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ACCENTUATION IN AUTHENTIC ENGLISH CONVERSATION

1 Attenuation-Accentuation Dichotomy in Spoken Discourse

Fowler (1986.27) expresses the view that "Linguistic codes do not reflect the reality neutrally, they interpret, organize, and classify the subjects of discourse".

The **interpretative character of meaning** which is "to some degree negotiable" (Leech 1980.127) is reflected in the modification of the illocutionary force in authentic conversation. Meaning in conversation is dynamic in the sense that new shades of meaning constantly come into existence through contextual clues and speaker-hearer interaction, simultaneously reflecting idiosyncracies and predilections on part of the speaker.

Van Dijk (1997a.19) describes interaction in discourse as a continuous and complex process: "...language users activate or build, and continuously update, a model of the current context, and of the actions they engage in, actively or passively. Making sense of text or talk, then, involves the construction of such models based on semantic meanings of the discourse, as well as on the interactional meanings or functions, together with the specific application of the more general, socially shared knowledge and opinions". In his terms, discourse thus integrates three main dimensions, namely language use, communication of beliefs (cognition) and interaction in social situations.

The illocutionary force of discourse utterances is subject to constant modification due to two counteracting, yet co-existing tendencies influencing the relative weight of the message, namely **attenuation** and **accentuation**. The urgent need to express the speaker's own standpoint, assessment and evaluation, covered by the term **modality**, dominates conversational behaviour. Usage of individual speakers reflects a high degree of **subjectivity** in speaker meaning.

The attenuation-accentuation dichotomy can be represented in the following chart:

attenuation	**accentuation**
the meaning becomes subdued, indirect and implicit	the meaning becomes reinforced, underlined, exaggerated, explicit

Example 1: attenuation

*I suppose **in a sense** it is* (S.1.2.493)

Example 2: accentuation

***I am absolutely convinced** that the schools are wrong* (S.1.2.1289-1290)

These counteracting notions, which can be understood as discourse tactics, coexist, thus creating a tension, which can contribute substantially to the dynamic flow of communication.

Strictly speaking, the relationship between attenuation and accentuation is not a dichotomy in the proper sense of the word. **Fuzziness**, which is characteristic of spoken language in general, is reflected also in the **opacity inherent in the illocutionary force**. It sometimes happens that the same pragmatic marker can serve either the purpose of attenuation or accentuation, the final disambiguation being supported by the presence or absence of stress, nucleus, speed of utterance and, above all, by the situational context.

For instance, the discourse marker *I think*, which is very frequent in authentic conversation, sometimes plays the role of attenuation, conveying hesitation and uncertainty; in other contexts, however, *I think* becomes prosodically marked by emphasis or a nucleus, in which case it contributes to the reinforcement of the speaker's personal judgement, playing the role of an accentuation device.

Example 3: attenuation

particularly <u>I think</u> you probably like the sort of clothes I like anyway (S.1.3.78)

Example 4: accentuation

*I say **I think** they made up their minds before they started* (S.1.3.991)

(**I** is prosodically marked with heavy stress)

The distinction between attenuation and accentuation should rather be interpreted in terms of a **cline**. The feasibility of **illocutionary force gradation** gives rise to very subtle meaningful distinctions reflecting the **degrees of the speaker's commitment** to the content of the message. The speaker meaning reflects the degree of personal involvement (expressive function) and the appeal to the hearer (conative function).

The transition from attenuation to accentuation, i.e. the shift from a weak to a strong judgement or commitment is reflected in the following chart representing the **uncertainty vs. certainty scale**:

I wonder > I am not sure > I hope > it may be > perhaps > obviously > I am sure > I am quite sure > I am certain > I am absolutely convinced

Example 5: weak judgement

*well **perhaps** Oscar didn't need any persuading* (S.1.2.346-347)

Example 6: strong judgement

***I'm certain** he understands our system better* (S.1.2.251)

2 The Role of Accentuation in Authentic English Conversation

The frequency of occurrence of accentuation markers has been studied in three texts from the London-Lund Corpus (S.1.1, S.1.2 and S.1.3), the total extent of which is 15,000 words.

The high frequency of occurrence of accentuation in the above-mentioned texts bears witness to the need of the speaker to reinforce interaction, persuade and influence the hearer, evaluate the communicative events and satisfy the need for confirmation in conversation.

As has been mentioned above, the expressive and conative functions are crucial in authentic face-to-face conversation. Since the majority of markers renders positive attitudes, it can be generalized that accentuation contributes to **positive politeness**, i.e. the expression of solidarity by means of **gradation and intensification of meaning**.

Accentuation markers can be classified into three categories, namely:

(a) **hearer-oriented,** the function of which is conative;
(b) **speaker-oriented,** the function of which is expressive;
(c) **discourse-organizing,** the function of which is especially that of foregrounding.

