**Intonation in English Pronunciation**

**INTONATION**

**What is intonation?**  
  
 Intonation and stress are closely linked. In fact it's impossible to dissociate them. They go hand in

hand.  
 Intonation is about *how* we say things, rather than *what*we say, the way the voice rises and falls

when speaking, in other words the music of the language.Just as words have stressed syllables,

sentences have regular patterns of stressed words. In addition, the voice tends to rise, fall or remain

flat depending on the meaning or feeling we want to convey (surprise, anger, interest, boredom,

gratitude, etc.). Intonation therefore indicates the mood of the speaker.

There are two basic patterns of intonation in English: falling intonation and rising intonation.

**Different functions of intonation in English**

There are quite a few theories that attempt to explain what intonation does and how it is used in English. Let us take a look at two of its main functions:

**Attitudinal**

In many spoken languages around the world – but especially in British English – it is easy for the listener to understand the speaker's attitude: boredom, interest, surprise, anger, appreciation, happiness, and so on, are often evident in their intonation.

For instance, a server at a restaurant asks ‘How’s the chocolate muffin, madam?’ and you reply ‘mMMmmmm’ with the intonation rising in the middle and falling towards the end. The server nods with a smile. Why? Because you have just expressed your appreciation for the item through the music of your voice – and without so much as a single (ordinarily meaningful) word.

Another instance of a different type would be your intonation on receiving a surprise birthday cake at your work. ‘Did you get that for me?’ you might say – your rising intonation, particularly on ‘me’ at the end, expressing surprise and delight.

The feeling of boredom or indifference, on the other hand, might be expressed with a flat tone, (think of a robot). Compare the 'thank you' uttered to the mailman delivering a utility bill (flat) and the ‘thank you!’ said when someone helps you mend a flat tyre on the side of a road (expressive, heartfelt).

We often express gratitude and other emotions as much by our use of intonation as by the use of specific words.

**Grammatical**

There are some intonation patterns in English, which, for the most part, correspond to the use of particular grammar structures. The most common example is in the use of **[wh-questions](http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/wh-questions)** (questions beginning with 'who', 'what', 'why', 'where', 'when', 'which', and 'how'), which usually have a falling intonation.

In a conversation with a new classmate, the following questions would sound most natural with falling intonation: 'What's your name?', 'Where are you from?', 'Why did you choose this school?', 'How long will you study here?'.

Questions that require a 'yes' or 'no' answer, however, usually have upward intonation. In the same conversation with your classmate, your voice would rise at the end when asking the following questions: 'Have you studied here before?', 'Do you like the teacher?', 'Will you come back tomorrow?'

**In the following examples a downward arrow (➘) indicates a fall in intonation and an upward arrow (➚) indicates a rise in intonation.**  
 Again, these are not rules but patterns generally used by native speakers of English.Just remember that content words are stressed, and intonation adds attitude or emotion.This explanation on intonation is intended to serve as a general guide to help learners.It should in no way make them unnecessarily anxious!  
 It should be remembered that a written explanation can never be a substitute for a 'live' conversation with a native speaker.  
Attitudinal intonation is something that is best acquired through talking and listening to English speakers.  
**Falling Intonation** (➘)  
(The pitch of the voice falls at the end of the sentence.)  
Falling intonation is the most common intonation pattern in English.It is commonly found in statements, commands, wh-questions (information questions),confirmatory question tags and exclamations.  
 **1. Statements**

* + Nice to meet **↘**you.
  + I’ll be back in a**↘**minute.
  + She doesn’t live here **↘**anymore.
  + Dad wants to change his**↘**car.
  + Here is the weather **↘**forecast.
  + Cloudy weather is expected at the end of the **↘**week.
  + We should work together more **↘**often
  + I'm going for a walk in the **↘**park.

**2. Commands**

* + Write your name **↘**here.
  + Show me what you’ve **↘**written.
  + Leave it on the**↘**desk.
  + Take that picture **↘** down.
  + Throw that **↘**out.
  + Put your books on the **↘**table.
  + Take your hands out of your **↘**pockets.

**3. Wh- questions**(requesting information.)

(questions beginning with 'who', 'what', 'why', 'where', 'when', 'which', and 'how')

* + What country do you come**↘**from?
  + Where do you**↘**work?
  + Which of them do you **↘**prefer?
  + When does the shop **↘**open?
  + How many books have you **↘**bought?
  + Which coat is **↘**yours?
  + Whose bag is **↘**this?

