

Uptalk

‘Uptalk’ is commonly used to refer to rising intonation at the end of declarative sentences, or (to put it more simply) the **tendency for people to make statements that sound like questions**, a phenomenon that has received wide exposure and commentary in the media. How and where did it originate? Who are the most frequent ‘uptalkers’? How much does it vary according to the speaker’s age, gender and regional dialect? Is it found in other languages as well as English? These and other questions are the subject of this fascinating book. The first comprehensive analysis of ‘uptalk’, it examines its historical origins, geographical spread and social influences. Paul Warren also looks at the media’s coverage of the phenomenon, including the tension between the public’s perception and the views of experts.

Informed by a wealth of research findings, *Uptalk* will be welcomed by those working in linguistics, as well as anyone interested in the way we talk today.

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Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-12385-4 - Uptalk: The Phenomenon of Rising Intonation

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Uptalk

The Phenomenon of Rising Intonation

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107560840

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First published 2016

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Warren, Paul, 1966–

Uptalk : the phenomenon of rising intonation / Paul Warren, School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, Victoria University of Wellington.
 pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-12385-4 (hardback) – ISBN 978-1-107-56084-0 (pbk)

1. Intonation (Phonetics) 2. Phonetics. I. Title.

P222.W37 2015

414'.6–dc23 2015023047

ISBN 978-1-107-12385-4 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-56084-0 Paperback

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To Liz, Matthew and Chris.

In loving memory of two non-uptalkers, Bunny (1927–2011)
and Brian (1937–2015), caring, inspiring and generous father
and father-in-law.

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Preface

This book provides an overview of a rising form of intonation, widely but not universally known as *uptalk*. This label refers to a rather innovative use of rising intonation on declarative utterances. Uptalk has become a topic of public discussion and of linguistic research in the latter part of the twentieth century, and is now frequently encountered in a range of varieties of English, as well as in other languages. The focus in this book will be primarily on English, and will include discussion of varieties of English, since these vary in the nature of their intonation patterns and in the shape and role of uptalk in their intonational inventory. It will nevertheless also include discussion of uptalk in languages other than English.

Uptalk is perceptually salient because although rising intonation is typically (and somewhat naively) associated with questions rather than statements in English, uptalk is the use of rising intonation in contexts where questions would not usually be expected. This salience means that it has received considerable attention, both from expert researchers and from the general public. Media commentary on uptalk has been highly speculative and often condemnatory, associating uptalk with uncertainty and insecurity among younger speakers, who are the more typical users of this form of intonation, and blaming the increasing incidence of uptalk on the influence of youth culture and in some cases even specifically on Australian soap operas. However, we will see that the meanings conveyed by uptalk intonation are more complex than a simple association of rises with questions, that the interpretation of uptalk depends on social factors as well as linguistic ones, and that uptalk plays an important role in tracking the listener's comprehension and in maintaining a constructive relationship between conversational partners.

Twenty-five years ago, an early review of uptalk-type intonation in Australian English (Guy and Vonwiller, 1989) posed three questions that were current in the debate at that time: What does this form of intonation mean? Is it changing and spreading? Who uses it? These questions remain relevant today, along with many others that have emerged since in both public debate and scientific research. The current overview therefore aims to bring together in one place some of the extensive discussion of the forms (Chapter 2) and functions

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(Chapter 3) of this intonational phenomenon; to highlight and comment on the range of English varieties in which it is found (Chapter 4); to discuss its historical and geographic spread (Chapter 5); to review the social and textual factors that influence its use (Chapter 6); to describe how it is perceived, as revealed both in media commentary (Chapter 7) and in experimental research (Chapter 8); and to note also the incidence of uptalk in languages other than English (Chapter 9). Finally (Chapter 10), a few remarks about methodological issues help to explain some of the differences between results reported by different researchers and act as a guide for future uptalk research.

My aim in writing this book has been to bring together these different strands of linguistic research and public perception in an attempt to provide a coherent account of the origins, distribution, nature and use of that ‘rising inflection at the end of each sentence, which makes every remark sound like a whiny question’ (Fergus, 1997).

Acknowledgements

Many colleagues and collaborators have contributed to my interest in and understanding of intonation, and of uptalk in particular. I would especially like to thank Nicola Daly and Dave Britain for their contributions to our study of intonation in New Zealand English, and Janet Fletcher for discussions of intonational issues in both New Zealand and Australian English. I am also grateful to Sasha Calhoun for her close reading of and feedback on portions of the text.

Symbols and abbreviations

Stress (symbol placed before stressed syllable)

- ' primary
- , secondary

Nuclear tones (symbol placed before accented syllable)

- \ high-fall
- \ low-fall
- / high-rise
- / low-rise
- ✓ fall-rise
- ^ rise-fall
- > level

Global tunes (also used in this text for nuclear tones where the height of the tone is not crucial)

- ↗ rising
- ↘ falling
- H high tone
- L low tone
- * pitch accent
- phrase accent
- % boundary tone

Abbreviations

- AQI Australian Question(ing) Intonation
- ERB equivalent rectangular bandwidth
- F0 fundamental frequency
- HRT high-rise/rising tone/tune/terminal
- HRTD high-rise/rising terminal declarative
- Hz Hertz (cycles per second)
- ToBI Tones and Break Indices
- UNB Urban Northern British
- WHQ wh-question
- YNQ yes-no question