The Importance of Teaching Intonation to Greek Learners of English

Anastasia Georgountzou
The American College of Greece

Abstract

The intonation of Modern Greek (MG) is in many ways different to the intonation of English (E) (specific examples are given from both languages) and improper use of the intonation of E results in serious or less serious problems in communication. In other words, some intonation choices appear to be more crucial than others. Nevertheless, even when no communication problems appear, an unexpected intonational choice makes the utterance sound non-E and the Greek speakers’ speech stigmatised. Therefore, Greek learners of English should aim at achieving high performance at all levels, including intonation, as this is the best and safest way to ensure successful communication in E at all times. The present paper is also concerned with materials, methods, as well as techniques of intonational teaching. (Special emphasis is given in the use of the laryngograph).

1. Introduction

Intonation has generally been considered one of the neglected areas in the study of human language. This is not only because suprasegmental analysis is thought to be hard to achieve; a popular belief among linguists, teachers and learners of foreign languages has been held that prosodic and paralinguistic study does not offer any crucial role in better understanding a foreign language.

Therefore, the question that is automatically raised is the following: “Is the intonation of a foreign language worth studying?”

As it will be shown in the following pages, improper use of the intonation of E results in serious or less serious problems in communication, that is, some intonational choices appear to be more crucial than others. Nevertheless, an unexpected intonational choice of a Greek learner of E will stigmatised him/her as a foreigner. I hold the view that any learner of a foreign language should aim at achieving high performance at all levels of this language. This is not only the best but also the safest way to ensure successful communication at all times. On the other hand, if the learner is “selective” and decides to neglect some levels of language (as, for instance, pronunciation and intonation) he/she can never be sure whether successful communication will be achieved, especially because lack of knowledge of the foreign language makes learners unable to judge in advance what can cause communication problems.
II. Brief comparison of E and MG with reference to the intonational treatment of “polar questions”, “warnings” and “tag questions”.

Despite the fact that E and MG are both intonation languages, that is, tone is not a feature of the lexicon and syllables or words do not acquire a different meaning if one tone is exchanged for another on one syllable or word, the intonational treatment of specific sentence types is not the same in two languages. In fact, it has been found that Native Speakers of Modern Greek (NSMG) are often faced with a variety of problems when producing and perceiving E intonation (Georgountzou, 1993).

A. Polar questions

In MG polar questions are produced with a rising - falling tone whereas in E the same type of questions is produced with a high - falling or a rising (low - rising or falling - rising) tone (Georgountzou 178 - 179). Furthermore, intonation in this area has a grammatical function in MG, since this is the only way to distinguish polar questions from statements (Georgountzou, 1994). Typical tokens of E polar questions produced with an unexpected rising - falling tone are the following:

(1) Are you a student?
(2) Have you finished with that?
(3) Are you going to the park?

Errors of the above type are not severe in the sense that they usually do not affect communication but they definitely mark Greek speakers of E as foreigners. However, problems in mutual understanding are frequently caused when NSMG fail to produce polar questions with inversion of S(ubject) - V(erb) into V - S position and they also use a rising - falling tone. In such cases questions of the above type can only be perceived by Native English Speakers (NES) as statements which carry an emotional overtone, since a rising - falling tone is typically associated with statements with an emotional overtone in E (O'Connor and Arnold 78). Thus examples 1, 2 and 3 can often be pronounced as:

(4) You are a student?
(5) You have finished with that?
(6) You are going to the park?

In 4, 5 and 6 the intended meaning is “polar question” but the actual meaning of the message communicated is “impressed statement”.

B. Negative Commands versus warnings.

In both MG and E imperative sentences may be used as negative commands or as warnings, depending on intonation. The tone we use in E commands is a fall on the negative particle “don’t”:

(7) ‘Don’t wash the car!
(8) ‘Don’t throw crumbs on the carpet!

In MG such utterances are produced with a falling tone:
(9) 'min plenis to aftokjinito!
(10) 'mi rixnis psixula sto xali!

On the other hand, warnings are produced with a falling - rising tone on the last lexical item in E whereas in MG warnings take a falling tone on the last lexical item. So in E the meaning contrast between command versus warning is achieved through tonicity and tone whereas in MG the contrast is realised through tonicity only:

(11) Don't throw crumbs on the \textit{carpet}
(12) Don't wash the \textit{car}
(13) \textit{mi rixsis}² nera sto xa'li
(14) min plinis to afio'kjinito

On the basis of the above mentioned, we realize that NSMG have difficulties in producing and perceiving E warnings. In fact, typical tokens of Greek unexpected versions of the above examples are cases 15 and 16 below where the meaning of "warning" is not conveyed and such tokens can only be perceived as negative commands:

(15) Don't throw crumbs on the \textit{carpet}!
(16) Don't wash the \textit{car}!