The unifying semantic feature of accentuation markers is a high degree of **subjectivity**. Typically, the co-existence of accentuation and attenuation in the same utterance can be found, reflecting the constant **need for balance** with regard to the validity of the interpretation of the meaning conveyed by particular speech acts.

Example 7:
I think I think this is **really** *this feels* ***fairly*** *sound* (S.1.3.277)
Example 8:
I wasn't ***really*** *able to* **you know** *they seemed to have meant things like digressions in Chaucer* (S.1.3.390-394)

On the other hand, **clusters of accentuation markers** in the same utterances are a common feature. Similarly, there are many instances of clusters of attenuation markers in the same utterance.

Example 9:
I'm sure *this is so and a lot of the ritualistic side of it* ***of course*** *is* ***thoroughly*** *phony* **anyway** (S.1.3.936-939)
Example 10:
it was ***quite obvious*** *very early on* ***really*** (S.1.3.248)
Example 11:
it's ***certainly very*** *unfortunate* (S.1.2.162)

2.1 Criteria for Classification of Accentuation Markers

My classification of accentuation markers reflects the character of the illocutionary force contributing to discourse meaning. Accentuation markers can reinforce the speaker meaning, or strengthen the impact of the speaker meaning on the hearer.

A distinct category of accentuation markers connected with the organization of discourse structure serves textual needs in making the message more accessible and understandable for the hearer.

Empathizers are **hearer-oriented boosters** which are primarily attention-catching, stressing the relevance of the utterance for the hearer. They can also question the validity of the given utterance, asking indirectly for its confirmation. The most frequent empathizers are *you see*, *you know*, *you remember*. In some sources they are also labelled **prompters** (see Stenström 1984). Including the ways of address, which tend to be informal and highly emotive such as *old chum* or *old Sam*, these accentuation markers reinforce **closeness** and **intimity** of the interaction.

Assurances are **speaker-oriented boosters** expressing certainty and conviction; they are highly assertive.

Expressions such as *certainly*, *of course*, *indeed*, *really*, *I'm sure*, *obviously*, *I know*, *definitely*, *surely*, *I am convinced*, *I am not surprised* etc. tend to be frequently used to amplify the trustworthiness of the message rendered by the speaker.

Example 12:

*but I am **definitely** not going abroad for any commitments next summer* (S.1.2.1127)

Agreement/understanding-showing boosters are **speaker-oriented boosters**, which are essential in the expression of solidarity and positive attitudes.

Expressions such as *exactly*, *right*, *quite* (including *yes*, *quite*, *no*, *quite*), *absolutely*, *that's true*, *that's right*, *I agree*, *I quite agree* are generally used for the purpose of **backchannelling**, i.e. giving feedback in the process of interaction.

Example 13:

*this is **exactly** in the line with English language examining report* (S.1.1.1033)

Attitudinal boosters expressing the degree of a certain quality are **speaker-oriented boosters** reinforcing the positive or negative quality, thus reflecting the attitude of the speaker towards the message.

Expressions such as *very*, *very largely*, *perfectly*, *frantically*, *ghastly*, *terribly*, *kindly*, *sharply*, *typically*, *absolutely*, *bloody*, *damned* as well as exclamations *oh*, *to hell with this* underscore positive or negative evaluations.

Example 14: negative evaluation
*where he **absolutely** turned our guts over* (S.1.2.696)
Example 15: positive evaluation
*American professors are **typically** determined to toughen curricula* (S.1.2.1248-1250)

Attitudinal boosters expressing beliefs are **speaker-oriented boosters** emphasizing the subjective attitude of the speaker, making the utterance highly assertive in the case of prosodically strong markers, or doubtful when prosodically weak.

Expressions such as *I think, I mean, I see, personally, I'd rather* which are **prosodically marked** show involvement and sound persuasive. They differ from the prosodically weak tentative and vague remarks, the wording of which is similar, which, however, function as downtoners, i.e. attenuations. According to Holmes (1984.359) "*I think* and *I believe* are parenthetical verbs which, with different intonation patterns and in different contexts, may boost or attenuate the force of the utterances they modify. Moreover, the status of the speaker in the context of utterance is another crucial factor in determining the pragmatic effect of such personalized forms on the utterances in which they occur. Many personalized forms may thus function as Boosters or as Downtoners, and their function in a particular utterance can only be determined in context." The unmarked, weak judgement tends to express a point which is marginal with regard to the situational context.

Example 16: accentuation (prosodically strong)
*and I I'm I'm **personally** assuming that a million in the bush is more is more likely to happen* (S.1.2.400-402)
Example 17: attenuation (prosodically weak)
<u>I think</u> they they have got to the sticking point and finally said well no (S.1.2.118-119)

Discourse-organizing boosters serve the purpose of pinpointing parts of the message and foregrounding specific pieces of information within the utterance structure. In this respect their function is primarily **textual** and **cohesive**.

