Intonation, Visuals, Text, and Narrative

18

Abstract

It is precisely because academic CPs tend to be heavily tilted toward the informative dimension that dynamic intonation becomes an increasingly important factor in performing an effective CP. A speaker's consideration for intonation allows the audience to better grasp rhetorical moves and linguistic relationships, serving as a conductor to explicate the notes of the narrative. Visual displays, beyond the text written on CP slides, also often serve as a semiotic focal point, especially in scientific CPs. Visuals need not only to be comprehensible to the viewers in order to justify their appearance in the research narrative, but will often require some type of spoken metadiscourse to accompany them. This short chapter looks at some problems and suggestions regarding the importance of intonation and the narration of visual elements.

18.1 Intonation—The Use (or Non-use) of Enhanced Prosody

Intonation is a highly specific subfield of linguistics, and any in-depth discussion of the nuances of intonation is beyond the scope of this book. However, I would like to impress upon the reader the central role that intonation does play in conveying the 'narrative' element of the CP.

Hyland (2010) noted that in scientific CPs in particular, non-verbal communication carries even more weight as it helps to structure the discourse. In my own observations as well, immediate and visceral connections could be made between those presenters deploying explicit transitional markers and their enhanced use of prosody, particularly the employment of a more dynamic intonation. The crucial role that intonation plays in conveying semantic and pragmatic intentions,

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particularly within Asian academic conference settings—where indirectness might often be a more prevalent discourse strategy—was further explored by Cheng (2004) to analyze a post-presentation DS.

Cheng noted that it appears that the use of considered transition phrases allows the presenter to intone more fully, to offer a hint to the audience as to what type of rhetorical move the speaker is making. On the other hand, those presenters who used (semantically infelicitous) acoustic filler transition forms or simply read headword to signal every change rarely altered their pace, took little or no time to breathe fully, nor otherwise displayed any physical or audible manifestations hinting at the transition. The signal went largely unnoticed.

In my own CP observations, I could not help but notice an uncanny correspondence between the explicit use of considered transitional discourse markers and the utilization of other prosodic/paralinguistic features, such as regulated breathing, more dynamic pacing, the shifting of one's body position, and increased variations in pitch and tone, all of which served to further mark the transition and thus enhance the narrative. Although the relationship of the causal mechanisms is intricate, there is to be a visceral correlation between them, one immediately noticeable to any CP audience.

In such cases, the lack of an explicit transitional phrase allowed the speaker to more easily avoid or ignore the need to alter the pace and adjust the dynamics. When this happens, no deep breath is taken, and no suggestive spaces are created—resulting in flatness and a consequent lack of impact. This had the effect of minimizing or negating any transitional impact the speaker had wished to convey. Such speakers appeared to rely on the text alone to carry the narrative force, but while this may be a necessity for RPs, it is anathema for CPs.

There are perfectly logical reasons for this. Think of the four bars of the song, 'Happy Birthday to You.' The first bar sets a tonal root that allows for elevation or lift, the second bar provides that lift, the third bar reaches the climax, and the fourth bar resolves. Now, imagine 'Happy Birthday to You' sung in a monotone. The first thing one would notice is that it certainly does not sound very joyful or congratulatory. More importantly, if the final bar does not resolve musically, listeners may not even realize that the tune has ended.

The same elements hold true in CPs. Monotone, accompanied by a lack of change in speed or dynamics, makes it hard for listeners to decode or interpret any element of the speaker's stance or engagement. A CP without metadiscourse markers of some sort, unaided by prosody, will simply make most viewers drowsy. Whatever the research content being conveyed may be, much of it will be rendered moot if there is no tonal variation.

While the semantic value of tones can vary from language to language (with Chinese, Thai, and Vietnamese being obvious examples), the prosodic uptake of tones does not vary much. Surprise, anger, and worry tend to be expressed using the same tonal patterns regardless of the language that they are being expressed in. Thus, for NNESs, the same intonation patterns found in L1 can easily be applied to English. Contrary to certain popular beliefs, most intonation patterns are not language-specific. A good number of speech 'moves' share the same tonal structure

across languages—invective, doubt, urgency, all are generally identifiable regardless of the source language. This is what allows us to often accurately guess what, for example, a Korean actor or actress in a TV drama is expressing even if one does not know a single word of that language.

