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Lexical Meaning and Prominence

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Lexical Meaning and Prominence*

Morio Kohno

(1)

It is often said that in spoken English the amount of information is reflected in the degree of prominence, which is determined by any or all of the following factors: change of auditory intensity or loudness, change of duration or quantity, change of direction of melodic curve or pitch, change of characteristics of consonants and vowels, and increased amplitude of physiological movement.

D. Bolinger (1972-B), for instance, explains from this viewpoint why the last verbs of the following sentences have different prominences from each other.

- 1/ a) The end of the chapter is reserved for various problèmes to solve.
- b) The end of the chapter is reserved for various problèmes to computerise.

In the first sentence (a), 'to solve' would be easily guessed semantically from the rest of the sentence even if there were no words, but 'to computerise' in the second sentence (b) would not: it actually gives new information. In this case, it can be said that 'solve' bears less information than 'computerise'.

We are able to cite many other examples. Here are a few of them.

- 2/ a) I enjoyed myself.
- b) I hurt myself.

* This treatise was written after revising papers read both at the Third World Congress of Phoneticians held in Tokyo, 1976, and at the symposium at the General Meeting of the English Literary Society of Japan, Tokyo, 1975.

3/ a) My m^ôther is a k^înd woman.

b) My m^ôther is a k^înd rec^éptionist.

The words, 'myself' in 2-a) sentence and 'woman' are semantically or informationally redundant, but 'myself' in 2-b) and 'receptionist' are not.⁽¹⁾

All these prove that a word empty in meaning or information is pronounced weakly, and a rich word strongly.

Let us adduce one more evidence:

4/ a) He's bringing in the b^âggage.

b) ?He's bringing in the th^îng.

c) He's bringing the thing ^în.

(Bolinger, 1971)

This shows that nouns like 'thing', which have too common a meaning, are often treated as a kind of pronoun – a usually weakly pronounced function word.

(2)

In the above-mentioned examples, the amount of information or the force of meaning was determined mainly on the syntactical level.

But on the lexical level also, we can find some degrees of the amount of information fixed in the proper meanings of some specific words. Such is the case in so-called adverbial 'degree words'.

(1) The usage of the parenthesized parts in the following will be interpreted in the same way: they bare little information and can be semantically and syntactically omitted. Their pronunciation is weak.

a/ We h^âve to d^êe s^ômetime. It d^ôesn't seem to m^âtter so much wh^{ên}
(we have to die).

b/ The imm^êdiate pr^ôb^lem was to find a s^ÿmpath^êtic place to l^îve (in).

c/ They w^ênt b^âck along the gr^âvel p^âth / and p^âssed ^în (through) the door.

d/ He will rep^ôrt it at the me^êting (to be held) tom^ôrr^ôrow.

However, when a word has a strong stress, we can neither omit nor abbreviate it. Quirk's following judgment could not be understood if attention were not paid to pronunciation.

* I'm happy if you're. (Pronunciation: I'm h^âppy / if y^ôu ^âre.) (Quirk *et al*, 1972)

'Quite', for instance, has the following meanings:

- 1) Entirely, Absolutely.
- 2) to all intents and purposes, almost, practically.
- 3) (colloq.) to a considerable extent or degree.
- 4) (chiefly British) to a certain extent.

cf. *The American College Dictionary* (ACD)

The Universal English Dictionary (UED)

Here we can say that meaning (1) is the most forceful, and shows the greatest amount of emotional information, and then (2) (3) in this order, and (4) the weakest. And (4), at the same time, indicates the speaker's distorted mental state, as in 'He was *quite* polite, of course, but somehow I don't like his manner.' The UED says that this is an expression of reluctant consent to, acquiescence with, something which is more or less taken for granted.

Other adverbs, such as 'just', have a more complicated system of meaning.