C. Question tags

In MG such tags consist of two parts, that is, an utterance which carries an expressive force and another short utterance (tag) which shares the same verb with the first utterance. Therefore, in MG tags are characterized by non-ellipsis of the verb of the main utterance.

The types and functions of the E tags are numerous³. According to Kingdon (1958), E tags are those added to an utterance already made which consist of a noun or a pronoun as subject and an anomalous finite as predicate in which the finite refers to and takes the verb which is used in the original utterance (246). Here, I will only focus on tags that both languages share, that is: (a) reverse polarity tags with the first utterance in the affirmative and the tag in the negative form (eg. irisane/\textit{den} irisane? they came/didn't they?) (b) reverse polarity tags with the first utterance in the negative and the tag in the affirmative form (\textit{den} irisane/irisane? they didn't come/did they?) and (c) constant polarity tags whereby both utterances are in the affirmative form (irisane/e, etsi? they came/did they?).

As to the meanings conveyed by the above question tags, in MG such types express some sort of certainty in the first utterance to be challenged by the tag. Therefore, although some anticipation of the hearer's answer is generally expected, the hearer can possibly get an answer which will be different to his/her expectation. In particular, the affirmative - negative type sounds like a negative question and the negative - affirmative type like a polar question. The affirmative - affirmative type maybe implies more confirmation to speaker but again there also exists some possibility for contradicting the speaker's statement. Note, too, that in the Greek tags there exists only one possibility for tone choice and this variable is not available to signal the degree of the speaker's certainty with regard to the truth of his/her statement.

With regard to E, different points of view have been expressed about the meanings of tags. However, most authors seem to agree that although some anticipatory/biased meaning is generally conveyed in all E tags, the nuclear tone in the tag plays a decisive role in the
meaning distinction of “genuine question” versus “confirmation”. In particular, in reverse
polarity tags a falling tone in the tag gives a confirmative pattern whereas tags produced
with a rising tone denote speaker’s doubts. On the other hand, constant polarity tags are
only produced with a rising tone in the tag (Cruz 1983: 264, Hawkes 1981: 58). Consider
the following examples:

Reverse Polarity Tags
(17) irðane / Åden irðane?
(18) ine filos su / Åden ine?
(19) Åden irðane / Åirðane?
(20) Åden ine filos su / Åine?
(21) they came / did they?
(22) he’s a friend of yours / isn’t he?
(23) they came / didn’t they?
(24) he’s your friend / isn’t he? \{ \text{GENUINE QUESTIONS} \}
\{ \text{ASKING FOR CONFIRMATION} \}

Constant Polarity Tags: Only Rising tones
(25) He’s your friend / is he?
(26) John is here / is he?

Therefore, NSMG are often faced with problems when producing and perceiving E tags
as they are totally insensitive in the meaning distinctions that E tags convey. In production,
the choice of nuclear tone is purely accidental.

III. Teaching intonation to NSMG.

The previous pages showed that E and MG have important intonational differences and
there is indeed good reason to teach E intonation to NSMG.

With regard to the teaching of the intonation of E to NSMG, the teacher has to answer a
number of questions:

1. “When should NSMG start to learn the intonation of E?”

The introduction to the E intonation should start at an early age, provided of course, that
English language learning starts when NSMG are very young. In any case, they should be
exposed to the intonation of E together with the other aspects of the English language.

2. “In which teaching materials should we include the teaching of the intonation
   of E?”

The answer to this question is closely related to the age as well as level of proficiency in
E; at an early stage of learning, the E intonation should only indirectly be taught, while later
on NSMG can directly be exposed to the intonation of E through the general language and
grammar books which make specific references to intonation. At an even more advanced
level (university students), E intonation can be taught more systematically through books
which deal exclusively with this area.
3. “What materials shall we choose for teaching the intonation of E to NSMG?”

Unfortunately, there is a limited number of pedagogically orientated textbooks. Among these, I would clearly distinguish Brazil et al’s (1980) and O’Connor and Arnold’s (1973) books.

