.

Let's turn this around and see how far we can get with the notion that beyond the intent to communicate, no intentional choices are involved. The intonation pattern is not imposed on what we say but develops from it, and our hearers grasp our meaning by interpreting how we feel about what we say. They read our intonation as they read our faces.

For many years, since long before The sound pattern of English, analysts have been looking for rule-governed mechanisms for predicting what will be accented and what will not. From time to time they've appealed to word class ('nouns rather than verbs'), propositional structure ('arguments before predicates before conditions'), position (the last content item), discourse (the 'new' item), and semantics (information focus). All these ideas contain a truth, and each of them will predict correctly the greater part of the time. But not all the time, which suggests that we may have been trying too hard to find a logical solution. The answer, or at least a key to the missing part, lies elsewhere.

I am speaking now of accent, commonly and confusingly referred to as stress, by which I mean prominence conferred by the intonation contour. If we say

TERRible WEA

(1) What

ther we're having!

we have a figure and ground gestalt in which two syllables stick out, the ter- of terrible and the wea- of weather. There is not much disagreement any more about the nature of the obtrusion. The disagreements are about what purposes it serves and how we can tell where it goes.

Accent, as I see the matter, has two functions, and we have been concentrating our attention on just one of them. My term for it is accent of interest. It's the one that involves notions of focus, information, and thematic relations, the one that must be accounted for in explaining how an utterance is understood. Put this way it hardly seems as if emotivity should enter the picture, and yet if we look at how children learn to control it, the picture changes. We know that by age 3 children are in command of a reasonably adult-like system of prosody. They put terminals in the right places and they put accents on the right words. You would think that they knew exactly what they were doing, and that they ought to be able to play the tape backwards and use those contrasts to help them figure out the meaning of what they hear. But for children before about five years of age this seems not to be the case. The response-time tests in experiments conducted by Cutler and Swinney (1986) showed no advantage when the items with which these younger children were tested were correctly accented. After age 5 the subjects rapidly approached the adult norm.

What was happening with these youngsters? The conventional wisdom is that comprehension precedes production, yet the two- and three-year-olds were placing accents correctly without having learned to. The only plausible explanation I can think of is that the children were putting accents on the words that excited them. They knew the meanings, and the pitch prominence was triggered by the way they felt. And their parents and other caregivers were fellow conspirators, doing what is so typical in motherese, exaggerating the interesting words: Look at the DOGGY!, as Anne Fernald points out (p.c.). What I am suggesting is that there is an emotive mediation: the skill that we eventually acquire as manipulators of accent rests on how well we show the way we feel about what we say. If something is new, unexpected, unpredictable, intensely informative, it tends to animate us. And these objective correlations teach us a lot about how prosody meshes with the outside world. But ultimately we're interested in what we're interested in, regardless of newness or informativeness or anything else. To take a humdrum example, when something is repeated we don't usually accent it the second time around, and out of that we fabricate an

objective rule: if an item is repeated, don't accent it. But that is only because repetition is usually boring. When the interest is maintained, so is the accent. As Fred Agard once said to me, Raw FISH is good, but after all, how much raw FISH can you eat!

The second kind of accent I call accent of power. It competes for the same prosodic resources as accents of interest and has to be adjusted to them, but it has an existence of its own. If I say

(2) GOD

how I hate this place!

or

(3) IT'S

no use!

it isn't because I'm excited by the meaning of God or by the referent of it. That accent at the beginning of my utterance is there to bowl you over, to put me in command, to establish my authority. Oaths and imprecations are where we see it in pure form. Listen to two ways in which we can say Jesus Christ and one way we can't. We can say JEEsus Christ! or we can say JE-sus CHRIST! But we can't say Jesus CHRIST! That's fine when someone else controls the turn--say when we are answering the question Whom do the Christians regard as Savior? Answer, Jesus CHRIST.

I have to admit that the grammarian half of us is not keen to swallow this kind of flamboyance. Everybody knows that emotion is out there somewhere, but we have trained ourselves to shut it out. We would like to think that there is such a thing as a colorless prosody. It's up to me to demonstrate that this big bang at the beginning that I've just described is an essential part of discourse.

Imagine yourself in the role of lecturer stepping up to the podium and saying to your audience

DAY'S discussion will be on HEART
(4) To attacks.

You will not say

DAY'S discussion will be on HEART
(5) To attacks.

although that would make a nice answer to someone's question: What will today's discussion be about?

