



## Misuses of English Intonation for Chinese Students in Cross-Cultural Communication

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Received 21 November 2016; accepted 19 January 2017

Published online 26 January 2017

### Abstract

Increasingly cross-cultural communications bring about more English learners in China. With attitudinal and discourse functions, English intonation plays an important role in cross-cultural communication. However, students in China have insufficient awareness of the important role intonation plays. Some students are able to tell the real intentions conveyed by the intonation of the speaker. Others misuse English intonations and lead to misunderstandings. These will have a negative impact on a successful cross-cultural communication. Based on the former researches, this paper focuses on analyzing the common types of intonation misuses and exploring their root causes. It points out that the negative transfer of China is one of the root causes for indecent intonation, and then comes up with several suggestions on how to avoid indecent intonations. It argues that learners should firstly realize the differences between Chinese and English intonation, focus more on intonation learning with a sound motivation and cultivate good learning strategies so as to reduce the negative transfer from Chinese and avoid indecent intonation. As more people have realized the importance of intonation, decent intonation will help them achieve more and more successful cross-cultural communication.

**Key words:** English intonation; Chinese students; English learners; Negative transfer; Cross-cultural communication;

Huo, S. Y., & Luo, Q. (2017). Misuses of English Intonation for Chinese Students in Cross-Cultural Communication. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 13(1), 47-52. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/9332>  
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/9332>

### INTRODUCTION

As a primary language being used in the globalized world, English has played an increasingly important role in cross-cultural communications. English linguist Widdowson (2000) mentions that the ultimate goal of language learning is communicative competence. That's why more and more students are learning English in China. But for those who can speak English, can they be properly understood? Without a large amount of vocabulary, you can choose simple ones to express yourself. But it's hard to imagine that misuses of intonation can lead to a successful communication. However, most Chinese students have plain intonation and make others confuse about their real intentions. That's why they are speaking unnatural English and behave poorly in real cross-cultural communications. Cross-cultural communication failures can be caused by inadequate language skills, unawareness of cultural differences, thinking patterns, misuses of intonation, etc.. This paper will focus on the importance of intonation and talk about misuses of intonation in cross-cultural communication. Pike (1979) has learned from his teaching experience that weird intonation makes unnatural English and indecent melody will add to your accent even you have the right pronunciation of vowels and consonants. Thus, decent intonation has played an important role in a successful cross-cultural communication. However, ignorance and misuses of English intonation are very common in China. With an overall aim to study the distinctive functions of English

intonation and get a deeper understanding of why misuses happen in cross-cultural communication, this paper will classify the common types of misuses of intonation and explore their root causes so as to give some suggestions on how to avoid them and facilitate a successful cross-cultural communication by decent ones. With more and more studies being conducted on such topic, people will have more awareness of the importance of intonation in cross-cultural communication, and we have every reason to believe that intonation will play its due role in future cross-cultural communications.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

John Hart was known as the earliest founder of English intonation study (Fries, 1964, p.242). He had ushered a new study branch of linguistic study. Sweet (1877) studied the change patterns of the main pitches in English intonation earlier in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Earlier linguists focused their studies more on vowels, consonants, stress and paid little attention to intonation. As more people become aware of the importance of English intonation, more thorough researches have been conducted. Palmer (1924), Armstrong and Ward (1931), Kingdon (1958), Jones (1962), Halliday (1967), O'Connor and Arnold (1973), Crystal (1976), Pike (1979), Brazil (1980), Bolinger (1989), Tench (1996), Cruttenden (1997), Gussenhoven (2004) and other linguists have made great contributions to the studies of English intonation. Their views and theories have facilitated and diversified the development of English intonation theories (Jiang & Shi, 2009). Distinguished studies have been conducted on British English and American English intonation. For British intonation, there are academic monographs such as *The Groundwork of English Intonation* by Kingdon (1958) and *Intonation of Colloquial English* by O'Connor and Arnold (1973). And for American intonation study, there is academic monograph *The Intonation of American English* by Pike (1979).

