Prosodic Patterns in English Conversation

Language is more than words: it includes the prosodic features and patterns that we use, subconsciously, to frame meanings and achieve our goals in our interaction with others. Here, Nigel G. Ward explains how we do this, going beyond intonation to show how pitch, timing, intensity, and voicing properties combine to form meaningful temporal configurations: prosodic constructions. Bringing together new findings and hitherto-scattered observations from phonetic and pragmatic studies, this book describes over twenty common prosodic patterns in English conversation. Using examples from real conversations, it illustrates how prosodic constructions serve essential functions such as inviting, showing approval, taking turns, organizing ideas, reaching agreement, and evoking action. Prosody helps us establish rapport and nurture relationships, but subtle differences in prosody across languages and subcultures can be damagingly misunderstood. The findings presented here will enable both native speakers of English and learners to listen more sensitively and communicate more effectively.

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Preface

This book presents the principal prosodic constructions of English dialog. I came to this topic in a roundabout way, after twenty-five years of research in spoken language processing (most recently with support from the National Science Foundation, Toyota Motor Corporation, and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency).

Building new applications requires new tools, and over the years I have accumulated a large collection. It started in 1993, at the University of Tokyo, with the gift of a pitch tracker (from Keikichi Hirose). Gradually I built a suite of tools for prosodic analysis (with help from Alejandro Vega, Paula Gallardo, Ricky Garcia, and others), complemented by freeware, especially Voicebox, Praat, and Elan (written by Mike Brookes, Paul Boersma, and others). A breakthrough came in 2011, with the addition of Principal Component Analysis to the workflow (suggested by Olac Fuentes).

This not only improved our application’s performance, but revealed what looked like meaningful patterns. Departing from the norms of my research community – where the custom is to address the application at hand, maybe developing a new algorithm or two, but generally leaving knowledge discovery to the linguists – I decided to try to make sense of these patterns. I had the good fortune to find students willing to work with me for hours and hours, examining hundreds of dialog fragments to figure out the meanings of the prosodic constructions of English (Alejandro Vega, Paola Gallardo, Luis Ramirez, and James Jodoin). As we worked, I applied methods learned from my teachers at Berkeley in the late 1980s (George Lakoff, Charles Fillmore, and many others), especially about how to work out the connections between language forms and human intentions.

As data we used real conversations (mostly among students of the University of Texas at El Paso, and mostly recorded in my lab by Steven Werner, Esaul Campos, Saiful Abu, and Paola Gallardo). Additional data to support examination of specific phenomena was contributed by other scholars (Rachel Steindel Burdin, Jeremey Day-O’Connell, and Alejna Brugos).
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With all this help I learned many things. Bursting to share them, I was able to devote a full year to writing (while working with Tatsuya Kawahara and his students and colleagues at Kyoto University, thanks to a Fulbright award and a leave from my home institution, the University of Texas at El Paso).

Aiming for a book that is both scholarly and readable, I have benefited greatly from discussions with colleagues (especially Oliver Niebuhr, Stefan Benus, Juergen Trouvain, Richard Ogden, Francisco Torreira, Gina Levow, David Novick, and Eric Freudenthal), and detailed comments on chapters (by Stefan Benus, Margaret Zellers, German Zarate-Sandez, Jeremey Day-O’Connell, Yoko Hasegawa, Timo Baumann, Keikichi Hirose, Anton Batliner, Yi Xu, Carlos Ishi, Keelan Evanini, Rasmus Persson, Colleen Myers, Isabel Ward, and Susan Ward). The cover art is based on a concept by Adan Contreras, and Helen Barton was my editor.

I sincerely thank them all.