

Speak Easy #012 – Introduction to intonation

Episode description

In this episode, Suzanne and Andrew introduce intonation, describe what it is, and explain how it's essential for mastering English pronunciation.

Fun fact

English speakers use intonation for a variety of different reasons. Some of these include expressing emotion, conveying a grammatical function, and marking their social identities!

Material included in the study guide

- Transcript
- Practice exercise
- Bonus audio
- Quiz
- Writing and discussion questions



Transcript

Note: The transcript has been edited for clarity.

Andrew: Hey, everybody, my name is Andrew.

Suzanne: And I'm Suzanne.

Andrew: And you're listening to Culips.

Andrew: Hey, everyone, welcome back to another edition of the Culips English Podcast. Today we have a Speak Easy episode for you, which is our pronunciation series, which is really run by my trusty cohost, Suzanne. So today, I am joined by Suzanne. Hey, Sue.

Suzanne: Hey, how's it going?

Andrew: Not too bad. Suzanne, you have an interesting topic here for us today. It is an introduction to the pronunciation feature that's called intonation. Intonation.

Suzanne: Yes, intonation. Exactly.

Andrew: So intonation is a really important pronunciation feature that can really affect how clear and comprehensible your English is. It's a really vital feature to focus on. And Sue is going to tell us all about it today, give us an introduction to it.

Andrew: But just before we jump into that, everyone, I want to remind you that the best way to study with Culips is with our study guide. And you can download that from our website, which is Culips.com. And there's a transcript inside of it, so you can follow along and read every word that you'll hear us use today. And there's also a lot of bonus pronunciation exercises that Sue has made to accompany this lesson. So it's a really great way to study pronunciation here with us in the study guide. And, again, that's on our website, Culips.com, so check it out.

Andrew: OK, Suzanne, let's start. Intonation.

Suzanne: I was thinking we could kind of maybe start off by defining intonation, right? Figuring out what it really means, because I think it can get confusing as to what intonation really is.

Andrew: Absolutely. I think even a lot of English native speakers don't know what intonation is. It's not a common word. We don't use it in our everyday speaking. So it's important that we clarify this concept of intonation. And I mean, Sue, you know better than I do, but when I think of intonation, I think of music and pitch and the movements of pitch, kind of like going from high tones to low tones and high tones and low tones. Is that correct?

Suzanne: Exactly. Yeah, I mean, it is. It's really, if you think about it, intonation is really the music of a language, the tones, the pitches, how they move from one to the other. So we can really define intonation as the rise and fall of pitch in our speech. So earlier you had asked me about pitch, well, is intonation just pitch or is it the same? So intonation is made up of lots of pitches or different pitches that become one contour or one piece of music or one line of music, one phrase. So it's not just one pitch. It's the kind of fluctuation or change from one pitch to the next in our speech.

Andrew: OK, so it's not just, like, one musical note, right? It's, like, a bunch of notes connected that kind of make a melody. Could we explain it that way?

Suzanne: Exactly. Yeah, so, like, say, I gave you a dialogue. And I said, OK, tomorrow, bring in the intonation contour. That would be you writing down the pitch changes on your paper, like you were writing music, right? Like you were writing, like, music to your lyrics, in a way. The intonation is kind of the whole sheet of music, whereas a pitch is just like one note on that sheet.

Andrew: OK, I got it. I got it.

Suzanne: Yeah, and intonation is sometimes ignored because, I mean, I don't know about you, but most of the time when we're listening to somebody speak, whether it's in person or on a podcast or maybe on TV, many times, we're just listening to the meaning. We're focused in on the words, the vocabulary, the grammar. So we're not really focusing on the intonation or the stress, either. Those are, like, the things that are helping our vocabulary and our grammar. And those are things that we don't see in the forefront. They're not really in them as the main character many times, so people don't really think about it. It's not, you know, it's not their favorite feature, maybe. But it's very, very important and very helpful, as we'll see in our episode today, that it can really change and alter the meaning of your utterance, of your speech.