Early scholars focused their studies more on the structure of intonation. For example, R. Kingdon and other scholars had divided intonation into four parts: pre-head, head, body, nucleus and tail. Later, scholars changed their attention to study the functions of intonation (Yu, 1992, p.12). O'Connor and Arnold (1973) analyzed intonation from its grammatical function, attitudinal function and accentual function. Crystal (1976) pointed out the different functions of intonation: emotional, grammatical, information structure, textual, psychological and indexical. Lindsey (1985) concluded that the main functions of intonation are highlighting the key point and expressing one's attitude. Bolinger (1986) argued that the primary function of intonation is to express one's feelings. Tench (1990) mentioned the six functions of intonation, namely attitude, syntax, information, communication, text

and style. Wells (2006) has well developed Crystal's ideas, he believed that "attitudinal function" would be better than "emotional function" to reflect the communicative function of intonation. And as to the grammatical function of intonation, Wells (2006) pointed out that intonation plays an important role to show the grammar structure in oral English just as punctuations in written English. He replaced "information structure function" to "focusing function" and "textual function" to "discourse function". In recent years, linguists have conducted more studies on the semantic functions of intonation. They have tried to explore the relationship between intonation and syntax, and indicate that intonation is not only a basic aspect of syntax, but also an essential part of it.

Most of the linguists have emphasized the importance of intonation. French scholar Pierre Delattre mentioned that, intonation to the words is what salt is to food. Indecent intonation will cause confusing ambiguity to listeners. J. R. Firth mentioned that a spoken language will have no morphology without phonetics and no syntax without intonation (Lee, 1990). In his book *Intonation Practice*, Kingdon (1958) called intonation as the soul of English language.

What is very noticeable is the tolerance that native speakers show when a learner fumbles over consonants, vowels and word stress. ...But such tolerance does not always extend to intonation. For two reasons: Firstly, native speakers are not usually so aware of intonation, a point that we have made before. But secondly, and possibly more alarmingly, a mistaken intonation still means something it might well be that you intended to convey one particular meaning but they interpreted it quite differently. (Tench, 1996, p.11)

However, the study on intonation starts late in China. That is partly because of the unique characteristics of the Chinese language. Most of the linguists focus their studies on the tones of Chinese characters. Some scholars conducted researches on the differences between Chinese and English phonetics, among which Zhao, Yanzhen and Lü Shuxiang can be called pioneers. Since 1980s, studies on comparison between Chinese and English phonetics have grown vigorously, more and more dissertations and works have emerged on this regard. Scholars like Yu Yugen, Zhao Demei, Pan Wenguo, Xiong Wenhua are very influential in this field (Yu, 1994). Gui (1978) compared the main characteristics of these two language- English as intonation language and Chinese as tone language. Xu (2002, p.94) argues that the meaning of English sentence is distinguished by its intonations and Chinese is restricted by its tones, thus has less free changes in intonation than English. Although there are studies on English intonations in China, but most people are still unaware of or pay insufficient attention to the importance of intonation. This paper will discuss the distinctive functions of English intonation and explore the root causes of English intonations misuses in Chinese speakers according to different types of misuses, with the hope to help more people to realize the importance

of English intonation in a successful cross-cultural communication. Also it aims to give suggestions on how to avoid indecent intonations and how to use intonation to make a cross-cultural communication.

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## 2. WHAT IS INTONATION?

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### 2.1 Definition

According to Wells (2006), intonation is the melody of speech. By studying intonation, we study how the pitch of the voice rises and falls, and how speakers use this pitch variation to convey meaning. It also involves the study of the rhythm of speech, and (in English, at any rate) the study of how the interplay of accented, unstressed syllables functions as a framework onto which the intonation patterns are attached (2006, p.1) People use language as a tool to communicate with others. No language around the world can be found spoken on a monotone. Intonation is very important in vocal communication for people to express emotions and change ideas. English is known as an intonation language and the change of its tone will bring about a change in the meaning of an utterance. An individual English word just has accents but no intonations. However, when it comes to a sentence, both lexical meaning and intonation meaning can be found at the same time. Intonation meaning indicates the attitudes of the speakers.

A successful cross-cultural communication need not only a solid language foundation, but also a strong verbal communication skills, where intonation plays an important role. It will help the listener learn the real meaning of the speaker and response in a cooperative way. Unfortunately, English learners in China often ignore the importance of intonation. Therefore, sometimes they cannot get the real intentions, emotions and attitudes of the speaker in cross-cultural communications. Most students ignore the flexibility of intonation in cross-cultural communication, which on the one hand may result in their monotonous tone, and on the other hand will fail them to learn the paralinguistic meaning conveyed by the speaker's intonation. Unawareness of intonation meanings will probably lead to difficulties in understanding others. And misuses of intonation may cause misunderstanding to the listener and even cause communication failures.

