



A Contrastive View of Intonation; The Case of English and Persian

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.18415/ijmmu.v7i8.1934>

Abstract

Intonation plays an important part in communicating the precise meaning. Despite similarities, there are potentially differences between languages in terms of function-intonation relationships. Adopting a contrastive analysis framework and an intuitive approach, the present study sought to find if there are such differences between Persian and English. English movies as well as the observation notes by the researcher from his years of teaching English constituted the data. Instances of one-to-one correspondences between functions and intonations were abstracted both in English utterances and their Persian equivalents. These were then collated to find the similarities and differences. A number of differences were observed in both neutral and pragmatic use of some intonation patterns. Assuming that the cases of divergence would potentially create problems for L2 learners, only these were highlighted and delineated. Suggestion is made about the necessity of including the findings in the design of L2 course materials.

Keywords: *Contrastive View; Intonation*

Introduction

In a world that is moving toward globalization, understanding between and among people of different cultures is of a crucial importance. There is no doubt that one of the most important means of improving such understanding is language. Although language is a wonderful means of communicating ideas, it can at the same time be a source of confusion and misunderstanding--that is, if it is used without enough precision. Imprecisions in grammar, sentence structure and diction are among the impediments to understanding most heard of. Also, consciousness has long been raised about the important role of pronunciation and word stress in getting the exact meaning across. L2 course books are now replete with exercises intended to improve precision of use in these areas. The domain that is much less commonly referred to in this respect is imprecisions in intonation.

It is common knowledge that with its various patterns, intonation serves to engender different functions in the language. Examples include the use of different intonation patterns in English--within neutral (as opposed to pragmatic) conditions--on yes/no questions, information questions and pending

statements. Some of these features are common among a number of languages (e.g. the use of a rising intonation on yes/no questions in both English and French). However, there is not enough evidence at hand on an all-inclusive universality of such features, or even on the similarity of other functions among languages for that matter. On the contrary, one would expect to see more differences than similarities among the multitude of languages spoken all across the globe. One reason for this expectation is the prosodic nature different languages are known to have—a fact that renders intonation-function relationship a tricky one. The other reason is the subtleties of changes in the vibration of vocal cords (the precursor to intonation) and the effect they have on the intended meaning of the utterance.

Objective/Rationale

Along this line of logic, the objective of the present paper is to unravel some differences between two languages in an attempt to improve understanding between speakers of those two languages. Assuming an inductive approach within the framework of contrastive analysis (Lardiere, 2009; Rustipa, 211; Keshavarz, 2015 among others), it looks at some cases where English and Persian diverge in the use of intonation in doing the same functions. This can be potentially a source of problem for the speakers of either of these two languages who would wish to learn the other one. This is so because one would be tempted to over-extend the intonational ‘habits’ of one’s mother tongue to the target language when intending to do a similar function in the latter. What exacerbates the situation is that these are areas that are hardly ever addressed in the course materials prepared to date for either of these two languages. The ultimate goal of the present study, therefore, is to entice course book writers/publishers into integrating these points in their materials.

As hinted above, the present study has a contrastive analysis viewpoint. The main rationale is that where there are similarities between two languages, the native speaker of one of those languages who wishes to learn the other will transfer his competence into the target language. This will make such a learner find acquiring those shared aspects less challenging. By contrast, it is the areas where the two languages differ that poses problems for the learner. Emphasizing these areas of divergences in second language instruction will therefore make the learner more conscious of those, which provides him in turn with the possibility of integrating them into his competence.

With this rationale in mind, the research question of the study can be formulated as follows:

- Are there any intonation differences between English and Persian that serve the same function in these two languages?

Although finding the answer to this question will be an aid to English learners of Persian to improve their precision of intonation in Persian, a larger impact will be on Persian learners of English. This is so as the latter group far outnumber the former. After all, English is among the most widely-spoken languages on our planet; it is the language of science, commerce and international communication. Moreover, there is a strong tendency among many people in Iran (where the formal as well as the dominant spoken language is Persian) to learn English for a variety of purposes including post-secondary education, immigration, travelling or even the prestige associated with the language. It is for the same reason that English language institutes have mushroomed all across the country, not to mention the English courses students have to take both at secondary and post-secondary levels. In this way, a large clientele of Persian learners of English are expected to be addressed in case the answer to the above research question turns out to be positive.