In short, concentrating on using appropriate and considered English transition phrases also allows speakers to more deeply consider effective changes in tone or speed—or at least exhorts the speaker to take a breath, a quality which audiences uniformly welcome (the speaker's pause for breathing is often accompanied by collective pauses for breathing from the audience).

In short, there is nothing exotic about English intonation—there is no magical formula involved in mastering it. NNESs need to simply recognize that most L1 intonation can be transferred into English and remember that it is the transition forms which tend to carry the intonation power in English CPs. And novice researchers should note once again that a CP is not just a matter of 'reading a report.' Reading your script or your slides will not likely be sufficient for the purpose of communicating your research contents. This relationship between considered transitional phrases, its effect upon intonation, and the utilization of more dynamic prosody is an area in which further research may is very much be warranted.

Questions and Exercises for Section 18.1

1. Watch a short segment of a CP or a TV drama in a language that you do not understand. Based on the intonation alone, what do you think the speaker or speakers were conveying?
2. At which points during a CP do we have to mark our intonation most distinctly?
3. What is the relationship between the use of dynamic intonation and (a) breathing, (b) audience comprehension of the content, and (c) CP pacing?

18.2 Visuals, Text, and Narrative

As Carter-Thomas and Rowley-Jolivet (2003, p. 37) note, 'Visual communication in science is… universal, and communication via this mode is thus likely to be more effective for such audiences.' Thus, visuals, including photographs, animations, videos, and even laptop-run 'virtual experiments' take up a large proportion of many academic CPs, particularly in the hard sciences and, based on my observations, seem to be particularly effective in attracting and maintaining the attention of the audience.

In scientific CPs in particular, visuals serve to give the viewer immediate access to data, thereby reinforcing the novelty and immediacy of the content presented. Visuals can allow audience members to process information more quickly than text, particularly when mathematical or spatial information is being displayed. This is

because visuals aid in cognitive processing—although I would argue that some presentations (particularly in the field of medicine) can suffer from visual overload.

However, the types of intricate charts, graphs, and statistical analysis that are necessary in an RP can be rather unsettling and disorienting when shown only for ten seconds during a CP. After all, while the researcher is well aware of the minutiae of the data and has likely given great care to detail in the construction of the visual display, the audience seeing it for the first time will take some time—more time than is usually allowed—to absorb it. Even though scientific conference audiences tend to be very visually literate (at least when viewing visuals related to their specific fields), cognitive and sensory overload are ever-present dangers.

A CP, as I have repeatedly stated, should not just be a visual reproduction of a published paper but serve to draw attention to aspects of the research that lies outside the confines of the RP text. Visuals are thus a central part of the multimodal semiotic spanning nature of the CP, but they have to be integrated into the spoken text.

However, what about the language used to narrate or explain visuals? Indeed, a sloppy narration can undercut the audience's natural interest in the visuals. In my observations, the introduction of visuals was often rather weak. For example, I often noticed presenters' using the following type of narrative *as* the video started playing:

- *Here is our endoscopy… we enter like this…*

This form is not 'wrong' per se, but it lacks any anticipatory impact. To properly background the content of the video before playing it, to allow audiences to activate a cognitive schema, used more effectively were the following forms:

- *Now/next, I'd like to show you…*
- *Ok. Let's look at…*

During the narration of the video, novice and ineffective presenters often interjected their narratives every few seconds with filler such as, '*Like this, then like this,*' forms more suited to hands-on physical instructions. Narrating a video, however, requires more parenthetical 'framing' forms. The following phrases served powerfully and effectively as narrative signals for the audience:

- *As you can see here,*
- *This shows how/that…*
- *As the video shows…*

Of course, visuals are not limited to videos. Charts, graphs, and other statistical displays, as well as detailed panels, are extremely common in scientific presentations, particularly in the findings/results sections, to indicate relationships and

trends. First, let us look at a list of some more of the most effective phrases recurring at scientific conferences used to point out visual details:

- *So here are the steps that we took.* (indicating a flow chart or sequence)
- *Here you can see X.* (often said while using the laser)
- *As you can see here (in the left/right panel),…*
- *Here is an illustrative case*
- *As you can see in this chart/graph,*
- *Ok, I'm going to show you two pictures of…* (preceding the visual)

Many of the above are examples of inversion ('*Here is…*'), an effective means by which visuals can be introduced. Often, no verbalization at all was necessary in order to draw the audience's attention to the visual, but once attention had been gained, inversion forms were a common choice to maintain and orient interest.