### 2.2 Patterns of English Intonation

There are four main intonation patterns in English: falling, rising, falling-rising and rising-falling. Falling tone often indicates certainty, completeness, order, or strong contrast, etc.. Rising tone often means uncertainty, hesitation, incompleteness, request, impatience, or politeness, etc.. Falling-rising tone itself has the function of implication. And it is used to show reservation, concession or implied contrast, etc.. Rising-falling tone often implies reproach, joking or sarcasm. For example: That is OK. ↘ (falling

to show the fact, or agreement). That is OK. ↗ (rising to show a high happy or encouraging mood). That is OK. ^ (rising-falling to show a relief from a worry just now).

### 2.3 The Main Functions of Intonation

To learn good intonation, we should have a deeper understanding of its communicative function. This paper will focus on attitudinal and discourse functions of English intonation, which are most important in cross-cultural communication.

#### (a) Attitudinal Function

Decent intonation will facilitate the success of cross-cultural communication. One sentence can have different meanings if spoke with different intonation patterns. See the following dialogue:

A: Do you know what? Karen has won the second prize in the running contest!

B: Really? ↗ (Rise tone: B is also surprised)

B: Really? ↘ (Fall tone: B is not surprised—already known or having no interest in it)

All the above example can show the attitudinal function of intonation. By showing the speaker's emotions and attitudes, intonation convey the denotative meaning of a word or sentence.

#### (b) Discourse Function

Discourse is the unit of verbal communication. Discourse function means that intonation connects each sentence into a discourse. It can be a sign, together with gestures, eye contact, facial expressions and other body languages, to show if the conversation is expected to finish, continue or to which direction it will go. See the following two dialogues:

A: Do you know Henry Wang?

B: Yes. ↗ (Rise tone: indicates interests of B, he/she knows Henry and wants A to continue the conversation. Served as a connecting link between the preceding and the following.)

B: Yes. ↘ (Fall tone: indicates no interests and the end of the conversation. Even A wants to talk more, but it will be hard for A to continue since B use a Fall tone.)

A: I'm off to Guiyang tomorrow.

B: Where? ↗ (Please repeat, I didn't catch what you said. Off to where?)

B: Where? ↘ (Please give detailed information. Where in Guiyang are you going?)

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## 3. COMMON TYPES OF INTONATION MISUSES

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Professor Jiang (2012) from Sichuan University has conducted empirical study on the conditions of intonation use by English majors in Sichuan University. In her study, it can be found that students of English majors have monotonous intonation and prefer to use falling tone in all types of sentences. It is very common phenomenon

among English learners in China who for one reason or another have misuses of intonation. There are several major types of misuses.

### 3.1 Misuses of Falling Tone

Chinese students are not familiar with the rises and falls in English intonation and use falling tone frequently in cross-cultural communication, no matter it is a general question or special question (Wang, 2000, p.72). This will give the listener a impolite and unfriendly impression, and it can even make they feel aggressive and lead to misunderstanding. For example, you intend to show your friendliness by saying “How are you?”, but mistakenly used a falling tone. It will reversely give the listener a feeling that you are indifferent and lack of concern. This will have negative effects on a successful cross-cultural communication.

### 3.2 Mix-Using of Intonation

English intonation is conventional, which cannot be used casually. Most students in China have insufficient knowledge of the intonation patterns and their pragmatic functions. So when they say “good afternoon”, they probably don’t realize that a rising tone means polite and routine, a falling tone means seriously greeting, a falling-rising tone indicates the speaker’s happy mood and a rising-falling implies arrogance. Intonation patterns should be carefully chosen and should not be used casually in cross-cultural communication.

### 3.3 Lack of Falling-Rising Tone

Falling-rising tone has a function of implication and reservation, which is very important in a successful cross-cultural communication. For example, “Mary doesn’t tell anybody the story.” In falling-rising tone implies that Mary has told the story to someone. Although falling-rising tone is very important in English intonation, English learners in China seldom use it, that’s a reason why they are speaking Chinglish.

### 3.4 Lack of Rhythm

Generally speaking, content words should have a strong form. And function words should have a weak form and should be read as shortly as you can make them (Wang, 2000, p.70). While speaking English, most students in China stress every word they speak and ignore the beautiful rhythm of English. Thus, they make very unnatural English and difficult for others to understand.

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## 4. ROOT CAUSES AND SOLUTIONS

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J. C. Wells mentions that while learning a second language, one will be influenced by his mother tongue. He distinguishes the influence as “positive transfer”, “inter-language” and “negative transfer”. And for “negative transfer”, he takes an example: French people may find it difficult to learn English intonation, as French intonation

system differs a lot from English intonation system (Wells, 2006, p.12). There are several causes of misuses of English intonation, such as choosing indecent intonation patterns for lack of pragmatic knowledge, insufficient awareness to the communicative function of intonation, etc.. This paper will focus on the “negative transfer” of Chinese on the learning of English intonation. The “negative transfer” can be divided into several aspects.

