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The Intricacies of English Intonation and its Transfer
Las complejidades de la entonación inglesa y su transferencia

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Abstract

Intonation is a central yet, most of the time, a frequently neglected component of pronunciation in English language teaching, particularly in EFL contexts and teacher training programmes. This paper explores the intricacies of English intonation and its transfer from Spanish, focusing on the difficulties Spanish-speaking learners may encounter when acquiring English prosody. Through an exploratory and qualitative approach, the study analyses and compares key aspects of English and Spanish intonation, including tone choice, nuclear stress placement, pitch range, sentence types, and pragmatic meanings. The contrastive analysis reveals that negative transfer may arise when learners apply Spanish intonational patterns to English utterances, especially in relation to pitch range, nuclear stress flexibility, and the expression of discourse and attitudinal meanings. The paper also points out that River Plate Spanish remains underexplored in intonational studies, despite the influence of Italian prosody on its rising and falling patterns. This limitation highlights the need for broader empirical research on regional varieties of Spanish. Ultimately, the paper argues that intonation should be explicitly taught through awareness-raising, perception and production practice, and through contrastive analysis with learners' L1.

Key Words: English intonation, Spanish intonation, Negative transfer, Intonation teaching, River Plate Spanish

Resumen

La entonación es un componente central, aunque frecuentemente desatendido, de la pronunciación en la enseñanza del inglés, especialmente en contextos de inglés como lengua extranjera y en programas de formación docente. Este trabajo explora las complejidades de la entonación inglesa y su transferencia desde el español, centrándose en las dificultades que los estudiantes hispanohablantes pueden encontrar al adquirir la prosodia del inglés. A través de un enfoque exploratorio y cualitativo, el estudio analiza y compara aspectos clave de la entonación del inglés y del español, entre ellos la elección de tonos, la ubicación del acento nuclear, el rango tonal, los tipos de oraciones y los significados pragmáticos. El análisis contrastivo revela que la transferencia negativa puede surgir cuando los estudiantes

aplican patrones entonativos del español a enunciados en inglés, especialmente en relación con el rango tonal, la flexibilidad del acento nuclear y la expresión de significados discursivos y actitudinales. El trabajo también señala que el español rioplatense sigue siendo un campo poco explorado en los estudios entonativos, a pesar de la influencia de la prosodia italiana en sus patrones ascendentes y descendentes. Esta limitación pone de manifiesto la necesidad de ampliar la investigación empírica sobre las variedades regionales del español. Finalmente, el trabajo sostiene que la entonación debería enseñarse de manera explícita mediante actividades de concientización, prácticas de percepción y producción, y análisis contrastivo con la L1 de los estudiantes.

Palabras clave: Revisiones, Diseños, Plan 696/01, Plurilingüismo, Interculturalidad.

Introduction

It is an unassailable truth that phonology and phonetics are key aspects not only in the English language and teaching but also for student teachers who are training to become teachers. However, these inherent characteristics of pronunciation are most of the time neglected, as most teachers in the EFL classroom do not dedicate enough time to the pronunciation of English, its intonation and other intricacies, even if essential when learning a second language.

Nonetheless, if attention had to be placed somewhere, it would be on the segmental features of the language, i.e. the sounds, rather than the suprasegmental features, such as rhythm and intonation. This is partly because the majority of teachers of English usually feel uncertain whether or not they will be able to make it comprehensible to their students, and because of its less tangible nature than that of sounds.

Moreover, when it comes to comparative studies, it seems that little attention is being given to intonation in the instruction and teaching of English both as a foreign language and at Teacher Training College. I can tell from experience that, when student teachers start dealing with intonation, they most of the time feel frustrated and overwhelmed, sometimes even unsure of how to tackle it themselves, as they are constantly committing mistakes by applying features from Spanish intonation into English utterances and therefore sounding like non-natives, unable to become aware of their own mistakes, unable to understand the differences between the two systems. This happens because L1 intonation is most commonly acquired during the first stage of linguistic development, becoming automatic after it. It is not surprising that, when learning the L2, L1 intonation rules will be generalised into the L2, hindering communication and understanding, opening possibilities for miscommunication and unintelligibility. Intonation may be seen, then, as a source of negative transfer. Transfer, also called cross-linguistic reference, is defined by Yule (2006) as using sounds, expressions or structures from the L1 when performing in the L2. This results in negative transfer, and it

may make the L2 expression difficult to understand, as intonation is acquired during the first stage of linguistic development

Thus, it is a matter of paramount concern in this paper to aim at analysing and comparing both English and Spanish intonation, which are the aspects that are difficult for native speakers of Spanish to apply and to try to foretell and correct arising and avoidable mistakes in their intonation, preventing negative transfer as much as possible.

