

INTRODUCTION

One of the enduring problems of working on intonation is to work out what ‘meaning’ intonation contours have, and what speakers can do with them. In this paper, we use a theory of pragmatics to demonstrate how Finnish participants in naturally-occurring conversation use a particular stylised contour. We present both internal and external evidence, from linguistic design features of turns at talk, as well as co-participants’ treatment of stylised turns to show that the stylised contour indexes an affective stance which can be glossed as something like “not worth talking about”, “nothing special”, “no news”. This is of course a common gloss for stylisation, for example Ladd 1978. By looking at naturally-occurring conversation, we can find a more empirically-grounded warrant for this gloss, and also see that it’s got a more sequentially sensitive organisation than just ‘stereotyped exchanges’.

We’ll look first at the phonetic properties of stylised turns, then the lexical, morphological and syntactic properties, then their sequential organisation. Then I’ll talk through one fragment in more detail so you can see how the contour functions in context. Some details of the data and method are in section 2, which I will skip.

PHONETICS

Let’s start with the phonetic design of the contour, section 3 on the handout.

The contour consists of a low tone which falls on a stressed syllable; it’s followed by a high tone on an unstressed syllable; and then another tone

on a stressed syllable. Fig 1 on the handout shows some examples from our data. On average, the upstep is +5 semitones, followed by a downstep of −3 semitones. The pitch span though is variable, and bigger and smaller up-steps and down-steps do occur. Stylised turns are often offset from surrounding talk, for instance by gaps, in-breaths, changes in tempo and resetting of pitch.

Example 1 is a canonical phonetic example. Note the highly stylised ‘skips’ not ‘glides’ between the tones; the change in tempo and register; the gap before the turn; and the continued stylisation after the L-H-M contour. There isn’t time to discuss other aspects of the linguistic design of this example, but you’ll see later that they do fit the overall pattern.

MORPHOSYNTAX

Turns with this stylised contour contain a constellation of linguistic features which index that the content of the turn is somehow already known. This knowledge might be explicit—for example, the stylised turn might repeat something that’s already been said—or it might be implicit, for instance it might be an inference available from prior talk. In section 4 on the handout we list some of the common linguistic features of these turns which relate to the indexing of this epistemic stance.

The linguistic design features include epistemic indexes of shared knowledge, as in 4.1; particles which present the turn as an inference from, or as a paraphrase of something already that’s already been said, as in 4.2; thirdly, idioms and fixed expressions, or in institutional settings, things which are routine for the official are commonly stylised; and finally at 4.4 elements that downplay the importance of what’s being said,

by making the turn vaguer or downgrading some element of it. These elements have been highlighted grey in the transcripts on the handout.

SEQUENCE

Section 5 presents common sequential properties of stylised turns. They rarely present new information: they commonly recycle lexis and syntax from a prior turn, and in doing that, they index that the turn doesn't add anything new.

Stylised turns are most usually in second pair parts, that is, in responsive actions, such as in giving answers to questions. They also commonly come at the end of a sequence, for example at the end of a longer answer to a question as in example 1. Drew & Holt 1998 show that idiomatic expressions are often used to closure sequences down: so it's perhaps not a coincidence that figurative and idiomatic expressions are frequently stylised in our data.

The up-take of stylised turns is typically a minimal response such as *joo* or *niin*, which are roughly translatable as 'yes', or 'right'. Co-participants can be seen to orient to the non-importance of what is said in the stylized talk by these minimal responses and/or a change of topic soon afterwards. In other words, participants regularly treat stylised turns as if they are not designed for further up-take.

MAIN EXAMPLE

Let's look at an excerpt which contains two turns that have the stylised contour. Tiina has called her friend Marko for help. She and her husband

are renovating their flat, and they need people to carry rubble out of the flat to a skip in the back yard of the house. In the opening of the call, Tiina has described her call as *tämmönen hätäapusoitto*, literally ‘a kind of emergency help call’. At l. 1-13 Tiina explains that they’re getting a skip and they need to put the remains of a knocked-down wall into it, but she doesn’t make it clear how the rubble will be moved from the house to the skip. In other words, she doesn’t explicitly make a request for help.

At l. 14-15 Marko produces a confirmation check *eli ne pitää siis kantaa* ‘so they have to be carried then’. The turn-initial particle *eli* (l. 14) has the sense of ‘in other words’. Along with the particle *siis* in line 16, he presents the turn as an inference he’s making based on what she’s said. With this turn Marko pre-empts the request for help that Tiina still hasn’t made.

((Sorjonen 2001 shows that the unmarked response to a confirmation check is *niin* ‘yes’, which we find in the same sequential location in l.131.)) In line 16, Tiina receipts the confirmation check not with an unmarked ‘yes, but by recycling the essential syntax of the preceding TCU, *ne pi↑tää kantaa*, using the stylized figure. The stylisation implies that in doing her repeat, Tiina both confirms that her co-participant’s inference from her previous talk was correct, and shows that her repeat is also a paraphrase of what she had already indicated herself in l. 7-8. Schegloff 1996 discusses similar cases in English, where repeats are used to confirm both the content of a prior turn and the implications alluded to in it.

((CAN BE LEFT OUT As Tiina still doesn’t come up with a straightforward request, Marko once more pre-empts it at line 23 with

okei siis perjantaina mun pitäis tulla kantaa ‘OK so on Friday I should come and carry’ (l. 23), which is a more explicit offer of help.))

After a lengthy sequence about alternative possible ways of doing the job, at line 130, Marko accepts that they will have to carry the rubbish by hand. He recycles the syntax and some of the lexis of lines 14-16, and stylises his turn. This turn presents his inferred understanding of the sequence in-between, and refers back to the earlier turn that it recycles. There are three lexical items he adds to this second instance of the figure: the particle *no*, which marks the turn as resumptive; the particle *sit*, a marker of inference, and the particle *vaan*, ‘just’, which does the job of downgrading.

In both lines 17 and 131, the uptake of the figure is a minimal response. This is the way co-participants regularly treat turns stylised in this way.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the stylised contour we’ve discussed has pragmatic properties very like those mentioned in intonation literature; it indexes an affective stance that we can roughly gloss as ‘not worth talking about’, ‘this is obvious’, or ‘no news’. We’ve shown both internal and external evidence that this is not just our analysis, but also co-participants’ analysis of it. Our data also show that by looking at stylised contours in their naturally occurring environment, that is, as part of a longer sequence, it’s possible to see some of the pragmatic subtleties that stylisation can be used for.