Andrew: And really affect the emotional quality of your speech, too. We use intonation often when we are expressing emotion, right? So happy and excited emotion sounds very different than angry and sad and stressed emotion and intonation.

Suzanne: Totally, even like us, right? Our podcast intonation is very different than a TV show intonation, where you also see the people and you see, right? Or, like, a conversation with a professor. A professor giving a lecture intonation, kind of intonation, is different than going to see—

Andrew: Like a stand-up comedian or something.

Suzanne: Exactly. You don't even need to hear the words that they're saying. You could probably listen to just the "wah, wah, wah." You know? Like you're watching the Charlie Brown cartoon. And you would actually go, "That sounds like a comedy show." Right? You could probably figure out what you're listening to just by the intonation.

Andrew: I think that if our listeners have previous exposure to intonation, maybe they've studied it a little bit when it comes to question formation. Because I do think that's one area that is taught in, like, English classes is basic question intonation, kind of like the rising intonation at the end of certain questions, right? That's studied, but we're going to go a little bit deeper in it today.

Andrew: And, guys, really what our plan here today is to introduce you to this concept and to help you notice it in your future English listening. It's kind of an introduction to it, because I have a gut feeling that a lot of people ignore intonation for the most part. But, as we said, it can be really impactful and really help you make your English clear. And kind of the first step to using it in your own speech is to know what to listen for. And so this is what we're going to help you discover today is to know what to listen for in your future English listening.

Suzanne: Exactly. So today is really focusing on your perception and learning how to perceive that intonation in your speech and in the speech that you hear, for example, on podcasts or in TV shows, and just start to open your ears and your mind to listening to the music of English. In a future episode, we'll look at, sort of, more application and ways you can apply intonation to your speech for effective comprehensibility. So I think one thing I want everyone to know is that—and maybe this is going to make people sad, but—

Andrew: Oh no, don't bum us out Suzanne. I've been having such a good day today.

Suzanne: Oh, I know. Sorry. I'm gonna kind of bum you guys out. But, for the most part, I mean, maybe not 100%, but probably like 90% of English intonation is really narrow.

Andrew: Narrow.

Suzanne: Narrow. Yeah. So when we say narrow, we mean, like, well, if you look at a piece of music, right, you see, like, a note that goes from, like, down here to up here, right? It's like a really big jump. That would not be narrow.

Andrew: That's a very wide range.

Suzanne: Exactly. It has a wide range. But English doesn't. English has a very short range. We don't usually go all the way up and then all the way down and then all the way up and then all the way down. It's rarely going to have such high, wide fluctuations. So I hate to break it to everybody, but we're kind of a little more boring in English, I would say.

Andrew: Right, and, Sue, we were talking a little bit off air about French speakers in Quebec, where you live in Montreal, and how it's the opposite with French. And French is, really, it does have that very wide range of intonation patterns available. And it's much more musical. Whereas I agree with you that English is in a more narrow range. And I think it's almost monotone to me. Of course, there are, there is intonation, but it's not to the same extent as we have in other languages.

Andrew: And, of course, you know, different Asian languages have lots of different pitch and intonation functions that are really meaningful, too, that can change the different meanings of the sentence. We don't have that in English, of course, very much, maybe a tiny bit.

Suzanne: A little bit. Well, you know, we're also, remember, speaking about North American English, right? Where, because if we look at, like, Irish, Scottish, Australian, for example, English, that's native-speaker English, but it's also a lot different. There are certain sounds that are just different that we don't do in North America. And the music is very different, right? So, like, if I were to do an Irish accent, and I'm sure that is not perfect right now, but they're going off at the end, you know? And, like, that's very different. We don't talk like that in the United States or in Canada, right? We don't really do that. So that is an intonation contour that is common to Ireland, or parts of Ireland, but not common to North America.

