Discourse Intonation

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What is intonation?

Broad definition: Three *Ps*

- **Prominence:** Utterance stress, prominent syllables are usually louder, longer and higher in pitch
- **Pitch:** "Melody" of the speech – rises & falls, pitch height
- **Pause:** Creation of speech units in the speech stream

Why is teaching intonation important?

intonation

intonation

impression
management
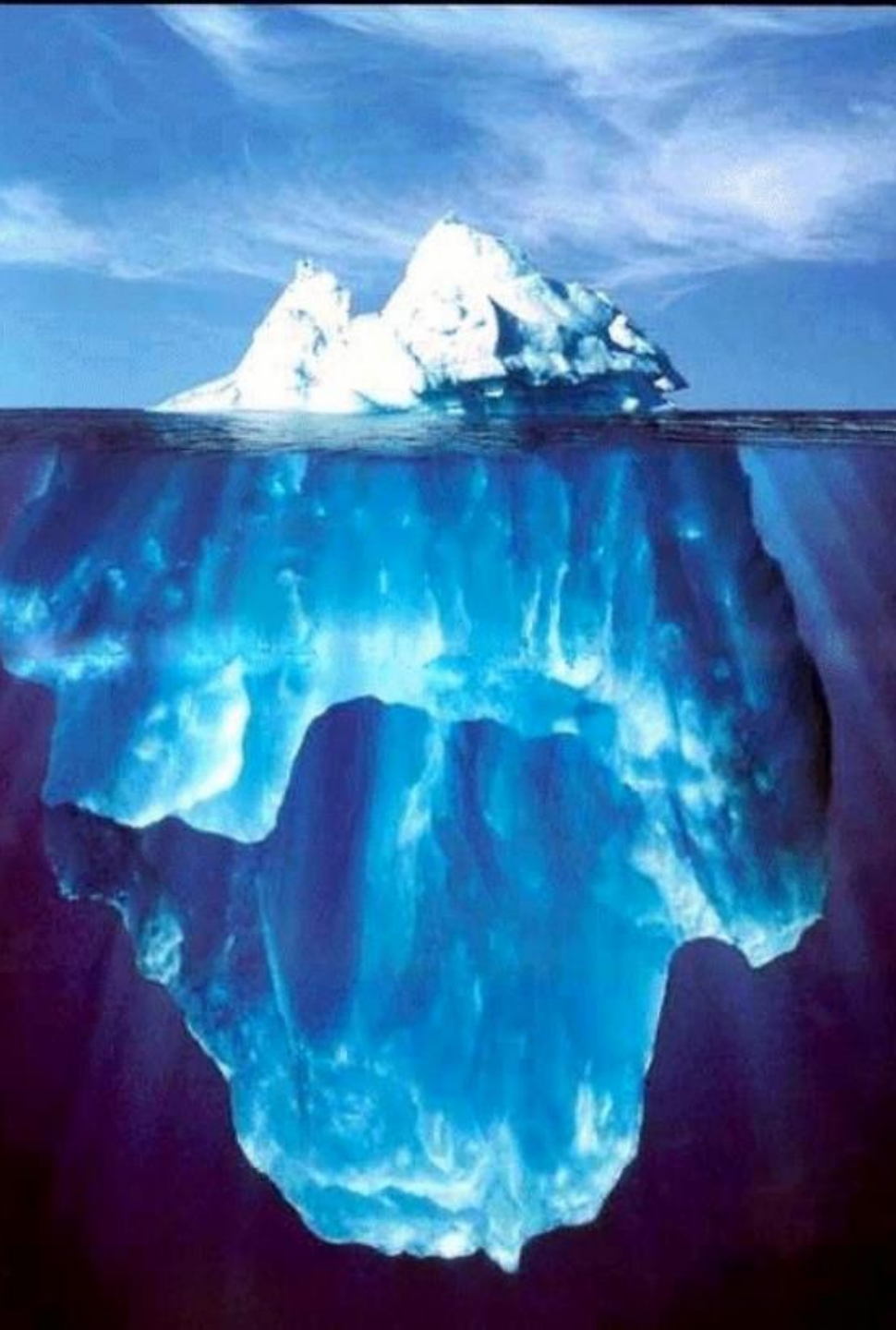
The Linguistic Penalty.

The Linguistic Penalty is the result of hidden interactional difficulties or interpretations of linguistic behaviors that are "below the waterline"

Given that we derive much of our impressions about a speaker's attitude and disposition toward us from the way they use intonation in speech, listeners may form a negative impression of a speaker based on the constantly inappropriate use of intonation.

(Mennen, 2007, p. 54)

What are the effects of unexpected intonation patterns?

Benign………Highly Disruptive

Benign example…

Many times, my husband, a native Spanish-speaker, has said, "Where's YOUR car?" I asked him, "As opposed to who else's?" (We had come together in mine.)

He asked me what I was talking about, and I told him that the way he said it sounded "weird".

I had tacit knowledge of intonation but could not verbalize the rules.

I told him he should say instead 'Where's your CAR?'

