Academic Competence and Linguistic Performance: A Study of English Intonation Tune Assignment by Some Nigerian English Language Postgraduate Students

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Abstract

It has been observed that being academically competent in Phonetics, English Phonology and Spoken English does not affect most Nigerians' performance in the appropriate use of English intonation tunes. This is probably due to the fact that, contrary to what obtains in its mother tongue context, English is often learnt in the classroom rather than acquired naturally in Nigeria. Therefore, this paper presents an investigation of the relevance of academic competence to linguistic performance in the use of English intonation tunes in Nigeria. Thirty subjects, who have been exposed to the basic knowledge of Phonetics, English Phonology and Spoken English, and have been considered academically competent enough to be awarded a first degree in the English language and admitted to a Master of Arts in the English language in University of Ibadan were randomly selected for this investigation. They were given some oral production tests on intonation tune assignment. The data was subjected to perceptual analysis by awarding scores for appropriate performance and statistically converting the scores to simple percentages. The acoustic analysis was done using Speech Filing System (SFS)/WASP version 1.3 computerized speech tools developed in University of London. The results revealed the subjects' performance as reflecting that academic competence has little or no effect on the appropriate assignment of intonation tunes in polite requests, complex sentences and attitudinal functions such as surprise, indifference and expression of doubts or uncertainty, and that the only appropriately used tune is the falling tune followed by the rising tune which has been fairly mastered for polar questions.

Introduction

It has been established that English as spoken and used in Nigeria differ remarkably from the Standard. The area where the differences are most noticed is the spoken form since it is basically performance. The native speaker of English acquires the spoken form naturally while the Nigerian speakers, as second language users, learn it. While the native speaker is expected to have intuition about what is right or wrong in English, his mother tongue, the Nigerian speaker has to learn its appropriate use. The question of linguistic competence therefore becomes irrelevant in the second language context where the speakers, rather than possess intuition have to learn the rules in the classroom.

The question to be addressed then is, even for those that have been accredited to possess some academic competence by the award of the first degree and the subsequent pursuit of a Master's degree in the English language, how well does their performance reflect there academic competence which secondarily translates to linguistic competence in the second language setting?

Competence and Performance

Noam Chomsky (1965) defines linguistic competence as the system of linguistic knowledge possessed by native speakers of a language which makes it possible for speakers to produce and understand an infinite number of sentences in their language and to distinguish grammatical sentences from ungrammatical sentences. He differentiates linguistic competence from linguistic performance, claiming that the later has to do with the use of language. Linguistic competence is the speakers' unconscious knowledge of the grammar of his or her native language while linguistic performance has to do with the actual production and comprehension of utterances (Wales, 1987; de Valenzuela, 1998). Chomsky separates 'competence,' an idealized capacity, from the production of actual utterances, 'performance.'

Since, competence, being an ideal, is a psychological or mental property or function, it is obvious that the concept will not be appropriate in relation to English in Nigeria where it is a second language, often learnt in school and rarely acquired naturally. It is therefore paramount to redefine competence in relation to spoken English in the Nigerian context. Multilinguals rarely develop equal fluency in all the languages they know. Most Nigerians possess the competence described in generative grammar only in their mother tongues, not in English. This paper therefore addresses competence in Nigerian English from an academic point of view. A degree or higher degree in English language is assessed as a proof of competence, especially having been exposed to the basic knowledge of English phonetics, phonology and spoken English.

Intonation

Intonation is the aspect of speech melody which arises as words are put together into phrases (Pierrehumbert, 1992) and is associated with relative prominence and pitch modulation, the aspect of sound which we perceive in terms of high or 'low' (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1987). It has also been asserted that intonational languages employ the use of pitch distinctively since two sentences can be exactly the same phonetically except for the overall pitch contour which is called intonation which can be used to distinguish between two different meanings (Fromkin and Rodman, 1978).

There is relative agreement in the literature on the fact that all languages make use of intonation but that the difference between tonal and intonational languages is in the domain of use (Pierrehumbert 1992; Crutenden, 1986). An intonational language has the tone group (often a word group) as its domain while a tonal language has the word as its domain.

The intonation of English has been considerably studied when compared to other languages. However, a lot of controversy has been generated on its inventory as well as the phonological characterization of its different patterns. Many linguists identified two 'basic' tunes for English and other varied combinations of these two tunes have been discussed (Robin, 1971; Gimson, 1975; Roach, 1992). According to Robins, Tune I and Tune II, as termed by Jones, stand for the falling tune while Tune II stands for the rising tune. He went further to explain that these tunes (I and II) are not the only tunes in English but that they cover a good deal of ordinary speech. For example, wh-questions,

declarative statements, exclamations and orders are assigned the falling tune while polar questions and requests are assigned the rising tune.