- 1) Exactly, Precisely. (*just* the words we often have to look up in a dictionary)
- 2) (British) on the point of being — often used with *on*. (It was now *just* on eight o'clock.)
- 3) by a very small margin: Barely. (I could *just* see the very high weathercock of the church.)
- 4) Quite, Very, Absolutely, Really — used as an intensive. (That's *just* ducky.)
- 5) a) precisely at the time referred to or implied. (It was *just* ten when he came in.)
b) but a very short time ago, very recently. (The book has *just* been published.)
- 6) in immediate proximity: Immediately, Directly. (*just* across from the campus)
- 7) Only, Merely, Simply. (I'm *just* your interpreter.)
- 8) chiefly dial.: Indeed, Truly. (Couldn't he play the violin, *just*.)

cf. *Webster's 3rd New International Dictionary*

We can here indeed find the 'strong-weak' order of force of emotion; but as

phoneticians,⁽³⁾ it may be dangerous to draw a conclusion only from these materials, but we can see the general trend of the fact. In the present case we may be able to say that the word 'just' is apt to be uttered with great prominence.

In some cases, we were indeed puzzled whether we should classify the concerned word according to this meaning division or another.

Mány Américans are offénded by the nórmal intonátions of Brítish English, just as Brítishers are óften húrty by Américan intonations.

(Abercrombie)

In the above-mentioned passage, the word 'just' might be grouped according to meaning division (1), or according to (7), if we consider that the word often works as a downtoner or meaningless empty word as pointed out in A.S. Hornby's *Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*.

In order to solve this problem, the author asked two or three native speakers (in this case, Britishers) to read this passage and then inquired the meaning of 'just'. Interestingly enough, those who interpreted it as 'exactly' pronounced it strongly, but those who thought it a downtoner, weakly. All these facts considered, it was concluded that Abercrombie's example should be classified as a downtoner or a meaningless word.

(Meaning division 2)

No examples were found. See the next chapter.

(Meaning division 3)

There were only two examples, and both of them were judged to be prominent as follows:

"I'm sure he won't apply for the job." "It's not very probable. But it's

(3) Some of the transcripts used only two kinds of stress marks, some three, and others four. Some used the term 'stress' to mean 'prominence', and others did not. Some described no intonation mark and others did. Also, the method of pitch description was different in American and British data. As for discussion of this in detail, see my paper, "Intonation Hyoki Saiko (Reconsideration of Intonation Description)" *The Journal of Kobe City University of Foreign Studies* (to be published).

˘just ˘possible.” (O'Connor)

(In O'Connor's prosodic notation, all the marks such as ˘, ˘˘, ||, ˘, ˘, ˘ show great prominence.)

(Meaning division 4)

All the examples (12 in all) had great prominence:

“He said he'd handed them to you.” “That ˘˘ just isn't, true.” (O'Connor)

(Meaning division 5a)

The number of examples which were thought to belong to this division were fifteen, and all of them were presumed to have great prominence, judging from the transcription. Here is one example.

“Why that is the véry quéstion I was júst gòing to àsk yóu,” ànswèred Mr. À. (Jones – 1)

(Meaning division 5b)

This usage commonly appears with the perfect tense. Out of the total 36 examples, 32 were prominent as in the following:

She had júst fínished scrúbbing the flóor and pólishing the bráss, and was
nów engáged in láying líttle páths of páper in cásé any chance cústomer
should come in óver níght and sóil the bóards before Súnday.

(Armstrong)

But the other four had no stress marks nor pitch accent as in this sentence:

It doesn't seem to have much reference to love, as far as I can see, and the only other rhyme I can think of is above. I have just put it in my sécond

line which énds with the phráse / líke the stárs abóve. (Pike)

-1-2 1- °2- -1- °2-2 °3- -2- °3- °2- °3-1

(Meaning division 6)

A total of two examples, and they had the secondary stress marks. As for the intonation, nuclei were not necessarily put on them.

(Meaning division 7)

1/ (We pût the fâns ôn, but the âir from them just rôasted us.⁽⁴⁾ (Hill))

"Yèah it's jùst twô mìles from our còttage." "Mhm, right at the end of

"What shall I do with her letters?" "Just hand them to her."