Method

In this study, two types of data were appealed to. First, a number of English movies were meticulously scoured by the researcher in order to abstract intonation patterns that would have a one-to-one correspondence with functions and/or structures. The intonation markers that were basically the matter of concern were ‘the rise’ (increase in vibration of vocal cords over one or a number of syllables), ‘the fall’ (the opposite of the rise) and ‘the dive’ (a fall followed by a rise). Every utterance that seemed promising in terms of providing those correspondences were transcribed verbatim and the intonation markers were added onto them. Being a native speaker of Persian, the researcher then used his own judgement as to how the same functions would be expressed in Persian. In so doing, consideration of the context of communication was paid close attention to as well. The second source of data came from the experience of researcher over years of teaching English to Persian learners of different levels and in a variety of different areas. He had observed that certain areas of intonation were used wrongly by such a learner in a systematic way, that is, under similar conditions, with the same format and quite repetitively.

A list of intonation-function correspondences was produced. The items were then divided into two categories: those that showed resemblance with the Persian equivalent (context-bound) utterances and those that differed from them. Given the presupposition made above about the potential problem posed by cases of difference, the presentation of similarities is ignored here in favor of the differences. What follows then is cases of function-intonation correspondence that do not show resemblance between the two languages of English and Persian. It should be noted that the study is an inductive one, which means that as long as there are no cases to contradict the data at hand, the findings will be considered to hold true.

Results and Discussion

What follows is a detailed taxonomy of the function-intonation correspondences that proved different between English and Persian. Each function will be explained by presenting the intonation pattern that a native English speaker would normally adopt on it, followed by the pattern a Persian speaker would use. This is intended to bring to light the diverging areas that will be worthy of attention when giving language instructions, that is, as far as the aforementioned two languages are concerned.


A. Yes/no questions with unsatisfactory answers

When a native speaker of English asks a yes/no question that requires an answer (i.e. not asked for rhetorical reasons), the usual intonation to use would be a rise. The rise will normally start on the stressed syllable of the last word of the question and extends onto the end of the question. Conditions are imaginable to occur, however, where the speaker believes that the addressee has not fulfilled the act of responding. This may happen for a variety of reasons; the response might be judged as irrelevant; the addressee might not have heard the question in the first place; or he might even ignore the question altogether. If the interrogator still wishes to get the answer, what he will normally do would be to repeat the question, but this time with a falling intonation. Such a change in tone seems to be intended to give the signal to the other party that the expected communication has not been established as the answer (i.e. either yes or no) has not been provided, or that the given answer has not been relevant.

Consider the following example coming from the bulk of the data.

Speaker A. *So you could have infected Mr. Alvarez. Is that correct?* 

Speaker B. *Miguel has not been infected.*

Speaker A. *You didn't answer the question. You could have infected him. Is that correct?* 

Here is a second example from another movie.

Control tower: *Odyssey! this is Houston, do you read me?*
 [There is silence; no answer]

Control tower: *Odyssey! This is Houston, do you read me?*

This pattern is recurrently seen every time an English-speaking interlocutor sees it fit to repeat his yes/no question. However, this is not exactly what a Persian speaker would do in a similar situation. In Persian, yes/no questions are asked with a rising intonation, just like English. The difference is that when the Persian speaker wishes to repeat such a question for one of the reasons mentioned above, he would normally repeat the same question, with a rise (rather than a fall), and often followed by a tag ending such as 'or not', or a conventional tag question, uttered with a fall. The Persianized versions of the questions in their second time of being uttered is therefore expected to be the following. Although grammatically the utterances are correct, they sound affected.

1) *You didn't answer my question. You could have infected him. Is that correct or not?*

2) *Odyssey! This is Houston. Do you read me or not?*

B. Tag questions

We know that in English tag questions are asked in two different cases. The first case is when the speaker is almost certain about the information he provides and only wishes to see if the listener agrees or disagrees with his statement. In other words, the main reason behind using the tag is receiving confirmation of the information. In this case, the tag is akin to a rhetorical question. The second case a tag might be asked is when the speaker has some guesses, but is not quite sure about the veracity of the information. He would thus ask the tag question to have the speaker correct him if he is wrong. Although the two tags are structurally the same, the two types of intentions in asking them are translated into two different intonation patterns: the first situation requires a fall and the second, a rise. Consider the following example.

Situation 1: Speaker A to speaker B. *It was a great match, wasn't it?*

Situation 2: Speaker A to speaker B. *It was a great match, wasn't it?*

It could be hypothesized that in the first situation, both speakers have been watching the match and so neither one has any doubt over whether or not it was a great match. The only reason behind asking the tag is then receiving confirmation as a form of emphasis. In the second scenario, however, we could imagine that speaker A has not been able to see the match, but given the prior knowledge that he has about the strong abilities of the two teams, he expects the match to have been a 'great' one. This means that he is not sure about the quality of the game, and so wishes the other party to inform him whether or not this was the case. The tag therefore is similar to a normal yes/no question.