It is worth noting that this article is based on a research project conducted as part of an adscripción, a voluntary, supervised teaching and research assistantship within the Argentine higher education system. The original study examined differences between English and Spanish intonation and the difficulties Spanish-speaking learners may encounter in acquiring English intonation patterns. The present article draws upon that research while adapting and expanding its main findings for a broader educational context.

Theoretical Framework

What is intonation?

Intonation is defined by Wells (2006) as 'the melody of speech. In studying intonation, we study how the pitch of the voice rises and falls, and how speakers use this pitch variation to convey linguistic and pragmatic meaning' (Wells, 2006, p. 1).

According to the above-mentioned author, if intonation did not exist, our speech would sound 'monotonous' (Wells, 2006, p. 1). He explains that 'either it would all remain on one pitch throughout, or every utterance would employ exactly the same stereotyped tune at all times' (Wells, 2006, p. 1).

English Intonation

Languages such as Spanish or English are considered to be 'intonational languages' or 'lenguas entonativas', in which intonation is not used to distinguish words but to show pragmatic meanings. 'Por ejemplo, en español, pronunciemos 'pan' con tono alto, tono bajo, tono ascendente o descendente, tenemos siempre la misma palabra. Lo que puede cambiar es su significado pragmático en el discurso. [...] Las diferencias en tono en español se usan exclusivamente para comunicar significados relacionados con el discurso' (Hualde, 2014, pp. 260-261).

In order to delve into English intonation, it is crucial to mention what Wells (2006) calls 'the three T's' (p. 6): tonality, tonicity and tone, which are features that speakers of the English language repeatedly face as they speak.

Tonality relates to the decision on how the spoken material will be divided into chunks, called 'intonation phrases or IPs' (Wells, 2006, p. 6), referred to by other authors as 'word group', 'tone group', 'intonation group' and 'tone unit'. For all of these chunks, there is going to be a certain intonation pattern associated with them.

Tonicity refers to the words on which the person who speaks wants to place the focus on. 'To highlight an important word, we accent it. More precisely, we accent its stressed syllable (or one or both of its stressed syllables, if it has more than one). That is to say, we add pitch prominence (= a change in pitch, or the beginning of a pitch movement) to the rhythmic prominence that a stressed syllable bears' (Wells, 2006, p. 7).

Wells (2006) continues explaining that the nucleus is the 'most important accent in the IP. It indicates the end of the focused part of the material. In terms of pitch, it is marked out by being the place where the pitch change or movement where the nuclear tone begins' (Wells, 2006, p. 7). Finch and Ortiz Lira (1982) state that, in connected speech, we must make some words stand out from others. It is worth noticing that, in English, it is possible to find utterances in which every syllable is liable to be accented, and therefore liable to become the 'peak of prominence' (Finch & Ortiz Lira, 1982, p. 113).

Wells (2006) continues explaining that the nucleus is the 'most important accent in the IP. It indicates the end of the focused part of the material. In terms of pitch, it is marked out by being the place where the pitch change or movement where the nuclear tone begins' (Wells, 2006, p. 7).

I believe it was ab\surd.

I believe it was ab/surd.

The nucleus in this example is the syllable -surd- in the word absurd. According to Wells (2006), the movement begins on that syllable, but it really doesn't matter which nuclear tone we use. The nucleus is most of the time placed at the end of the IP, unless there are other reasons to change it and place it somewhere else. Some other authors call the nucleus the 'tonic'.

Regarding the anatomy of the IP, the part of the IP that follows the nucleus or tonic is called the 'tail', which contains all the syllables which are not accented. However, if the nucleus is placed on the last syllable in the IP, there is no tail.