More disruptive: Emphatic mismatch
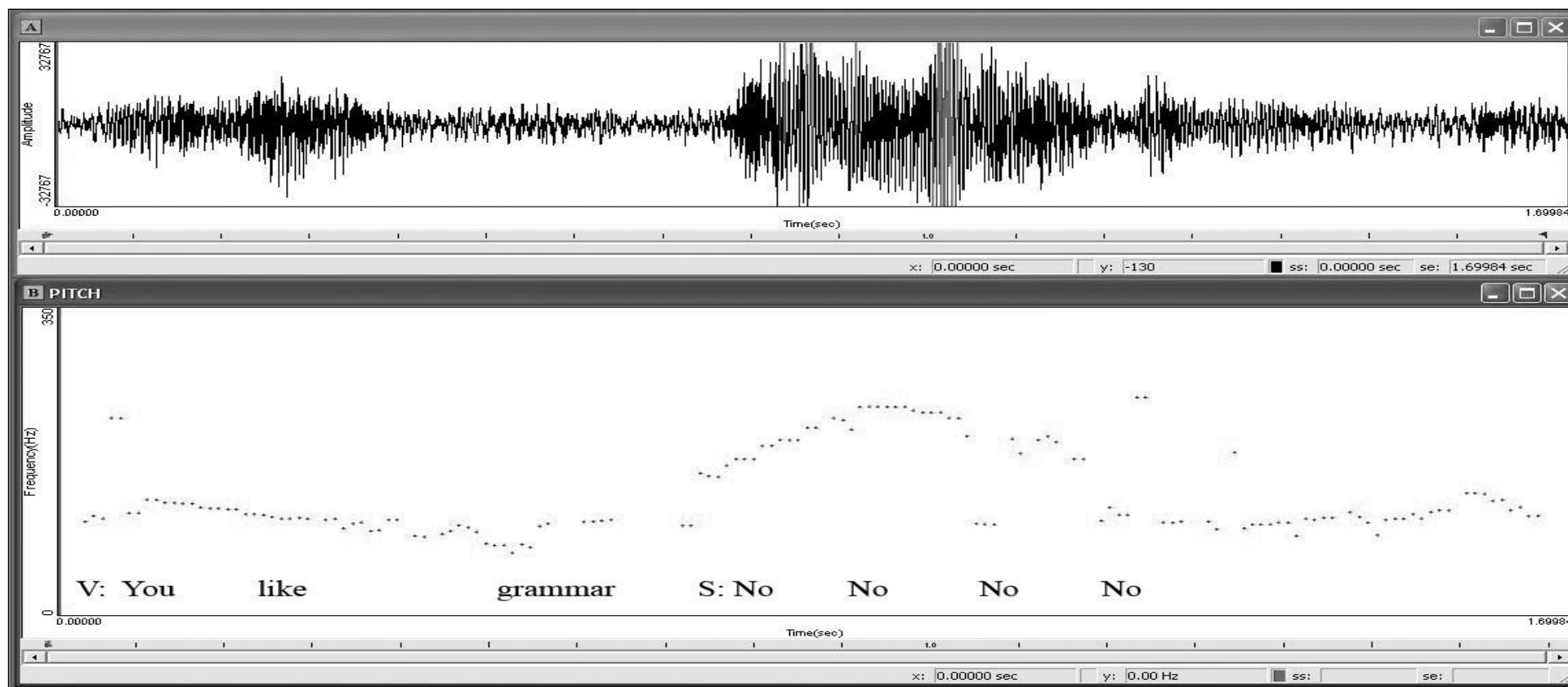
Where do I start?

3 Ps: Prominence

Traditional Approach: Stress all content words and no function words

Typical learner error: Multiple prominences with a single unit

Better Approach: Use discourse examples to highlight how prominence reflects information structure

Example

A: I need to borrow some <u>MO</u>ney (*money* is the new information)

B: How <u>MUCH</u> money? (prominence shifts to *much* a⃗s money is now old information)

BUT NOT:

A: I need to borrow some <u>Mo</u>ney

B: How much <u>MO</u>ney?

3 Ps: Pitch

Traditional Approach: Syntax and affect (e.g. questions)

Typical learner error: Overusing falling and level tones

Better Approach: Prioritize relationship-building function of pitch

Example: Intonational "Yes, but..." strategy

(1) A: //I thought the movie was **↘GREAT ↑RIGHT**//
   B: // →**UMM ↑WELL**//
   Does B probably agree or disagree with A?

(2) T: So, if the flame turns purple – what chemical is that?
   S: Sodium
   T: **↘NO** it's not **↘SO**dium
   or
   T: **↑SO**dium
   Which answer is more likely and why?

3 Ps: Pause

Traditional Approach: There really isn't one ☺

Typical learner error: Erratic pause patterns with highly variable pause placement and lengths that break up melodic contours

Better Approach: Work with different discourse genres to improve spoken fluency

Example

Have learners mark pauses in two or more very different genres; for example, a speech vs. someone excitedly telling a story:

//where do we begin// from those I have spoken to// through my work with 'Turning Point'// the beginning seems to be// that women in our society are seen as the carers// whatever life throws at them// they will always cope// (Princess Diana, 1993; *Sweetspeeches.com*)

//so totally the best vacation I ever went on was to Disneyworld when we were like 6 or 7 and all of us went you know like Coco, Ale, Kieran, you know Kathy's kids//It's the only time mum paid for the Disney hotel so we were right there like a boat ride away like we were but not Kathy and her kids//

(my niece ☺)

Intonation is learnable and teachable!

"I feel as though my entire language learning experience has been one punctuated by uncomfortable interactions caused in part by different norms in intonation, stress, and/or non-verbal communication!"

"All these years I've been teaching various things and to actually get a term, as simple as the word 'prominence', which I probably should have known, but I had never come across before ... so for me it's like putting together a jigsaw puzzle."

MIND THE GAP

Shameless plug…