This usage is a kind of understatement: statement which feigns a casual

(4) In L.A. Hill's book referred to, all the intonation curves are illustrated under the sentences.

manner in appearance, but expects more strong effectiveness at heart than ordinary expression.

In the following passage, the first 'just' simply means 'only', and the second one is that usage.

"He réally gèts the féel òf / òf this just slìghtly sùbstândard
 2- °4- °3- 2 2- °3-
 Ènglish." (After examining the book, it becomes clear that the English is
 °2- -1

really substandard.)

"Jùst slìghtly sùbstândard." (Bowman)
 °3- °2- °1- -1

We should here notice that the intonation of the last sentence is so-called 'cascade' type⁵⁾ or stepping head + low fall type,⁶⁾ which is often used to suggest impatience and disapproval as well as a categoric and weighty attitude.

Generally speaking, intonation often works as a cue to know the speaker's distorted mental state. See the following utterance of the chief editor (Burns) to his subordinate reporter (Hildy), who suddenly tendered his resignation in spite of the possibility of getting a great scoop. Here we can find many instances of the above-mentioned 'cascade' type of intonation, which show the attitude of impatience and disapproval more strongly by widening the range of pitch and by putting insistent regularity of rhythm⁷⁾ in the sentences even when they themselves have rather favorable meanings. (Prosodic Analysis was done by the author. As for the intonation notation, the one now being most widely employed in Japan has been selected for the

(5) This is advocated by H.E. Palmer: *A Grammar of Spoken English*, W. Heffer & Sons, 1939, p. 16.

(6) This is advocated by J.D. O'Connor and G.F. Arnold, and sometimes repalced by high pre-head + low fall or slurred pre-contour + low fall. cf. *Intonation of Colloquial English*, Longmans, 1964, p.37 and K.L. Pike: *The Intonation of American English*, University of Michigan Press, p.68 & p.70

(7) Quirk *et al* (1972) say that an insistent regularity may be introduced for emphasis, especially when one is implying repetition of something which ought to be accepted without argument, and especially again, perhaps, when the speaker is expressing irritation or sarcasm. p.1043

convenience of Japanese readers. This method of notation, in spite of its faults, will be sufficient to indicate the general trend.

Burns: Jees, Hildy, why didn't you / tell me, / Kid? I would've
thrown you a little / farewell party.

Hildy: Oh, no, no, no. I know your farewell parties. When Ben Hecht was leaving for Hollywood, you slipped a mickey in his gin fizz, it took four of us to get him on the California Limited.

Burns: Well look at him now. Sitting under those goddamn plum trees,

writing dialogue for Rin Tin Tin. What's the matter with you
guys? / You're traitors, / all of you. / If it isn't Hollywood,
it's Broad way ... / or Paris. Write the great American
novel.

Bé / Scott / Fitz / Gerald. / Christ! / And now, you are
gonna / sell out. / The last / real newspaperman I got on
this / sheet. (The Front Page (film))

Intonation also shows the difference of presupposition:

a/ Harry criticised Mary for writing the editorial.

b/ Harry accused Mary of writing the editorial.

In the sentence (a), Harry presupposed Mary was responsible for writing the

editorial and he asserted that writing the editorial was bad; whereas in sentence (b), Harry presupposed that writing the editorial was bad and he asserted Mary was responsible for writing. (D.T. Langendoen, 1971)

This prominence pattern is not altered even when in negative form.

a/ Rockey didn't criticize Max for spending the foot.

b/ Rockey didn't accuse Max of spending the foot.

The following is an example of the presupposition-assertion distinction for nouns.

a/ My cousin isn't a boy any more. (My cousin has grown up.)

b/ My cousin isn't a boy any more. (My cousin has changed sex.)

(Meaning division 8)

All the examples (5 in total) were those of understatement and had the cascade type of intonation.

"I made rather a mess of it." "I should 'just 'think you did."

(O'Connor)

The negative form of general questions was used as an exclamatory device in this sort of intonation.

"He's two hours late again." "'Isn't he 'just the 'sort of 'person to 'drive you , mad?"