Roach (1991) identifies three basic tunes: high, fall, level but went further to expand the three basic tunes to five by exploring how they are combined in speech, subsequently proposing the tunes: fall, rise , fall-rise , rise-fall and level. The fall tune is regarded as giving an impression of finality, the rise as conveying that something more is to follow; the fall-rise ,which is used a lot in English, as conveying 'limited agreement' or 'response with reservations', the rise-fall a strong feeling of approval, disapproval or surprise', and the level, which is used in a rather restricted context in English, almost always convey (on single-syllable utterances), a feeling of saying something routine, uninteresting or boring. These set of tunes as expressed by Roach (1991) are rather odd-looking and might make the intonation of English seem rather too complex to understand to a second language user of English who uses intonation restrictively in his mothertongue.

The domain of intonation is the tone unit or group which has four components. These are the optional Pre-head, optional Head, obligatory Nucleus and optional Tail. The Nucleus (also called the tonic syllable) is usually but not necessarily the last stressed syllable in the tone group and it is usually on this syllable that the pitch direction is effected. Sommerstein (1977) also notes that a tonic syllable (i.e. nucleus) in a tone group does not only bear the tone but also a type of stress termed nuclear stress. The Head is from the first stressed syllable to the last syllable before the tonic syllable (or Nucleus), the Pre-Head- all unstressed syllables before the Head, while the Tail is every unstressed syllable after the Tonic syllable (Crutenden 1986; Roach, 1991).

Nigerian English Intonation
Intonation, a feature of many languages, has different presentations in different languages. In tonal languages such as most Nigerian languages, the variation in pitch is used to contrast the meaning of individual words while in intonational languages such as English, it is a feature of the word group. Cruz- Ferraire (1989) claims that intonation is the 'last stronghold of a foreign accent in speaking any L2' and intonation as used in Nigerian English has been observed to be peculiarly different from that of Standard English and it has been viewed as a difficult suprasegmental to master for Nigerian speakers of English. (Dunstan, 1969; Banjo, 1979; Eka, 1985; Atoye, 2005; Jowitt, 1991; Udofot, 1997; Akinjobi & Oladipupo, 2010)

Eka (1985) found that the distribution of simple tones were more than complex tones in Nigerian English as compared to higher complex tones in Standard English while Udofot's study revealed that both in read and spontaneous speeches, falling tunes were predominant in Nigerian English, rising tones relatively rare, fall-rise even rarer and rise-fall mainly by Variety II subjects. Still confirming the disparity between the uses of intonation tunes in Standard English and Nigerian English, Jowitt (1991) also observes that the rich intonational resources of Standard English are neglected by the majority of Nigerian users.

Atoye (2005) however observes that the problem is greater with interpretation than perception after investigating the perception and interpretation of a sub-class of sentence intonation by some Nigerian users of English. He discovered that 85.7% correctly perceived changes in intonation but obtained only 25.7% correct interpretation of the meanings normally associated with the intonation contours of the ten sentences played back to the subjects. He therefore recommends the teaching of the social meaning of intonation to non-native learners instead of the analysis of its phonological structure.

Akinjobi and Oladipupo's (2010) study further confirms that Nigerian users of English encounter difficulties in the appropriate use of Intonation tunes, especially for attitudinal functions.

Nigerian English
It has been established by various researches conducted on Nigerian English that it differs markedly from Standard English at every level of language, most especially, the spoken form. The various language groups even have their peculiar characteristics which mark the sub-varieties found within the variety – Nigerian English. Therefore it is possible to use terms such as Igbo English, Hausa English, Yoruba English, Ibiobio English etc. (Jibril 1982; Eka, 1985; Jowitt, 1990, Udofot, 1997; Gut, 2001)

Nigerian English has also been classified using educational parameters. The classical Banjo (1971) 'points on a cline' categorization has been used by many as a yardstick to determine the standard in relation to Nigerian English. (Udofot, 1997, 2000; Eka 1985; Akinjobi, 2004, 2006). It has been observed however that variation is more noticeable in the spoken form and that it often transcends educational status.

This paper therefore investigates how some Nigerian postgraduate students of English (emphasizing language) who have acquired a degree in English language and are in pursuit of a master's degree utilize the knowledge they have acquired and whether or not their performance reflect their academic competence.

