Uptalk in Southern Ontario English

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Uptalk is the semantically bleached use of a rising intonation pattern over a declarative sentence. Uptalk runs counter to the cross-linguistic generalization that rising contours indicate interrogatives, uncertainty (Ohala 1983), or continuation (Ladd 1996). Although uptalk has been discussed extensively in academia and the media (Britain 1992, Cruttenden 1994, Fletcher et al. 2002, Gorman 1993, McLemore 1991, Warren 2005), there has been no precise phonetic examination of this contour in North American English, where it is used extensively. My work investigates rising contours in Southern Ontario English, examining their phonetic nature and semantic interpretation. Some findings of particular interest are a) women uptalk significantly more than men; b) the overall use of rising terminal contours appears stable; and c) men more readily interpret the traditional falling contour as an indicator of certainty and finality and rising contours as indicators of uncertainty and continuation, while women are less inclined to perceive the contours as having their traditional meanings.

To study uptalk, I investigate the general use of rising terminal contours over declarative sentences to determine i) who uses rising terminals; ii) whether the use of rising contours is on the increase; iii) how rising intonation (L*H-H% and H*L-H%), opposed to the standard falling contour (H*L-L%), is interpreted. To examine the use of rising contours, I recorded 12 native speakers of Southern Ontario English drawn from two age groups (19-25 and 45-55) and balanced for gender as they performed a direction task, an activity designed to elicit a high proportion of sentences with continuation or uncertainty readings. DAMSL sentence tagging is used to categorize the semantic nature of each sentence (Allen and Core 1997) and ToBI labeling (Beckman and Ayers 1993) to notate the contours. To examine the interpretation of rising contours, I played tokens from the production study for participants selected from the same age and gender groups as the production study. They were asked to rate speakers' certainty, finality, and confidence for tokens produced with falling contours (H*L-H%) and rising contours (L*H-H% and H*L-H%).

The results of the production study show that women from both age groups use rising terminal contours extensively: younger women use rising contours on 67.3% of sentences and older women 63.2%. Men use rising contours much less (on 30.1% of tokens), but like the women, age does not affect contour use (32.7% for younger men and 27.3% for older men). According to this measure of apparent time, the use of rising terminal contours is not increasing.

The perception study revealed that men interpret intonational contours as having a more traditional function than women do. Men reported that the falling contour conveyed finality and certainty and one of the rising contours, L*H-H%, conveyed continuation. Women did not interpret these contours to have their conventional readings, suggesting that women use these contours to convey other social functions.

In addition to presenting the results of production and perception studies of rising terminal contours, this work addresses the larger question of how intonation can be examined in a variation framework.

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