Suzanne: Now, the second thing I'm going to say that kind of explains this concept of narrow is if you think about our, sort of, categories of languages. Andrew, you talked about certain Asian languages, which are more tonal, right? So they are ruled by the tone, the tone in which you speak, or the pitch will actually tell you the meaning, right? It carries the meaning of the sentence or the word. And so this is tonal. And that you can kind of look at, if we drew that out, it would have, like, lots of ups and downs. If we looked at it like a wave form on an audio recording system, we'd see them go, like, up and down and up and down, up and down. And it would have a lot of variation because that's where the meaning is.

Suzanne: If we look at another—languages like French or Italian, for example, they would be, like, the second lowest. Like, if tonal languages have high peaks and ranges, maybe French and Italian kind of languages would have medium peaks and valleys. They would have, like, a medium-wide range. And this is because they are a syllable-timed language. And when you are a syllable-timed language, you actually really pronounce the entire syllable, you really pay attention to saying all the sounds in the syllable, and that causes your intonation to, sort of, reach a little bit more. There's a little bit more of a bounce.

Suzanne: Now, English, however, is a stress-timed language. So we can think of it, instead of going up and down, that it kind of goes wide, side to side. Like, hey, Andrew, how's it going? Like, I don't even need to move my pitch. All I have to do is elongate, make it louder, stretch, right? Yo, that movie was crazy, dude, right? I don't need to go up or down. I can move side to side. And so that's kind of, if we look at it like a visual, that's sort of how we can do a quick and easy image in our mind of why English is like that, more narrow.

Andrew: OK, yeah, that's really interesting. Yeah. Yeah. And I think it helps to think of the visual aspect of it, to kind of imagine, like, a waveform, an audio waveform that you'd see on a computer. And when you think of it that way, it's pretty easy to visualize and understand.

Suzanne: Yeah, and I would say, like, the only time that we really use high pitches are when we are truly using emphatic stress or, like, emotion, right? Like, no way, what? That's crazy, right?

Andrew: I think that's when I used, like, high pitch like that is, like, when I'm talking with my friends and—I should say that kind of high intonation is when I'm talking with my friends and something really surprising happens. Like maybe, Suzanne, you had some good news to share with me. So you're like, "Andrew, guess what? I won the lottery!" And I'd be like, "What? No way!"

Suzanne: Exactly. And you really jump, right? Like, you jump three or four notes or something to your falsetto, like, "What? No way!" But then you go right back, right? "No way. That's so cool. That's crazy." Right? We don't stay there. We don't go back there very often. So, again, North American intonation. We can't speak for the entire native-speaking English world. But let me ask you, Andrew, like, do you notice that about you when you're, you know, listening to yourself on Culips or editing some of the podcast episodes? What do you notice about your intonation?

Andrew: Of course, I think everybody hates, to an extent, their own voice, right?

Suzanne: Right. It's true.

Andrew: I think a lot of people say, like, oh my voice, why does it have to sound like that? I've got pretty used to the sound of my voice because I spend, you know, hours every week preparing Culips episodes and editing them and re-listening to them. So I'm forced to pay a lot more attention to my voice than I usually have to. And, to be honest with you, I think it sounds really monotone a lot of the time. When I listen back to myself, I'm always, like, oh, why am I not being more emphatic? Why am I not using more intonation? Because it sounds, you know, kind of flat and monotone.

Suzanne: Yeah, but that's natural.

Andrew: Yeah, that's natural. I think one of the things that I realized is that a lot of the times when I compare myself to other podcasters, the other podcasters are really trying to be broadcasters and trying to be entertainers. You know? So they're speaking in a way that's not natural, like, "Hey, everybody! Welcome to the Cool Guys Podcast!" You know? But, like, we're trying to speak naturally for our listeners so that they can get real sense of natural English and I think that's why my voice tends to sound a little monotone, a little flat, even though I wish it wasn't always that way.

Suzanne: Yeah, I totally agree. The key is sort of what's your learning and speaking goal. If you're trying to emulate or give an example of natural speech, then that's kind of this, that's not really, you know, "Hey guys, how's it going?" But maybe I would do that in a different context, right? On the intro or the outro. Or maybe you would do, like, a different intonation, you know, if you're telling a crazy story. But for the most part, we tend to hang out in this kind of one to three note, at the most, range.