In Persian, as opposed to English, forming tag questions is not dependant on the structure of the preceding utterance. No matter what the structure of the latter, there are a number of fixed structures that can be used at the end of the statement, the difference between them being the degree of formality. When it comes to the intonation of the tag, there is also a difference between English and Persian; the fixed phrases in Persian also have their own fixed intonation pattern (either a rise or a fall), which, irrespective of the intention behind asking the tag, is always used in without change. In the Table 1. below, the

phonetic representation, meaning and the degree of formality of some of the most-frequently used examples of Persian tags are provided.

Table 1. Persian tags, their degrees of formality and the proper 381 intonation

<i>Phonetic transcription</i>	<i>Meaning</i>	<i>Degree of formality</i>	<i>Intonation marker</i>
/in'tθŪr 'nist/	Isn't that the case?	Formal	rise
/mægær in'tθŪr 'nist/	Isn't that the case?	Formal	fall
/do'roste/	Is that right?	Semi-formal	rise
/'hæmintθŪre/	Is that the case?	Semi-formal	rise
/mæge'næ/	Ain't that right?	Informal	fall

It is noteworthy that there might be other fixed variations of the utterances above to use as a tag. The point is, however, that those phrases are formed independent of the structure, tense and mode (i.e. positivity vs. negativity) of the original sentence, and can be added with no regard for the context, except for the degree of formality. Moreover, whether the phrase uses a rise or a fall always goes together with the tag and acts independently of the intention of the speaker in asking the tag. In this way, assigning the appropriate intonation on a tag by a Persian speaker of English who is not aware of the rule in English would be rendered a haphazard undertaking. The possibility of making mistakes is therefore increased.

C. Negation

When making negative statements, there are disparities between English and Persian in terms of assigning the main sentence stress (the fall) and the resulting intonation. This holds true both for neutral and pragmatic conditions. Below, we will be looking at the rules governing negative statements in both languages as far as assigning sentence stress is concerned, and point at areas where the learner of one the languages can potentially make mistakes.

C1. Neutral conditions

Under neutral conditions (i.e. when the intention behind an utterance is only conveying information with no pragmatic function involved), there is a difference between how a Persian speaker would utter a negative sentence and how an English speaker would do so. In Persian, there is a negating element (pronounced as /ne/ or /næ/, being in complementary distribution) that is added as a prefix to the verb. This element invariably attracts the main stress of the whole sentence to itself, affecting in turn the intonation of the sentence. In other words, in all Persian negative sentences the negating element determines the main sentence stress.

In English negative sentences, on the other hand, the element receiving the prominent stress is not the negative element; in neutral conditions that is. It is rather the last 'main' word of the sentence. The question arises here as to what words fall outside the category of 'main'. These are often pronouns, prepositions, and time and place adverbials. In this respect, therefore, there is no difference between positive and negative statements when assigning sentence stress. To determine what word in the sentence receives the main stress, one could start from the end of the sentence, ignore any words that are not 'main', and stress the first main word.

Due to such a difference, a Persian learner of English is therefore likely to unconsciously transfer the Persian negating rule to English negative sentences, wrongly assigning the sentence stress on the negative element of the sentence, whatever it might be. In fact, the researcher has constantly come across cases of Persian learners of English who have applied such an over-generalization. It should be noted that in case the negating element is bound with the verb (i.e. contracted form), the negative verb is likely to be

stressed by the Persian speaker. Here are two examples to show how negative sentences are neutrally pronounced, together with the ‘Persianized’ version. Please note that the sentences are taken to have been uttered with a neutral intent.

Normal English: *I have not seen this movie before.* = *I haven't seen this movie before.*
 Persianized: *I have not seen this movie before.* = *I haven't seen this movie before.*
 Normal English: *Susan never attends international conferences.*
 Persianized: *Susan never attends international conferences.*

Interestingly, the Persianized versions are similar to the ‘emphatic’ form of the negative sentence in English. In other words, it is only when the native speaker of English wishes to emphasize the negativity of the sentence that use uses a fall on the negative element.

C2. Pragmatic conditions

Intonation can be used to different effects, ones that go beyond the simple transfer of information (i.e. used neutrally). Examples of such pragmatic use include expressing interest or lack thereof, excitement, threat, warning, anger and correcting wrong presuppositions. There are similarities between English and Persian while there are differences as well. The data collected for the present study alludes to a specific difference between the two languages in the use of negative sentences uttered to correct the other party’s wrong presupposition. The following sub-section attends to this difference.

C2.1. correction of presuppositions

When two parties converse, a situation may arise in which one of the interlocutors discovers that the other party has some information that needs to be corrected. In such conditions, a ‘contrastive stress’, may be used (Honbolygo, Kobor, & Csepe, 2017; Laufer & Girsai, 2008; Levis & Levis, 2018). This could be done to imply, for instance, that the information is correct, though not about the entity the speaker has in mind, but rather about a competing entity. Consider the following example for more clarity.

