

REVIEW

The use of prosody in the production of meaning

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ABSTRACT

During the presentation, Anne Wichmann explains how prosody can be used to attribute pragmatic meaning to utterances, give structure to the text read aloud, negotiate turn-taking, demonstrate a set of emotions, and display marked speech styles. Therefore, prosody can be employed by the speaker to give a different meaning to the utterances, which are syntactically similar, but are pragmatically different because of the intonation. It can also be used by the reader to mark the structural parts of the text as title, subtitle, and paragraph. Besides, prosody can be employed to negotiate turn-taking between speaker and listener, demonstrate emotions and present marked speech styles, such as the following reading styles: news, storytelling/audiobook, liturgy, and poetry recitation.



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RESUMO

Durante a apresentação, Anne Wichmann explica como a prosódia pode ser utilizada para atribuir significado pragmático às elocuições, dar estrutura ao texto lido em voz alta, negociar as tomadas de turno, demonstrar um conjunto de emoções e exibir estilos de fala marcados. Por conseguinte, a prosódia pode ser empregada pelo falante para conferir um significado diferente às elocuições, que são sintaticamente semelhantes, entretanto são pragmaticamente diferentes por conta da entonação. Também pode ser usada pelo leitor para marcar as partes estruturais do texto, como título, subtítulo e parágrafo. Além disso, a prosódia pode ser empregada para negociar as tomadas de turno entre falante e ouvinte, demonstrar emoções e apresentar estilos de fala marcados, tais como os estilos de leitura de notícias, contação de histórias/*audiobook*, liturgia e recitação de poesia.

KEYWORDS

Pragmatics. Prosody. Reading.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Pragmática. Prosódia. Leitura.

Anne Wichmann is an emeritus professor of UCLAN (University of Central Lancashire) in the United Kingdom. Her research is on language and speech. More specifically, intonation, speech prosody, pragmatics and discourse. On May 11th, 2020, *Abralin ao Vivo* broadcasted her presentation that was named “Aspects of intonation meaning: what do our voices convey?”. The talk was about how intonation contributes to the expression of meaning over and above the words that the individuals say. The presentation was divided into sections comprising pragmatic meaning, text structure, turn-taking, emotion, and speaking styles.

The professor starts the lecture explaining that prosody has several components such as tempo, loudness, voice quality, and pitch. While some researchers use the word intonation to refer to prosody, Wichmann asserts she uses it only referring to pitch. After the introductory explanations, the lecturer presents the sections. The first one was entitled *pragmatic meaning*, which can be understood as the meaning that is taken from the extralinguistic context of an utterance. This phenomenon pervades techniques as speech acts and politeness. Some examples are used by the lecturer to deal with this topic. One of them was the question: Have you heard about the accident? And the answers no (↑) and no (↓). The pragmatic difference between the answers relies on the rising tone of the first and the falling tone of the second one. The falling tone elicits the speaker to carry on talking about the accident, giving more details about it. While the second answer – the falling tone – closes the topic, suggesting that the speaker should not tell the hearer more about the crash.

In the section named *text structure*, Ann Wichmann deals with how the readers provide information while they are reading aloud. When people have a written text in front of them, they can see the structures of the text such as titles, subtitles, paragraphs and columns, but when they are just listening to somebody reading it aloud, they need to recognize the structures. So, the readers emphasize words using higher pitch or do not highlight them using a lower tone. They lift the pitch to indicate that they are starting a new topic and use falling intonation when they are reading the title.

Considering that turn-taking happens smoothly in English, with few overlaps between individuals, the speaker concludes that he should use strategies (which include prosodic and/or non-verbal signals) to signal to the interlocutor that he/she wishes to maintain or finish his turn. Consequently, when perceiving these strategies, the interlocutor knows that he can start a turn, even if the speaker has not taken a long pause. The listener feels the tone to drop and a short pause, then he/she understands that he/she can take the turn. Other signs can indicate that the floor can be taken such as gaze, head and hand turns. The researcher explains that there are two

practices used in some kinds of turn-taking environments: rush-through and backchannels. Rush-through is a technique used to hold a turn by speeding up the pace of conversation and backchannels are feedbacks that speakers need from their listeners to show they are still listening such as *aha*, *right*, *uhu*, *mmm*, *yes* and *I see*. In rush-through, people want to hang on to the turn, and even when they are coming to a conclusion of the topic, they want to start another one. Instead of coming to a low pitch, people accelerate what they are saying in order to get to the new topic without being interrupted by the hearer. In backchannels, the listeners use rising intonation to indicate that they want the speaker to continue (*aha* ↑) or falling intonation (*aha* ↓) to demonstrate they want him/her to hand the floor to them. According to the professor, rush-through and backchannel are eminently used in interviews by politicians.