I'm \fine.

I'm /fine.

If the IP contains an accent in the stretch before the nucleus, the first accent is called the onset, while the part extending from the last syllable before the nucleus is called the head.

It was in'credibly \reasonable.

It was in'credibly /reasonable.

In this example, the onset is the syllable -cre- because it is accented, standing out a bit over the non-prominent syllables. The syllables -credibly constitute the head. The unaccented and unstressed syllables before the onset are called the prehead, e.g. It was in-. 'If an IP contains no accented syllables before the nucleus, there is no head. If it contains no

unaccented syllables before the first accent (onset or nucleus), there is no prehead' (Wells, 2006, p. 8).

However, it is worth acknowledging that there is a certain flexibility when accentuating words, although some words will always need to be accented, as stated by Finch and Ortiz Lira (1982).

ˈDoes he ˈalways ˈhave to ˈgive /homework?

Does he ˈalways ˈhave to ˈgive /homework?

Does he ˈalways have to give /homework?

According to the authors, depending on the amount and type of information the accentuated words carry, and then depending on the choice of the nucleus, then the speaker can decide the movement s/he is going to use: rising, falling or falling-rising.

Wells (2006) continues explaining that the nucleus is the 'most important accent in the IP. It indicates the end of the focused part of the material. In terms of pitch, it is marked out by being the place where the pitch change or movement where the nuclear tone begins' (Wells, 2006, p. 7).

Wells (2006) states that any word in the English language may be said with any of the tones. However, its choice will not alter its lexical identity or meaning (that is to say, its dictionary meaning).

According to the author, although the nucleus is most of the time placed on the last lexical item of a tone unit, its placement may vary according to the type of information we want to give, since you may not only decide on or select from a wide range of intonation patterns, but you may also decide where to place the nucleus, taking into consideration the meaning and the circumstances.

We are ˈtrying to learn Spanish.

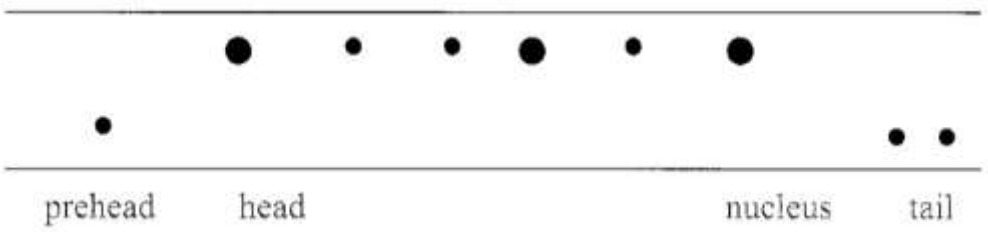


Fig. 1 - Placement of the nucleus according to meaning.

Nonetheless, the same statement may also be said in the following ways, and thus it may have different implications:

We are ˈtrying to learn Spanish.

We are trying to learn Spanish.

We are trying to learn Spanish.

If the nucleus is placed on the syllable "Spa" from the word Spanish, this could be interpreted as new information and everything before it may be already shared knowledge, and the implication is that of a contrast: Spanish, not any other language.

If the nucleus is placed on "learn", it suggests the effort itself is important. It may imply that learning Spanish is difficult, that success is uncertain, or that the speaker is attempting rather than definitely succeeding.

If the nucleus is placed on the syllable "try" of the word "trying", then it is contrasting learning Spanish with some other action, such as teaching it, practising it casually, or translating it.

If the nucleus is placed on "we", it shows who is doing the action: not only me, the speaker, but probably I am learning with my whole family or my friends, not any other people. It's not "they", not "you", it's "we".

Once the speaker has selected a 'suitable selection for the nucleus' (Wells, 2006, p. 9), s/he must decide the kind of pitch movement or tone the speaker will use.

Tone is realised by changes in the pitch of voice. In English, there are five possible tones. The following chart summarises the tones in English, taking into consideration the notions taken from Brazil (1985), Wells (2006) and Cruttenden (2014).

