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# On the importance of the prosodic component in the expression of linguistic im/politeness

**Abstract:** This paper outlines the important relationship between prosody and im/politeness and presents a brief overview of what has been done in this field. Sections 2, 3 and 4 present several theoretical concepts which are especially relevant for understanding im/politeness in concrete frameworks (mainly in conversation). Section 5 points out the necessity of studying a pragmatic phenomenon like im/politeness with its prosodic expression. Finally, section 6 discusses some studies in this field on different languages, with a special focus on prosodic values like the  $F_0$  (pitch/fundamental frequency), intonation patterns, duration and speech rate.

**Keywords:**  $F_0$ , duration, speech rate, im/politeness, conversation

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## 1 Introduction

### *It's not what you said, it's how you said it* (Culpeper 2011a)

The aim of this paper is to present a brief state of art of what is going on in the analysis of the relationship between im/politeness and prosody. The usual practice within discourse analysis is to identify what is conveyed by the speaker's utterances. This is a difficult task, given that researchers must struggle to recognize common features out of samples of idiosyncratic linguistic behaviour, which means explaining the underlying reason why one particular speaker used this or that word and, above all, why in that particular context; on the other hand, the difficulty of discourse analysis lies in the fact that any

good explanation cannot be rigidly restricted to lexical-semantic aspects. For any approach to be complete, it must incorporate other features, namely phonetic, syntactic and pragmatic, considering this last one as a global contextual perspective diagonally intersecting the others (Leech 1980; Rittaud-Huttinet 1995; Briz 1998; Calsamiglia and Tusón 2002; Mugford 2012). From these, perhaps the most immediate, primary mechanism to be expressive is prosody (Navarro 1974; Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 1996; Morel and Danon-Boilueau 1998; Alvarez Muro et al. 2011; Hidalgo 2011).

Indeed, it is very common to find situations where the speaker says X, but uses a singular prosodic modulation during the oral production of the utterance, aiming to a) express another meaning, namely Y (like in irony, sarcasm or other indirect speech acts), or to b) change substantially the meaning X, which immediately becomes X' (like in intensification, attenuation or analogous phenomena). Discourse analysts mainly concern themselves with the expressive nuances speakers might have intended to convey: *Was he/she rude? Was he/she ironic?*, and, what is most interesting for the present paper, *was he/she polite?*

It has been pointed out (Watts 2008) that analysts often regard the interpretation of utterances as polite/impolite almost as a matter of faith: they take an auditory input and immediately suggest an interpretation for it. We researchers consider the words, their combination, their phonic usage, and, finally, we try to understand the true meaning of the global sentence uttered by the speaker. Nevertheless, human perception needs to be empirically contrasted. Put in another way, our speech perception can be influenced by our deeply rooted mental linguistic structures, causing people (analysts included) to perceive what their mind is telling them to perceive, and not what is really there. Analysts must then ask themselves: *Why am I thinking that the speaker said that? What is the specific clue that led me to this interpretation?*

In order to avoid any cognitive bias, attention must be paid to real data (Cabedo 2009). Just by reading a transcription, researchers may think about some contextual meaning for a particular expression. In a second stage, however, when listening to the original audio file, the initial impression may or may not be confirmed. If the latter is the case, the prosody will most probably have a crucial role in the new interpretation made by the analyst. In fact, pragmatic work confers a special relevance to the phonic component in achieving the speaker's meaning (Rittaud-Huttinet 1995; Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 1996; Wennerstrom 2001; Fox 2002; Waltreit 2005; Wichmann and Blakemore 2006; Grawunder and Winter 2010; Culpeper 2011b; Hidalgo 2011). In Conversation Analysis the audio signal is typically used to perceive expressive differences,

including the polite/impolite intention in an utterance. For instance, when interpreting expressions:

A common assumption is that the prime function of prosody is expressive, i.e., to convey mainly emotions and attitudes rather than any referential meaning. This suggests that prosody/intonation is a kind of paralinguistic overlay on an utterance whose referential meaning has already been identified by other means. (Wichmann and Blakemore 2006: 1537)

Thus, differences in the sound patterns may help linguists to distinguish what is polite from what is not, and also what is impolite from what is not. When we hear an utterance we perceive a string of words, we also perceive prosodic information that can be attitudinal, stylistic, sociolinguistic, dialectal, etc., and we perform all these tasks simultaneously and selectively. Clearly, other parameters *in praesentia* are important alongside the parsing of conversation. It is the case, for example, that paralinguistic elements (such as vocalizations like *erm*, *uh*, *psst*, etc.) or kinesic elements (gestures, facial movements, etc.), also play a relevant role in establishing conversational progress (Mugford 2012). However, without *suprasegmental* elements (intonation wave or pitch, intensity, rhythm, pause) the listener would face difficulties in assigning the real communicative value to any utterance.

In other words, prosody is not merely the dressing of our messages. It is a useful instrument to convey the real speaker meaning (seriousness, joy, sadness, hostility, etc.), and it is likely that, if the prosody is marked in some way (i.e., high pitch, vowel lengthening, extreme speech rate, etc.), it will elicit a meaning that is totally or partially different from the one deriving from the other non-phonetic levels alone. Extending this idea, prosody is expected to be marked in those expressions where there is some potential ambiguity (Estellés *in press*). This is an accurate statement for the majority of pragmatic expressions, including im/politeness.

