

Non-Native Speakers, Intonation, Pragmatics, and Background

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Abstract

Intonation is intricately connected to pragmatic meaning (Hirschberg 2004, Portes, Beyssade, Michelas, Marandin, & Champagne-Lavau, M. 2014) and speakers can manipulate prosody to convey implicit messages (Cheang & Pell, 2007). In this study, I have defined these implicit messages as a speaker's illocutionary point (Searle 1985, Searle & Vanderveken 1985). This study evaluates to what extent NNSs of English understand the pragmatic meaning that can be delivered through intonation and how their background in listening to American TV/movies/video games in English contributes. It further evaluates if previous input from NS contributes to their understanding. Sixteen students participated from two Level 4 and one Level 5 Listening and Speaking classes at the Program in Intensive English (PIE). Results show that NNS understanding of a speaker's illocutionary point varied, but the two highest scoring students both watched 6 to 10 hours of TV/movies in English per week, while the lowest scoring student watched no TV/movies and played no games. Furthermore, input from NS before the participants arrived in the U.S. was limited for most. Other observations illustrated that students heard and were able to take note of many different ways to describe the quality of speech.

Keywords: *pragmatics, intonation, illocutionary point*

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BACKGROUND

This study combined the fields of phonology and pragmatics, as it investigated the link between a learner's background and their comprehension of a speaker's illocutionary point, in regards to intonation, delivered through four different speech acts (compliments, apologies, invitations, and assertions) and polarity questions. Speaking of intonation and the illocutionary point, this study evaluated if intermediate and high intermediate NNSs of English understand the "consequences" of a speaker choosing one tone (*fall-rise, fall, etc.*) as opposed to another (Brazil, 1997) and the meaning that is conveyed through that choice. Intonation is involved in the delivery of a certain speech act (assertion, compliment, etc.), as well as in the response. Once the speech act is delivered and recognized by the hearer, there is a preferred and dispreferred response that can be performed in a preferred and dispreferred manner (Schegloff, 2007).

NNS participants listened to sound files of interaction involving invitations, yes/no questions, compliments, apologies, and assertions (two sound files for each). For each sound file, there was a preferred or dispreferred second-pair part, which involved intonation in the response. The participants responded to questions about the illocutionary point (Searle 1985, Searle & Vanderveken 1985) of the speaker in the second pair part (excluding apologies in which the questions were about the first pair part of the apology) using a modified version of Andrew Cohen's model of assessment of pragmatic comprehension (2010). After these questions, the learners completed a questionnaire (modeled after Freed, Dewey, Segalowitz, & Halter, 2004) about their background, mainly evaluating if they listen to TV/movies and/or video games in English. Because my study is largely dependent on background, data was only used

from students who consented both their background information about how often they watched TV/movies and played games, as well as their written responses to the questions about a speaker's illocutionary point. The results show that the two highest-scoring students (8 correct responses) both watched TV/movies for 6 to 10 hours a week, and the lowest scoring student (4 correct responses) watched no TV/movies and played no games.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. To what extent do non-native speakers of English understand the illocutionary point from intonation?
2. Does a learner's background in listening to TV shows, movies, and games in English influence the learner's understanding of the illocutionary point through intonation?
3. Does input from native speakers of English (outside the context of media and games) influence a learner's understanding of the illocutionary point through intonation?

METHODS

My study was implemented in two Level 4 (intermediate) and one Level 5 (upper intermediate) Listening and Speaking classes to a total of sixteen participants at the Program in Intensive English (PIE). Context was provided before playing each sound file, introducing the names of the speakers in each sound file. Potentially difficult vocabulary that would come up in the listening of the sound file was also explained in advance. The participants were allowed to listen to the sound files several times until they were ready to answer the questions. The instrumentation included the multiple choice options a) *likely* b) *unlikely* and c) *I don't know*. The answer "I don't know" was advised only if the students were really unsure of how to respond. The rationale (explanation of the student's response) was obligatory. I removed the

names of the movies or TV series from which I took the sound files in order not to give unnecessary clues about how the shows if the students were familiar with them.