### 4.1 Negative Transfer in Learning Method

At the beginning of learning Chinese, students learn the tone and meaning of the character as the same time. In addition, clear and cadence are key evaluation criteria for good Chinese speaking. Most students use the same way to learn each English word. That’s why they speak English word by word and try to be in a very clear manner, while ignoring the importance of rhythm and the correct use of stress. Some students know that English has a faster speed than Chinese, but they don’t know much about the rhythm of English. On the one hand, they are not familiar with the light-stressed English rhythm, the weak form, the liaison, and on the other hand, they pursue speak faster English. This will worsen their situation in cross-cultural communication.

### 4.2 Negative Transfer in Intonation

The fourth tone is very commonly used in Chinese spoken language, it is a tool to distinguish different words and meanings. While in English intonation, falling tone indicates certainty and completeness. But sometimes it means to order or strong contrast. Native speakers do not often use falling tone because it sounds kind of rude and impolite. If students cannot well use the rising tone and falling tone, it will lead to misunderstandings and sometime make the speaker rude and indelicate, which eventually lead to failures of the cross-cultural communication.

### 4.3 Language Fossilization

The “inter-language” Wells (2006) mentioned is a state of second language learning, which starts from the mother tongue and moving towards the target language. Fossilization means the development of the dynamic inter-language system stops and the learner is deeply affected by the express ways of their mother tongue. Fossilization may cover the area of phonetics, vocabulary and grammar. It indicates that the learner are lack of enough of knowledge of the target language. The difference between Chinese and English intonation may lead to intonation fossilization, which will be an obstacle of learning decent English intonation. And that’s why most English learners in China are speaking Chinglish, and finds it hard to get rid of the negative transfer of Chinese. This will affect the cross-cultural communication.

### 4.4 How to Avoid Indecent Intonation?

Decent intonation is key to successful cross-cultural communication. We should take effective strategies,

such as focusing more on intonation teaching, reducing the negative transfer from mother tongue, cultivating good learning strategies and maintaining sound learning motivation, so as to prevent from indecent intonation and achieve fruitful communication. Be aware of the differences between Chinese and English intonation, so as to better understand the communicative and pragmatic function of English intonation.

First of all, new grammar teaching modes should be built on the basis of discourse. According to this, the grammatical competence testing system should be built on communication. Spoken English and written English are not antithetical and exclusive, they are complementary and symbiotic. Learning grammar aims for more accurate and proper language to conduct better communication. Therefore, people should pay more attention to intonation and grammar of spoken English so as to improve the communicative competence of students.

Secondly, teachers should pay more attention to intonation teaching, and they should act as a role model and good helper for their students on intonation. They should keep learning and improve their professional skills so as to help their students improve their skills of intonation and cross-cultural communication. For example, repeated training can be conducted on intonation. And technical methods can be taken to correct the wrong intonation of the students.

Thirdly, the students should be aware of the importance of intonation in their study, they should have a thorough knowledge of intonation theories and apply them in their practices. Professor Wang (2004, pp.130-132) has pointed out that analyzing and learning the intonation theories are essential part of intonation learning. And the law of Practice-Theory-Practice should be used to achieve the goals of communication by decent intonation. Besides, he adds that imitation is the basic approach to learn English intonation. The imitation to speech, dialogue in the original movie and talk show will make us feel the charm of intonation and be a good way to learn it. However, it is not easy to control good intonation, they should preserve in practicing. Besides, they should have confidence and diligence.

In addition, we should take advantage of the similarities between Chinese tones and English intonation and make Chinese plays a positive transfer in learning intonation so as to realize a real and successful cross-cultural communication and to prevent language fossilization.

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## CONCLUSION

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English intonation has attitudinal functions and plays an important role in communication. Students in China learn English to facilitate their cross-cultural communications. However, most students ignore the importance of

intonation in their learning, thus they often misuse intonation patterns and cause communication failures. The root causes of their indecent intonation include the lack of attention to intonation practices and the negative transfer of Chinese. The listener could easily understand the errors of grammar or pronunciation. But if the speaker uses improper intonation, the listener will doubt about their intentions, which may lead to cross-cultural communication failures. Thus, English learners in China should realize the importance of intonation and take strategic learning on intonation so as to reduce the negative effects from Chinese and misuses of intonations. As more research will be conducted on intonation, learners will realize the importance of intonation and achieve successful cross-cultural communications.

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