

Suzanne's Quick Tips

Episode #5: Question intonation



Culips English Podcast

Transcript

Hey guys, this is Suzanne and you're listening to Culips.

So today, we have a quick tip for you. And today we're going to talk about open-ended questions, the intonation anyway. So, when you ask a question, does it always go up at the end? Not always.

Before we begin, I want to remind you that the best way to study with Culips is not just listening to the podcasts, but also becoming a member. Going to Culips.com, and becoming a member gives you access to lots of study materials that will help you bring your English to the next level. So, go to Culips.com and check it out.

So, intonation. Many times people see a question mark or ask a question and automatically assume that a question should always go up in intonation. But there are actually some rules regarding questions and intonation. Let's first define intonation. What is intonation? Well, it's the rise and fall of pitch during speech, usually following a contour or a pattern throughout a thought group.

Okay, so that sounded really, really complicated. So let's break that down. Basically, **intonation is the rise and fall of pitch during speech**. So, if I'm going up and down and up and down, and I don't know why that *dadadada dededede* right? That's intonation. And it's usually following a contour or a pattern throughout a thought group. So, we think of speaking in thoughts, not always in complete and perfect sentences. So, we have thought patterns and our speech usually follows an intonational pattern that really echoes our thought pattern. So, since we speak in thoughts more often than we do in sentences, we usually think of intonation in patterns as well. So, a question is a thought.

So, today we're talking about what we call open-ended questions. These are questions that when we ask them have an open-ended answer. In other words, the responder can have a one word answer, a one sentence answer, or a whole monologue as an answer. This means the quality and quantity of the answer really depends on, and is in the hands of, the responder. This is different than what we would call a yes/no question that can simply be answered by the responder saying yes or yeah or no. Like, maybe a yes or no question would be, do you like milk? And the person can say, "Uh, no." Or do you want to go out for dinner? "Uh, yeah." So as you can tell, those intonational patterns go up at the end. Do you want to go out for dinner?

But in an open-ended question our intonation most of the time will go down, not up. So let's look at some examples.

What do you want for your birthday?

Do you hear the intonation going down? Another example:

How is your family?

As you can hear, my intonational contour is *dadadadada dadadadada*. And our last example:

Where did you get that coffee?

Okay, now let's review our quick tip takeaways. Number one: intonation is the rise and fall of pitch when we speak specifically within each thought. Number two: not all questions are created equal, some go up and some go down in intonation. Number three: open-ended questions, where the answer is not a yes or no, but a longer, more specific answer go down in intonation, right?

So, I want you to try this next time you're in a store looking for something. Ask, where can I find the XYZ? Or maybe where can I find the paper cups? Or where can I find the sweaters? Right? Paper cups, sweaters, sweaters, sweaters. Where can I find the sweaters or the jeans?

All right. I hope this helps. And I hope you've had as much fun as I have. Find us on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. And if you have any questions, contact us at contact@culips.com. Catch you next time. Bye!

Quick Tip Takeaways

1. Just because a question ends with a question mark (?) does not mean the intonation or pitch should go up at the end.
2. Intonation is the rise and fall of pitch in speech, usually used to emphasize and stress a word in a sentence.
3. An open-ended question is a question that cannot be answered with yes or no. Instead, it is answered with a descriptive response.

Writing and Discussion Questions

1. In your first language, do you always use upward intonation for all questions? If not, how does this intonation rule in English compare to your language? Do you have the same rules?
2. Can you name some native English speaking accents that always go up at the end of a sentence, even if they aren't asking questions?

Study Challenges

Practice the following questions. Try recording yourself to make sure the open-ended questions go down in intonation. Think of it like music, and make sure your final “note” is lower than the previous ones. If you can answer the question with a YES or a NO, the intonation should go up.

- a) Will John be joining us this weekend?
- b) How did you do on the English final?
- c) Where did you buy those shoes?
- d) Do you like eating meat?
- e) Where did you park the car?

Credits

Music: If by Broke for Free; Things to Come by Broke for free

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