A similar situation is that of story-telling, where the narrator is the authority figure and puts himself in command with that same initial high-pitched accent:

(6) ONCE upon a time there was a REAL SAN ta Claus.

There can be other accents, but the initial accent of power grabs the stage.

I think that at this point it would be instructive to pause a moment and ask how what we've just seen affects the claims dating back to long before the TG era, but continuously repeated since then, that the 'normal' intonation contour for declarative sentences is 231. If by 'normal' you mean a good odds-on bet for a Martian, then there are two normal contours, not one: 231 for answers and 321 for assertions. And by assertion I mean what you do when you are being assertive. If you ask me what my name is and I reply with (7) rather than (8),

(7) My NAME'S

(8) My NAME'S JO

JOhn.

hn.

you may feel like telling me to get off my high horse, because it sounds rather as if I meant to go on with What business is it of yours? It all depends on what mood you're in.

This same 'being in command' initial bang, given all its other associations, is what we would expect for literal commands, and that is just what we find--an initial high-pitched accent--which you are free to tone down later with a tag if you feel like it:

(9) HAND me the PLI
ers there, WILL you?

Consider how it would sound to say

(10) HAND me the PLI
ers there.

That would make a good answer to the question What

would you like me to do?, but it isn't a very good command unless you are rather keyed up, as you might be if there were an emergency of some kind.

So much for the big bang at the beginning. But it's only half the story where accents of power are concerned. There is also a big bang at the end, as plenty of linguists have noticed, though without crediting it with an emotive underpinning. The nuclear stress so-called is simply this terminal bang in a disguised form. If the initial bang is for control, the terminal bang is for commitment. It tells us how keen the speaker is in putting across what he has to say. If he says JE-sus Christ! you can relax--he is commenting half-internally; if he says JE-sus CHR-ist! you'd better watch out. In ordinary discourse we water this down in infinite degrees--may even imagine that we can produce a 'neutral' sentence with no trace of it. But I suspect that if a neutral sentence were possible, the speaker would have to be a corpse.

The reality of that terminal bang can be appreciated to the fullest in the climactic pressure toward the end that often results in the mispronunciation of the last word in a tone group. The speaker is carried away by his emphasis and fails to drop his pitch where the official stress pattern tells him to. Everyone does this some time or other and few even realize it to the point of correcting themselves. Eleanor Smeal, the president of NOW, referring to the way women used to feel about not being engaged, even repeated herself; she said, This was a trageDY! A first rate trageDY! Our KGO talk-show host Owen Spann recently said, When we know everything immediateLY. The result is not necessarily a mispronunciation but may be just a shift of the accent to another word. Notice how calm and unconcerned it sounds to say That was one of the things we wanted to imPRESS upon people. Too calm and unconcerned. What the speaker actually said was That was one of the things we wanted to impress upon PECple--not intending any contrast with computers or animals; the accent was there for the sake of the power of the utterance. One can only smile at the observation made in 1866 by the visiting Englishman Edward Dicey, writing of a look he had at the American Congress: 'The constant accentuation...of unimportant words, and the frequent misplacement of the right emphasis to the wrong place, make listening to an American debate wearisome to an Englishman' (Dicey 1972, 71; reference from Judy Gilbert). The climactic tendency leaves permanent traces on the morphology, in the stress shifts that occur on words that are likely to be used in an emphatic position--temporarily and primarily become temporarily and pri-

marily; influence becomes influence, justificable becomes justificable; the intensive reflexives instead of being contrastively stressed on the element that differs are stressed on the element that remains the same: myself, yourself, themselves; and the whole class of verbs and verby nouns and adjectives, such as report, alert, demand, arrest, despair, appeal, is permanently scarred by this power struggle. But the process continues, and the permanent shifts are less significant than the ones we freely generate, because they compete with accents of interest. Someone who wants to apologize emphatically does not say ExcUSE me but ExcUSE ME. Someone who wants to warn does not say I wouldn't with accent on I--which is the logical place for the accent since it supposedly means I wouldn't if I were YOU--but says instead I WOULDn't!, with the same climax as in You'd better NOT! And the radio announcers who read from their scripts and seem incapable of getting the right stress on a compound are simply adopting the strategy of making everything emphatic--like the one on KCBS a couple of years ago giving a weather report who said, [The weather] brought thousands of outdoor LOVers to Stimson Beach yesterday.