(O'Connor)

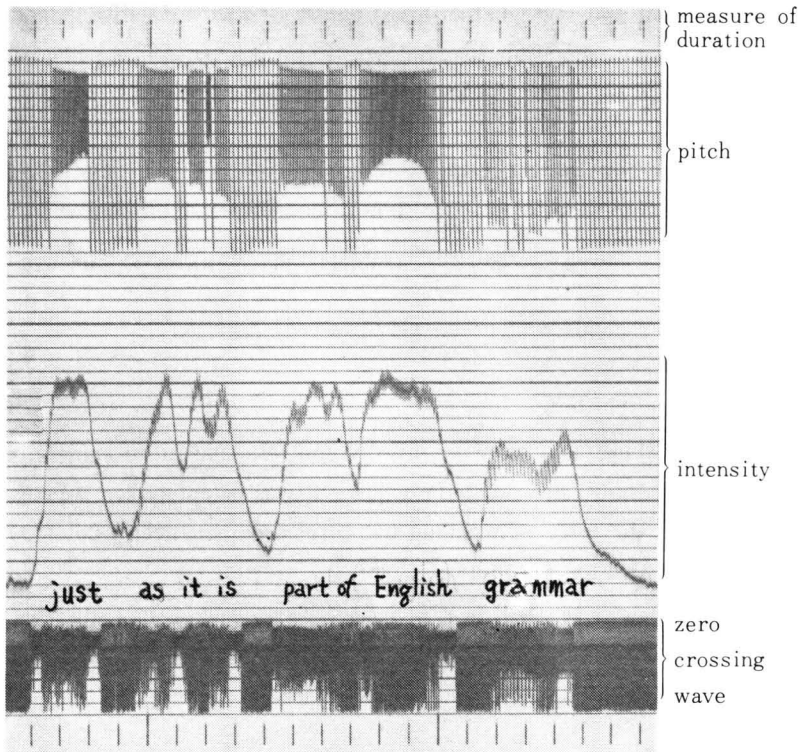
(4)

After the author had gathered 177 sentences including 'justs' from actually spoken English recorded on various levels of speech circumstances, he asked 20 – 40 Japanese and 1 – 3 English and American subjects the degree of prominence of 'justs' using a language laboratory. And besides, in

order to ensure the data, he measured the intensity, duration, and pitch of each word in the sentences by using a 'Pitch Indicator' ⁽⁸⁾ and an 'Electro-Magnetic Oscillograph'. ⁽⁹⁾ (As the relationship between acoustic facts and auditory images is rather complex, and as some areas have not been made clear yet, these data may have only secondary importance, compared with the auditory analysis. As for the detailed inquiry into these points, see M. Kohno's *The Study of Spoken English*, Taishukan, (to be published).)

(Meaning division 1)

In all the examples (22 in all) 'justs' had great prominence:



(8) Type PI-3A Nippon Denshi Sokki

(9) Type 2901 Yokogawa Denki

Sally, / this môdel seeems to be júst w hát you are loóking fòr. / (Cortina)

In this sentence, all the subjects (the number of them was 28) perceived 'just' as the most prominent of all the words in the rhythm unit (or tone unit), which is indicated by slanted bars. The degree of prominence of every word in the unit was also decided on by the author through his auditory analysis — listening to the tapes repeatedly and taking the instrumental data into consideration. (It has been known that, if other conditions are the same, the pitch contrast is a better cue to prominence than either duration or intensity, and duration is better than intensity.)¹⁰⁾ In addition, in order to make the analysis more firm, he himself reproduced the sentence which has been analysed and saw whether his attempts satisfied his native helpers or not. (Prominence notation is as follows: ['] = primary, [^] = secondary, [`] = tertiary)

(Meaning division 2)

The twelve examples spoken by British informants were all prominent.

It is júst òn twèlve o'clôck. / (subjects' judgment on prominence:

primary = 24; secondary = 2)

(Meaning division 3)

Generally speaking, the 'justs' of this division were spoken prominently: but if the word 'only' was put before 'just', it was often spoken weakly, perhaps because the force of meaning was dispersed. Eighteen out of 27 examples exemplified this assumption.

