

RESEARCH ARTICLE **Section:** *Literature and Criticism*

Pragmatic Functions Of Intonation In Nigerian English: A Study Of Attitudinal Meanings

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ABSTRACT

This pragma-phonological study examines the complicated relationship between linguistic form and social context in Nigerian English, focusing on the role of intonation phrases in expressing attitudes during conversation. This study examines the interplay between pitch levels, tone movements, and pragmatic functions. This research investigates how Nigerian English users strategically employ intonation to convey context-dependent meanings and negotiate social relationships. The study's objectives are to (1) examine the pragma-phonological features of Nigerian English intonation phrases; (2) analyse the relationship between intonation and attitudes in Nigerian English; and (3) establish how attitudes are reflected in Nigerian English intonation phrases. Data collection involved 30 Nigerians from diverse linguistic backgrounds across Northern, Southern, and Eastern Nigeria, with utterances analysed using Praat speech analysis software. The findings reveal that Nigerian English users employ intonation phrases to convey nuanced attitudes and pragmatic meanings, highlighting the importance of context in shaping linguistic form and social interaction.

KEYWORDS: Intonation Phrase, pragma-intonation, Nigerian English, Attitude

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Introduction

This study is situated within the domain of pragma-phonology—it investigates the complex relationship between language, context, and social interaction in Nigerian English. O'Connor and Arnold say that utterances which differ only based on intonation may well differ in meaning. On this note, they believe intonation is significant in communication (1). In relation to this, they identified 10 intonation phrases used in English communication. They include the High drop, Low drop, Take-off, Low Bounce, High Bounce, switchback, long jump, Jackknife, high dive, and terrace. This study is limited to the take-off Intonation Phrase. By analysing the relationship between intonation and speaker intention, the study reaffirms the centrality of intention and intentionality to the general study of pragmatics and to the meaning-making process.

Intonation is as important in determining the meaning of a statement as it is in determining the attitude which the statement is expected to produce. Gimson states that change in intonation is “the most efficient means of rendering prominent for a listener those parts of an utterance on which the speaker wishes to concentrate attention” (264). This study explores the role of intonation in negotiating meaning and social relationships by investigating how context influences the interpretation of attitudes and intentions.

Katamba avers that intonation also has attitudinal functions. The speaker's attitude can be inferred through the intonation used such that a person might say *It is the tone of voice she used that really upset me*. He adds that “the contribution made by intonation *per se* is not easy to isolate with any certainty,” as it is difficult to actually establish a simple, direct correlation between intonation and attitude.

He says that a clear link can be established between intonation and attitude in the sense that *George is a lawyer, isn't he?* This will indicate a confirmation because of the use of falling tone. If it is said with a rising tone, as in *George is a lawyer, isn't he?* it indicates a greater degree of uncertainty, and the speaker is not only seeking confirmation, but needs more clarity. The use of intonation is able to show whether the person is depressed or sad, where such person is likely to lower part of their pitch range and be slow in speech. However, Katamba adds that there are no firm rules which govern the use of intonation to signal attitude. He says that “the right interpretation of an utterance depends only in part on intonation” (248).

The researcher examined how Nigerian users of English express attitudes through manipulation of the IP, whether or not it is richly utilized as in native English usage. In BE, attitude and tone correlate so that different intonation patterns are used to express various attitudes.

Theoretical approach

Two theories have been used to analyse the use of IP by Nigerian English users pragma-phonologically. Jacob Mey's pragmatic Acts Theory (PAT), which specifically accounts for how intonation triggers pragmatic inference, is found useful to this study. Particularly, Mey's emphasis on the role of context in shaping meaning enables an analysis of how intonation contributes to attitudinal meaning. It also projects how intonation interacts with contextual factors to further shape meaning. Pragmatic acts theory (PAT) also focuses on acts like requesting, promising, or apologising and how intonation influences the interpretation of these acts in Nigerian English.

On the other hand, CL is useful in this study to accentuate the micro-phonological elements that language users are not likely to identify by mere auditory observation. Some learners are able to learn by hearing alone, but several others can hardly recognise sounds or intonational variations unless the differences are displayed as visible items. Through CL, language properties are made visible so that learners and researchers do not have to rely entirely on their hearing ability (which is abstract) but also on the physical and measurable property of utterances, which may be displayed pictorially or numerically. They could be presented graphically for easy interpretation. The study therefore builds on the PAT and CL as theoretical frameworks for analysing intonation and attitudinal meanings in Nigerian English.