Suzanne: So the third thing I want to cover about this is that it is something that you said in the beginning about how it can really affect the emotion that you're conveying. The intonation, it doesn't matter what you say sometimes, but how you say it. So if you're changing your intonation to not many peaks and valleys, you will convey a certain emotion and then maybe if you change the exact same text so that it has more peaks and valleys, lots of pitch changes, higher ranges, you might actually convey a very different emotion with the exact same message. So this is something actors look at all the time. And we have a little example here. So let's listen to the example in the first way and see if our listeners can guess what the emotion behind it is. What we're kind of conveying, or how we sound in the first version, OK?

Andrew: Right. So we're going to read this, guys, two times, all right? It's the same example, the same sample dialogue, but we're going to read it using two different intonation patterns. And we hope that you can notice and hear the different intonation when you compare the two of them. So, here we go. Suzanne, let's read this example conversation for the first time and then we'll do it again a second time.

Suzanne: Awesome.

Andrew: Hey, did you hear about Carol?

Suzanne: Yeah, she got a new job.

Andrew: Yeah, I can't believe she's moving to Ottawa. Crazy.

Suzanne: Think she said she was leaving next week?

Andrew: Maybe we can go visit her.

Suzanne: Yeah, maybe.

Andrew: OK, guys, we're going to do this one more time. Same conversation, same vocabulary, but different intonation now, OK?

Andrew: Hey, did you hear about Carol?

Suzanne: Yeah, she got a new job.

Andrew: Yeah, I can't believe she's moving to Ottawa. Crazy.

Suzanne: Think she said she was leaving next week?

Andrew: Maybe we can go visit her.

Suzanne: Yeah, maybe.

Andrew: All right. So I think the difference between those two is really shocking. Actually, I'm a little surprised to hear them myself, how different they sound.

Suzanne: Yeah, for sure. It's like we're in a whole different TV show, right? If that was the scene, like, the first one is maybe, like, a really serious show. And the second one is like a comedy, right? Like some sitcom.

Andrew: Right, well, if anybody didn't pick up on it, the first conversation we read with a disappointed intonation pattern, kind of depressed or gloomy intonation pattern. And then we were very happy and excited for the second one. Yeah, I was interpreting it like, in the first example, maybe the coworkers are really sad that Carol was leaving and got a new job and was moving to Ottawa, the capital city of Canada. But then in the second example, I thought, oh, they're really excited and proud of their coworker and supportive and happy that she got a new job.

Suzanne: Yeah, and excited to go visit, you know? Like, let's go, now we can go see her there.

Andrew: Right, right, right.

Suzanne: Yeah. So, exactly. I mean, this is a very stark example, right? It's a very obvious example of how intonation can change your emotion and your message and the meaning behind your message. And if you noticed in the first version, we really did not use many intonational shifts. We maybe went, if we were kind of talking about notes, we maybe went up a half note, you know, just like a little bit. "Hey, did you hear about Carol?" Carol, Carol, Carol, right? "Yeah, she got a new job." Job, job, right? It's very subtle that we're lifting a little bit.

Suzanne: Whereas in the second version, we really shifted quite a bit in just one thought, right? "Hey," even in just that word. "Hey, did you hear about Carol?" Right? So we're accessing higher pitches, and we're shifting them more often to show excitement. I mean, if you even looked at this, like, if we drew a line, like a contour—which we're gonna do next episode—if you looked at a contour, you'd see that it'd be very spiky, right? Like really excited. It would look excited, that line, and the disappointed version would also look kind of disappointed. It would kind of just hang down and not really moved that much, right?

Andrew: Just kind of stale and flat, yeah.

Suzanne: Exactly, totally. So, all this to say that as you listen to Culips podcasts, as you listen to other podcasts, and maybe watch TV shows, see if you can close your eyes for a second and just listen to the music. Maybe listen to some stand-up comedians, maybe switch it up and listen to some comedies, some dramas, and see if you can notice a difference within the intonational contour or the pitch change. Is it changing a lot, like a happy song, like the music is going up and down and up and down? Or is it kind of staying here most of the time. I don't know. You'll kind of perceive that. And we'd love to hear from you guys about it. What you have found, your research watching and listening, and let us know what you noticed in the intonation in different media.

