

Rising intonation in statements of German speakers of English as a Foreign Language

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High rising terminals (HRT) are intonation contours used in statements that rise towards the end of the utterance. In these cases a fall still feels to be more appropriate for most native speakers of English because HRTs show a phonological form that is prototypically associated with yes/no-questions in English. Their function goes beyond the linguistic one of indicating sentence mode and include social and attitudinal aspects as well as discursal markers, such as requesting confirmation or holding the turn (see Ritchart & Arvaniti 2014, Armstrong et al. 2015 for HRTs in Southern Californian English; Warren 2005 for New Zealand English; McGregor 1980, Guy et al. 1986, Fletcher & Loakes 2010, Schmidt et al. 2015 for Australian English).

Despite English and German having very similar intonation systems (Grabe 1998), HRTs in German have not attracted similar attention in the literature. It is an open question whether they occur as frequently in German speech as they do in some English varieties and with the same functions. Our research therefore sets out to address two research questions: (1) Do German speakers use HRTs when speaking German? (2) Do highly proficient German speakers of English as a Foreign Language use HRTs when they speak English? If so, are HRTs used with similar functions as in the speech of English native speakers?

Our hypotheses are that if speakers use HRTs in their German speech, they also do so when speaking English, given the positive transfer of intonational patterns between L1 and L2 (Wells 2007). If they do not use HRTs in German, they might use HRTs limited to the aspect of seeking information as the prototypical function of rising intonation.

To test these research questions, we run a pilot study in which we elicited primary speech data in a way that is conducive to the occurrence of HRTs. According to Guy & Vonwiller (1989), HRTs occur most often in narratives (see also Ladd 2008, Armstrong et al. 2015). Eight German speakers (female, students, aged 24-27) were presented postcards from preferred holiday destinations and were encouraged to talk about them to the first author with who they were acquainted with (evoking a casual speech style). They talked about the postcards in both German and English. Their speech was recorded, transcribed and subsequently annotated for the phrase-final intonation contours, using an AM-based annotation system that was extended beyond the L1 or L2 system in order to best describe the observed data.

The qualitative results show that HRTs are used by all German speakers when speaking English but not necessarily when speaking German. HRTs were classified into three different types depending on their phonetic realization: a sudden steep rise, a continuous steep rise and a continuous flat rise. The continuous steep rise is used by all speakers, whereas the sudden steep rise and the continuous flat rise are used infrequently and only by certain speakers. As far as it is possible to deduce the functions from the contexts, HRTs were used to express uncertainty (e.g. vocabulary item) but also floor holding.

The data from our pilot suggest that HRTs are used in the speech of L2 speakers not only for seeking information or confirmation but also for floor holding. Further research is needed on

the phonetic implementation of HRTs in L2 speech, their functions as well as their perception. There is a potential for misunderstanding if HRTs used for floor holding are interpreted as expressing uncertainty by native listeners.

Literature

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