

Chapter 2: The Prosody of Contrasts and Complaints

2.1 Narrow-Pitch Regions Indicate Contrast

Conversants often talk things over to figure something out together. Sometimes it's easy, for example if all the evidence points to the same conclusion. But more often, you need to consider various factors, and then it becomes important to indicate whether what you're saying supports the previous point or not.

Suppose we're discussing when to go hiking, and you note that tomorrow the forecast says warm. I might say:

2.1) 
yes, but it's also supposed to be windy

with the pitch going up and down as shown by the thick line, but with a region of nearly flat pitch in the middle, shown also by underlining. The prosody tells you that there's a contrast here, specifically contrasting with your implication that tomorrow's weather is good for hiking. The prosody alone is enough to convey this:

2.2) *it's also supposed to be windy*

conveys the same message, without an explicit "but", or "well" or "actually." In fact, prosody is not only enough to show contrast by itself, it may be necessary to do so. For example, another way to produce this sentence is stressed syllables scattered throughout. This is how you might say it if reading it from a book, rather than producing it as part of a conversation.

2.3) 
yes, but it's also supposed to be windy

With this prosody, there is no narrow-pitch region, and the meaning of contrast is gone. Perhaps you can still infer that this is a reason not to go hiking tomorrow, but it's not obvious. Indeed, you could equally well interpret this as meaning that, since I like hiking on windy days, that's another reason to go. Or, more likely, you'd infer that I've lost interest in the pros and cons of hiking tomorrow, and am commenting at random.

Now, this prosodic pattern is so strongly associated with contrast that it can force otherwise implausible interpretations. Suppose my response to your hiking suggestion is instead

2.4) *it's also supposed to be beautiful*

there's still a contrast implied. It may be tricky to infer why; perhaps there could be an implication that the day is too beautiful to waste on a hike. But in any case the prosody clearly marks this as not supporting a hike tomorrow.

Here's a real example. S and G are students discussing programming, and S mentions the iPhone. He suggests using it to program:

In this chapter we'll mostly using underlining instead of drawing actual pitch contours. This is better anyway, since contours make people think of singing, and strive to "hit all the notes." But speaking is freer: the pitch height can vary, and so can the matching of pitch to syllables.

2.5) S: you could program easier on that, per se, so I don't know why problem.au
G: well, the, I mean the problem with that is, to do like uh, to to compile

and G introduces his reply with a narrow-pitch region. This indicates straight away that he's intending to say something that contrasts with B's thought.

2.2. Americans like Contrast

Narrow-pitch regions are common when two people are exchanging information, putting the pieces together to come up with a joint plan or shared understanding.

And in such cases, it's good to mark contrasting statements as such. Americans like to feel that they're making progress, to feel that each statement in a discussion is contributing, in some way, to reaching the ultimate conclusion. (Of course this is not true of all English speakers, nor even all Americans, but I think it's a useful generalization.) Statements that don't clearly contribute, for or against, are felt to be "just talking" rather than moving the discussion forward. Going back to the hiking example, if I say

2.6) 
it's supposed to be windy tomorrow

without a narrow-pitch region, again it's not clear whether this is agreeing or disagreeing, and can seem unfocused, uninvolved, or even evasive. While in some cultures it's a bit rude to explicitly mark contrasts, Americans often like debate, and a bit of healthy contrast or even disagreement can be satisfying. Having this in a dialog can help the speakers feel good about whatever final conclusion they reach: considering multiple factors and perspectives can make a conclusion feel solid and shared.

The narrow-pitch region, used in this way, is generally part of an agreement-seeking process. It invites the other to consider the contrasting information, and to consider changing his opinion. In this it is unlike, for example, a bald declaration of opposition or disagreement. For example, if I say

2.7) 
it's supposed to be windy tomorrow

with a sharper fall, then I'm indicating that I have no interest in persuading you, or in your opinion at all.

2.3 "Bookends" Distinguish Contrasting from Musing, Stalling, etc.

Now that we've seen two functions of this pattern, let's examine its form in detail. There are four components.

In English, the pitch range is sometimes wide, with lots of ups and downs, and sometimes narrow and almost flat. Some people tend to have wide pitch ranges, others generally are more narrow. But for any speaker, contrast can be expressed by using a pitch range narrower than their typical one. The narrow-pitch region has to be long enough to notice, of course. Typically 400 milliseconds suffices, and thus these narrow-pitch regions typically span two or three words and three to seven syllables, fewer to the extent that these words are said slowly. This narrow pitch region is the first component of this pattern.

