One of the true joys in life is saying something positive about someone, preferably to them directly. Prosody has an important role here: English has a specific construction for positive assessments.

### 7.1 The Positive Assessment Construction

Let’s start with some clear cases:

1.  it gives me great plea#sure to present you with this year’s staff # award
2.  thank you for your ser#vice
3.  good # job
4.  go Cou#gars!
5.  stay on it; there you # go

directed, respectively, to an employee, a man in uniform, a student, a basketball team, and a novice player of a collaborative videogame. Positive regard takes many forms and can be expressed in many ways: praise, respect, admiration, approval, appreciation, encouragement, compliments, flattery and so on. Prosodically these examples share a configuration including relatively high pitch, then a lengthened, loud region with clear voicing, and finally a clipped end, that is, a sharp final drop in intensity\(^1\). Figure 7.1 summarizes these components, and Figure 7.2 illustrates.

The hash mark in each example indicate roughly where the high pitch ends and the loud region starts. To see that this is indeed contributing to

![Figure 7.1 The three main components of the Positive Assessment Construction.](image-url)
the positive feeling, consider the final prosody of two utterances ending in the same words:

6) there’s # a good dog

7) what she wants is just a good dog

While the first example, praising the dog, exhibits this configuration, in the second it is absent. The same difference can be seen between mm (8) used for positive-assessment and an mm (9) lacking that meaning.

The strength of this pattern can, as for other patterns, be tuned to the occasion. In the context of an awards ceremony, over-the-top prosody may sound just right, but in a different situation the same prosody may sound condescending or sound ingratiating, as in

10) wow boss, that # was great. I always learn so much just by watching you

11) Dad#dy, next week, can I, um ...

Let’s take a closer look at the form. One thing to note is that the intensity is only relatively loud: the final syllable may not be loud in absolute terms. This prosodic construction, like the others, does not by itself fully determine the values of the features. Rather, its contributions are superimposed on whatever else is there in the prosody. In general, these include at least the contributions of a turn end; this construction thus adds some energy at the end and sharpens the final intensity drop.

A second interesting aspect of this form is that when the last sound is a consonant, it often includes a final release². In English the usual pattern at word-final consonants is for the sound to end right after the tongue moves up and makes a closure: for example on the /g/ of dog. (This is not true for all languages. For example, a stereotypical Italian-accented pronunciation of big dog may sound like bigga dogga, with the final stops being released, following the general pattern in Italian.) However, this construction can overpower the usual pattern, to cause the final consonant to be released. The final bit of air is, incidentally, why Figure 7.2 shows an apparent high pitch at the end of the first and third examples; this is a microprosodic artifact of the consonant release.

The third interesting aspect of this form is that the final syllable is
Chapter 1

Positive Assessment Construction

Function: Express Positive Assessment

Form:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>timespan</th>
<th>prosodic properties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>−1600 to −800 ms</td>
<td>raised pitch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>−800 to −200 ms</td>
<td>increased loudness, lengthened vowels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>−200 to 0 ms</td>
<td>sharp drop in loudness (clipped end)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 to 800 ms</td>
<td>silence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

mnemonic: High then Loud then Quiet

Figure 7.3 The Positive Assessment Construction. The timings are typical for conversational uses; in stand-alone uses the initial raised pitch may be much shorter.

strongly voiced. As a result this site is suitable for the salient realization of other pitch-related features. These may include superimposed creaky voice to assert control or authority, or vibrato to convey warmth and encouragement\(^3\).

Figure 7.3 summarizes this construction. This is not the only way in English to convey positive assessment; there are several others: the Book-ended Narrow Pitch Construction for grudging admiration; late peaks for liking and admiration; and high and wide pitch with fast rate for expressing happiness and giving good news\(^4\). Thus speakers of English have many ready ways to be positive in conversation.

7.2 Uses in Conversation

Now let’s look at how this construction is actually used in conversation. Often it is used in simple positive assessments of something, such as a product, a situation, or an activity:

12) J: I also really love the Boon\#dock Saints

13) E: speaking of which, how do you feel about Monday:
    Monday’s exam?
    G: I feel # good

14) M: it’s really cool # like, coming up with # like, you know, a
    program, and then like being able to see # like that # program
    on someone else’s # phone

Incidentally, for speaker M the loud part of this construction seems to have an affinity for the word like. While the word like does have specific pragmatic functions\(^5\), here it may serve mostly just as a docking site for the second part of this prosodic pattern.
This construction also seems to be used in avoiding conflict. Speakers sometimes say things that could be taken as challenges or face threats, but in friendly conversations, they usually take care to mitigate these. One way is to use this pattern to convey positive regard of the other person, thereby taking the sting out of something that might otherwise cause offense. For example, in

15) L: so, how’s your semester going?  
E: um, pretty good. I’m getting As in all my classes.

L’s question is rather blunt and potentially a face threat, especially in a department where the students place great value on academic performance, but his final prosody makes this upbeat and positive-sounding. Similarly, in the following, J signals her positive regard and her intent to be non-judgmental. She uses this construction first on her words, faintly, then again more strongly in her laughter.