Methodology
Thirty postgraduate students of English who are emphasizing language (as opposed to Literature) and have all undergone undergraduate courses in English phonetics and phonology as well as completed an advance English phonology course were made to utter some English sentences into a computerized speech laboratory. The instrument covers grammatical functions such as tune assignment to simple statements, commands, wh-questions, exclamations, polar questions, polite requests, statements to be changed to questions; and attitudinal functions such as uttering surprises, showing indifference and expressing doubt and uncertainty.

The speech data were listened to and consequently sorted out into various items that were being tested. Appropriate and inappropriate uses were counted and converted statistically to percentages. This is with the aim of revealing the variants that are most frequent and determining whether they conform to standard forms or further corroborate findings from

earlier researches that Nigerian English intonation tune assignment differ markedly from the standard.

The acoustic analysis, aimed at corroborating the findings from perceptual analysis, was done with a PC based sound analysis system. The software consists of a suite of sound processing packages – the SFS/WASP version 1.3.

3.5   Research questions
The research questions are:
- Does the academic competence of the postgraduate students specializing in English with Language emphasis reflect in their linguistic performance in English Intonation tune assignment?

- Having been assumed to be academically competent, can the subjects' performance be assessed as debunking earlier claims that Nigerians do not assign intonation tunes appropriately?

ANALYSES

1. Test of Appropriate grammatical function

Utterance Type	Falling Tune		Rising Tune		Flat Tune.	
	No of instances	Percentage	No of instances	Percentage	No of instances	Percentage
Simple statements	24	80%	-	-	*6	20%
Simple Commands	23	77%	-	-	*7	23%
Wh-questions	24	80%	*3	10%	*3	10%
Exclamations	26	87%			*4	13%
Polar Questions	*6	20%	18	60%	*6	20%

* Inappropriate tune assignment

In the assignment of intonation tunes to simple statements, commands, wh-questions, and exclamations, the subjects assigned the appropriate falling tune 80%, 77%, 80% and 87% of the instances respectively. With polar questions where the rising tune is expected, 60% of the instances, the appropriate rising tune was assigned while a significant 40% of the instances has the falling and flat tunes inappropriately assigned. However, in the uttering of polite requests, only two instances, constituting 7% have the appropriate rising tune assigned while in a very significant 53% and 40% of the instances, the wrong falling and flat tunes were inappropriately assigned.

2. Test of Appropriate grammatical function

Utterance Type	Fall/Fall		Rise/fall		Flat/flat	
	No of instances	Percentage	No of instances	Percentage	No of instances	Percentage
Sentences with dependent and independent clauses	*18	60%	3	10%	*9	30%

* Inappropriate tune assignment

In the assignment of intonation tune to sentences with dependent and independent clauses, none of the subjects used the appropriate rise/fall tune, while a significant 60% and 40% respectively assigned the fall/fall and the flat tunes.

3. Test of Appropriate grammatical function

Utterance Type	Falling Tune		Rising Tune		Flat Tune.	
	No of instances	Percentage	No of instances	Percentage	No of instances	Percentage
Statements as statements	20	100%	-	-	-	-
Statements as questions	*7	35%	11	55%	*2	10%

* Inappropriate tune assignment

Regarding changing statements to questions, all the subjects (100%) appropriately used the falling tune for the statements but only 55% of the instances have the appropriate rising tune for changing statements to questions while 35% and 10% inappropriately used the falling and flat tunes respectively.

4. Test of Attitudinal Function

Utterance Type	Falling Tune		Rising Tune		Flat Tune.	
	No of instances	Percentage	No of instances	Percentage	No of instances	Percentage
Surprise	*21	70%	-	0%	*9	30%
Indifference	*24	80%	-	0%	*6	20%
Uncertainty	*18	60%	-	0%	*12	40%

and doubt						
Polite Requests	*16	53%	**2**	7%	*12	40%

* Inappropriate tune assignment

In the test of the use of attitudinal function of intonation, in 70% of the instances, the falling tune is inappropriately used to express surprise, 80% to express indifference and 60% to express uncertainty or doubt while the flat tune constitutes 30%, 20% and 40% respectively. In none of the instances is the appropriate rising tune assigned.