The Take-Off

The take-off is one of the types of Intonation Phrases classified under the rising intonation. According to O'Connor and Arnold, it is used in relation to whether the utterance is only a statement, question, command, or interjection. The rise starts from a level of very low pitch to somewhere a little higher. To a large extent, the attitude expressed with the take-off seems to be what most scholars list in discussing the rising tone. In ordinary statements it is used to encourage continuing conversation, reserve judgement, express resentful feelings, or guard one's interest. Observe the following examples.

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------|
| 1. Have you heard about ₁ Max? | ₁ No. |
| 2. You ₁ know where ₁ John lives? | ₁ Yes. |
| 3. What's ₁ your hubby? | ₁ Gardening. |
| 4. ₁ Aren't they rather ex ₁ pensive? | ₁ Some of them are. |

It can be observed that the responses to the questions take the rising pattern, but this is also largely dependent on the specific context, speaker's intention, and relationship with then listener otherwise known as social distance. It is because the take-off intonation used gives them the look of a question. Although they are not meant to attract a response, the speaker may expect a non-verbal reaction. It is to indicate that the speaker may have some undisclosed dissatisfaction about the questions and would expect a reassurance on why the question is asked. The interlocutor may only not be interested in the conversation and is thereby irritated.

WH-questions generally take the falling intonation, but they can take the Take-off intonation to expresses wonder, mild puzzle, or a very calm but disapproving and resentful attitude. This means questions are not all the time just questions to elicit information. Not only questions but basically, utterances often would have both the explicit meaning and the implicit or underlying meaning, and John Searle advocates that

'the mind 'imposes' intentionality, so to speak, on linguistic expressions in that the basic intention to represent is responsible for the derived intention to communicate. In brief, beliefs have intrinsic intentionality, while utterances have derived intentionality, our beliefs and intention have intrinsic basic intentionality' (84).

A falling tone on a WH-question does not create the same attitudinal linguistic value as when the rising tone is used. These responses to the questions below come as questions obviously because they indicate that the speaker is irritated by the question(though not explicitly stated as such, but implied by the attitude) and probably wishes he or she didn't have to provide an answer. Therefore, the responses are not ones that are quite pleasing or satisfying. It probably would be better if the responder does not have to respond.

The following are examples.

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. When's the meeting due to take ₁ place? | ₁ When (Why, at ₁ five.) |
| 2. The ₁ meeting's at ₁ five. | ₁ When (I thought it was ₁ six.) |

When the Take-off intonation is used in a **Polar (Yes-No)** question, the likelihood is that it would indicate disapproval or scepticism. It comes as a comment rather than a question or an answer to an earlier question. These are questions that come after other statements have been made. They hardly or not necessarily begin the discussion; they are used to confirm or disapprove of an earlier proposition. Take a look at the following examples.

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Mary said ₁ Maisie was going to play. | ₁ Did she play, in fact? |
| 2. I ₁ said I'd ₁ call for him. | ₁ Are you going to call for him? |
| 3. I'll ₁ sing you my ₁ song. | ₁ Must you? |

Using the Take-Off intonation on commands expresses appeal or admonition. It is more of an advice for the good of the addressee. It is not the same as giving an instruction that must be followed with an instant response, as may be experienced in a boss-subordinate conversation. The addressee entirely retains the choice to act in response to the command.

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| 1. [Mother to small daughter who is overexcited] | ₁ Steady. |
| 2. [Father to small son who is riding his bicycle a | ₁ Slowly. little too fast] |

Pragmatically, Take-off intonation used in a polar question can imply an expectation of agreement, and it can influence the readers response potentially leading to agreement or confirmation or a different interpretation.

Interjections are also used with the Take-Off intonation sometimes to reserve judgment or make casual acknowledgement. The expression of interjection in the examples below does not show ready or complete acceptance of the given information. The information may not be satisfying and probably contradict the hearer's expectation; but he or she may not be willing to be openly confrontational. A euphemistic expression becomes the tactics to hide ones reservation.