I was óny júst in tìme for schóol. / (subjects' judgment on

prominence: primary = 3; secondary = 23; tertiary = 7)

(Meaning division 4)

(10) cf. D.L. Bolinger: "Theory of Pitch Accent in English" *Word* 2-3, 1958; M.J. Lightfoot: "Accent and Time in Descriptive Prosody" *Word* 26-1, 1970

The eight examples had the greatest prominence.

(Meaning division 5a)

Contrary to the data in the previous chapter, only three out of 11 examples had great prominence, the others were inconspicuous:

I dón't knów whèther we can gét to New Órleans at jùst thàt tíme. /

(Cortina)

(subjects' judgment on prominence: primary = 2; secondary = 3; tertiary = 6; weakest = 15)

(Meaning division 5b)

The result was quite the same as 5a: ten out of 28 examples were prominent, and 17 were inconspicuous. The other one was judged as intermediate. All these findings mean that this division does not always require specific prominence.

(Meaning division 6)

In this division, the nine examples were all pronounced neither strongly nor weakly — they were always in the middle.

(Meaning division 7)

Thirty-eight out of 45 were inconspicuous. Sometimes they were pronounced very rapidly in a weak form.

Óh, I was just lóok ing at a màgà zîne cálled Árizona Híghways / ...

(Conversation)

[ów ajwəz dzəst lúkɪŋə ə mægəzɪn kɔːld ærɪlɔʊnə hájweɪz] (secondary = 4; tertiary = 21; weakest = 15)

The others were strong both in meaning and in pronunciation. The following, for instance, has a stronger meaning than ordinary imperatives — it is a kind of cross examination; and at the same time it is spoken with

the 'cascade' type of intonation and with insistent regularity of rhythm, both of which give a serious, weighty, pressing character to the statement, indicative of irritation on the part of the speaker.

What are you going to do when it begins to snow? Just think, / in three
months, / winter will bè / hére. (Cortina) (primary = 28)

(Meaning division 8)

All of the 15 sentences were spoken with the 'cascade' type of intonation, although the 'justs' themselves did not always have great prominence, in spite of their often prolonged duration.

(5)

As a result of the foregoing research, it may be concluded that in the meaning divisions (1), (2), (4), 'just' is always pronounced prominently, and so is (3), although it is often spoken with suppressed prominence when it is with 'only'. As for (5a) and (5b), it does not always require specific prominence, except in the case when the idea of time is especially emphasized. The pronunciation is often affected by rhythm. (6) is generally spoken in the middle degree of prominence. In (7), it is spoken inconspicuously when it literally means 'only'; but if it works as understatement, it is uttered prominently or takes the intonation of the stepping head + low fall (or high pre-head + low fall or slurred pre-countour + low fall⁽¹¹⁾). (8) is exclusively spoken with the above-mentioned 'cascade' type of intonation, even when the prominence of 'just' is not so great.

Applying the same procedure of research, the author has proved the relationship between the meaning and the pronunciation of the words 'quite', 'indeed' and 'well'.⁽¹²⁾

(11) Pike's usage

(12) As for 'quite', the author examined 169 actually spoken utterances and for 'indeed' 74, and 40 for 'well'.

(Quite)⁽¹³⁾

Prominence shifts from great to small, according to the meaning divisions (1) through (3), which are described in chapter 2. The only exception is meaning (4): in this division, prominence is not an absolute index of the meaning; rather, we must also consider the type of intonation. The rise-fall-rise type is often used, which implies concession and suggests such meanings or sous-entendus as 'but', 'although', 'even if'.⁽¹⁴⁾ Here is an example:

Bíll is quite a good driver, of course, / but he couldn't avoid the accident.