5. Overall performance

Utterance type	Appropriate Intonation Tune	Percentage of Appropriate Tune Assignment	Percentage of Inappropriate tune Assignment
Simple statements	Falling	80%	20%
Simple Commands	Falling	77%	23%
Wh-questions	falling	80%	20%
Exclamations	Falling	87%	13%
Polar Questions	Rising	60%	40%
Complex sentences	Rise/fall	10%	90%
Statements as statements	Falling	100%	0%
Statements as questions	Rising	55%	45%
Surprise	Rising	0%	100%
Indifference	Rising	0%	100%
Uncertainty and doubt	Rising	0%	100%
Polite Requests	Rising	7%	93%

The table above is a summary of the overall performance of the subjects. It reveals good performance in the assignment of tunes to simple statements, commands, wh-questions, exclamations and a fairly good performance with regards to polar questions and changing statements to questions. However, with sentences with dependent and independent clauses, the subjects did not perform well.

In the test of the use of attitudinal function of intonation, all the subjects assigned the wrong tunes to express surprises, indifference as well as uncertainty and doubt. With polite requests, the inappropriate falling and flat tunes were used almost in all instances.

6. Acoustic Analysis

Are you the prince we're looking for? **(Rising tune)**
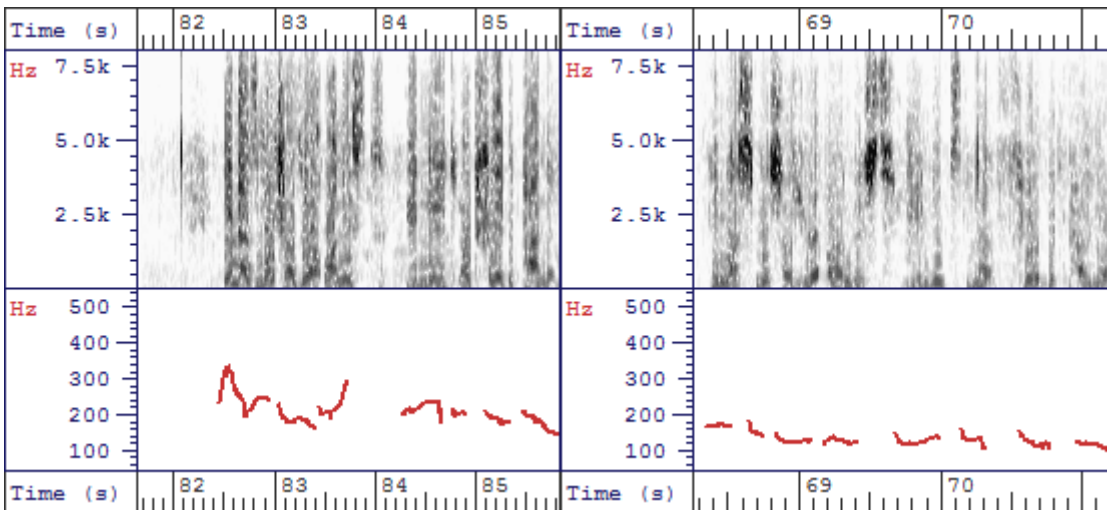
Subject 1:right   **Subject 11: wrong**
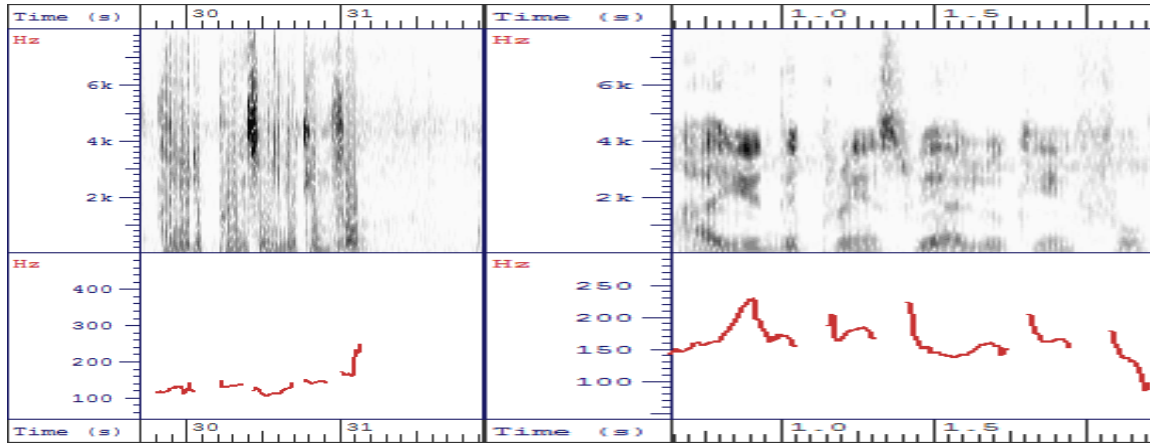
The pitch contour for Subject 1 glides up appropriately (rising tune) while that of Subject 11 glides down (falling tune) in the polar question 'Are you the prince we're looking for?'