Examples:

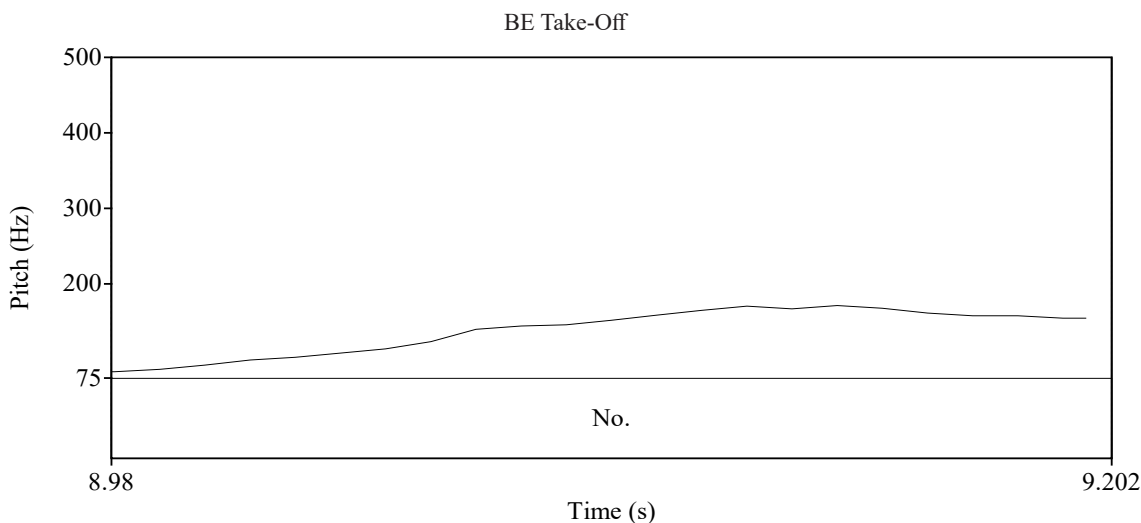
They've sold \out. ,Really! (I 'thought they had \plenty.)

I've \finished my ,work ,Splendid!

Interjections with 'Take off' can be used in various contexts, which may include topic shift, contrast or surprise, emphasis or importance. They can imply, speaker's attitude, expectation, or contrast. The specific implication depends largely on the context, speaker's intention, and relationship with the listener.

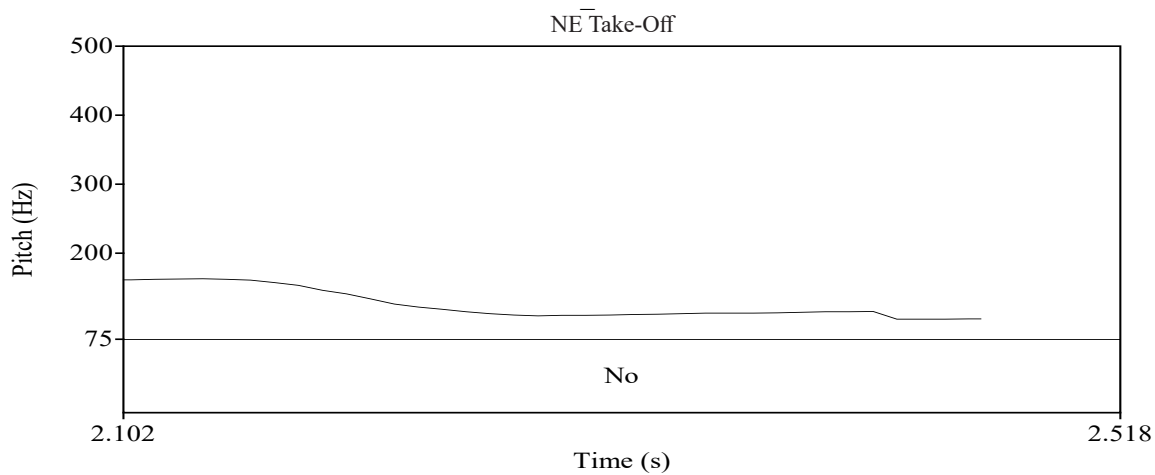
Data presentation and analysis
The Take-Off in Nigerian English usage

This section displays the Take-Off IP which has the structure (Low Pre-Head+) (Low head+) Low Rise. It is a rising tune utterance.