There's nothing exact about this: the narrow pitch duration can vary, and so can its location. For example, the narrow-pitch region can go almost anywhere in a sentence, and it still indicates a contrast:

2.8) *well, yeah, I saw that it will hit 80, but it's also supposed to be windy in the afternoon*

2.9) *well, yeah, I saw that it will hit 80, but it's also supposed to be windy in the afternoon*

2.10) *well, yeah, I saw that it will hit 80, but it's also supposed to be windy in the afternoon*

The narrow-pitch region is usually low in pitch, but not always. For example, I can say

2.11) 
yes, but, it's also supposed to be windy

Here the narrow-pitch region is fairly high, but it still marks a contrast.

The second and third components of this pattern are "bookends": regions of normally-wide pitch both before and after this narrow region. Lacking a preceding bookend, a narrow pitch region can sound like a vague musing

2.12) *it's also supposed to be windy*

Lacking a tailing bookend, a narrow pitch region sounds incomplete

2.13) *it's also supposed to be windy*

as if the speaker hasn't finished deciding what he wants to say, which is another pattern entirely.

Finally, this pattern has a fourth component: the fact that the left bookend is produced in a fairly high speaking rate.

Four components may seem like a lot to remember, but if you just practice the imitating the examples, you'll master the pattern without even thinking about it.

2.4 You can use a Narrow-Pitch Region to Complain

The narrow-pitch pattern is used in complaints also. For example

2.14) *yeah, but I hear a lot of static*

Actually, this utterance conveys an element of contrast also. In the dialog, it followed the other speaker's observation that the audio quality was good for her. But with no context, this pattern can be a pure complaint. For example, if you hear someone say

2.15) *well, I don't like to complain, but...*

you can be sure that they are going to complain.

Complaining is something to do strategically. Americans are, I think, happiest with complaints if they identify a specific problem which can then be solved. After example 2.14, the complainer immediately went to adjust the audio quality and clear away the static.

Americans also use complaining to show trust. If you ask me how I feel, and I say

2.16) *okay, although I've got a little cold still*

I'm trusting you enough to reveal my condition, trusting you to show sympathy, or at least not be disgusted by my weakness.

But Americans hate whining and grumbling. Whining is complaining about your personal situation, typically in a high nasal voice.

2.17) *...nobody ever listens to anything I say...*

Grumbling is complaining about something more distant, typically in a low creaky voice.

2.18) *...those stupid politicians will never understand...*

Both whining and grumbling involve narrow pitch ranges, like other complaints, but they are "open-ended" rather than delimited by bookends. They are disliked, since they are usually too negative and seldom advance the conversation in any productive direction.

Learners of English shouldn't complain too much. While in some cultures people complain to share their problems and lighten their individual burdens, Americans may consider you negative or tiresome if you complain too much, especially about things you can't change.

But learners of English do need to know how to complain, and when. In some cultures it is rude to complain at all. This may be because people are expected to ignore problems, or always talk about the positive, or to just accept whatever fate brings. But in English, if you never complain, Americans may consider you to be oblivious and not aware of what's good or bad, or unwilling to identify problems and share responsibility for solving them, or untrusting and afraid of opening up about things.

2.5 Complaints have Varied Forms

The phonetic differences between complaints and contrasts are subtle. Complaints, however, more commonly have creaky (rough) voice. Considering the hike-planning scenario again, if I use creaky voice

2.19) *yeah, but it's also supposed to be windy*

then I'm not just making a contrast, I'm also complaining. That nuance is absent if the voice is not creaky (as in example 2.1).

Complaining doesn't have any special syntax: again the narrow pitch can go on pretty much any words:

2.20) *it's annoying, how much homework is given.*

Some complaints are co-constructed, performed by two speakers together. For example, the leading bookend can be produced by one speaker, and the rest of the pattern by another.

2.21) *A: did you hear what that senator said? B: yeah, it's simply deplorable*

If you and a friend can pull this off, you've demonstrated a high degree of mutual understanding and solidarity. Getting the timing right, so that the two contributions form one construction, is something of a feat: it seems like two minds working as one.

Although a narrow-pitch region can be used to complain, not all complaints include one. For example

2.22) *I really don't like it when you do that.*

a long rise-fall works, just as well as a narrow pitch:

2.23) *I really don't like it when you do that.*

But there's a difference in nuance. The first version is just a bald declaration of displeasure. The speaker could walk away after saying it. But the second invites further discussion, maybe leading to a compromise, or at least requests some sympathy. In general, across contrasts and complaints, the narrow pitch seems to invite empathy.