In the section on *emotion*, Wichmann claims that the research is difficult since when the researcher asks the emotion expressed by an intonation to different interviewees, they may give distinct labels (e.g. sad, gloomy, miserable). Therefore, it would be difficult to bundle them and to have an evident label for a particular emotion. Another difficulty is getting the data ethically, considering that it is not ethical to make people feel a bad or good emotion just for the sake of research. To deal with these problems some researchers use actors during the study. Although it can be a little artificial, it is not unethical and even with real recorded data, the researcher cannot assure the person is feeling that emotion, because people do not always show their true feelings. Hereupon, the lecturer proposes a range of pitch for emotions, namely *high energy and very active expression*, *neutral* and *very low energy*. In *high energy and very active expression* of good or bad emotions, people use a wide range of pitch. In *neutral*, people are more impersonal (nor negative neither positive). In a *very low energy*, they can express passive emotion (e.g. depression, serene happiness) with very little energy and narrow pitch range.

The last section of the talk is *speaking styles*, that are defined as ways of speaking according to the context the person is in. Citing David Crystal's book *Investigating English Style* as a work which deals with this topic, Anne Wichmann explains that the linguist wrote about marked reading styles such as sports commentary and liturgical style. She is particularly interested in the pitch ranges of four marked reading styles portrayed by Crystal: news reading, storytelling/audiobook, liturgy, and poetry reading. Hence, news reading is more impersonal. The listener does not expect expressions of emotions from the reader. The voice is only used to convey the information. Storytelling/audiobook is very different from news reading since it is expected to be expressive and to create an experience for the listener. The reader has to evoke the emotions involved in the story by creating suspense, doing emphasis, imitating the voices of the characters, pausing, or speeding up the reading. The reader also has to give a sense of structure to the listeners (e.g. titles, paragraphs, new topics). Liturgy uses a narrow pitch sometimes similar to chant, small phrases and sections such as greetings, Bible reading, sermon, and notices. Poetry reading is similar to the liturgy (lyrical poetry) and the storytelling (narrative poetry) and it has an additional emphasis on the rhythm. Using Goffman's perspective (Presentation of Self and Forms of talk), Anne Wichmann reframes the analysis to see how much of the readers' self is implied in the reading and who the hearer is. To this extent,

people can read as: i. author; ii. interpreter or iii. mouthpiece and can listen as i. addressee or ii. witness. The newsreader is a mouthpiece and the hearer is unseen by the professional, but each one thinks he/she is being addressed. The storyteller is the interpreter of the text. He/she is involved with the narrative, animates the characters' voice and conveys the structure of the text. The hearer should be drawn by the story, so he/she has the role of addressee. The narrative poetry reader can be an interpreter of the text that simulates the voice and the emotions of the poet and the hearer is the addressee of the poem. The lyrical poetry reader is a mouthpiece – an instrument transmitting the text – that is thinking or reflecting aloud and the hearer is seen as the witness to the reflection. The liturgical reader is a mouthpiece and the hearer (the congregation) is a witness.

Thus, the presentation by Ann Wichmann was of great value since it encompassed an important topic to Pragmatics and Discourse theories, the meanings behind intonation. The professor was very didactic in her explanations and surely was understood by the audience. It was very interesting the way she interacted with the works of David Crystal and Ervin Goffman. She created bridges between their knowledge and hers. After the end of the talk, Wichmann answered all the questions from the live, as she had notified, she would do at the beginning of the presentation. Also, this event of broadcasting talks by Abralín is of great importance to the linguists and students worldwide, considering that it is a way of keeping up the research environment even in a moment so bleak as this of COVID-19.

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