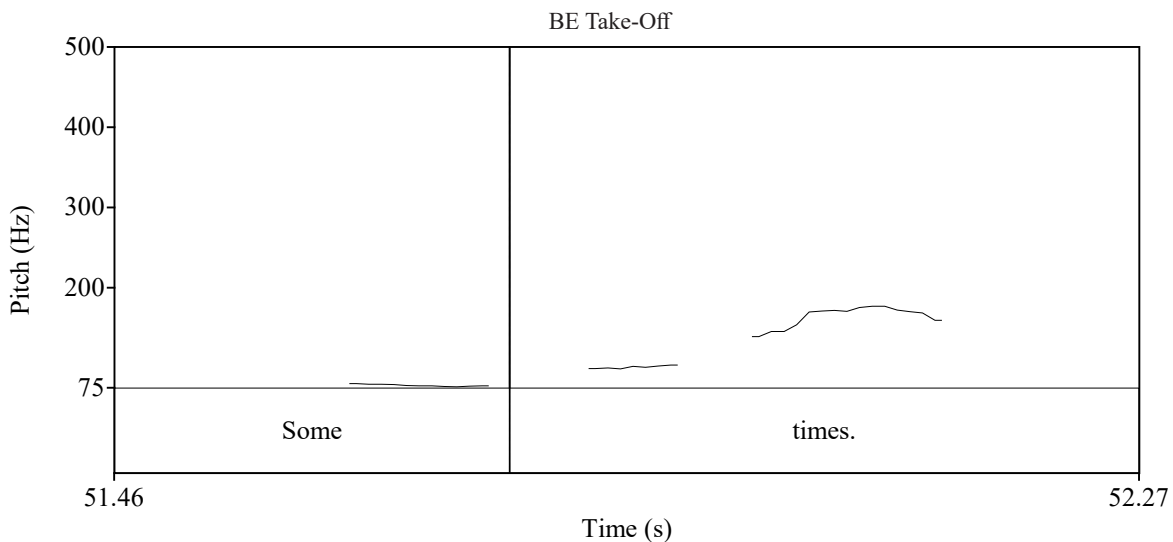
Picture 1: The BE Take-Off analysis of *No*

In Picture 1 is the analysis of *No* as an IP of one-element nucleus. The Praat picture shows that the phrase begins at a low pitch of 84.35hz and rises to 171.34hz. There is a pitch difference of 86.99hz between the maximum and minimum F0s. The analysis of the utterance shows that BE observes the Take-Off structure on the utterance. The rise in the pitch has displayed that the utterance expresses nonfinality. This matches the requirement for producing the BE Take-Off intonation.



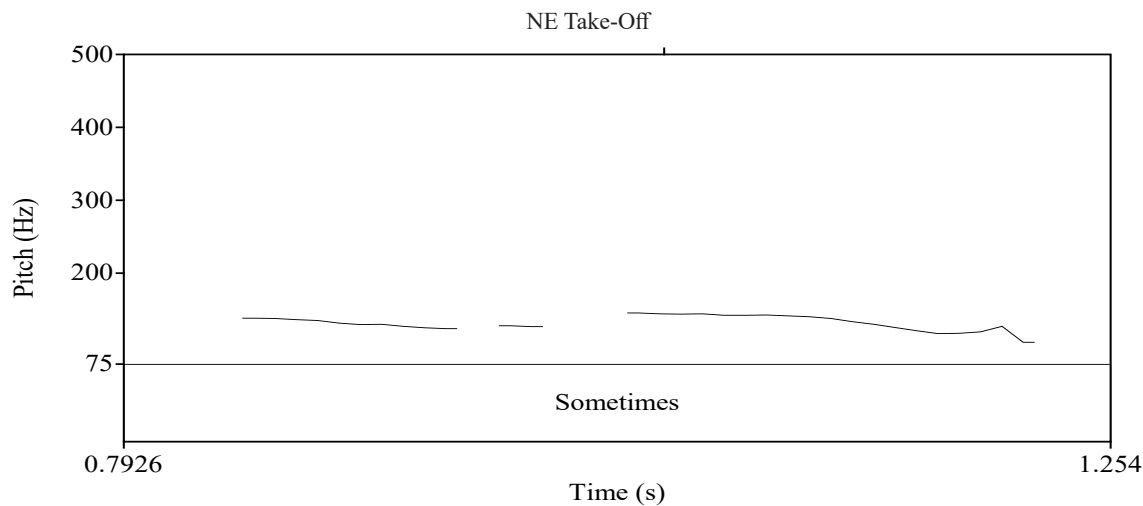
Picture 2: The NE Take-Off analysis of *No*

