

Uses of Positive Assessment Prosody in Local Radio News

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In American English, positive feeling can be conveyed with a specific temporal configuration of prosodic features, consisting of a high pitch, then a lengthened syllable, often relatively loud, and then a silence or pause (Ward 2019). The connection between this prosodic construction and the meaning of positive assessment has been experimentally demonstrated, and previous work data has categorized the pragmatic contexts where this construction, the "Positive Assessment Construction", is frequently deployed in dialog. These include showing respect to the conversation partner and positively assessing someone, something, or an aspect of the current situation.

The present paper examines how this construction is used in local radio news. I computed a battery of prosodic features at each of several hundred thousand timepoints, sampled densely across 90 minutes of broadcasts, and then applied Principal Component Analysis to derive dimensions, each corresponding to one or two commonly recurring patterns. The negative side of Dimension 5 turned out to match the Positive Assessment Construction, with a pitch peak followed closely by a region of increased loudness and then a region of lengthened phonemes, with the entire configuration typically lasting about 1.2 seconds. Listening to places in the data which most strongly matched this configuration revealed that most did indeed involve positive assessment. (In the examples, the asterisk marks the word where the Positive Assessment prosody begins.) Listening again to identify the typical contexts and pragmatic functions revealed several common uses.

- In positive assessments of situations, actions, or people, as in "[name of suspected criminal] is in *custody," much as seen in dialog data.
- During station identification, as in "this is Space Coast *Radio News".
- When mentioning local cities, institutions and sports teams, as in "both *Melbourne residents" and in "the Brevard County *Manatees today are on the road".
- To nullify the usual negative connotations of some words, as in "are you ready for a *hurricane? Take our poll." and in "medical *marijuana".
- When recommending locations and events to the listeners, as in "Coffee Tree *Café is set for a July 26th opening" and in "enjoy the Wonders of *Waters event on Thursday".
- When referring to victims of accidents or crimes, as in "*[name] was stabbed by [name]".
- When winding up a broadcast or a topic, as in "the investigation into the cause of the crash, *ongoing".

This study illustrates how a prosodic construction can be adapted for functions beyond its core meaning.

See also: Ward, Nigel G. *The Prosodic Patterns of English Conversation*. Cambridge University Press, 2019, Chapter 7: Expressing Positive Assessments. Ward, Nigel G. and James A. Jodoin. A Prosodic Configuration that Conveys Positive Assessment in American English. International Congress of the Phonetic Sciences, 2019