



What's in a Rise? The Relevance of Intonation for Attention Orienting

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Martine Grice
University of Cologne, Germany

Abstract

In this talk I will explore why and how intonational rises are used to orient attention towards the words and phrases bearing them. The attention orienting function of rising pitch is known outside the linguistic domain, with evidence from auditory looming, a phenomenon whereby a signal that increases in loudness or pitch appears to be approaching the listener and is perceived as an immediate threat.

This attention orienting function extends to speech communication, where rises in pitch are crucial for directing listeners' attention to the most important parts of the linguistic message. I will provide evidence from event related brain potentials that such rises affect both preattentive and conscious attention. Moreover, the lack of a rise can, in some situations, direct attention away from parts of the message, leading to information being missed. I will also discuss the influence of intonational rises on short-term memory, showing that rises can boost recall of items in a list. This effect can be local to a particular item if the rise is accentual, or more global if the rise is at the edge of a domain. However, despite the cross-linguistic effect of rises on attention, their influence can be impacted by language specific prosodic structure and linguistic expectations.

Biography

Martine Grice is the Professor of Phonetics at the University of Cologne. She has served as President of the Association of Laboratory Phonology and is board member of Journal of Phonetics and Laboratory Phonology, and editor-in-chief of Studies in Laboratory Phonology.

Her work on intonation theory investigates complex tonal structures at heads and edges of prosodic constituents and at the interplay between tune and text. Besides her analyses of Italian, English and German, she has tackled particularly challenging languages, such as Tashlhiyt Berber (where sonorant material for bearing intonational tones can be scarce), Vietnamese (where intonation can overwrite tone) and Maltese (where lexical and post-lexical prominences do not always align).

Her current projects deal with attention orienting, looking for evidence of prosodic structure in the effect of prosody on serial recall and processing of incongruence, individual-specific patterns in face-to-face dyadic communication, with a focus on autism, and modelling of prominence in language.