In Picture 2, the analysis of NE IP *No* is displayed. The Praat picture shows that the phrase begins at a high pitch of 162.78hz that falls to 102.91hz. There is a pitch difference of 59.87hz between the maximum and minimum F0s. Rather than a rise, the NE utterance has a fall. The analysis of the utterance does not conform to the Take-Off pattern of the BE utterance. From the pictorial object, the tone movement is seen to be irregular due to the sudden fall.



Picture 3: The BE Take-Off analysis of *sometimes*

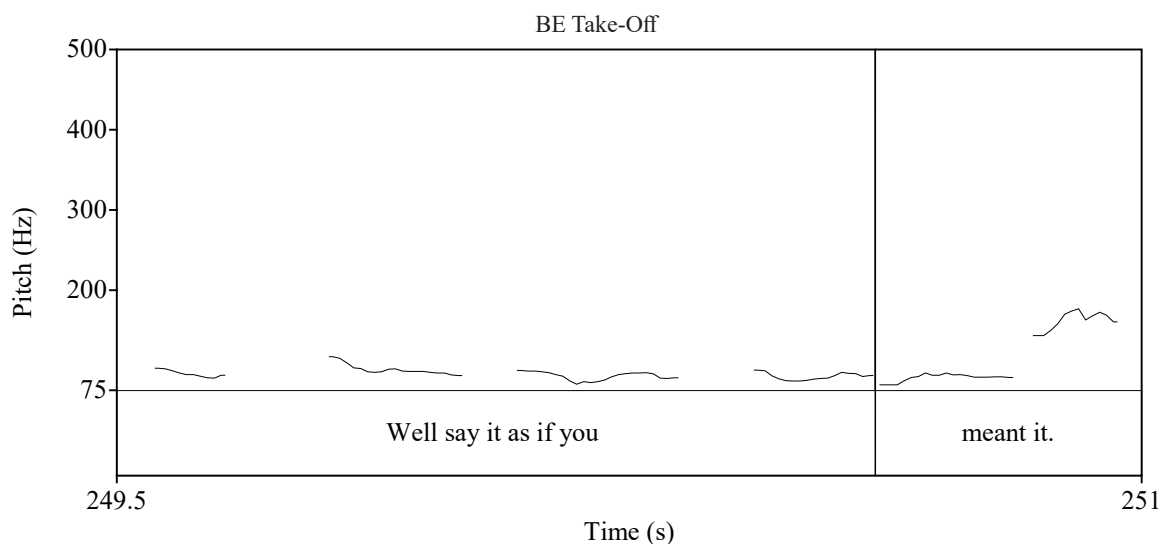
Picture 3 displays the analysis of *some times* as a Take-Off IP. This utterance contains two elements – Pre-Head and Nucleus. *Some* is the Pre-head and *times* is the nucleus. The Pre-Head begins at a low pitch of 77.48hz and rises to 99.63hz which begins the nucleus. The nucleus rises to 177.02hz to indicate an obvious upward tone movement. There is a pitch difference of 99.45hz between the Pre-Head and the highest pitch of the nucleus. This analysis shows that this BE utterance is in line with the Take-Off tune.