It is within this complex conversational (and colloquial) interpretation that our present approach stands; we will assume, then, that:

- (a) there is no complete message without the presence of prosodic (or suprasegmental) resources or, in other words, without the presence of intonation (which is “faked” in the written text by using punctuation), and
- (b) that the direct association between intonation, linguistic structure, speaker’s attitude, pragmatic function, etc. is virtually impossible to discern if we do not consider the whole contextual interaction, especially the negotiation between conversational partners (Waltereit 2005; Alvarez Muro et al. 2011, Hidalgo 2011); this can be done by taking account of several factors, like the place and the time of interaction, the role of participants,

their relationship, their common knowledge, etc. However arbitrary and chaotic these factors may seem, some regularities are expected by speakers/hearers. In fact, if these expectations are not met, the conversational exchange may fail (the listener does not understand the speaker) and communication is doomed to failure.

The capacity of prosody to provide a pragmatic anchorage to utterances has been tested in many ways and in many cases; the speaker can tell the listener what the relevant information is in a discursive continuum by using the focal accent or emphasis (Navarro 1974; Quilis 1988; Rittaud-Huttinet 1995; Llisterri et al. 2005; Cabedo 2009, Hidalgo 2011); or, by contrast, the speaker can prosodically minimize what is not relevant to the speech situation by articulating parenthetically, with a lower intensity; or the speaker can use prosody to ostensibly mark the topic changes.<sup>1</sup> Other effects are achieved by mechanisms that are not strictly intonational, but prosodic, like duration or speech rate.<sup>2</sup>

The current state of the art on the prosody-conversation interface focuses on two perspectives. The first one is the syntagmatic perspective, linked to intonation units *in praesentia*, i.e., occurring in the horizontal line of the speech. This perspective studies how linguistic items become prosodically bounded and thus form superior intonational units. The second is the paradigmatic perspective. Here, the intonation units formed syntagmatically are analyzed *in absentia*, i.e., are studied contrastively, determining when they are excluded or interchangeable in a given context (Quilis 1988; Hidalgo 2011). Variations in meaning depending on the different prosodic patterns applied belong to the latter perspective, which will be adopted in the present study.

In the paradigmatic axis, the meanings generated by intonation can be more or less systematic. For each intonation pattern, a Primary Modal Function (PMF) can be identified (Hidalgo 2009). This intonation pattern “by default” – frequently shared by several languages – creates objective and stable meanings, mainly assertive statements, interrogative and imperative (Bolinger 1978; Arndt and Wayne 1985; Waltereit 2005). This PMF is generally manifested in formal records, such as texts read aloud, speeches or lectures, and generally

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<sup>1</sup> The latter is seen, for example, in the delineation of prosodic sections called paratones, which are broader than simple utterances. Paratones have the same topic and are usually expressed with common intonation features (Hidalgo 2011; Wichmann 2000).

<sup>2</sup> In Peninsular Spanish, for example, the demonstration of politeness in contexts of social exchange (expressing gratitude, granting permission, etc.) is accompanied by an increase of the normal speech rate (Devis Herráiz 2011; Hidalgo 2006), whereas irony or ironic intention is usually associated to a slower tempo (Padilla García 2004).

in any oral statement in which the speaker and the listener relationship becomes formal or distant. In everyday conversation, however, there are frequently intonation patterns that are distanced from neutral parameters. Normally, they occur in situations when expressiveness and subjectivity develop freely: there is no need to be understood by an unknown audience, or to address a listener in a formal situation. In these cases, a Secondary Modal Function (SMF) or Expressive Function of intonation emerges, which is accompanied by changes – sometimes of great importance – in primary melodic patterns.

It is precisely in the field of SMF where *phonopoliteness* study arises. The term *phonopoliteness* delimits a very specific portion of the relationship between prosodic behaviours and their related meanings. More precisely, the study of phonopoliteness aims to shed light on how politeness strategies are expressed by different prosodic patterns and, reversely, how modulating prosodic patterns might eventually affect the im/polite intention of a given utterance. Bearing this aim in mind, politeness formulae (greetings, thanksgiving, apologies ...) are studied to establish the prosodic patterns usually applied to them; also strategic contextual politeness (*humour, irony, sarcasm*) is paid attention, as well as the impact of the prosodic level in some discourse markers, whose phonic modulation (segmental and suprasegmental) may lead to im/politeness.

## 2 Politeness, impoliteness and other related terms

The following lines will outline the notion of *politeness* and *impoliteness* adopted in this study. Works on *politeness* (Escandell-Vidal 1995; Watts 2003; Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2004; Hidalgo 2006; Bravo 2001; Brown and Crawford 2009; Harrison and Barlow 2009) are much more frequent than those on *impoliteness*. Yet, the term *impoliteness* has received a great variety of definitions (Culpeper 1996, 2011a, b; Culpeper et al. 2003; Kienpointner 2008; Lorenzo-Dus 2009; Angouri and Tseliga 2010; Alvarez Muro et al. 2011; Mugford 2012). Consequently, the task of adopting a single notion for each of these terms is a complicated one.