2.6 Complaints can Call for Action

So far we've been discussing complaints that come up in conversation, usually about a third party. But people also complain directly:

2.24) *We've been waiting twenty minutes and we still haven't seen a waitress.*

2.25) *Carla, you left the water running again!*

2.26) *Mommy, Jimmy's bothering me again.*

The last one has the narrow pitch on only a couple of syllables, but these are lengthened, so it's still salient.

Complaints like these usually call for a response, typically an apology or some action to rectify the problem.

2.7 Contradictions

A strong contrast can amount to a contradiction. You may hear these in debates, where a person someone else's assumption or claim.

2.27) *I'm not going to Japan*

Earlier I said that Americans are comfortable with contrasts, but you have to be careful. Imagine the boss wants to do something that's wrong, and you need to say something. The conversation might go like this

2.28) *B: we need to ship this tomorrow
Y: well, but we can't skip quality checks*

with a direct contradiction, but this would probably be too confrontational. If you wanted to keep your job, you'd use instead a less direct way to make your point.

If you want to hear examples of narrow pitch used for contradiction, listen to the song *Nine Bowls of Soup* by the band They Might be Giants: there are many, including some co-constructed examples.

2.8 Grudging Admiration

Finally, a narrow-pitch region can be used to express grudging admiration, where a person doesn't really want to admit that something is good, but is forced to by the reality of things.

2.29) *I mean, it, it does like, it does everything. As far as I've seen. 7*

This pattern is appropriate, for example, when you have expert knowledge of a topic and are therefore qualified to pass judgment on something.

2.9 Narrow-Pitch Regions can be Combined with other Prosodic Patterns

This pattern, like most patterns, can be used in combination with others. For example, complaints can be combined with list intonation. In English, lists often take a form

2.30) *I need flour, butter, eggs, milk, sugar ...*

where each item in the list ends with a mid-level flat pitch. This can be combined with the complaint pattern to form a litany:

2.31) *first she tells me she wants to go then she says she won't go unless Carla also comes ...*

Complaints can also be combined with pleas for sympathy, for example, by adding a touch of feeling to the last bookend:

2.32) *yes, but it's supposed to be windy tomorrow*

(circumflex on windy tomorrow, last word suddenly quiet and slow)

which suggest that I want you to feel sorry for me.

In my part of the world, pleas for sympathy sometimes take a Spanish-derived form.

2.33) *I don't know. Matrix algebra, what's that?!*

These patterns are not universal. In Jewish English, list intonation may have a different form, with a rise-fall contour on each item in the list. Since a sequence of items therefore has a sequence of lows between highs, the result can sound like a litany of complaints. This pattern is often used to good effect in Jewish-Grandmother jokes.

This example, produced by a two native speakers of Spanish who were speaking English, is clearly a complaint plus a bid for sympathy. The trailing bookend includes a convex pitch contour, a borrowing from Spanish prosody. This may sound over-emotional to American ears.

Finally, you might use the narrow-pitch pattern to tease. In

2.34) *J: taking five classes ... 13 hours*
S: that's not technically five ... like

S is speaking with a smile. You can hear it in his voice (smiling stretches the mouth and changes the sound slightly). Here he is contradicting her, but just to tease, just to get a reaction.

2.8 Summary

Form: A region of narrow-pitch range, 400 milliseconds or longer, preceded by a region of wider pitch range spoken quickly, and followed also by wider pitch range.

Functions: contrast, complaint, contradiction, grudging appreciation

Notes

Variation in list intonation in American Jewish English. Rachel Steindel Burdin. In *Speech Prosody 2014*.

Linguistic resources for complaints in conversation, Richard A. Ogden. In *International Congress of the Phonetic Sciences, 2007*.

The Intonation of Contradictions in American English. Nancy Hedberg, Juan M. Sosa and Lorna Fadden. *Prosody and Pragmatics Conference, 2003*.

Prosodic Form and Discourse Function. Mark Liberman and Ivan Sag. In *Papers from Tenth Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society*, pages 402-427, 1974.

Example 2.5, is from iPhone, utep-social08, IPrA B1

Example 2.14, static, from utep-social 00, IPrA B2

Example 2.20, how much homework is given, from utep-social00, HDLS A2

Example 2.29, grudging admiration, from utep-social08, HDLS A3

Example 2.33 matrix algebra, pfrom utep-social15, HDLS A4

Example 2.34 not technically five classes, from utep-social00 1:56-2:04