

Script for the Minor Third video, Feb 10, 2014, Nigel Ward

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Going Beyond Words ...

to really communicate effectively, you need to use intonation, to modulate your voice, in order to interact well with your dialog partner.

Today we'll look at one powerful prosodic pattern, the minor third.

For example <slide 2> It sounds like this: "Hang on".

Here's a context: you're in conversation with someone, she's talking away <animate>, and her phone vibrates <animate>. She stops, then says "Hang on <animate> I've got to get that."

The prosody is important: a high pitch, then a low pitch: "hang on".

It's very distinctive.

Before the details of the prosodic form, let's consider a simpler case: a knock-knock joke. <slide 3>

[tell the joke] ha-ha-ha.

It's a pun: <animation> "Doris" for "door is".

These are quite childish. First graders like them a lot.

But let's look at it in detail.

The interesting thing is that the “Knock knock” demands a response,
Not so much because of the words, but because you say it with a
specific prosodic pattern. <slide 4> “knock knock”

It demands a response, if you hear "knock knock" and don't respond
<animate> “who’s there,” you seem cold, asocial out-of-it ... or just
someone who doesn’t really speak English.

And you have to respond quickly; too slow, and you seem dim-
witted.

So you want to catch the rhythm. If you think of it musically
<animate> there's two bars in three-quarter time, with a rest.

So it goes like this: <animate to hide rest> knock knock <animate to
show rest> who’s there.

Now, how can people respond so quickly? There’s really no time to
think how to respond.

But it’s okay, because this pattern is used only when there’s no need
to think...

... when from the context it’s obvious what to do, because there’s a
social imperative, that you just have to follow.

Alright, what exactly is the prosodic pattern here? <slide 5>

Well, the two syllables are both lengthened <animate>, with the
second typically longer: 200 milliseconds and 300 milliseconds are typical.

- Both syllables have flat pitch <animate>
- Both are loud and clear <animate>

All these things make it a good attention-getter.

Finally there's the pitch drop <animate>. This is typically a minor third, hence the name of this pattern.

However it can be a little less, if you're an adult, and not too playful, you might say: "knock knock" ... with less of a drop.

However, it can also be greater.

For example, imagine you're calling to your nephew Johnny, who's playing out back <slide 6> "Johnny", or even "Johnny" [hugely sung].

Here the pitch drop is more extreme; it's really singing rather than speaking.

In any case, it again demands a response. Johnny, hearing this, will ideally say "yes" and come running. (If he's a good boy and still small.)

By the way, there's a power difference here: parents can use the minor-third pattern with kids, and bosses when talking to workers, but not so often the other way.

Unless you're being playful.

Here's another example. <slide7> Over here!

Johnny might say this if he's up in a tree wanting Mom to look at him. With the pitch drop it's again demands a response. The response "wow, look at you!" or just a wave....

Now this one's interesting because the word "here" gets transformed. Every dictionary will tell you that "here" has one syllable, but in this context it clearly has two.

Why? Well, this pattern requires loud, lengthened syllables. That is, they must be stressed. But in "over here", only the second word is stressed.

So, that word gets broken in two, to provide enough syllables for the pattern. It's pretty strange: the needs of prosody are stronger than normal pronunciation rules.

Here's another example <slide 8> "I'm home". Again an extra syllable appears.

Interestingly, you can see this pattern without words at all. <slide 9>

Many doorbells ring as a minor third or a major third [hummed ming-mong doorbell sound]

Of course doorbells speak no words; they just make two tones, but this still demands a response. Often the response even comes in the same rhythm <animate>

ding dong, come in;

ding dong, just a second;

ding dong, <animate> who's there

Which relates back to the knock-knock jokes.

Another example where this pattern works without words <slide 10>

is "unh unh".

You might use this if a two-year old is reaching for the cookies, but it's not snack time yet.

In general, the minor-third pattern cues a socially-mandated response. What's the response to "unh-unh"? Stop right away: whatever you're doing, stop.

<slide 11>

Here are some more minor-third examples. These are learned by every native speaker as a child, some in games, and some starting very young.

- Peek-a boo --- for a baby, a way to catch her attention. Usually for babies; they soon learn that this pattern means to pay attention, and then a little later that it demands a response, typically cute laughter works well.
- Knock-knock, usually for first graders, as we saw.
- Nyah Nyah, second-and-third graders, playground taunt, as in nyah-nyah, you can't catch me. (Again there's a social convention: you're supposed to respond by looking up at the taunter and starting to chase him.)
- and Marco, as in Marco (.. Polo), the pool game, for older kids. Call Marco, and the response is Polo, again with the rhythm.

Here are a few more:

- Unh-unh
- Stop that
- Excuse me

Okay, let's review <slide 12>. The minor third pattern has:

- a pitch drop
- two flat, loud, lengthened syllables
- and it demands a response, by social obligation

Okay, one final example; one that you probably know very well; using this minor-third pattern for Good Bye. <slide 13>

<animate>Good<animate>Bye<animate rest>[silent nod for timing]

<animate>good<animate>bye

There's a minor third, a rest, then the other person responds; typically also with 'good bye'.

Let's do this one together. <slide 14>Ready?

*Well, it's been nice talking to you. *Good *Bye. * * * **

(click on each *beat to drive it forward)

(slide 15: title slide again)

F10

[7 to 8 minutes total]