Brown and Levinson (1987) established the well-known distinction between *positive image* (the desire expressed by the speaker to make his requirements/ desires be positively valued in every social interaction) and *negative image* (the want for linguistic self-determination and independence; not to be forced to

accept another speaker's imposition) built on the notion of *face* developed by Goffman (1967: 5), the "positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact (...) is an image of self-delineated in terms of approved social attributes". Recent studies have worked out Brown and Levinson's (1987) proposal, and new concepts such as *relational work* have provided a new, more general perspective on the phenomenon of *politeness*. Postmodernist approaches (Watts 2003, 2008; Locher and Watts 2005), focus on the crossroads between *appropriateness* and *im/politeness*, and emphasize the importance of real context, as well as the role of researchers in understanding this context in order to achieve an accurate pragmatic interpretation.

The study of *impoliteness* (although most analyses have dealt rather with the *lack of politeness*) develops much later, in the mid 1990s (Culpeper 1996, 2011a; Kienpointer 1997). Most approaches deal with the presence of a specific, generalized pragmatic function and, in some cases, with the association (not always accurate) between *incivility* and certain communicative situations where *bad manners* are the prevailing ones in the interactive process. As for *politeness*, most scholars distinguish two main theoretical proposals, one being more anthropological or sociocultural (a), another being closer to a discursive or more linguistic explanation (b). In this sense, *politeness* can be considered:<sup>3</sup>

- (a) as a set of social norms, conventional and specific for each society or culture, that determine the correct behaviour of its members, causing them to avoid certain forms of behaviour, while encouraging others (Goffman 1967; Bravo 1998, 1999; Bravo and Briz 2004).
- (b) as a conversational strategy, committed to the elimination or mitigation of conflicts, with which conversationalists try to find and select language methods to keep the established relationship; Leech defines it as "a strategic conflict avoidance" which "can be measured in terms of the degree of effort put into the avoidance of a conflict situation and the establishment and maintenance of comity" (Leech 1980: 9).

The present research is related to the second approach of *im/politeness*, understood as a conversational strategy, and a sum of pragmatic effects resulting from its manifestation in colloquial conversation. Such pragmatic effects are favoured by the use of several linguistic mechanisms, among which only the prosodic marks will be discussed in this paper.

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<sup>3</sup> This is just a matter of approximation to a phenomenon. Both perspectives take account of linguistic analysis in their theoretical assumptions, but, for option a, this is not a priority, whereas it is the focus for option b.

Any approach to the interface between *im/politeness* and intonation must be data-driven in order to interpret more appropriately the actual realization of the phenomenon. In this case, Garcés-Conejos (2013: 24) points out that “we need, rather than staying at the theoretical level, to support our claims empirically”. This is our methodological perspective too: observing the context and obtaining data in order to recognize patterns and establish correlations between what it is marked politely and prosodically at the same time.

### 3 The natural space of communication: Colloquial conversation

The vast majority of our everyday communicative activity takes place under the shape of a conversation:

Conversation is one of the most typically human activities. It's the prototypical way languages are manifested, their primary form of existence and the universal way of linguistic use. (Tusón 2002: 134)

Conversation is the most natural locus to study pragmatic phenomena (Sacks et al. 1974; Fraser 1980; Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 1996; Briz 1998; Bravo 2001; Tusón 2002; Hidalgo 2006); it is the way we are born into language, the way we spontaneously communicate and, therefore, examining this genre is of great interest, especially if valuable corpus material, recorded secretly<sup>4</sup>, is available.

Several characteristics have been posited by Conversational Analysis that define conversation (Sacks et al. 1974; Fraser 1980; Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 1996); in general, conversation could be considered initially as a dialogue between two or more speakers, mainly spontaneous and with interactive purposes only (non-transactional ones). We follow Briz's (1998: 42) five standards to define conversation, given their operativity in a corpus framework, and have exploited Briz and Val.Es.Co.'s (2002; 2013) corpora of Spanish colloquial conversations as the main sources of data to illustrate the importance of phonopoliteness. All the samples have been transcribed and analyzed using the phonic speech synthesis software PRAAT<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> In Spanish, the Val.Es.Co corpus (Valencia Colloquial Spanish) is spontaneous and secretly recorded; the COLA corpus is also spontaneous. These corpora can be accessed respectively at the following addresses: [http://www.colam.org/om\\_prosj-espannol.html](http://www.colam.org/om_prosj-espannol.html)  
<http://www.fonocortesia.es/corpusval>

<sup>5</sup> The software is free and can be downloaded here: <http://www.fon.hum.uva.nl/praat/>

## 4 Prosodic features

Prosody studies phenomena like pitch, intensity or speech rate (Quilis 1988; Morel and Danon-Boilueau 1998; Fox 2002; Hidalgo 2006, 2011). These phenomena are *suprasegmental*, i.e., have effects on groups of linguistic items or *segments*, like phonemes. Literature has focused more on the *suprasegmental*/prosodic expression of *im/politeness* (Roldán 2000; Culpeper et al. 2003; Wichmann 2004; Hidalgo 2006; Lin et al. 2006; Stadler 2006; Nadeu 2008; Orozco 2008; Grawunder and Winter 2010; Alvarez Muro et al. 2011; Nadeu and Prieto 2011). The most frequently used parameters in the literature to carry out prosodic analyses are the following:

- (a) *Pitch (melodic/intonation wave)*. Every utterance is expressed with a global melody. To give an accessible example, pitch is the prosodic parameter that helps us to differentiate between declarative (*downward melody*) and interrogative utterances (*upward melody*). This intonation wave may adopt several forms: *suspended* (horizontal wave), *circumflex* (variable wave from top to bottom or vice versa), *rising tone* (upward wave), *down tone* (downward wave).
- (b) *Pitch range*. This is the distance between the lowest and the highest pitch value of the speaker. This parameter is commonly used to convey more or less expressiveness on what has been said.
- (c) *Toneme*. This refers to the last part of the phonic group. Concretely, it is the section included between the last stressed syllable of the phonic group and the pause (or tonal reset) after the phonic group. For example, in

*The new cook surprised us with the most amazing delicacy*

the *toneme* is the phonic section after the /e/ in the word *delicacy* (/’de-li-ka-sē/). Most works on prosody typically assume that the actual expressiveness – at least in some languages like Spanish – appears in this last part of the phonic group (Quilis 1988).

- (d) *Intensity*. This parameter is commonly associated with the volume. Until recently (Llisterri et al. 2005), most authors have directly correlated intensity to the stressed syllable mark in Spanish (Navarro 1974; Quilis 1988). Intensity has frequently been overlooked in *im/politeness* studies, with some exceptions (Grawunder and Winter 2010).
- (e) *Duration*. It is the temporal extension of a phonic group. This is an absolute value that can be relativized if it is intersected with other factors, like, for instance, the number of syllables per phonic group. In this last case, the result is the *speech rate* or, in other words, how fast a speaker utters his/her intervention.



- (f) *Pauses*. Pauses can be seen as the time span between phonic groups where no (linguistic) sound is uttered. They usually provide valuable data about verbal fluidness or general expressiveness.

When we want to study the relation between a linguistic element and any phonic feature we must focus on different aspects like, for instance, the particularities of the phonetics involved. So, there are traits that we must pay attention to, like the audio quality of recordings or the units measured (semitones, Hertz, decibels etc.) (Quilis 1988; De Dominicis 1992; Morel and Danon-Boilueau 1998; Fox 2002; Cabedo 2009; Hidalgo 2011; Wennerstrom 2001).

## 5 Politeness, prosody and their mutual influences. A brief overview

The intersection zone between *pragmatics* in general (including *irony*, *im/politeness*, *humor* ...) and *prosody* has been explored by quite a few papers and books. Some references from the mid 1990s already addressed this relationship (Halliday 1964; Kurath 1964; Navarro 1974; Cruttenden 1976; Quilis 1988) and, more recently, papers about a variety of languages from different typological backgrounds have dealt with this theoretical crossroads. In Romance languages – the aim of this special issue – Catalan (Nadeu 2008; Nadeu and Prieto 2011), Spanish (Roldán 2000; Alcoba and Poch 2006a; Hidalgo 2006; Rao 2006; Orozco 2008), Italian (De Dominicis 1992), and French (Rittaud-Huttinet 1995; Morel and Danon-Boilueau 1998; Grobet and Auchlin 2002) have highlighted the relationship between pragmatics and prosody. Also non-Romance languages have dealt with the interface between these levels, like English (Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 1996; Wennerstrom 2001; Culpeper et al. 2003; Wichmann 2004; Wichmann and Blakemore 2006; Angouri and Tseliga 2010; Culpeper 2011a), German/Korean (Grawunder and Winter 2010) and Japanese (Ofuka et al. 2000), among others.

Within pragmatics, the particular field of im/politeness and its relationship with prosody has witnessed a growing interest in the literature of the last few years. This is partially encouraged by Brown and Levinson's (1987) claim that *im/politeness* has a presumptive universal character. In Spanish, for instance, some research projects have been carried out that aimed to explain this potential relationship between prosody and im/politeness, like the one supervised by Dolors Poch at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (Alcoba 2004;

Alcoba and Poch 2006a, 2006b).<sup>6</sup> Also the work of the EDICE Program,<sup>7</sup> directed by Diana Bravo has certainly contributed to a better description of *im/politeness* strategies, both in Spanish alone and in contrast with other languages (Bravo 1998, 1999, 2001; Bravo and Briz 2004; Bernal 2007; Hernández Flores 2008). In a similar way, the above mentioned project Fonocortesía (Phonopoliteness) aims to analyze the different phonic strategies – both segmental, suprasegmental and paralinguistic – developed in colloquial speech situations (mainly in Spanish) to express polite or impolite communicative meanings.

Some general assumptions or prosodic trends have been highlighted that have effects on the expression of Spanish politeness. To mention just a few:

- It has been established a possible relation between basic prosody (questions, exclamations, hesitations in speech) and a marked tone to identify the image activity (*serious tone, jokes, emphasis ...*) (Hernández Flores 2002).
- *Aggressiveness or rude tone* seems to be related with the pitch and other marks, like a high intensity or an increased tone, but also with minimal melodic contrasts (Briz 2007).
- Intonation is a highly relevant parameter to minimize the argumentative weight of an attenuation (Ferrer and Sánchez 2002).