Picture 4: The NE Take-Off analysis of *Sometimes*

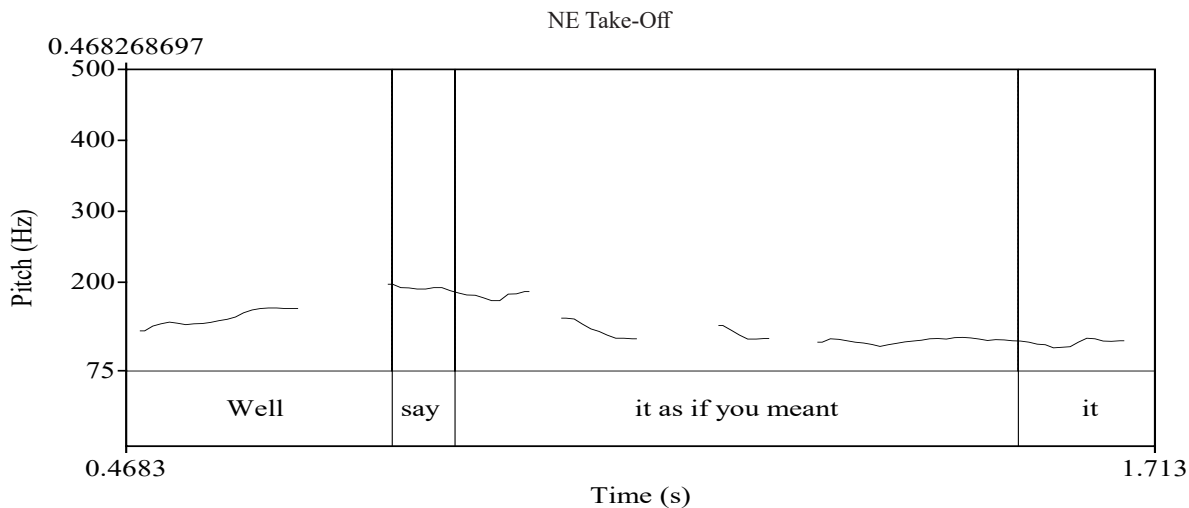
The displayed utterance on Picture 4 is the Nigerian IP for *Sometimes*. The word is produced to have a head and nucleus. The head, which is *some-*, is pitched at 138.07hz while the nucleus, which is *-times*, is pitched initially at 145.22hz before it falls to 116.75hz. This Pattern is in contrast with the BE utterance for the Take-Off which takes the rising tone. The fall is very brief, such that there is hardly any evidence of tone moment. This shows a flat fluctuation in the NE utterance.

The NE response is likely to be followed by some presequences such as “mmm...” so that the presequence indicates the doubt or lack of confidence. Others may begin with “well” using the rising intonation. But the sentence would always end in falling tone. there could also be an expression such as “sometimes it will: sometimes it will not”.



Picture 5: The BE Take-Off analysis of *Well say it as if you meant it*

The statement on Picture 5 contains three IP elements; Head, Nucleus and tail. *Well say it as if you* is the Head while *mean* is the nucleus followed by *it* at the tail. The head element is pitched at 97.77hz while the nucleus rises to the tail with 81.79hz to 177.79hz. There is a rising difference of 96hz. This BE utterance corresponds with the Take-Off structure described as low head and low rise.



Picture 6: The NE Take-Off analysis of *Well say it as if you meant it*.

The picture of the NE utterance for the IP *Well say it as if you meant it* is displayed on Picture 6. *Well*, it is produced with a rising from 142.51hz to *say* at 191.20hz while *mean* is 117.08hz. *It* is pitched at 113.65hz. This utterance begins much higher than what is obtained in the BE version. It generally ends with a falling tone as opposed to the BE pattern that ends with a rising tone. This pattern of NE does not reflect the pattern of BE, which is low Pre-Head, low head, and rising nucleus.

The realization in this utterance is that it is divided into two IPs so that *well* is one and *say it as if you mean it* is another. Although *well* carries a rising pattern, it also does not correspond with the take-Off IP due to its high initial pitch.

Summary of the Take-off realisation in Nigerian English

The Take-Off has the structure (low pre-head+) (low head+) low rise. It is a rising tone utterance. This IP gives the impression of reservation of idea. The speaker wishes to complete the information before finalizing his or her conversation. It indicates incompleteness and non-finality; that is, more information will follow after some reassurance. It can sound appealing to the listener to reconsider what he or she has said earlier.

In this investigation, a mono-syllabic utterance is studied to establish the realization of the Take-Off in a nucleus-only utterance. The utterance is *No* as shown in the conversation below.

Speaker 1. Have you heard about Max?

Speaker 2. No.

An investigation on the Take-Off was conducted to establish the Take-Off on a three-element IP. The statement taken for this investigation is *Well say it as if you meant it*.