**4. Questions Tags that are statements requesting confirmation rather than questions.**

Not all tag questions are really questions.Some of them merely ask for confirmation or invite

agreement, in which case we use a falling tone at the end.

* + He thinks he’s so clever, doesn’t **↘**he?
  + She's such a nuisance, isn't**↘**she?
  + I failed the test because I didn't revise, did**↘** I?
  + It doesn't seem to bother him much, does**↘** it?

**4. Exclamations**

* + How nice of**↘** you!
  + That's just what I **↘**need!
  + You don't**↘** say!
  + What a beautiful**↘** voice!
  + That's a **↘**surprise!

**Rising Intonation** (➚)   
(The pitch of the voice rises at the end of a sentence.)  
  
Rising intonation invites the speaker to continue talking.It is normally used with yes/no questions,

and question tags that are real questions.

* **Yes/no Questions**  
  (Questions that can be answered by 'yes' or 'no'.)
  + Do you like your new ➚teacher?
  + Have you finished ➚already?
  + May I borrow your ➚dictionary?
  + Do you have any ➚magazines?
  + Do you sell ➚stamps?
* **Questions tags that show uncertainty and require an answer**(real questions).
  + We've met already, ➚haven't we?
  + You like fish, ➚don't you?
  + You're a new student ➚aren't you?
  + The view is beautiful, ➚isn't it?

**We sometimes use a combination of rising and falling intonation in the same sentence.**

**The combination is called Rise-Fall or Fall-Rise intonation.**  
  
**Rise-Fall Intonation** (➚➘)  
(The intonation rises and then falls.)  
  
We use rise-fall intonation for choices, lists, unfinished thoughts and conditional sentences.

* **Choices**(alternative questions.)
  + Are you having ➚soup or ➘salad?
  + Is John leaving on ➚Thursday or ➘Friday?
  + Does he speak ➚German or ➘French?
  + Is your name ➚Ava or ➘Eva?
* **Lists**(rising, rising, rising, falling

Intonation falls on the last item to show that the list is finished.

* + We've got ➚apples, pears, bananas and ➘oranges
  + The sweater comes in ➚blue, white pink and ➘black
  + I like ➚football, tennis, basketball and ➘volleyball.
  + I bought ➚a tee-shirt, a skirt and a ➘handbag.
* **Unfinished thoughts (partial statements)**  
  In the responses to the following questions, the rise-fall intonation indicates reservation.  
  The speaker hesitates to fully express his/her thoughts.
  + Do you like my new handbag? Well the ➚leather is ➘nice... ( but I don't like it.)
  + What was the meal like? Hmm, the ➚fish was ➘good... (but the rest wasn't great).
  + So you both live in Los Angeles? Well ➚Alex ➘does ... (but I don't).
* **Conditional sentences**

(The tone rises in the first clause and falls gradually in the second clause.)

* + If he ➚calls, ask him to leave a ➘message.
  + Unless he ➚insists, I'm not going to ➘go.
  + If you have any ➚problems, just ➘contact us.

**Fall-Rise Intonation** (➘➚)  
(The voice falls and rises*usually within one word*.  
  
 The main function of fall-rise intonation is to show that the speaker is not certain of the answer they

are giving to a question, or is reluctant to reply (as opposed to a falling tone used when there is no

hesitation). It is also used in polite requests or suggestions.  
**Hesitation/reluctance**:

* + So you'd be willing to confirm that? ...Well ... I ➘sup➚pose so ...
  + You didn't see him on Monday?   I don't quite ➘re➚member ...
* **Politeness-Doubt-Uncertainty**: (You are not sure what the answer might be.)
  + Perhaps we could ➘vis➚it the place?
  + Should we ➘cop➚y the list?
  + Do you think it's ➘al➚lowed?

**CONCLUSION**

As we have seen, intonation is an important aspect of pronunciation, but it is worth remembering that you are probably using it correctly much of the time. Even if your intonation sounds robotic, like the cab driver we met earlier, it is unlikely to be causing a breakdown in communication.

But if you want to be more confident about your intonation in English, and especially if you want to use it with precision and subtlety, then it is certainly worth spending time noticing how others use it, imitating their use, and listening to a recording of your own voice.