As it has recently been found, the intonational system of O’Connor and Arnold can still describe the intonational tendencies of current RP and near RP to a considerable extent. (Georgountzou, 1993). Nevertheless, my view is that the teacher should take into consideration more than one teaching materials and select from them what is best for teaching purposes. For example, the intonational system of O’Connor and Arnold is good for general terminology and training of nuclear and prenuclear patterns but it was found that it gives no or very little information about tonicity and even less about tonality. It also adopts an exclusively attitudinal approach and neglects the grammatical and discoursal function of intonation. On the other hand, Brazil et al are mainly concerned with discourse matters. The presentation of the grammatical function of intonation in MG is particularly useful (yes/no questions). Also, the role of context is crucial when focusing on nucleus shifting and contrastive stress.

It is also important to stress the intonational similarities and differences that E and MG exhibit because in this way many errors of NSMG can be predicted and avoided in areas where the two languages differ intonationally. Therefore, first, the Greek learners should become familiar with the inventory of the English nuclear tones and compare/contrast it to the Greek inventory. Special attention should be given to the production and perception of the English rise - fall and fall - rise realized on one word. Tonicity of the English negative statements, wh - questions and negative questions, polar questions, warnings and other idiosyncratic cases where intonation in E distinguishes otherwise identical sentence pairs should also be extensively practiced (Georgountzou 1993: 93-406). NSMG should also learn the meanings that the English nuclear tones convey (for instance, the rising - falling tone is used in yes/no questions but in E almost the same tone is used in utterances which convey emotional tension, or, in E the meaning of warning is conveyed with the fall - rise but in MG the same meaning is conveyed with a falling tone).

Any practical intonational material should also aim at making learners improve all four skills; in this direction NSMG should be given passages and dialogues to read as well as separate sentences. Most important of all, communication in classroom should be realized in E at all times and the teacher should be alert to any types of intonational errors committed by NSMG.

4. “How should we teach the intonation of E to NSMG?”

The methods and techniques of intonation teaching are surely numerous and they should always be in accordance with the age of the Greek learners, the level and the materials used. As it is the case with the other areas of the English language, the teaching of intonation to young learners should be achieved through various activities while overt instruction should be minimal. Later on, as learners’ exposure to E increases, intonation drills can take a more specific form. Given that the classroom is an artificial setting which does not promote genuine communicative needs, it is up to the teacher to introduce techniques which will change the classroom into a real social community (e.g role simulating drills).
Lastly, another important technique to practice the formal configurations of the English tones is the use of the laryngograph and the oscilloscope. My particular reference is to the laryngograph which was developed by Fourcin and Abberton at University College London in 1971. According to Abberton (1976), this is a combined visual and auditory model which allows the whole pattern to be stored and displayed very easily. It responds to vocal fold movement during normal phonation through the use of two electrodes which are placed on the neck of the speaker at the point of the vibrating vocal folds. The laryngograph signal (Lx) is then displayed on the oscilloscope. Both speech and Lx are simultaneously recorded by a tape recorder which is connected with the laryngograph and the oscilloscope. Fundamental frequency contours (Fx) are acquired through the use of a special software and are presented on the computer screen (see Fig.1). Displays of this type have been successfully used in the speech training of normal and deaf adults. The simplicity of use of the apparatus and the fact that learners have immediate visual feedback of their intonational contours makes them enthusiastic and motivated.

IV. Conclusions

The present paper made obvious the following points:
1. It is worth teaching the intonation of E in order to help NSMG achieve better understanding of the E language in production and perception and avoid the stigma of sounding non-E.
2. E intonation should be taught at a young age, if this is possible.
3. E intonation should be included in the general language and grammar books while at a more advanced level, and according to the students' needs, learners should be taught the intonation of E through intonation books.
4. Intonation materials should be based on simple and easily memorizable models and aim at improving performance in all four skills. Intonational similarities and differences between E and MG should be pointed to students and extensively discussed.
5. The methods and techniques of intonational teaching should agree with the age and level of the Greek learners. Thus at a young age the teacher should practice E intonation through various activities, games and role simulating drills, while older and intermediate or advanced students can be exposed to overt instruction and visual aids such as the use of the laryngograph.

Notes

1 Even in cases of unmarked tonicity example 1 can be produced in two ways by NSMG, namely with the nucleus on "are" or with the nucleus on "student". In example 2 the nucleus can be placed either on "have" or on "that" while in example 3 the nucleus can fall either on "are" or on "park".

2 In MG, apart from tonicity, the meaning contrast of "negative command" versus "warning" is realized through tense difference. In particular "mi rixnis..."= stop doing... while "mi riksis nera sto xali" = watch out....
For a thorough presentation of the authors who have dealt with question tags in E, see Cruz (1983: 246-261).

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