Now that we've taken care of the two ends, what do we do about the middle? From the standpoint of power, the more accents the merrier. So we can go from absOLUTely, with one accent, to ABsOLUTely with two, to ABSOLUTely with three, to ABSOLUTely with four. In a brief lifetime of listening I have one attested example of more than one accent on a single syllable, obligingly provided by an angry daughter refusing to do something: NO-O-O! And we get many instances of redundant words thrown in for the sake of their accents. The person who says I did it with my OWN TWO HANDS is presumed not to be emphasizing the nature of inalienable possession or demonstrating an ability to count to two. The speaker who says I won't pay you ONE CENT instead of I won't pay you a CENT is not pointing out the singularity of the indefinite article, and the one who instead of that says I won't pay you ONE RED CENT is presumably not informing us of the color of copper. And besides all this there are set expressions that enable us to go either way--we can be controlled, and say NOT by a HELL of a lot, or we can be defiant, and say NOT by a HELL of a LOT. English supposedly has a rhythm rule that causes accents to back off from each other: we say INefficient METHod rather than inefficient METHod--but for more power we put in both accents, and can even take advantage of the tabooed sequence of accents immediately succeeding one another and say a SO OBvious excUSE rather than the feeble such an OBvious excUSE.

The problem now is to see what happens when accents of power and accents of interest are fitted together. One way of harmonizing them is to arrange things so that the most interesting item comes where we would like the biggest bang. Maybe you'd like it at the end so that it will go on echoing in your listener's ear. That's climax. Or maybe you'd rather let it come early and then fizzle out. That's anticlimax. Let's take an example involving two words of low specificity, that are about equal in semantic weight, the word things and the word way meaning 'path'. Suppose you ask me why I don't carry something through the garage instead of lugging it all the way around the house. I can reply with either (11) or (12):

- (11) Too many THINGS in the way.
 (12) Too many things in the WAY.

If I want to put you rather sharply on notice I'll use the one with the accent on the end. If I want to be good-humored about it I'll put the accent farther back. We can make these power choices without getting into trouble with accents of interest because either way the accent goes on something semantically appropriate. The word things intimates 'clutter' and the phrase in the way intimates 'obstruction'.

The words things and way can be regarded as content words. The examples that are most controversial are those that embody so-called function words. I'm going to give you an example involving the words where and to. The meaning of the sentence has to do with a destination, so--semantically--either the where or the to should be eligible for the accent. I'll give the sentence in four different forms, three of which are acceptably accented and one is not:

- (13) I know he went, but I don't know WHERE.
 (14) I know he went, but I don't know where TO.
 (15) I know he went, but I don't know to WHERE.
 (16) I know he went, but I don't know WHERE to.

I hope you spotted the last one as the oddity. The word to is entitled both by its meaning and by its position to get the accent, but it doesn't. Not just because it is the word to. We can show that by comparing the sentence with

- (17) I've got to do it SOMEwhere, but I don't know WHERE to.

--this is OK because the to although entitled by position to have the accent, is not entitled to it as a 'mere' sign of the infinitive. But we can put the accent there, and when we do we key things up to a despe-

rate search:

- (18) I've got to do it SOMEwhere but I don't know where TO!

In each case the adjustments result in an utterance with the right word getting the bang and the bang coming at the right place.

Of late a good bit of attention has been given to a notion that I dallied with twenty years ago and gave up, namely 'default accent'. If for instance something would go in a normal position for accent but is repeated and accordingly deaccented, then the accent will go looking around for a function word to pick on. If my theory is right, even in this case it will be desirable for that function word to be semantically interesting--that is, appropriate not just grammatically but semantically to the context. Take the to of the infinitive again in this sentence:

- (19) Would you refrain from buying it if you were really eager TO buy it?

Buy it is repeated, is deaccented, and the accent falls on to by default. But compare (19) with (20):

- (20) Wouldn't you refrain from buying it if you were really reluctant TO buy it?

The same operation has been performed, but now the accent on to seems much less appropriate: the literal 'goal' meaning of to, which was fine with eager, is contradicted by reluctant. But that would not prevent from, if we could use it, as we can in

- (21) Wouldn't you hesitate to buy it if you were really discouraged FROM buying it?