Andrew: Yeah, absolutely. And if I could just offer up one quick tip here, as well, before we finish up, I would say, guys, if you want to practice intonation, shadowing could be a really cool way to do that. But I would suggest using something that is really, really easy for you. OK, so don't jump into, you know what, taking a scene from a movie that's really hard for you to understand and maybe has some vocabulary that you're not really familiar with. Take some audio, maybe it's, like, a Culips Simplified Speech episode or something, a part of that, that is very easy for you to understand. And shadow with that because, as Suzanne said, sometimes if you're not familiar with the vocabulary, or the grammar in what you're listening to, it can be hard to hear some of the intonation and other pronunciation features. So I would recommend practicing these pronunciation techniques like intonation with something that's very easy for you to understand.

Andrew: Well, everyone that brings us to the end of today's episode. Thanks as always, Suzanne, that was very insightful.

Suzanne: Yeah, of course. It's my pleasure.

Andrew: And everyone, once again, our website is Culips.com. It's the place where you can sign up and become a Culips member and get access to the study guides or listen to our previous episodes or even figure out how to get in touch with us. Send us an email, or follow us on social media like YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, all of them. We'll be back soon with another brand-new Culips episode and we'll talk to you then. Goodbye.

Suzanne: Bye.

Practice exercise

The audio for the practice exercise is included at the end of the ad-free version of this episode. To download this file, please visit the Culips Dashboard by going to www.Culips.com and logging in to your account.

- 1. Listen to the recording and, for each question, note whether you think the intonation goes UP or DOWN. Finally, practice repeating the sentences and mimic the intonation.**

| | |
|--|--|
| 1. Do you want to go to the party tonight? | |
| 2. Did you do the homework for English class? | |
| 3. Where do you want to eat tonight? | |
| 4. Can you play the piano? | |
| 5. How many of us are going hiking this weekend? | |
| 6. Do I need to bring my passport? | |
| 7. Did you say Thursday or Friday? | |
| 8. Isn't it important that I at least try? | |
| 9. Where can I find the bathroom? | |

Quiz

1. What is intonation?

- a) the music of a language
- b) the rise and fall of pitch in a spoken language
- c) a cool new band that Suzanne found on Spotify
- d) A and B

2. What is the difference between intonation and stress?

- a) Stress is the rhythm of a language (in our case, English), whereas intonation is the pitch or tone.
- b) Stress and intonation are the same thing.
- c) Stress is not important in English.
- d) Intonation is only used in questions.

3. What is TRUE about intonation?

- a) Intonation helps us to express emotion in English.
- b) If your intonation goes up at the end of a sentence, you can sound like you are asking a question.
- c) North American English intonation is very narrow, only using about four notes.
- d) All of the above

Writing and discussion questions

1. In the first example, the hosts read with a narrow intonation. What emotion are they conveying? And how would you describe the intonation (besides narrow)? What do you notice? Do you think their intonation matches the emotion they are trying to convey?
2. In the second example, what emotion are the hosts conveying? What adjustments do they make to their intonation? Specifically, what did you notice about the pitch levels? Do you think their intonation matches the emotion that they are trying to convey?
3. Name some podcast hosts or actors you are listening to or watching. Write down descriptive words about their intonation. Do they use a lot of intonational shifts, going up and down frequently? Or are they more monotone, using very few notes?

Answers

| | |
|--|--------------------------|
| 1. Do you want to go to the party tonight? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Did you do the homework for English class? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Where do you want to eat tonight? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Can you play the piano? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. How many of us are going hiking this weekend? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. Do I need to bring my passport? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. Did you say Thursday or Friday? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. Isn't it important that I at least try? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9. Where can I find the bathroom? | <input type="checkbox"/> |

1.d 2.a 3.d

Episode credits

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