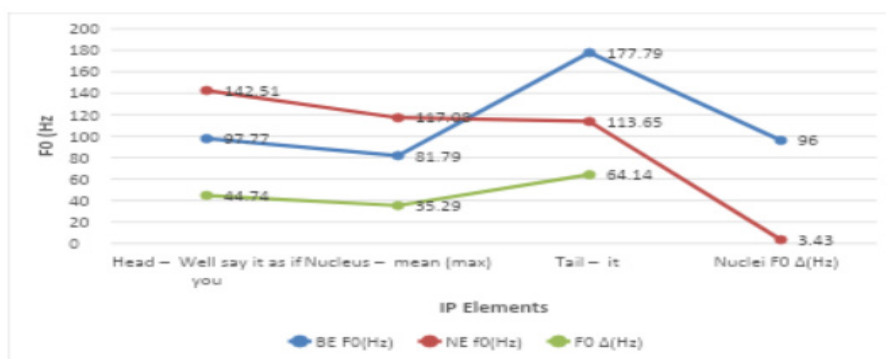


Figure 1: Summary of BE and NE nucleus-only Take-Off for *Well say it as if you mean it*

The NE utterance for the IP *Well say it as if you meant it* is seen to disregard the structure of the Take-Off by producing a falling tone where the rising is found to be the appropriate tone. Additionally, there is an obvious rise in the F0 of the head so that it becomes more pitched than the nucleus. Even as a falling intonation, the difference between the nucleus and tail is 3.43 hz which shows the disregard for tone movement. It generally ends with a falling tone as opposed to the BE pattern that ends with a rising tone. This pattern of NE does not reflect the pattern of BE which is low Pre-Head, low head and rising nucleus. It indicates finality and completeness; that is, the speaker does not expect further information to complete the discourse on the subject.

Reflection of Attitude in Nigerian English Intonation Phrase

This study acknowledges the connection of intonation and meaning attribution through reflection of attitude. The BE intonation is used to show attitudes like satisfaction, doubt, timidity etc. because Nigerian English patronizes more of the falling tone even in instances where the rising intonation would be expected in BE to express non-finality, the attitudinal expression is usually that of finality. This is basically to imply meaning or to hedge for reasons best known to the speaker.

Sometimes, this can be due to politeness purposes. Similarly, while the Low Drop tends to express confidence, probably in expressing approval, Nigerian speakers may be seen to lack such confidence in themselves, which can create a situation of distrust or doubt in the conversant. This kind of attitudinal atmosphere has the tendency to affect the normal flow of communication by interfering with the actual conversational outcome.

Pragmatic Reflection of Attitude in Nigerian English Intonation Phrase

The study underscores the intimate link between intonation and the speaker's attitude in Nigerian English (NigE), a variety of English shaped by local linguistic and socio-cultural influences. While British English (BE) intonation employs a variety of pitch patterns—such as rising tones to indicate openness, doubt, or non-finality—Nigerian English tends to favor the falling tone, even in contexts where BE would use rising tones. This intonational preference is not merely structural but deeply pragmatic, reflecting how Nigerian speakers encode attitude, manage face needs, or assert finality.

From a pragmatic standpoint, this over-reliance on falling tones has several implications:

1. **Attitudinal Signaling:** Falling tones in Nigerian English often signal finality, certainty, or even authority, regardless of whether the speaker actually intends to convey these attitudes. In cases where BE would employ a rising tone to suggest tentativeness or openness (e.g., in questions or polite suggestions), the use of a falling tone in NigE may unintentionally signal closure or even assertiveness.
2. **Politeness Strategy:** This intonation pattern might be used to hedge statements or appear polite, though it may be perceived as blunt or overly assertive by interlocutors unfamiliar with the variety. This aligns with Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, where tone can serve as a strategy to mitigate face-threatening acts.
3. **Confidence and Social Perception:** While intonational patterns like the Low Drop in BE project confidence or approval, Nigerian speakers may either underuse such tones or use them in ways that project timidity or uncertainty. This mismatch can affect interpersonal perceptions, leading to doubt or miscommunication.
4. **Communication Breakdown:** The divergence in attitudinal intonation between NigE and BE can disrupt the pragmatic flow of conversation, as the listener might misread the speaker's emotional or attitudinal intent. In intercultural communication, this poses a risk of pragmatic failure not due to grammatical errors, but due to mismatched expectations in tone and meaning.

In summary, the pragmatic reflection of attitude in Nigerian English intonation reveals a complex interplay between linguistic form, speaker intention, and socio-cultural context. Understanding these nuances is essential for improving both intra- and intercultural communication, especially in formal and educational settings where pragmatic clarity is key.

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