These general assumptions must transcend mere intuition, and data must be provided that support such claims. The objective phonic expressions in the analyzed languages, the acoustic materialization of what is and what is not *im/polite* must be evaluated and classified. In other words, the main objective of researchers working on the interface should be to reveal recurrent prosodic patterns or acoustic behaviours that express the same pragmatic meaning.

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<sup>6</sup> Concretely, the project *Las manifestaciones orales de la cortesía en español: estudio pragmalingüístico de las relaciones entre los elementos gramaticales que expresan la cortesía y los marcadores fónicos asociados* (Oral manifestations of politeness in Spanish: pragmalinguistic study of relations between grammatical politeness elements and phonic markers associated), led by D. Poch at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Spain). The aim of this project was not spontaneous oral conversation, but recordings from radio commercial advertisements. A number of relevant papers, some of them offered in the References section below, were published thanks to this project.

<sup>7</sup> *Estudios sobre el Discurso de la Cortesía en Español* (Spanish Politeness Discourse Studies), <http://edice.org/>

## 6 Using prosodic cues to interpret im/politeness

As seen above (see Section 5), research on *phonoim/politeness* in conversation is still a relatively novel area. Brown and Levinson, in their 1987 foundational work, “predict that across different cultures, positive politeness will be associated with creakiness and negative politeness with relatively high  $f_0$ ” (Grawunder and Winter 2010:1). However, we claim that, as has been pointed out by some authors (Wichmann 2000; Wennerstrom 2001; Wichmann and Blakemore 2006; Estellés in press), it is not that relevant to search for a constant relation between *im/politeness* and prosody, but rather between marked, unexpected (prosodic) forms and marked, unexpected meanings. We think that this way, and not any other, will be the option chosen by the speaker to convey a pragmatic meaning. For example, take a look at the following example<sup>8</sup>:

- (1) C: *me lo dijo Adela*  
 A: ***¡vete a la mierda!*** *como me lo dijo el padre de Ade- nos trajo el padre de Adela no podía decirle que habíamos vuelto a una hora y luego a otra// que no- no sabía cómo decirle que- que hemos estado// que le había sido infiel (( ))*  
 [C: Adela told me that  
 A: ***Fuck off!*** Since Adela’s father told me ... since Adela’s father drove us home, we could not tell her that we were back then and then tell her we were back at a different time / / so I did not- I did not know how to tell him that- that we have been / / that he had been unfaithful to her]

There is an evident manifestation of *im/politeness* in (1). Spanish *vete a la mierda* (*‘fuck off’*), is clearly an impolite expression, practically a flagrant insult. In this case, the semantic content of the words suffices to convey the offensive intention, and the use of an abnormally high prosodic value (i.e., high pitch) will be redundant, because that is the *expected* melodic behaviour for that particular expression; furthermore, were they expressed with a neutral pitch, the same utterance (*vete a la mierda*) would convey the same meaning.; nevertheless, in an alternative context, the speaker could play with his/her phonic expression in order to convey other values. For example: *vetee a laa mierda*↓ (with several vowel lengthenings and a final falling toneme) could express a lot of distinct meanings according to that context. The most important here is that a strange intonation contour, with two longer vowels followed by a final falling tone, is warning the hearer that something unusual is happening, that an unusual meaning must be recovered. The final interpretation of that mean-

<sup>8</sup> All of the Spanish examples in this paper can be accessed at this address: [www.fonocortesia.es](http://www.fonocortesia.es)

ing will be determined by other factors, such as the mutual knowledge of the speakers, the preceding semantic context, the place of the conversation, etc. (Briz 1998).

In summary, although prosody is always an important factor to consider in every utterance, it is even more relevant when speakers modulate it with the purpose of modifying conceptual, first-hand, meanings of utterances. For this reason, “it is sometimes the prosody that makes an utterance impolite – giving truth to the common view that the offence lay in how something was said rather than what was said” (Culpeper et al. 2003: 1576). Or, to put it in another way, altering some prosodic parameters can strengthen, tone down or even change the literal meaning of words.

In the following subsections, special attention will be paid to the influence of two prosodic factors in triggering im/polite meanings, namely the pitch or Fundamental frequency ( $F_0$ ) (Section 6.1), and the duration (Section 6.2). Special attention will be paid to the case of Spanish, but studies on other languages will also be provided.

## 6.1 $F_0$ and intonation patterns

The pitch or  $F_0$  is probably the most prototypical manifestation of prosody, since intonation has a major influence on conveying not just first-hand, but also second-hand meanings; in fact, intonation (see Section 4) can change the meaning of an utterance by modifying its mood (affirmative vs. interrogative utterance, for example) or by adding new pragmatic values (*irony*, *politeness*, *humour*).

However, intonation is frequently seen as a fuzzy category, in the sense that “the individual meanings or ‘attitudes’ conveyed by intonation are arrived at by a complex process of pragmatic interpretation, relating the very abstract underlying meanings of intonation to both the message and the context in which it is uttered” (Culpeper et al. 2003: 1569). Indeed, intonation is expressed very idiosyncratically and, therefore, it is not easy to systemize.