It would be easy to get the impression from my description up to this point that speakers are in the habit of pulling out the stops at every opportunity. Actually the opposite is probably closer to the truth, from sheer need to conserve energy. This poses the reverse problem: how do we decide, when an item is new and informative and unexpected etc., that it is not to get an accent? I'll tell you what I think, and then go back and lead up to it: the reason is that something else is more interesting, and we focus on that.

Susan Schmerling has an example (1976, 41-42) that illustrates the point. One day someone said to her, out of the blue, JOHNSon died. Both the mention of Johnson and the fact that he had died were unexpected, so why wasn't died accented? Carlos Gussenhoven (1983, 380, 391-92) offers the explanation that there is a 'focus domain' involving an argument, Johnson, and a predicate, died, with a rule attaching the accent to the argument. This

certainly sweeps a lot of problems out of the way, but it also creates others. Suppose Johnson had committed suicide, or suffocated, or had been assassinated. Would that announcement coming out of a clear sky have been JOHNSon suffocated? Or imagine that the deceased was someone's mother. The son comes into the room and says to his sister, MOTHER died. It would be a rather heartless sister who did not say at that point, Is that the way to tell me about our MOTHER?!

So what is there that makes JOHNSon died normal and MOTHER died not? In the first place, political figures come and go; we can be impersonal about what happens to them. In the second place, die is a rather special verb. It belongs to an open class of coming-and-going verbs that have been called presentative, which bring things and people onto the scene and remove them from it. We say The TRAIN arrived more easily than The TRAIN exploded, or The MAIL'S just been delivered more easily than The MAIL'S just been insured. It's no great task to contextualize so as to get the non-presentative forms, but the presentatives illustrate the limiting case: by simply announcing the name of the argument we create a presumption of presence or absence. There is too little in it to arouse us. Our interest is concentrated on what is more interesting. We can test this strategy by noting how easily the unaccented item can sometimes be left out altogether. Schmerling's speaker might have been asked, Anything in the news today? and replied simply Yes, JOHNSon, with the interlocutor chiming in with What happened, did he die or something? The speaker by evoking Johnson makes Johnson emblematic of some event which may require specification but does not command the same degree of interest as the fact that Johnson is the one affected. Though it happens less frequently, the balance can easily go the other way, with the predicate arousing the greater interest. Suppose you notice that I'm looking discouraged and you ask me what's the matter and I reply, People distrust me, THAT's what's the matter. Distrust outshines people-- for the simple reason that there are always people, just as among verbs there's always a presence and an absence.

But nothing in this analysis precludes there being more than one accent if our interest extends that far. Usually in short utterances we prefer to parcel the accents out one per utterance, so rather than say JOHNSon DIED we prefer to say JOHNSon. He DIED. In longer utterances extra accents are easily come by. Let's imagine two situations where one speaker, A, is trying to identify a noise, and the other, B, gives the necessary information. A says, What's that noise?, and B replies, in Situation 1, Some SOLDiers. That's enough for A to

identify the sound, 'marching', since soldiers are emblematic of it. If B mentions the word he will not accent it: Some SOLDiers marching. In Situation 2, A is a bigoted employer and the noise is a hubbub coming from the street below. A asks again, What's that noise? and B, who can see out the window, says, Your employEES seem to be STRIKing. Both argument and predicate receive accents; it is less likely that 'employees' will be emblematic of 'striking'.

I won't be so simplistic as to try to claim that everything in accentuation is pure emotional response, that no skills are involved. But I think we have to consider the possibility that intonation is always an emotive vehicle, and that the choices that are dictated by our skills have to be translated into some kind of emotive terms in order to deliver appropriate intonations. The dilemma for analysis is exactly the same as the one posed by Paul Ekman and his coworkers for facial expression. He draws the analogy from the acting profession. When an actor portrays a character in a situation how does he make the action look real? Is it by telling himself 'Now to make my role of returning hero appear authentic I hold my jaw up at an angle of 120 degrees, double my fists, and bend my elbows', or does he say 'I'm going to imagine myself a returning hero and let my feelings take over'? The term for this is Stanislavsky or method acting. I believe that imagination plays the same role in prosody, and that the only time most of us really intellectualize our choices is when we write. It's time--where prosody is concerned--to shake ourselves free of print culture.

Let me summarize my conception this way. There is a child in us. When we wish to express a feeling, we speak through the child. When we make an intellectual choice, we speak to the child, and the child speaks for us.

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