TONE	SHAPE[1]	DESCRIPTION OF THE MOVEMENT	IMPLICATIONS AND MEANINGS
Fall or Proclaiming	\ or ↘	The pitch of the voice starts relatively high and then moves downwards. When there is a tail, this is always low.	Statements, exclamations, wh-questions and commands. This tone is used when the speaker wants to make his/her point, when s/he expects to increase the area of convergence in discourse (=add new information), or when an idea is complete (low termination).
Rise or Referring Plus	/ or ↗	The pitch of the voice starts relatively low and then moves upwards. If there is a tail, the rising pitch movement does not occur completely on the nuclear syllable, but it will	Yes-no questions, vocatives, some greetings ("good morning") and if-clauses. Moreover, it is commonly used for incomplete ideas, or when the information between the

[1] For graphic representations and further examples see Appendix I, titled "Tone shapes"

		rather be spread over all the following syllables, making the last one the highest pitched, even if unaccented.	speakers is already negotiated or shared, part of the common ground. It is commonly used when the speaker is in the role of dominance.
Fall-rise or Referring	\/ or ↘↗	The pitch of the voice starts relatively high and then moves first downwards and then upwards again. The entire fall-rise movement will take place on the tonic syllable, but if there is a tail, the movement is lengthened over the nucleus and tail.	It may indicate there is something else which will come (non-finality), whenever the speaker wants to place special focus on something, or when the information between the speakers is already negotiated or shared, part of the common ground.
Rise-fall or Proclaiming Plus	/\ or ↗↘	The least common nuclear tone. If there is a short syllable followed by a tail, the speaker may continue falling on the tail.	An element of being impressed, or being very unimpressed and hence indignant or even sarcastic. It is also used for gossip. It is commonly used when the speaker is in the role of dominance.
Level	– or →	If it occurs on a single syllable, that syllable will be lengthened. If a tail follows the nucleus, then the unaccented syllables remain on the same level.	It signals interruption, either by the speaker himself (as in hesitations) or by others. It may be found in some interjections and breath pauses.

Chart 1 - Description of the tones in English

It would be virtually impossible to list and specify all the different types of sentences and intonation patterns. This occurs because there are many types of sentences: declarative statements, exclamatives, yes-no questions, wh-questions, imperatives, among others, and the variations in pitch movement might be many. However, although these general patterns may differ, we may arrive at what Wells calls the default tone, which is 'the tone used if there are no special circumstances' (Wells, 2006, p. 10). Thus, we may summarise the different tones for statements, exclamations, commands and wh- questions as a fall, but for yes-no questions, a rise.

- Declaratives: This is my \book.

- Exclamations: That's a\mazing!
- Yes-no questions: Are you /hungry?
- Wh-questions: Where is my \phone?
- Imperatives: For\get it!

Spanish Intonation

When it comes to Spanish intonation, we have to bear in mind that reference is made to what is known as "Español peninsular"[2].

According to Navarro Tomás (1963), there are a few aspects that should be considered when it comes to Spanish intonation. First of all, he explains what the "grupo tónico" (=all the prominent syllables) and "sílaba tónica" (=tonic syllable) are.

> El grupo tónico consta de un cierto número de sílabas, de entre las cuales se destaca una que por su altura musical domina sobre las demás; esta sílaba predominante se llama sílaba tónica; las demás, aún teniendo todas ellas un cierto grado de altura [...] se llaman sílabas átonas; entre las sílabas átonas se distinguen [...] las protónicas, que preceden a la tónica, y de otra, las postónicas, que la siguen'. (Navarro Tomás, 1963, p. 29).

He also defines the concept of "grupo fónico" (= tone unit) as 'la porción de discurso comprendida entre dos pausas o censuras sucesivas de la articulación' (Navarro Tomás T., 1963, p. 30). As it happens in English, depending on its meaning and intention, every sentence or phrase will take a specific intonation pattern, since the placement of the nucleus is more likely to be fixed. In Spanish, we may reduce intonation patterns into two shapes: pattern A and B.

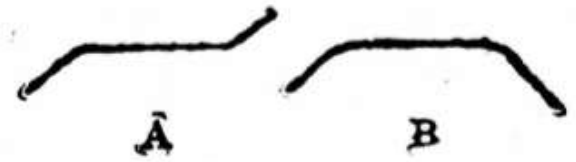


Fig. 2 - The tones in Spanish

In any of the two shapes, the voice at the beginning starts at a low point, and it gradually starts going up from the first syllable and up to the tonic syllable, and then it will either keep going up or down.

