

SING IT! FEEL THE MUSIC IN THE SPEECH

Remember the geeky terms *suprasegmentals* and *prosody* from Hack #5 relating to syllable stress?

Another element of suprasegmentals or prosody of an accent is intonation patterns or melody. I'm speaking here of speech and not actual music (although music is a great way to learn other features of language).



This feature of language might have elements that seem easy to access at a high level but that also feel a bit elusive at times. Let's break it down a little bit to make it more accessible, starting with the difference between tone and intonation

IT'S HOW YOU SAY IT

Tone: In tonal languages the relative tone or pitch (the soundwaves' frequency) of a word can change the meaning of that word. A great example of a tonal language is Cantonese, where there are at least six tones that can be applied to the sound [ma]. Depending on the tone, the sound "ma" could mean *mother* (high tone), the question particle (mid tone), and *to scold* (low tone).

Similarly, intonation involves the use of pitch patterns to add meaning at the phrase or sentence level. For example, in English, a rising inflection in *Ma?* could convey the meaning of: *Mom, is that you calling?* However, if it changes to a falling inflection, *Ma*, that might be the end of a phrase or sentence, meaning something like, *That is my mom*. Finally, modulating the pitch down and then back up in *Ma!* might be used to convey *Mom—stop it — you are embarrassing me!* But in all cases, *mother* is the meaning of the word "Ma" itself, regardless of the pitch.

You can witness another great example of language intonation differences when you listen to native Brazilian Portuguese speakers learning English. Brazilian Portuguese speakers have a tendency to end statements on a rising inflection, which, in some instances, can be interpreted by a native English speaker as expressing unsure-ness or even posing a question. For actors portraying characters from Brazil, analyzing and mimicking this inflection pattern can be very useful.

THE RISE AND FALL OF INFLECTIONS

Important things to explore when studying a language's intonation is to examine how the language handles:



A. Statements (also called Declaratives):

Ex. *I am happy.* In SAE, we use a falling inflection.

B. Questions (also called Interrogatives)

a. Yes/No Questions,

Ex. *Are you happy?* In SAE, we use a rising inflection.

b. WH-Questions (with a Question Word):

Ex. *How are you?* In SAE, we use a falling inflection.

C. Key words (also called operative words)

This can be one or more words that are most prominent or emphasized within a statement or either type of question. In SAE (generalizing for brevity), we use or begin a rise to the highest tone on the loudest syllable of the key word.

Ex. I'm happy. Did you think otherwise? Why?

BONUS TIP

Listen to audio recordings of native speakers speaking and listen for the intonation that makes the “music” in their speech. Next, transcribe a sentence and draw the intonation patterns (using a curved line or dots to denote high and low pitches). Now, try to sing along to the melody of the speech. You can start by just humming the melody of what the speakers are saying. Finally, apply this melody while repeating the actual words. And take note of the melody of statements, two types of questions, and the key words within them.