Other phrases noted that were effective in helping to orient viewers to visuals included the following:

- *…which include A, B, C, and D* (this form was often used while the speaker indicates a series of bulleted texts)
- *If you just look at X, you can see Y, ok?* (note the interpersonal qualities of 'just' and 'ok' in this sample, which represent a rhetorical departure from the greater body of the research data and thus helped distinguish the visual narrative from the written text)
- *X* (a term expressed in its full form) *which is also known as (*acronym/abbreviation*).* (This form was used to help orient viewers on slides containing numerous abbreviated forms or acronyms.)
- *We can see the meta-analysis and systemic review highlights here.* (followed by an animation highlighting the features being discussed circled in red)
- *So this is from a paper published last year.* (followed by a lengthy written quote).

What, then, are some of the phrases or habits readers might want to avoid when introducing or explaining visuals? Six examples based upon my observations follow:

1. *Please pay attention to X.*

As a directive, the phrase *'Pay attention (to)'* was overused by many NNES presenters. This form sounds more as if the speaker is scolding the audience than appealing to them. Better would be, '*In particular, I'd like to point out…'* or *'Please note/look at X.'*

2. *...like this picture.*

This example of right dislocation (adding an explanatory clause at the end of an utterance) runs the risk of shifting the tenor from academia to that of casual chat. Better would be, '*…as this picture shows…'*

3. *Next I will show…/This is…* (when repeated for each point).

When proceeding through a sequence, readers might consider not explicitly introducing the following item but simply show it. However, when serving as a cataphoric (forward-looking) signal, '*This is…*' can be effective.

4. *Here are my acknowledgements/references.*

Once again, do you really need an annotated acknowledgment or detailed reference slide? A CP is not a publication and the content will not be displayed long enough to be of value to your audience. As we have mentioned, thanks or acknowledgments can be displayed on the final slide for all to see without being explicitly verbalized.

5. *Too much data or information on one slide.*

In the name of thoroughness or full disclosure, many scientific presenters in particular are prone to filling slides with enormous amounts of data. Can a presenter really expect the audience to process it all within the few seconds that it is displayed? Moreover, cluttered slides written in a second language can increase the mental baggage for NNES presenters (not to mention NNESs in the audience). Simplification of such slides can relieve pressure upon oneself as a speaker as well as resulting in greater comprehensibility for the audience. One way to achieve this may be to highlight the key features with a distinct color or some other eye-catching visual motif. The use of bullet points can be particularly helpful here. Gradually increasing the complexity of the slide through the use of animation is another viable option.

6. *This slide shows…*

This is perhaps the most paradigmatic spoken accompaniment to a slide visual. Charles and Ventola (2002) refer to the multimodal interaction taking place here as one of repeated identification and contextualization. Readers should also note that this form was occasionally used with the speaker looking at their notes while introducing or narrating the slides. To maintain the notion of a CP as a type of dialogue, presenters should look at the visuals together with the audience!

There are two points regarding visuals that remain to be discussed. The first is that the use of complex visuals (graphs, charts, etc.) in particular demands the use of dynamic intonation to help orient the viewers. Besides accompanying transitional phrases, it is by using visual accompaniment that dynamic intonation can best breathe life and energy into a presenter's static research data.

The second point is as we have mentioned earlier that when presenters use a laser, they should use it only when necessary—such as when pinpointing a specific item in an illustration or chart, or to highlight a single item among complex text. Many otherwise proficient, even celebrated, speakers tended to use the laser like a karaoke bouncing ball, apparently to 'highlight' standard text that the audience can already read clearly. Most of all, presenters should refrain from the habit of twirling the laser around the whole slide for no particular reason. Doing so is disturbing for most viewers, renders the purpose of the laser meaningless, and, rather than underscoring the academic tenor of the CP, instead imbues it with the appearance of a nightclub.

Questions and Exercises from Section 18.2

1. What skills can a speaker use to help navigate viewers through complex slides?
2. With a partner serving as an audience, show and narrate a short 1-min video. Record the activity. Note in particular how you or your partner introduce the video and highlight any key points. Is there any excess verbiage that interferes with the audience understanding or comprehension of the video? Does your narration augment or hinder the intended effect upon the viewer?

References

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