Speaker A. *Despite being the largest planet in the solar system, earth might soon lose its capacity to feed every individual on it.*

In this dyad, speaker B discovers that his partner has a wrong presupposition—that of earth being the largest planet in the solar system. He therefore makes a negative sentence to correct him. In his sentence, however, he has to use a contrastive stress (see Connaghan & Patel, 2017; Cummins & Rohde 2015), which means he assigns the stress not according to the fact that the sentence is negative but in order to compare the two contrasting elements; namely earth and the planet that is truly the largest one. He therefore assigns the stress on the word ‘earth’ rather than the last main element of the sentence.

Speaker B. *Earth isn't the largest planet in the solar system.*

Interestingly, this is exactly what a Persian speaker does on the Persian equivalent of the negative sentence, assigning the main sentence stress onto the word ‘earth’. Such a speaker is therefore likely to use the same pattern in English, with little possibility of making a mistake. However, there is a minute difference here. In order to further signal that the presupposition of Speaker A is wrong and that he is trying to correct it, speaker B will use a final rise; that is, a rise on the last syllable of the very last word,

D. Adjective-noun compounds

Another area of concern is the way English and Persian speakers would assign stress on compound nouns and on adjective-noun compounds. In Persian, the modifier follows the noun, whether it is a noun or an adjective, which is the exact opposite of what happens in English. There is a difference in assigning the stress, too, as the Persian speaker would assign the main stress to the modifier in both cases within a neutral context.

In contrast, in English the modifier precedes the noun it modifies, and the stress is on the noun when the modifier is an adjective and on the first noun when it is the modifier. Once again, this holds true in neutral conditions. This seems to be a solid rule, as the meaning of an adjective-noun combination will basically change in case under a non-contrastive condition the adjective is stressed. The implication of the compound will then be a specific concept or object where the adjective is not simply intended to describe the noun. Compare the following examples:

Table 2. How modifier-noun compounds are stressed in English and Persian

Persian		English		
<i>Adj-N</i>	<i>N-N</i>	<i>Adj-N</i>	<i>N-N</i>	<i>Adj-N as N-N</i>
<i>white</i> house	<i>Brick</i> house	White <i>house</i>	<i>Brick</i> House	<i>White</i> House
<i>White</i> board	<i>Plastic</i> board	White <i>board</i>	<i>plastic</i> board	<i>White</i> board

As is clear from the Table 2, there is a difference between how a Persian speaker and an English one would assign stress on the adjective-Noun combinations. Each of these speakers, therefore, is likely to make a mistake in this regard, leading to compounds that inadvertently and unnecessarily imply a contrastive stress or an emphatic one.

E. Preposition-pronoun endings

It was earlier noted that under neutral conditions, the English speaker would assign sentence stress on the last 'main' element of the sentence. It was further added that prepositions, pronouns, and time and place adverbials are not considered among the main elements and will therefore not bear the sentences stress. There is one exception to the above statements, however.

When a sentence ends with a preposition followed by a pronoun, it will be the preposition that carries the main stress, regardless of whether the statement is positive or negative. This is not what a Persian speaker would do on the equivalent statements in Persian. When the sentence is positive, he will typically stress the final pronoun. Chances are, therefore, that he will do the same thing on the English statement, which, once again, will lead to the impression that stress is being used contrastively. If the statement is negative, however, the Persian speaker would be more likely to stress the negating element in the English equivalent (see section C1 above). Consider the following examples:

English Speaker: I want to go to the cinema with you. / I don't want to talk about it.

Persianized Version: I want to go to the cinema with you. / I don't want to talk about it.

Conclusion

Needless to say, the answer to the original research question is a positive one, as the areas of divergence were elaborated in detail. As is clear from the above results and examples, there are clear

differences between English and Persian over certain similar neutral and pragmatic contexts as far as the intonation is concerned. Given that intonation, especially under pragmatic conditions, is an area of the language that is rarely, if ever, attended to in L2 instruction programs, paying attention to such differences is needed if the L2 is to be learned authentically. This is especially so when the L2 is English rather than Persian, as the former has a much wider reach than the latter. The corollary is that L2 instruction coursebooks should include the points discussed here.

Based on years of experience in teaching English to Persian learners of this language, the researcher has witnessed that, especially in the intermediate proficiency level, the areas hypothesized above are those where the learner does actually make mistakes in a systematic way and along the lines predicted. One could say that using wrong intonation patterns as such is part of the interlanguage of the intermediate learner. Creating within the learner the consciousness about these areas will go a long way to not only make his speech sound normal and authentic, but to improve the efficiency of the language he uses through preventing misunderstanding. After all, this is what intonation is all about.

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