(The number of subjects who judged 'just' had primary prominence was 11 including a Britisher's judgment: secondary = 4, tertiary = 1.) It would be worth noting that H.W. Fowler and E. Gowers also made a similar observation about 'quite' in saying, "It is interesting that we now use *quite* colloqually, and generally with a special intonation, to mean *not quite*." (*Modern English Usage*, Revised Edition, Clarendon Press, 1965, p. 497)

(Indeed)⁽¹⁵⁾

The author got a similar result regarding 'indeed' as in the following list:

| | <u>meaning</u> | <u>pronunciation</u> |
|----|---|--|
| 1/ | (a) Truly, Certainly, Assuredly | big prominence |
| | (b) by all means, by any means | big prominence |
| | (c) really (used interrogatively) | big prominence |
| 2/ | so far as that goes | little prominence |
| 3/ | Admittedly; so far as the truth of the matter is concerned (used to indicate that something stated or about to be stated is true and is at the same time opposed to some- | little prominence or 'rise-fall-rise' type of intonation |

(13) cf. M. Kohno: "Multi-meaning Words and Stress" *Essays in Languages & Literature*, Kwansei Gakuin University, 1969

(14) H.E. Palmer: *A Grammar of Spoken English*, p.23. Palmer called this a 'snake' type of intonation.

(15) cf. M. Kohno: "The Meaning of 'Indeed' and its Stress" *Ronko*, No. 17, Kwansei Gakuin University, 1970

thing stated or implied or about to be stated).

(Well)⁽¹⁶⁾

As for 'well', the result is as follows:

| <u>meaning</u> | <u>pronunciation</u> |
|--|----------------------|
| 1/ (in a pleasing (or skilful, or becoming) manner) to the full extent | big prominence |
| 2/ (in a pleasing (or skilful, or becoming) manner) to a considerable extent | middle prominence |
| 3/ in a becoming manner to a common extent | little prominence |

Similar relations can also be seen in some adverbial phrases. Let us take the case of 'for oneself' as an example.⁽¹⁷⁾

The meaning of the phrase is as follows:

- (1) (in order to benefit oneself, do something) by one's own efforts; without any help from others:

(Example) Find out the meaning of the word *for yourself* in the dictionary.

I saw it *for myself*.⁽¹⁸⁾

- (2) (do something) for one's own sake or benefit:

(Example) I bought a new hat *for myself*.⁽¹⁹⁾

- (3) [usually in the form of 'for itself'] (do something) for its very essence; for the very merit it has:

(Example) I love honesty *for itself*.

After examining 53 utterances which include 'for oneself', it has been made clear that in meaning division (1), the phrase is always pronounced

(16) cf. M. Kohno: "The Meaning of 'Well' and its Stress" *Corpus*, No. 3, Rokko English Linguistics Circle, 1970

(17) cf. M. Kohno: "The Meaning of 'For Oneself' and Stress" *Corpus*, No. 4, Rokko English Linguistics Circle, 1971

(18) This is indeed an emphatic use of the compound pronoun in such a sentence as 'I saw it myself'.

(19) This sentence can be transformed without changing the meaning in this way: I bought a new hat for myself. = I bought myself a new hat. = (colloquial) I bought me a new hat. (cf. Curme (1935) p.157) This fact suggests the reason why this usage has only small prominence.

prominently, and also in division (3).⁽²⁰⁾ But in division (2), it is generally inconspicuous, except when it is used to express contrast.

A full-grown Arabian camel can carry its master and enough food and water for him across completely barren regions for many days on end, / and nêds lîttle or nôthing for itself. (secondary = 18; tertiary = 4)

(Used for contrast)⁽²¹⁾ You sêe, he has wórked for himsêlf àll his lîfe

/ never for anybody else, . . . (primary = 14; secondary = 5; tertiary = 4)

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(20) We can presume this result from the following usage: That poor boy was mysêlf. (Zandvoort (1965) p.145); You are not yoursêlf (= you yoursêlf) today. (Curme (1935) p.49).

(21) Sometimes the stress pattern of the compound personal pronoun (— —) is reversed in this usage.

"I want to have an opportunity to explain mysêlf," she said. "Then," said the opponent. "Let me have a chance to explain mysêlf, too."

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