Expressions such as *actually, in fact, the first thing, the point is, this is what, this is why, the trouble is, this was the thing, this is what we mean, what it does mean, solely, nevertheless, once again, after all* etc. are signals of importance and weight of the message to follow. These boosters are generally diathematic in character, expressing the circumstances in which the utterance is embedded. Their function is to introduce the rheme.

Example 18:
***which is which is why** I must go down to the bank you see* (S.1.1.423-425)

2.2 Frequency of Accentuation Markers

The table at the end of the present study shows the frequency of occurrence of accentuation types in discourse. Their occurrence is linked with the degree of involvement of the speaker (the stronger the involvement, the more current the accentuation markers in the text). My claim is that the repertoire of interactional and discourse-organizing accentuation markers is partly **idiosyncratic** and habitual in character. The use of accentuation markers contributes to the atmosphere of chattiness, since many of these markers are informal, colloquial, occasionally even vulgar in character.

According to their form, boosters are manifested by individual expressions, very infrequently also by clauses or even sentences, such as *as far as you could gather*, *isn't it incredible* etc. The repertoire of accentuation devices consists of a variety of means ranging from most common expressions such as *very* or *really* to more emotionally tinged phrases such as *this God awful row*, *a bloody great chart*, *he certainly has a hell of high opinion of himself* (S.1.1.818) etc. Exclamations such as *that's a devil* (S.1.1.1171), *to hell with this* (S.1.1.139) and *for God's sake* (S.1.2.859-861) carry strong negative emotions.

3 Conclusions

In authentic English conversation, accentuation is a common discourse tactic applied very frequently to achieve **positive politeness** and **solidarity**, less frequently to reinforce **negative attitudes** in a frank, straightforward, casual face-to-face exchange of views.

Accentuation complies with the phatic, conative and expressive functions of language by stressing mutuality and empathy, as well as with the need of the speaker to have the message confirmed by the hearer and the primarily attitudinal character of authentic face-to-face conversation.

In the material under investigation the frequency of occurrence of boosters is relatively high, although the frequencies of different types of accentuation markers distinctly differ from text to text. Research into this area shows that accentuation is a common discourse tactic in authentic conversation resulting in a variety of meanings and shades of meaning serving primarily attitudinal functions.

In pragmatic terms, accentuation underlines **authenticity**, **individuality** and **involvement** on part of the speaker, which is also manifested in speaker's distinct individual choices. The use of empathizers, accentuation markers showing agreement, degree of quality as well as subjectivity of opinion varies considerably in the repertoires of individual speakers. This variation can be explained by different degrees of involvement of the speaker in the process of interaction, together with individual predilections.

Comparison between the three texts under investigation also reveals the fact that the configuration of emotive discourse markers on the one hand, and mat-

ter-of-fact, logical textual markers on the other differs considerably in the usage of individual speakers. The degree of variation can be partly motivated by the topic under discussion. The functioning of the discourse-organizing boosters in the logical structure of spoken utterances is connected with semantic weight and prominence of certain discourse features.

3.1 Classification of Pragmatic Markers of Accentuation

The above-mentioned classification criteria result in the following division of accentuation markers according to their function:

(1) **empathizers/emphasizers** (*you see, you know, you remember, as far as you could gather*) sometimes combined with direct address which are hearer-oriented;
(2) **assurances** (*certainly, of course, indeed, really, I'm sure, obviously, I know, definitely, I am convinced, I am not surprised* etc.) which are speaker-oriented;
(3) **markers of agreement/understanding** (*exactly, right, quite, yes, quite, absolutely, that's true, that's right, I agree, to hell with this* etc.) which are hearer-oriented;
(4) **markers of the degree of a certain quality** (*very, a lot, very largely, perfectly, frantically, ghastly, terribly, kindly, sharply, typically, absolutely, thoroughly, bloody, damned*) which are speaker-oriented;
(5) **markers of subjectivity of judgement and opinion** (*I think, I thought, I mean, I see, I hope, personally, I'd rather*);
(6) **markers of topicalization** (*actually, anyway, in fact, the first thing, the point is, this is what, this is why, the trouble is, this was the thing, this is what we mean, what it does mean, solely, nevertheless, once again, after all* etc.) which are discourse-organizing.

Table 1
Accentuation Types in Examined Texts

Accentuation type	S.1.1	S.1.2	S.1.3
Empathizers/emphasizers	37	26	72
Assurances	12	25	36
Agreement/understanding	11	23	4
Degree of quality	17	31	43
Subjectivity	26	18	5
Topicalization	11	21	6
Blends	34	29	0
Total	**148**	**173**	**166**

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