Timing and meter in stance-final utterances

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Stancetaking—a discourse phenomenon familiar to studies of language use—has rarely entered the purview of phonetic or phonological research. Both social and animated, it offers a glimpse into how speakers marshal all of their prosodic resources in daily conversation. This presentation focusses on stance-final utterances, which typically sum up the speaker's stance before ceding the floor. As a conversational move, an SFU aspires to achieve a certain measure of interactive success, in part through a balance of timing and meter in paired intonation phrases.

Typical SFUs (*It doesn't get any better than that*) consist of two intonation phrases of 1-2 tone units each. The latter in turn contain an obligatory tonic and an optional pre-tonic. The two sides form a 'hat pattern' whereby the first exhibits a rising intonation, the second a falling one (Bolinger 1986). There is usually a short break at the peak as well, and occasionally an extra-metrical element (*Little to win (but) nothing to lose*). In several respects, a successful SFU resembles a proverb, where both sides have the same number and arrangement of syllables, tone units and/or morae ('tempo clusters'): *The bigger they are, the harder they fall*. In other cases, the repetition is subtler: in a 4/3 stance capsule, the last 'beat' of the second IP may be lengthened to preserve the symmetry of timing. Tempo also contributes to balance between the two IPs through subservience to duration: if there are more syllables in the second IP than in the first, they may be spoken at a faster tempo so that the duration of the two IP matches.

The data include samples of stance-final utterances from actual conversation, as well as commonly-heard ones collected by the author, a native speaker of American English. To fully understand the prosodic effects, SFUs are presented in reinterant form, i.e. where lexical content is replaced by nonsense syllables. The effect is purely prosodic, an accurate rendering of metrical structure and the timed articulation of its parts: Da.da.da.DAda | Da.da.da.DA:. A schematic representation of the same string displays pre-tonics and tonics in boldface, the number of beats in each IP (4/4), the grouping of syllables (two, in the fourth beat of IP-1), and lengthening (the fourth beat of IP-2, which effectively balances out the structure): [$\mathbf{x}^1$ x^2 x^3 $\mathbf{X}x^4$ | $\mathbf{x}^1$ x^2 x^3 $\mathbf{X:}^4$].

There are two main ways of testing for the success of an utterance: uptake and/or evaluation by an audience who can rank it alongside similar possible utterances. Conversation analysis (CA) chooses the former method, studying the recorded behavior (verbal or otherwise) of participants in conversation. A successful stance-final utterance might be met with words like *Whoa!* or *OK then,* or some other indication that the interlocutor took note of it. Clinical evaluation, on the other hand, is entirely subjective but given clear instructions (and a sufficient number of participants) it offers a quantitative measure of 'successful'. In order to eliminate some of the factors that make up this quality, utterances selected for ranking (test and control) are offered as reinterant forms as well. This poster reports on experiments undertaken in both formats.

References

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