

The highs and lows of social life: What studies of intonation can teach sociolinguists

Anna Jespersen, Aarhus University

anna.jespersen@cc.au.dk

When asked to characterise a variety, be it a sociolect, an ethnolect or a regional dialect, its intonation is often highlighted. Irish English is sing-song, German English is monotonous, and young women have this annoying habit of ending their sentences with a question-like rise. However, sociolinguists, who are interested in examining social stereotypes that come pre-packaged with such statements, have a tendency of focusing on vowels and consonants at the expense of all things prosodic (Hay & Drager 2007:93).

In this paper, I describe how studies of intonation can complement and add complexity to our knowledge of sociolinguistic variation. I show how an examination of fine-grained variation in fundamental frequency can unveil a layer of ethnolinguistic meaning in urban Aboriginal Australian English, which is generally described as identical to the standard variety (Eagleson 1977, Sharpe 1990; see Eckert & Labov 2017). I map out the ways in which Belfast English speakers employ intonation patterns associated with standard British English and Northern Irish English to indicate an affiliation with Britain or Ireland, and thus political stance—or escape political stance-taking through the use of intonation associated with global popular culture (Grabe et al. 2000; see Rampton 2011). Finally, I discuss the case of Danish, in which the primary—and sometimes only—marker of regional dialect now lies with the rises and falls of intonation (Grønnum 2005:340).

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