After this portion of the study was completed, I collected the responses, and as requested by the teachers of these students, I performed a pedagogical intervention by playing the sound files again and discussing the correct/incorrect responses. This is where I was able to address intonational patterns and explain in amateur terms the signification of some of the different patterns, as understood from the sound files. Following this explanation, I administered a background questionnaire to obtain information about whether or not the students listened to TV/movies and/or video games in English.

It should be noted that in the Level 5 Listening and Speaking class, my study was conducted by the teacher of that class after he had previously watched me conduct the study in his Level 4 Listening and Speaking class.

RESULTS

Research Question 1

The extent to which the participants understood the illocutionary point through intonation, as understood through correct responses, can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1.

Analysis of Correct Responses

4 correct responses: $n = 1$ 5 correct responses: $n = 4$ 6 correct responses: $n = 6$
7 correct responses: $n = 3$ 8 correct responses: $n = 2$

Mean (to nearest whole number) = 6 ~ ~ Standard deviation = 1.09

Total Number of Participants: $N = 16$

It seems to be suggested that the students' understanding of the illocutionary point in these sound files was quite mixed, but largely concentrated around 5 or 6 correct responses. There were no lower than 4 correct responses and no higher than 8.

Research Question 2

The student who answered the fewest questions correctly (four questions) also answered that she watched *no* TV/movies and played *no* games. The only other student who responded that he watched no TV/movies and played no games, received the second lowest score (5 correctly answered questions). The two students who answered 8 questions correctly *both* watched between 6 to 10 hours of TV/movies. Both students who answered 8 questions correctly played no video games. Besides these two highest scoring students who watched between 6 to 10 hours of TV/movies a week, 3 other students also watched between 6 to 10 hours as well (two scoring 5 points and the other scoring 6 points).

Research Question 3

The background questionnaire asked students to speak of their interaction with NS of English *before* coming to the United States. Six students marked that they “never” interacted with native speakers. Seven students marked “a few times a year.” The remaining three students spoke English with native speakers monthly or daily, and of these students, they all answered 6 questions correctly; thus, not the highest nor lowest scorers. The two highest scorers and the lowest scorer all reported speaking English a few times a year.

Other observations

I noted that level wasn't necessary a determining factor in predicting better scores, as the two highest scorers came from both level 4 and level 5. Furthermore, all students in level 5, besides the highest scoring student, answered between 5-6 correct questions (close to average).

Another observation concerns the variety of English to which the students listen: one student plays video games in American/British English and two others watch TV/movies in American/British English. All of the others who watch TV/movies and play games, do so in American English.

Finally, even though the students may have been missing the technical language to talk about intonation, they found numerous other ways to describe different qualities of a speaker's voice, illustrating that the students are paying attention to voice quality. Some ways the students described a speaker's voice were through the following words or phrases: "surprised," "excited," "awkward," "shy," "angry," "sincere," "confident," "low volume," "happy," "not happy," "with hesitation," "with emphasis," and "with feeling." One student out of the sixteen mentioned the word "intonation" in one of his ten rationales. Another student mentioned voice "intensity" in one of his rationales.

RELEVANCE TO THE PIE AND SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Eighty-eight percent of my sixteen participants from the PIE, an Intensive English Program with very academic oriented goals, are either watching TV/movies and/or playing games in English on a weekly basis. This means that these students are doing this in their own time through indirect input. Because the students are interested in these mediums of input, teachers can perhaps use TV and movie clips in a listening/speaking classroom in a more direct way to help students improve their skills. If this is something that students enjoy on their own time, it may increase student motivation in the classroom, especially when a teacher can take bits and pieces of these forms and use them for pedagogical purposes in a listening/speaking class.

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