

Two Types of Rising Declaratives: Speaker Dependent Perception of Intonational Cues

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Rising declaratives have been associated with diverse pragmatic and social meanings. Works in the semantics and pragmatics literature focus on examples such as: *It's raining?* (speaker in a windowless room; addressing a friend walking in wet), and show how they can function as non-neutral questions, licensed by special contexts (Malamud & Stephenson 2015, Gunlogson 2001). In comparison, works in the sociolinguistics literature focus on examples such as: *My name is Anna?* (speaker introducing herself), and show how they can function as polite assertions, indexing various levels of social, interactional meanings such as positive stance (Podesva 2011), solidarity (McLemore 1991), femininity (Lakoff 1973), etc.

Building on prior observations made by works such as Hirschberg & Ward (1995) and Fletcher et al. (2004), this paper claims that there exist at least two types of rising declaratives, with biased questions generally associated with a low-rise (L*H-H%) intonational pattern, and polite assertions with a high-rise (H*H-H%) contour. Crucially however, this paper also argues that the boundary between the two types of intonation is not as categorically divided as had been expected by previous works, and claims that an inherent ambiguity in the signal leaves room for the listener to move between the two interpretations (question vs. assertion), depending on their contextual inferences, as well as their inferences relating to the social information about the speaker.

The evidence for the argument comes from a series of perception experiments that had, among other sentence-types, 5 to 8 declaratives (spoken by 4 speakers) that were systematically manipulated in their terminal contour intonations: falling, and 3 types of rising contours (6/8/10 st. higher than nuclear pitch accents, respectively). Upon hearing declaratives with diverse content/context related biases in randomly chosen intonations, 400 participants (native speakers of American English) were asked to answer two types of questions: one inquiring about the most likely interpretation of the utterance (information-giving, information-seeking, etc.) as well as about the degree of speaker certainty on the proposition expressed, and the other inquiring about impressions of the speaker (ratings on speaker politeness, authority, etc.).

Results show that participants were significantly more likely to associate low-rising (steeper rising slope) declaratives with information-seeking (question) interpretations, and high-rising declaratives with assertion-based interpretations (information-giving; these interpretations were in turn associated with higher politeness ratings, etc.), and that intonation had incremental effects. However, the intonational differences did not elicit categorical divides in judgments, such that low-rises still elicited assertion interpretations, and high-rises, question interpretations, crucially depending on participants' contextual inferences and speaker's social information. For instance, high-rising contours were significantly more likely to be interpreted as questions than as assertions if the speaker was female.

The paper discusses possible reasons as to why these particular patterns of context/speaker-dependent intonational perception might have emerged, and argues for a model of linguistic interpretation that is sensitive to listeners' social reasoning, which is in turn influenced by not just their real-world sociolinguistic experiences, but also socially-constructed ones.