The idea of establishing perfectly defined, universal intonation patterns is perhaps somewhat utopic; however, having humbler expectations may render some interesting results. For instance, *marked* intonation patterns may contextually be able to convey some kind of *im/politeness* meaning. For example, circumflex intonation (Hidalgo 2006) is a strongly marked pattern conveying a wide range of pragmatic nuances. Richard Waltereit explains the pragmatic richness of the circumflex intonation pattern on the basis of its resemblance with *baby-talk* (Waltereit 2005) used as a *pragmatic quote*: baby talk is an affec-

tive talk, and applying that same pattern to ordinary discourse causes diverse pragmatic *affective* effects. By using this baby-talk-circumflex intonation, speakers distance themselves from what it is said and reduce their communicative responsibility with a polite mitigation.

In a similar way, in expressions standardly considered as polite, like English *would you mind*, intonation provides the clue to interpret the segment either as a real question (that is, the speaker really wants to know whether the hearer would mind doing X) or as an indirect request (the speaker wants the hearer to do X) (Watts 2003: 190). Culpeper et al. (2003) provide more examples where prosody is essential to access the full meaning. The sentence *do you want me to press the buzzer* might be seen as an ordinary question, but it can also be presented as a threat:

Since the last clause (*do you want me to press the buzzer*) constitutes a threat, this shift down in pitch is highly marked. One normally associates a threat with increased emotional involvement, and that in turn usually involves a widening of pitch range. A narrowing of range in this situation may suggest to the listener a degree of restraint, which is often more threatening than uncontrolled anger. (Culpeper et al. 2003: 1575)

In a contrastive study between German and New Zealand English, the modulation of pitch is also presented as a means for mitigating confrontations:

In particular, the slightly more frequent use of mid key pitch, which serves as a form of mitigation (...), shows an orientation to softening disagreements, since mid key pitch is neutral, and thereby avoids unnecessary challenges. In contrast, the use of high pitch, which is used more frequently by the Germans, is a strengthening device (Culpeper et al., 2003) and is aggravating. (Stadler 2006: 250)

Further  $F_0$  phenomena associated with impoliteness have been pointed out in other non-European languages. In Taiwan Mandarin (Lin et al. 2006: 176), female speakers the adjusted their pitch register to their hearers' in order to achieve politeness. Grawunder and Winter find differences in  $F_0$  related to polite effects in Korean. It must be noted, however, that, in this study, *polite* speech appears as opposed to *informal* speech, thus partially overlapping the pragmatic strategy *politeness* with the *formal* register:

For all averaged measures of  $f_0$ , male and female subjects tend to show higher values for informal speech (panmal) than for polite speech (contaymal) in a range of about 1–3 semitones. (...) In the polite speech register, we also observed a clear preference for a decrease in  $f_0$  range for female speakers (...) but not as clear for male speakers (...). (Grawunder and Winter 2010: 2)

In Romance languages like Catalan, similar conclusions have been expressed:

Based on the results obtained in the rating and comparison tasks, it can be concluded that pitch height does play a role in the perception of politeness, yet this role is highly dependent on the context (both linguistic and extralinguistic) in which utterances are embedded. The contribution of sentence-final pitch range is different when combined with static visual cues, and it is possible that varying other aspects of the signal (duration, intensity) and of the context would yield even different results. (Nadeu and Prieto 2011: 852)

In Spanish we also find similar conclusions. For instance, occasionally the use of a low  $F_0$  (interpreted as a *serious* tone) can also express a polite mitigating effect (Hidalgo and Folch 2011); this low  $F_0$  may also be associated with a downward tone and a pause after as in (2):

- (2) C1: [en serio Marta Juana/ fes-te l'ànimo↑ ¿eh? este- este estiu que-/ les vas a aprovar totes [en]\*  
 B1: [sí miraa↑]  
 A1: [¿noo?]  
 B2: NI [UNA]  
 A2: [a sacarte el] carnet  
 B3: este- este año me van a quedar↑  
 C2: ni una **qué burra ees**↓/ ni una ¿sabes?  
 A3: (RISAS)
- C1: Really, Marta Juana, make up your mind, OK? This- this summer, you're gonna pass all your exams ...  
 B1: yeah, sure ...  
 A1: aren't you?  
 B2: (I'm gonna pass) NONE OF THEM  
 A2: you must get your driving license  
 B3: this- this year, I'm gonna fail  
 C2: "none of them" ... **Oh she's so stupid.** "None of them", can you believe it?  
 A3: (LAUGHTER)

In C2, a falling toneme is followed by a pause. By using this phonic strategy, C is changing the initial rude meaning of the expression *qué burra ees* ('she's so stupid'). Usually this fragment would be expressed as an exclamation in Spanish, and its meaning would be rude, indicating the lack of intelligence of B, but C does not mean that; the real aim of C2's intervention is rather to preserve the image of B by pointing out her poor self-esteem (B thinks she's going to fail her final exams). The first, compositional meaning of *qué burra ees* is cancelled by the prosodic configuration chosen: a low  $F_0$  combined with a downward toneme, and a pause.