16) M: I don’t want to stereotype but, you know  
J: you can # stereotype [haha#haha  
M: [aha#haha  
yeah, you just don’t see a lot # of girls playing videogames,  
for some reason

Thus reassured, M goes on to verbalize what he’d hesitated to say. Interestingly his words, which might have caused offense due to the politically incorrect term girls, went over smoothly; his use of this prosodic construction conveys respect for female gamers.

Conversational interactions, according to the philosopher Grice, generally respect certain “maxims”\(^6\): people generally strive to say things that are informative, true, relevant, clear, and so on. Polite English conversation additionally follows more specific maxims. Sometimes these maxims come into conflict. The maxim “be interesting, not vacuous” may conflict with the maxim of “speak well of everyone.” Some speakers seem to give absolute priority to one maxim, by never saying anything negative about anyone, although at the risk of seeming dull. A more common strategy is to make negative comments when necessary, but to mitigate them with this construction. Consider

17) we all have our strengths and weaknesses, and that’s # hers

where the speaker mentions something negative about a teammate but at the same time, with her prosody, conveys that overall she likes and respects her. In contrast, the same words, and that’s hers (18), without this prosody may convey a much less positive feeling.
7.3 Considerations of Culture

Speakers of English know how to express positive assessment, but knowing when to do so can still be tricky. In my research group meetings, new members sometimes start out by showing great admiration and respect for everything the professors say. While this behavior may be appropriate in some groups, our group is minimally hierarchical and expects ideas to be praised or panned on their merits. New members usually adapt swiftly; after a stern look or two they learn this aspect of our microculture.

Positive assessment also ties in to broad cultural norms. This I realized in the course of some work for a Darpa project. Their need was for techniques to automatically discover sentiment towards various people and groups mentioned in news broadcasts: to identify who was being seen positively and who negatively. Naturally I tried out using the High then Loud then Quiet pattern. Since we can automatically detect times when this occurs, we can automatically tag the entity mentioned at that time as being viewed positively. This generally worked, but not always; Positive-Assessment prosody was also used for other purposes. One interesting case was mentions of recently deceased victims, for example of a stabbing or a traffic accident. Newscasters tended to use this prosody even though nothing praiseworthy had happened. I speculate that this may be a feature of our culture: our taboo on speaking ill of the dead. This dates back thousands of years, perhaps ultimately to some ancient tribal fear of vengeful ghosts.

Be that as it may, it is clear that the uses of this construction are complicated: positive assessment is done for various specific ends in various specific contexts.

7.4 Significance

This prosodic configuration does not seem to have been previously described in the literature. With its important social function, this seems strange, until we think about the history of prosody research.

Configurations like this have been completely off the radar for most lines of research, for reasons related to the the traditions surveyed above. Although there is a lot of work on prosody and emotions, including positive affect, this mostly involves primordial prosody expressing emotions like joy, where independent features, rather than features configurations, are the operative factors. More generally, most prosody research has examined prosodic features as independent streams, for example pitch in isolation or intensity in isolation, and this has led to the discovery of isolated correlations but rarely patterns. Research on the expression of sentiment\(^7\), has recently tended to handle every problem by feeding
prosodic features into machine-learning algorithms, leading to models whose behavior is uninterpretable. Another problem is that most computational research in prosody focuses on one of two timespans: the prosody of individual words or the prosody of entire sentences; neither of which permits discovery of constructions like this one. Finally, research in interactional linguistics has primarily examined sit-down conversations, but in such dialogs this pattern generally occurs superimposed with other patterns, which makes it hard to identify.

Thus the limitations discussed in Chapter 5 are not just theoretical problems. Rather they have constrained what the field has been able to discover. Fortunately we now have new, powerful methods. The next three chapters will explain how these can tease apart the separate contributions of superimposed constructions.
Chapter 7

1 Freeman and colleagues have also observed a sharper final intensity drop in positive-polarity instances of the word *yeah* (Freeman et al., 2015).
2 This may relate to the clipped ends and to a general stiffness of the articulators (Edwards et al., 1991).
3 Ward and Escalante-Ruiz (2009)
4 Murray and Arnott (1993); Freese and Maynard (1998)
5 Diskin (2017)
6 Grice (1975)
7 For example, in the social signal processing and computational paralinguistics traditions.

Chapter 8

1 Incidentally, the prosody of list intonation is not universal. In Jewish English, influenced by Yiddish, list intonation may have a rise-fall contour on each item (Burdin, 2014). Since a list therefore has a sequence of lows between highs, the result can sound like a litany of complaints. Rachel Steindel Burdin (personal communication) has observed that this pattern is often used to good effect in Jewish-Grandmother jokes.
2 Ogden (2017)
3 Most of the recordings were done without providing a list of topics; but after two participants reported difficulty finding things to talk about for 10 minutes, a few subsequent pairs were provided with lists of suggestions.
4 Xu (2015)
5 Ladd (2008)
6 Ward et al. (2005)
7 Black et al. (2012); Govind and Prasanna (2013)
8 Fujisaki (2004); Kochanski and Shih (2003); Chen et al. (2004); Xu (2005); van Santen et al. (2004); Hirose et al. (2016)
9 Actually Xu and Prom-on’s model was not simply additive; it attained higher accuracy by including equations to represent the dynamics of target approximation (Xu and Prom-on, 2014).
10 Portes and Beyssade (2015)
11 Xu (2015); Torreira and Grice (2018)

Chapter 9