

Intonation as a Speech Act Modifier: Rising Declaratives and Imperatives

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1. The goal of the paper: to derive the conventional discourse effect of rising declaratives (RDs) compositionally, from the contribution of declarative form and the contribution of rising intonation. I do so by analyzing intonational contours in English as discourse effect modifiers modulating whether the speaker commits to the content they put on the Table.

2. Empirical facts and prior work I use $p?$ to represent an RD whose falling-intonation counterpart denotes p . Krifka (2015—K) analyzes $p?$ as limiting the possible future evolutions of the context set to those in which it entails p —we can gloss this as $p?$ ANTICIPATING ADDRESSEE COMMITMENT to p (cf. Gunlogson 2001). Farkas & Roelofsen (2017—F&R) treat RDs as semantically identical to polar questions, with an additional discourse effect supplied by markedness. They take $p?$ to communicate that the strength of the speaker’s doxastic preference for p over $\neg p$ is at most low—we can gloss this as SKEPTICISM toward p . Gunlogson (2008—G) expresses the opposite intuition: that an utterance of $p?$ indicates the speaker’s willingness to commit to p contingent on the addressee’s commitment to p —on this account $p?$ signals EPISTEMIC DEFERENCE. F&R and G are both (partly) right: in some contexts, RDs indicate epistemic deference (1); in others they indicate skepticism (2):

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| (1) THE HAIRCUT CASE (cf. G) | (2) THE SUNSET CASE (cf. F&R) |
| a. [<i>Context: A’s addressee’s hair looks shorter than yesterday.</i>]
A: You got a haircut? | a. [<i>Context: A is looking at a sunset that her addressee is praising.</i>]
A: That’s a beautiful sunset? |
| b. [<i>Context: A’s addressee’s hair looks the same as yesterday.</i>]
A: #You got a haircut? | b. [<i>Context: A’s addressee is known for finding sunsets drab.</i>]
A: #That’s a beautiful sunset? |

RDs anticipate addressee response: $p?$ is only felicitous if the speaker suspects that the addressee believes p . Finally, it would be uncooperative for the addressee not to respond to the RDs in (1a) and (2a), just as it would be uncooperative not to respond to an interrogative sentence. My proposal unifies the insights of prior work by deriving the behavior of RDs from their form and intonation, rather than stipulating their discourse effect *ad hoc*.

3. Background assumptions I assume the commitment-based discourse model of Farkas & Bruce (2010—F&B), following recent work on RDs (e.g. F&R, Malamud & Stephenson 2015). A model M contains, in addition to the familiar Common Ground (cg) and Context Set (cs), a set of discourse commitments $dc(x)$ for every participant x , a stack of Issues (set of propositions) called the Table (T), the topmost element of which represents the Question Under Discussion (QUD), and the Projected Set (ps), the set of all possible cg s that could result from resolving the QUD. The QUD is resolved (popped off the stack) once one of its members p enters cg , which only happens once all participants have committed to p (possibly by tacit consent after one of them commits). I assume that declarative sentences raise singleton Issues (perhaps generated by type-shifting the proposition they denote to the singleton set containing it, though these denotations follow directly from assuming Inquisitive Semantics, as F&R do) and that interrogative sentences raise non-singleton Issues (which are simply their denotations, assuming the standard Hamblin 1973 analysis).

4. The core proposal I propose that the BASIC DISCOURSE EFFECT of an utterance of a sentence s is to add the Issue raised by s to T . A speaker x ’s use of falling or rising intonation

on a sentence that raises the Issue I modifies that effect as follows: falling intonation adds $\cup I$ to $dc(x)$ (cf. the basic discourse effect in F&R); rising intonation adds nothing to $dc(x)$.

(3) The model $M1$ resulting from x uttering a falling declarative denoting p in M :
 $dc(x)^{M1} = dc(x)^M + p$; $T^{M1} = T^M + p$; $ps^{M1} = \{cg^M + p\}$

(4) The model $M1$ resulting from x uttering a polar interrogative denoting $\{p, \neg p\}$ in M :
 $dc(x)^{M1} = dc(x)^M$; $T^{M1} = T^M + \{p, \neg p\}$; $ps^{M1} = \{cg^M + p, cg^M + \neg p\}$

The proposal derives the basic effects of asserting and questioning stipulated by F&B. ps represents expected addressee response: assertions anticipate addressee agreement, projecting acceptance of p ; an unbiased question anticipates either a positive or a negative answer.

(5) The model $M1$ resulting from x uttering a rising declarative denoting p in M :
 $dc(x)^{M1} = dc(x)^M$; $T^{M1} = T^M + p$; $ps^{M1} = \{cg^M + p\}$

$p?$ adds nothing to $dc(x)$, necessitating addressee response to resolve the Issue it raises, like a question; it projects only a cg updated with p , anticipating addressee commitment, like an assertion. Inferences about speaker attitude toward p are pragmatic inferences given the speaker’s choice to use a form that doesn’t commit them to p (they could’ve used falling intonation)—inferences of epistemic deference come in contexts where the speaker has reason to believe p , but takes their addressee to be more expert, explaining why they don’t make the initial commitment (1); inferences of skepticism come in contexts where the best explanation for the speaker’s avoiding committing to p is that they don’t believe it to be true (2).

5. Extension to Imperatives English imperatives also host rising intonation (6a):

(6) **A:** Do you have any ideas about how I should spend my afternoon?

a. **B:** Hmm... Work on your paper? Blow it off and go to the beach?

b. **B:** Hmm... Work on your paper. #Blow it off and go to the beach.

c. **B:** Hmm... *Work on your paper any more?

(cf. Hmm... Should you work on your paper any more?)

d. **B:** {Don’t/*Not} work on your paper, that’s for sure!

(cf. **A:** What should I do today? **B:** Not work on your paper, that’s for sure!)

These appear to be genuine imperatives, as opposed to fragment answers (Merchant 2004, Stainton 2005) or questions that have undergone left-edge ellipsis (Weir 2016). If they were questions with left-edge ellipsis, they would be able to host NPIs, but they can’t (6c) and if they were fragment answers they should be able to host negation without do-support (6d).

The behavior of these rising imperatives is derived straightforwardly from the interaction between an off-the-shelf semantics for imperatives and my proposal for the discourse effect of rising intonation. Consider for instance the fact that a sequence of mutually incompatible rising imperatives is acceptable (6a), with the feel of a list of suggestions, whereas a sequence of mutually incompatible falling imperatives isn’t (6b).

This fact is captured by an account of rising intonation in which it ‘calls off’ the speaker’s commitment to the content of that imperative. If one chooses a semantics for imperatives that reduces them to propositions (e.g. Kaufmann 2012, Condoravdi & Lauer 2012), the parallel is particularly clear: the speaker puts both propositions on the Table, but doesn’t commit to either, thus avoiding making self-contradictory commitments. The same story works for a semantics that treats imperatives as non-propositional updates (e.g. Charlow 2014, Starr 2017): the proposal to carry out the update is placed on the Table, but the speaker does not commit to favoring that the update go through, again leaving it up to the addressee.

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