In a similar sense, a suspended intonation can contribute to mitigating the utterance meaning, as in (3):

- (3) J1: eso es lo que me dijo/ hombre/ yo es lo que le dije- digoo ¡joder! nos metemos en el cuarto/ y dice ¿cómo nos vamos a meter en el cuarto y los demás fuera/? digoo ¡coño! ¡que no vamos a hacer nada!
- A1: ¡bueno!/ ¡pues podemos ir todos al cuarto si quieres!
- J2: (RISAS) que ella ya↑ ella ya iba en plan→ predestinaoo nano↑/ para mí// en plan salidorra/ y eso/ y dicee no/ no/ yo eso yo no/ porque si fuera en el chalé/ aún/ que es distinto/ hombre/ eso↓ está claro también/ ¿sabes? (Valesco 153A, 08-26/08-56)
- J1: that's what she said to me/ man/ what I said- I said "fuck!" We entered the room, and she said "are we both going inside the room while the others stay outside?". I said "don't fuck me! We are not going to do anything!"
- A1: Good, because we can all go to bed if you want!
- J2: (LAUGHTER) and she was going- she was already going in a *mood*→ a 'predestined' mood, man ... for me. In a 'horny mood', and things like that ... and she said "no, no, I don't want to do this, because if we were in my holiday home, I would ... because it is different". Man ... this is obvious, you know?

In this case (J2), with tonal suspension after *plan*→(*mood*→) the speaker J seems to be looking for the best way to express the sexually open attitude of the girl. First, speaker J uses the term *predestinaoo* (*predestined*) (with accentuated lengthening on the last vowel), then the same speaker does not hesitate to point out that his girlfriend was *en plan salidorra* (*in a horny mood*) which is extremely rude (not to his interlocutor, but to his girlfriend, who is thereby presented as an *easy girl*). The previous suspension *plan*→ appears to have an anticipative mitigating effect that will downgrade the pejorative value seen on the subsequent term *salidorra*.

One of the first proposals of polite intonation patterns (mainly attenuating) postulates the existence of what has been called *polite pretoneme* (Alvarez Muro et al. 2011). This proposal considers that the polite character of the whole utterance or expression is not determined only by the presence of a basic upward interrogative toneme, but by additional prosodic strategies such as  $F_0$  modulation (intonational variability), elevation of the pitch height (the polite interrogative sentence has an overall sharp tone, more high-pitched than the neutral interrogative; it is maintained from the beginning to the end of the utterance). Similarly, Roldán (2000) examines *attenuated speech acts*, usually developed in situations involving conflictive topics, commands, advices, criticism, etc. In his analysis, Roldán evaluates several phonic parameters and concludes that all of the attenuated utterances analyzed exhibit common phonetic features: vowel lengthening, marked pitch prominence, sinuous melodic pattern, wide pitch range, etc. Orozco (2008) observes that, in polite requests, the initial juncture tone tends to be H%, and the pitch range is greater than in neutral or in non-polite requests; a particular prosodic configuration accompanies polite

requests, regardless of their linguistic configuration (direct, indirect or conventionally indirect requests).

More recently, Devis (2011) outlines some  $F_0$ -related constants used to mark pragmatic attenuation in Spanish, such as:

- Final suspended melody on affirmative utterances (contrary to what it would be expected for ordinary affirmatives).
- Pitch modulation within the intonation group, which is seen as an emphatic device.
- Final circumflex melody (high-low), in order to reduce the responsibility about what was said (see again Hidalgo 1997; Waltereit 2005).
- Global low  $F_0$ , used to minimize the polemic impression.

## 6.2 Duration and speech rate

The duration or speech rate has also been considered in the literature but to a lesser extent than  $F_0$  (see Section 5), especially in recent approaches. However, the difference between *global duration* and *relative duration* must be considered (see also Section 4). The *global duration* is the time it takes to utter a phoneme, word, intonation group, sentence, or any group of phonic units. The *relative duration* is calculated in connection with other non-acoustic registers. For instance, the speech rate is obtained by counting the number of syllables or words per unit of time (seconds or milliseconds, depending on the scale).

In order to illustrate the importance of duration in producing im/polite effects, consider two examples of Spanish, namely (4) and (5):

- (4) A1: ... y dice doscientas mil pesetas si quiere ↑ se lo doy yo  
 B1: [(RISAS)]  
 C1: [(RISAS)]  
 A2: **miira** hicimos una cara to(do)s ↑  
**(600 ms)**
- A1: ... and he says two thousand pesetas; if you want, I'll give that to you  
 B1: [(LAUGHTER)]  
 C1: [(LAUGHTER)]  
 A2: you know, we all got a look in our face
- (5) V1: ayer te traje (...) **mira** ayer te traje los libros↑ y no vinistes [sic]§  
**(91 ms)**  
 R1: ¿sí es que resulta que ...
- V1: yesterday I brought you (...) look yesterday I brought you the books, but you didn't come  
 R1: yes, well, what happened is that ...



