

The concept & its importance

Listen to the **pitch of the voice (=how high or low it goes)** while someone says a sentence: it is **changing continuously**. The intonation of a sentence is its 'melody', its **pattern of pitch changes** – the voice goes up or down, **the intonation rises or falls**.

Intonation is important because it is used to convey **meaning** – both **grammatical** (for instance, to indicate that a sentence is a question) and about your **attitude** (are you happy or angry?). Using proper intonation allows you to **avoid misunderstandings**, and also allows you to **sound more “natural”**. **It is an often overlooked aspect of pronunciation, yet it is essential and deserves your attention.**

Basic differences with French

In **French**, we usually stress only the final word in a sentence; the sentence is pronounced with a rather '**flat**' tone. On the contrary, **English uses a lot of variation**, as **several words** in the sentence are **stressed**, which means they are pronounced with a **higher pitch**. In addition, English has a particularly **wide pitch range**, meaning that the voice can go much higher or much lower than in French – it is a very **expressive language**!

If you copy French intonation patterns, which are more flat, you will sound indifferent, or bored, but not natural. In addition, there are a few differences in intonation patterns (especially for questions – see below) which could lead to misunderstandings, so it is important to pay attention to intonation when you speak.

English intonation patterns

The part of a sentence over which a particular pattern extends is called an **intonational phrase** or **tone-unit**. Within an intonational phrase, **stressed syllables** usually have a **pitch change**; but there is also a **single syllable** that stands out because it carries the **major pitch change**. This syllable carries the **tonic accent**. In the sentence, the **stressed syllable** of the word carrying the **tonic accent** is usually the **last one with a large pitch change**. **The tonic accent usually occurs on the last stressed syllable in a tone group in neutral intonation.** But it **may occur earlier**, if some word requires **emphasis**. (*see chap. 4 - shifting stress*)

⇒ **To sum up, in each tone unit, the pitch movement (a rise or fall in tone) takes place on the most important syllable, the 'tonic-syllable', which is usually the last content word of the unit.**

Common intonation patterns in English:

- **Wh-word questions: falling intonation**

*What did he say? *

- **Yes/No questions: rising**

Are you hungry? /

- **Statements: falling**

*He's gone. *

- **Question-Tags: 'chat' - falling; 'check' – rising**

*He doesn't look happy, does he? *

You're coming to my party tomorrow, aren't you? /

- **Lists: rising, rising, rising, falling**

Last summer, I traveled to Australia, New Zealand, and Japan. / /

⇒ **The major difference with French is for Wh- questions – remember that your voice needs to go down at the end! Same for 'chat' question tags (not a real question, just a confirmation)**

You will find an activity on identifying 'real'(rising) vs 'false' (falling) question tags here:

<http://thesoundofenglish.org/question-tag-intonation/>

How to practice

As for sentence stress, the best way to make progress is to be aware of intonation changes when you listen to English speakers, and to practice reproducing them. Listen to articles or recorded books with the text in front of you, to compare the pronunciation and intonation with what you read. Record yourself reading some passages, then compare how you read to the original recording. Again, some good sources: www.npr.org (US) / <http://www.bbc.co.uk/> (UK) <https://www.ted.com/talks/> (varied)

Concluding remarks on pronunciation

If you read all 5 parts of this lesson, you are now more aware of the sounds and mechanisms behind English pronunciation. This knowledge gives you key to improve your pronunciation and have a more natural accent in English. However, the change will not happen overnight – but do not get discouraged!

The more you listen to English, and the more you speak, the more fluent and natural your English will be.

Keep up the good work! What matters is that you **understand the importance of improving** *(a French accent might be charming for actors or to find a date in a pub, but it will not be the same when you have to communicate efficiently with native speakers or give a presentation at a conference)* and that you **remain motivated to make progress** even though it takes time and efforts.

A summary of tips to keep working on your pronunciation and accent:

Tips on Reducing Accent

- **Watch the mouth movements of native speakers!** Observe the mouth movements of native American speakers. Repeat what they are saying, imitating the intonation and rhythm of their speech.
- **Slow down!** Until you learn the correct intonation and rhythm of English, slow down your speech. If you speak too quickly with the wrong intonation and rhythm, native speakers will have a hard time understanding you.
- **Use your dictionary!** Become familiar with the phonetic symbols of your dictionary and look up the correct pronunciation of words that are hard for you to say.
- **Ask someone!** Make a list of frequently used words that are difficult for you to pronounce and ask a native speaker to pronounce them for you. Record these words, listen to them, and practice saying them.
- **Listen to books on tape!** Listen and read at the same time. Record yourself reading some sections of the book. Compare the sound of your English with that of the speaker.
- **Pay attention to word endings!** Pronounce the ending of each word. Pay special attention to “s” and “ed” endings.
- **Read aloud!** Read aloud in English, such as a novel or the newspaper, for fifteen to twenty minutes each day. This will help you strengthen the mouth muscles that you use when you speak English. Research has shown that it takes about three months of daily practice to develop strong mouth muscles for speaking a new language.
- **Listen to yourself!** Record your own voice and listen for pronunciation mistakes. This is an excellent exercise because it will help you become conscious of the mistakes that you are making.
- **Be patient!** You can change the way you speak but it won't happen overnight. People often expect instant results and give up too soon. You can change the way you sound if you are willing to put some effort into it.