In questions, however, there are two variations to patterns A and B: "preguntas absolutas", also called interrogativas totales, where you usually expect a positive or negative

[2] In this section, some concepts and explanations are retained in Spanish in order to maintain the precise terminology employed by the authors.

answer, and "preguntas relativas", also called interrogativas parciales, where you expect a specific piece of information, and where a question word might be used, or not.

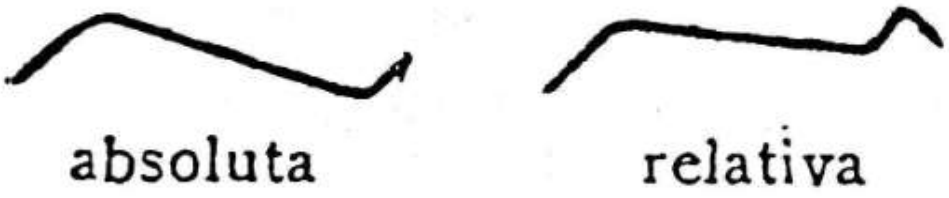


Fig. 3 - The tones for questions in Spanish

In "preguntas absolutas", the voice gradually goes up until it reaches the tonic syllable, and then goes down until the last syllable, where it goes up again. In "preguntas relativas", the voice goes up until the tonic and then is maintained gradually until the last stressed syllable, where it goes up and down again. This is what we call "movimiento circunflejo" or, in English, "rise-fall", which is usually used in questions in Argentina as well, as in: "¿Miraban a Ca/\mila?" and usually signals an element of surprise.

Taking all of these notions into account, then, we may arrive at the default tones of 'Español peninsular', which would be the following:

- For declaratives, we may use pattern B, as in: "Nos iremos a la plaza por la tarde", or A + B: "Cuando estuvimos en Madrid, fuimos a la plaza".
- Exclamatives will rise and then fall, for example, "¡Qué tormenta ha caído esta tarde por el barrio!"
- Yes-no questions are "preguntas absolutas", for example: "¿Lo compró Antonio?"
- Wh-questions are "preguntas relativas", as in: "¿Cómo lo hiciste?"
- Imperatives will rise, then fall, and rise again: "Lávate las manos antes de comer, ¿quieres?"

Differences between English and Spanish intonation

Although the two languages use intonation similarly, this may be deceptive in some cases. To delve into this, we must mention two key differences provided by Whitley (2022).

First of all, the matter of pitch variation. English uses more pitch variations than Español peninsular. Patterns of the intonation in English range over four pitches, while those in Spanish range over three.

Secondly, when it comes to pitch movement, in Spanish, there are two patterns, A and B, and special tones in the case of questions, yet this makes direct contrast with the five movements found in English. Moreover, in Spanish, tones tend to extend over the entire tone unit, whereas in English, the tonal movement is typically concentrated on the tonic syllable.

Yet the most important dissimilarity of them all is that of flexibility, posed by Hualde

(2014), Ortiz-Lira (1994) and Ladd (2008), regarding the tone placement. One important difference between the intonation system of Spanish (a Romance language) and English (a Germanic language) is the flexibility found in English when it comes to the placement of the tonic syllable. In English, the tone placement can be modified depending on where we wish to focus on. In Spanish, however, the nucleus placement is most likely to be fixed and cannot be changed.

How can Spanish speakers tackle English intonation?

As stated by Wells (2006), it is a truth widely acknowledged that transfer is a core issue when it comes to the learning and acquisition of intonation patterns. And, as it happens with the sounds of a language, 'learners of English will tend to start by assuming that English is like their own first language. They will transfer the intonation habits of the L1 to the L2' (Wells, p. 12, 2006).

He explains that, whether it is a case of positive or negative transfer, will only depend on the speaker's L1, as it may happen that some elements of intonation are the same in both languages. But the problem is the following: 'native speakers of English know that learners have difficulties with vowels and consonants. When interacting with someone who is not a native speaker of English, they make allowances for segmental errors, but they do not make allowances for errors of intonation' (Wells, p. 2, 2006). And since prosodic or suprasegmental features of the language may differ, transferring the patterns of one's mother tongue to a foreign language 'contributes to making you sound foreign, and may quite possibly lead to your being misunderstood by other speakers' (Wells, p. 3, 2006).