Examples (4) and (5) include the Spanish phatic discourse marker *mira* ('look'), but they reveal some important differences. In (4), the duration of the particle in A1 is 600ms, due to the lengthening of the stressed syllable *mi*. There is neither *politeness* nor *impoliteness* in A1; the particle *mira* is used as a call for attention, an intensification of what follows (the fact that everybody was very surprised by the utterance reported by A1). Nevertheless, the same phatic particle is pronounced in (5) with a fast tempo, just 91 ms. In this last case, the phonic modulation (accelerating the speech) is responsible for the impolite interpretation: Speaker R1 utters a sort of excuse (*si, es que resulta que ...*) because V1's former intervention has been perceived as an accusation. The difference between (4) and (5) illustrate how variability in *duration* (faster or slower) may contribute to understanding the full meaning of sentences.

Interestingly enough, however, *duration* (and *speech rate* in general) seems to be more closely related to the expression of *im/politeness* than it could be expected. In Korean (Grawunder and Winter 2010: 3–4), several factors other than pure vowel lengthening seem to affect duration:

[S]peech rate as measured by words per second differs significantly between the politeness registers: when speaking politely, the speech rate is slower than when speaking in the informal register (...) However, speech rate as measured by syllable rate (...) and articulation rate (...) shows no significant differences between the politeness registers. When speaking politely, there was a marked increase of laterally produced breath intakes (...). (...) We think that the higher amount of fillers and hesitation markers in the polite condition serves as a stylized way to mark insecurity. (Grawunder and Winter 2010: 3–4)

In Taiwan Mandarin, female speakers modulate the phrasal final length according to the degree of familiarity with their conversationalists, and “[t]herefore, the effect of social relationship between the interlocutors on their speech prosody is demonstrated” (Lin et al. 2006: 176). The same applies for Japanese where:

The results showed that the prosody (especially the duration) of the final vowel of the sentence had a great impact on politeness judgements; prosody information through the last 100 ms or so changed the total impression of the utterance. Speech rate was also found to be relevant. The main factors of speech rate and speaker, and the interaction between them were significant, and the function relating politeness and speech rate was that of an inverted U-shape. (Ofuka et al. 2000: 214)

In Spanish, some empirical tests have been carried out where the vowel length of a given utterance has been elongated or shortened. The results confirm a correlation between vowel lengthening and the perception of an utterance as polite:

Se ha podido entrever una posible relación entre la duración y la cortesía: una velocidad de habla marcada tiene efecto en oraciones corteses ya de por sí marcadas (peticiones que pueden derivar en conflicto y ofrecimientos) independiente de si la desviación es positiva (más velocidad) o negativa (menos velocidad). En el resto de casos, menos marcados, como son peticiones de lo que no es esperable una negativa por parte del interlocutor (...) a mayor velocidad, menor evidencia de la cortesía (y a la inversa). (Ruiz Santalbina 2013: 420)

[It appears to be a possible correlation between duration and politeness: a marked speech rate has an effect onto polite sentences (requests that may eventually end up in conflicts or in offerings), regardless of the deviation being positive (faster) or negative (slower). In the rest of cases, like those requests in which a negative response is not expected, a faster speech rate diminishes the evidence of politeness (and vice versa).

## 7 Conclusion

The literature on the interface *prosody / im/politeness* summarized above presents several explanations on how phonic variations (mainly  $F_0$  and duration) may trigger *im/polite* meanings. Notwithstanding, some works also highlight the *relative* weight of prosody in the interpretation of *im/polite* intentions. Ito (2002: 4) observes that “[f]rom rating experiments, it is questionable to say that the subjects rated the formality of stimuli using acoustic cues without contexts”. There is, indeed, a general consensus on the role of prosody as an *indicator* of some extra meaning added. However, most experts also agree that the final meaning of a given utterance cannot be recovered independently from its context. In other words, prosody definitely plays a role in signalling *unexpected* interpretations, but the actual interpretation emanates from the speaker’s re-consideration of the context in which the utterance was pronounced.

Seeing prosody an *indicator* of some meaning alteration does not prevent analysts from collecting and assessing phonic data. On the contrary, strong tendencies have been revealed in the behaviour of prosody, for instance, when polite and impolite utterances are confronted. Some (allegedly) cross-linguistic trends have been posited, and also some language-internal patterns have been revealed. Theoretical perspectives on politeness, impoliteness, facework, or any pragmatic approach involving the participants in interaction can definitely benefit from such an empirical method. Analyzing prosody offers objective, measurable data that might support some claims and classifications, or it may even provide the analysts with evidence of what was but an intuition before.

In a more applied perspective, using phonic data allows the creation of future educational tools, which are really useful for a) improving the phonic

baggage of the learner, and – what is more interesting – b) trying to avoid common socio-pragmatic mistakes related to linguistic politeness behaviour. For instance, many East Asian cultures (autonomy cultures) not only consider it polite to maintain a certain physical distance between speakers, but they also deploy some polite phonic strategies such as the use of a soft and discreet voice, or a scrupulous respect of turn-taking, allowing a few seconds between each intervention. By contrast, in Spanish society (affiliation culture), not only is the physical proximity between the conversational partners not seen as an threat, but also the turn-taking is almost instantaneous and frequent overlappings occur that are not perceived as impolite.

In conclusion, an interdisciplinary approach to im/politeness would allow researchers to unveil prosodic, pragmatic and even social (phonopragmatic differences between sexes) correlations that might provide extra empirical and statistical support for some theoretical claims, and might help refute others.

## Bionotes

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