In as much as you're honest, you need not fear the panel (**Rise/fall tune**)
Subject 6: Right   **Subject 4: wrong**

For subject 6, the tune rises on honest and falls on panel but subject 4 has a flat tune running through the whole utterance.

Well, she could make it here in the morning (**uncertainty and doubt- rising tune**)
No subject produced the right tune   **Subject 13 : wrong**
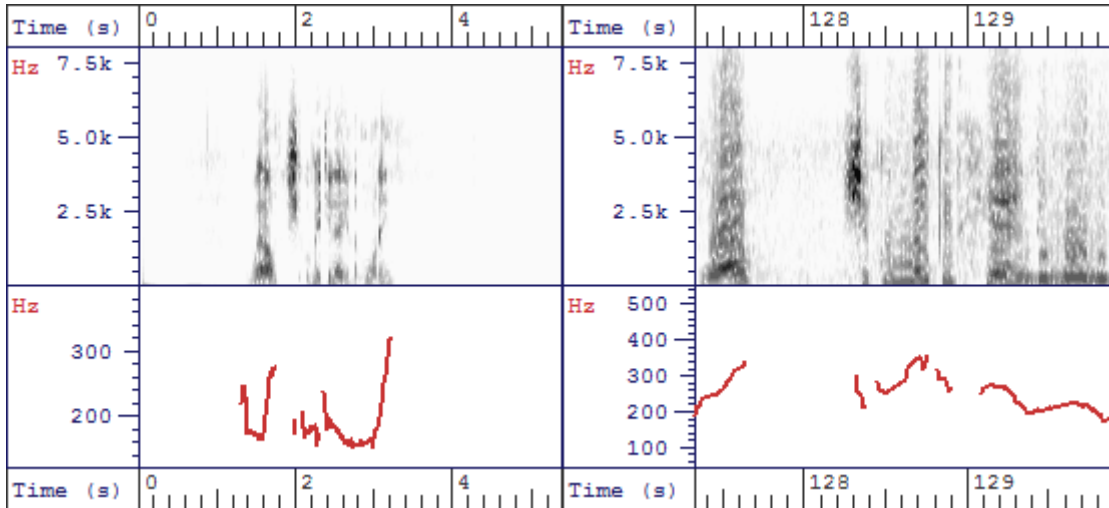
To express uncertainty or doubt above, none of the subjects used the appropriate rising tune on the 'mor-' of 'morning' while Subject 13 wrongly assigned the falling tune to the utterance.

Results

- The academic competence of the Nigerian postgraduate students specializing in English with language emphasis does not reflect in their linguistic performance in English intonation tune assignment. Though they could assign intonation tunes appropriately where the falling tune is used such as with simple statements, commands, wh-questions, and exclamations, they could only fairly employ the rising tune with polar questions. In the use of the rising tune to express attitudinal functions such as surprise, indifference, polite requests and certainty or doubt, they employed the falling and flat tunes.

- Despite the fact that they have undergone training at undergraduate and postgraduate levels which qualify them to be academically competent, the subjects' performance does not debunk earlier claims that Nigerians do not assign intonation tunes appropriately (Dunstan, 1969; Banjo, 1979; Cruz- Ferraire,1989; Eka, 1985; Udofot, 2001; Atoye, 2005; Akinjobi & Oladipupo 2005, 2010).

Conclusion and Suggestions

This study concludes that academic competence may not influence English language experts in the use of English intonation though they have been exposed to intonation at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Therefore, it agrees with Atoye's recommendation that the social meaning of intonation rather than the analysis of its phonological structure should be taken more seriously in teaching intonation to non-native learners.

It is further recommended that non-enculturation sources such as electronic media, for instance, recorded voices of first language users and second language users who

pronounce well be employed to help learners attain a moderate level of proficiency in the use of intonation. Radio stations such as British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Cable News Network (CNN), SkyNews and other stations where first language English could be accessed are good learning sources for English intonation. Closely related to these are satellite television sources such as Cartoon Network (CN), Mnet Series, Mnet Action etc which have been observed to be effective in the learning and improvement of performance in the use of English suprasegmentals. It will be too high a goal to aspire a native-like proficiency level but determined learners could get close enough to attain international intelligibility.

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