Wells (2006) explains that 'speakers of languages that make little or no use of tonicity are likely to make many inappropriate tonicity choices in English. Typically, they tend to accent the last word in an intonation phrase, even in cases where L1 speakers of English would not do so. On occasions this can make such a speaker sound bizarre or absurd to the listener, since it sends out the wrong signals about where the new information in the message ends, or about what is in focus and what is not.' (Wells, p. 14, 2006).

However, he adds that it is unknown if tonality is also a source of negative transfer. Tone, nonetheless, is a source of negative transfer 'since many languages have characteristic tone patterns or tone uses that sound strange or misleading in English.' (Wells, p. 14, 2006).

Moreover, according to Navarro Tomás (1968), Spanish has a wider intonational range than German and French, but narrower than English (pp. 32-33), therefore, it is common that native speakers of the Spanish language who are learning English as a foreign language struggle with intonation, mostly when considering aspects such as the placement of the tonic syllable and the pitch range.

As reported by Barjam (2004), pertaining to the River Plate region or area, there is not much pitch movement when it comes to intonation. The voice only tends to go up when there is a stressed syllable on the intonational phrase, and goes down gradually until the next stressed syllable, where it goes up again, thus not involving any substantial pitch movements,

even though the natural pitch is rather high, making it uncomfortable and even unbearable to English speakers. This is due to the influence of the Italian language, as a result of a massive wave of immigration between the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, according to Gabriel, Peskova, Labastía and Blázquez (2013), giving way to the use of 'tonos ascendentes' and 'tonos descendentes'. The rising and falling pitch is maintained across the whole intonation phrase, marking stressed and prominent syllables throughout with no distinction, in which 'el movimiento tonal es ascendente y el pico acentual se da dentro de la sílaba tónica,' opposed to other hispanic dialects, in which 'el movimiento tonal es también ascendente, sin embargo, el pico alcanza la sílaba postónica' (p. 114-115). They provide the following examples:

- Declaratives: María está comiendo mandarinas.
- Exclamatives: ¡Mmm! ¡Qué ricas medialunas!
- Yes-no questions (Interrogativas absolutas): ¿Tienen mandarinas?
- Wh-questions (Interrogativas parciales): ¿Quién te alquiló la casa esa?
- Imperatives: ¡Natalia! ¡Vení para acá! / ¡Dale! ¡Vení! ¡Ponele buena onda!
- Vocatives: ¡Natalia!

While declaratives, exclamatives, yes-no questions (interrogativas absolutas), imperatives and vocatives keep the pattern mentioned above, wh-questions (interrogativas parciales) start at a high pitch and then immediately start going down, keeping a low pitch after the tonic syllable. Thus, this makes the falling tones in English seem difficult to Spanish speakers. However, it is worth mentioning that exclamations may take, in some cases, the rise-fall pattern (that is to say, "movimiento circunflejo"), while yes-no questions may take the pattern of "preguntas relativas".

Conclusion

The purpose of this research paper was aimed at analysing and comparing the intonation patterns of English and Spanish, focusing attention on the features that pose difficulties for native Spanish speakers. By identifying these areas of challenge, the research sought to anticipate and address common, avoidable errors in intonation, thereby minimising instances of negative transfer.

The analysis confirms that both languages share comparable similarities when it comes to tones, as rising and falling tones are often employed to convey similar communicative functions. Nevertheless, significant differences emerge in terms of pitch range, since the English language exhibits a broader and more flexible pitch span involving four distinct pitch levels, while Spanish restricts itself to three. This divergence constitutes a major source of negative transfer, as learners tend to reproduce narrower Spanish pitch patterns in English, resulting in speech perceived as monotonous or flat by native English listeners.

Apart from pitch, differences also arise resulting from the interaction between word order and intonation. In English, the placement of nuclear stress can shift according to focus,

allowing speakers to highlight different elements of an utterance. In contrast, Spanish tends to maintain nuclear stress in a fixed position at the end of the phrase, even when the repeated or predictable information is not pragmatically relevant. This structural inflexibility contributes to negative transfer in the acquisition of English intonation, since Spanish speakers may not fully exploit the flexibility of stress placement available in English.

