The Prosodic Patterns of English Conversation

Short Description

Appropriate use of prosody in dialog is important for communicating effectively, but there is as yet no clear, comprehensive resource describing the patterns involved. This book will describe thirty of the most common patterns, integrating both classic and recent research and including new findings.

Approach

This book will exploit a new approach to describing prosody, one that breaks it down into prosodic constructions. These are recurring temporal patterns of prosodic activity that express specific meanings and functions. These typically involve not only pitch contours but also energy, rate, timing and articulation properties, and may involve synchronized contributions by two participants.

Variants of this style of description have been adopted independently over the past few years by leading figures in several research traditions: experimental phonetics, auto- segmental-metrical prosody, conversational analysis, and signal processing. In July there was an all-day panel at the International Pragmatics Association Meeting on Prosodic Constructions in Dialog. As we examined this convergence, it became clear that a theory-agnostic systematization of knowledge in this area is sorely needed.

This book will describe prosody using concise examples, simple figures, and clear explanations. It will mostly avoid specialized notations, such as ToBI, and lengthy examples, as favored by Conversation Analysis. While there are people interested in the topic but who may pass on a book that doesn't follow the traditions of their community, a book unconstrained by either can better serve the larger audience.

Unique Features

This book will integrate and relate findings that are currently scattered and buried in obscure papers, and augment these with findings derived from large datasets by my own semi-automated analysis procedure, developed with NSF support. The result will be a new synthesis. It will have a descriptive focus, unlike work which treats the phenomena only as fodder for developing theories. By analyzing the prosody of conversation in terms of individual constructions it will demystify some apparently-complex phenomena. For each construction the book will clearly present 1) the form, that is the sequence of prosodic properties that comprise it, 2) its meanings and functions, 3) the contexts in which it is appropriate, and 4) common ways that it combines with other constructions.

Audiences

The primary targets for this book are senior and graduate classes in programs in linguistics, applied linguistics, and the teaching of English as a second language. For example, it could be used in classes in Conversation Practices, Topics in Phonetics, Introductory Pragmatics, Language and Interaction, or in a seminar or practicum. Students love classes that reveal the hidden structure underlying the familiar and apparently mundane, and also like facts and concepts that they can apply in their professional lives and in their daily encounters.

The second target will be professors teaching such classes. They are generally eager for interesting topics that connect well to many aspects of language and its use. They generally want clear explanations of established knowledge but also speculative discussions and open questions suitable for homework assignments and essay topics.

The third target, overlapping the second, is linguists and other scholars. In both prosody and in dialog it can be hard to see the forest for the trees. By systematizing what is known and clarifying some key issues, this book will catalyze and enable deeper and broader study, not only by phoneticians and pragmatics researchers, but also by sociolinguists, cognitive linguists, comparative linguists, and specialists in language acquisition, education, and assessment. To support use as a handbook or reference, each chapter will include clear summaries and diagrams of the constructions introduced.

The fourth target will be teachers of English as a second language who are looking for new ways to help their students become more effective communicators. Prosody is important in interaction for everyone, from kindergarteners to professionals, and can be learned by students at all levels, without specific prerequisite knowledge. This book will not be a textbook nor a teachers guide, but for some chapters I will produce lesson plans, exercises and instructional videos, to illustrate how they can be taught. For the sake of readers who are not native speakers, who may need more than explanations and diagrams to appreciate the sounds of the constructions, I will provide audio clips for most of the examples.

A fifth possible audience is readers of self-help books. Everyone wants to communicate better, both in their work and in their relationships, and there are no books that clearly explain the nuts and bolts of prosody in effective conversation.

Competition

Existing books about prosody only marginally explain how it is used for effective communication. English language textbooks that include a chapter on prosody generally focus on rhythm, stress, and emphasis, which are important but by themselves adequate only for lecturing and other monolog activities. On the pragmatic aspects of prosody, the best existing resource is probably Wells's *English Intonation* (Cambridge, 2006), but this, like similar books, lacks two crucial things: discussion of prosody beyond pitch, and discussion of most of what really happens in conversation, beyond the classic categories of questions, invitations, and the like, and beyond simple situations such as asking directions of the hotel clerk. Deborah Tannen's books do a great job of illustrating the importance of sensitivity in interaction and the relevance of prosodic skills, but, except for the short Conversational Signals section of *That's Not What I Meant!* (1986), provide few specifics. Academic books on prosody in conversation exist, notably Szczepek Reed's *Analyzing Conversation: An introduction to prosody* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), but these are addressed to research-oriented students and mostly highlight the research methods, rather than actually listing and clearly explaining the patterns that people most commonly use.

I have exhaustively examined publishers' offerings in this area, including at TESOL in Toronto this spring (where your colleagues kindly gave me your card and suggested I contact you), and found no books that currently meet this need. And, based on conversations at IPrA, TESOL and elsewhere, it appears that no one else is planning a book in this area.

Reasons for Writing

I am writing this book because of frustration and hope. The frustration is from seeing valuable findings about conversational prosody go to waste, unknown and inaccessible beyond scholars in a

few isolated niches. I also see non-native speakers of English, including friends and co-workers, failing to communicative effectively because they never learned these constructions, because they were never taught, because their teachers lacked a resource on the facts of the prosody of dialog. My hope is that a clear and comprehensive account of prosodic constructions will change this, catalyzing further discoveries, fostering wider uptake of this knowledge, and helping people communicate better.

My interest in communication goes back to a course I took my senior year, an interdisciplinary course in language and culture whose readings included George Lakoff's *Metaphors We Live By*. I stayed up all night and read it through, thinking deep thoughts about language and concepts and society and life. I want this book to excite students the same way, revealing to them another little-remarked but deeply important part of human behavior.

My qualifications to write this book include 30 years of experience modeling language, starting with my graduate study at Berkeley with Professors Lakoff and Fillmore. While doing speech technology research, I have developed methods that enable the systematic discovery of recurring prosodic patterns from collections of dialog data. The patterns that this method discovers, happily, often correspond to those identified in various scattered studies in the research literatures. Thus, after 30 years working on speech and language technology, I feel I now have something to give back, a solid contribution to linguistic knowledge, and one that may also fascinate students and ultimately help everyone.

Thanks to a Fulbright Fellowship and support from Kyoto University, I now have a year to devote to this project.

Format and Schedule

I envision a book of 10 chapters, mostly about 11000 words each, for a total of about 100,000 words. There will be about 100 black-and-white figures, which I will provide. There will also be about 200 audio clips, which I will prepare and organize into web pages. The writing will likely be finished by July 2016.

This is the prospectus for the book that became *Prosodic Patterns in English Conversation*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2019.

Nigel G. Ward