Likewise, intonation plays a vital role in discourse pragmatics and attitudinal functions of intonation, allowing speakers of English to signal contrast, politeness or tentativeness through nuclear placement and pitch range, which are more restricted in Spanish, as the language relies less on shifts in nuclear stress or pitch to mark such nuances. This asymmetry means that Spanish speakers may fail to reproduce such subtleties of English intonation, resulting in unintended pragmatic interpretations. Consequently, transfer errors extend beyond prosodic form and can directly affect communicative intent.

In the specific case of Spanish from the River Plate region, intonational features remain mostly disregarded and, therefore, are not taken into account. Most studies focused on suprasegmental phenomena in Spanish direct their attention solely to stress, and reference is generally made to 'español peninsular' as a default model. Although some research has begun to document the influence of Italian prosody and the prevalence of rising and falling intonation patterns in the River Plate area, comprehensive accounts of intonation in other regional varieties are still lacking, underscoring the need for broader empirical work. Thus, we must take into consideration the framework of "español peninsular", because it is the default model for the teaching of Spanish as a second language, yet at the same time, teachers of English should consider the intonation patterns from the Italian language to eventually reach a common framework, though this thorough investigation needs to be pursued in further studies.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings emphasise the urgent need to explicitly address intonation not only through the integration of perception and production activities but also through contrastive analysis with learners' L1. This would be useful since students will not only become familiar with the three intonation systems, but also become aware of said differences and eventually achieve a native-like pronunciation.

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Appendix

Appendix I "Tone shapes"

Fall

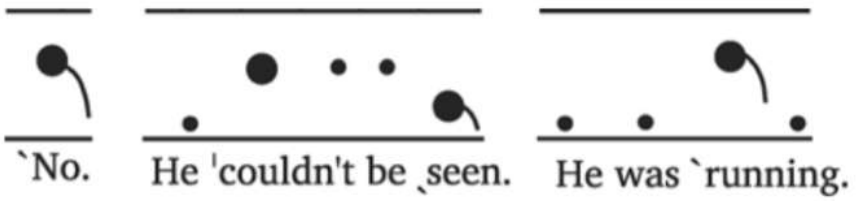


Fig. 4 - Fall tone

Rise



Fig. 5 - Rise tone

Fall-rise

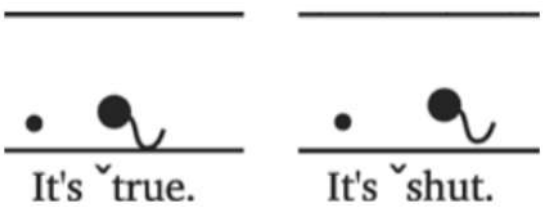


Fig. 6 - Fall-rise tone

Rise-fall

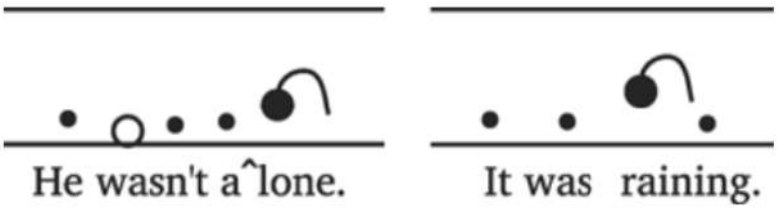


Fig. 7 - Rise-fall tone

Level

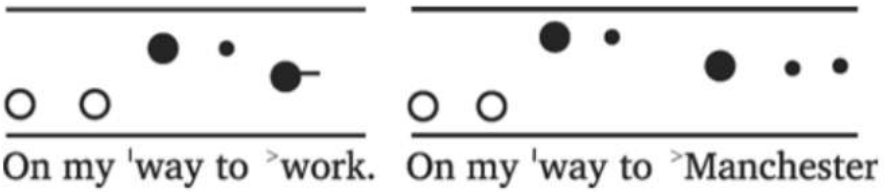


Fig. 8 - Level tone