

Continuation tunes in two central varieties of Italian: phonetic patterns and phonological issues

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Abstract

This paper presents the phonetic analysis of the intonational patterns conveying the pragmatic contents of *continuation* and/or marking syntactic relations in Rome and Perugia Italian: data show the type and the distribution of accents and boundaries occurring in spontaneous task-oriented dialogues. Results imply considerations about issues concerning systemic, phonotactic and realizational aspects of the intonational system of Italian: the co-presence of accents and boundaries marking continuation contents; their distribution in the intonation group; the phonetic features correlated, in Italian, to phonological contrast and to phonetic variation.

Key words: intonation, Italian, continuation, non-finality, spontaneous speech

Introduction

The intonation of Italian can vary according to diatopic factors, as it has been shown in several studies following different theoretical and methodological frameworks. Standard Italian and some regional varieties share rising shapes of either accents or boundary tones related to *non-finality*, even if consistent differences can occur among diatopic varieties (Avesani 1996; Gili Fivela 2004; Grice *et al.* 2005; Savino *et al.* 2006). Although the similarity of several melodic patterns in different varieties of Italian has been suggested basing on auditive or phonetic and instrumental analyses, the presence of both continuation accents and boundaries or of structural similarities in their properties is not clearly pointed out yet.

This work provides a preliminary description of continuation tunes for two regional varieties still scarcely investigated: Lazio and Umbria Italian. It is part of a contrastive research on question tunes and continuation tunes and it is based on the analysis of task-oriented dialogues (Giordano 2004, 2006).

Continuation tones are related to two main classes of facts: syntactic relations; pragmatic and conversational factors, which could be also defined *textual*. In the corpus here examined, they can occur in internal position of the dialogic turns, at the edges of intonation groups corresponding to syntactic phrases or clauses which are linked to the following ones by coordination, subordination or juxtaposition. But they can also occur at the edges of dialogic turns, as a means by which the place for turn-taking is signaled and by which the speaker usually can give feedback.

Method and corpus

Two dialogues, DGtdB04R (Rome) and DGtdA04O (Perugia), were selected from the Italian national corpus CLIPS (www.clips.unina.it); they were performed by the same speakers (4) who acted other dialogues analysed in a previous work (Giordano 2006). Dialogic turns were segmented into prosodic groups, basing on phonetic-acoustic criteria (final lengthening, prosodic cohesion and general trends of f_0 and energy) and uditive parsing (Ladd 1996, Hirst and Di Cristo 1998, Kohler 2006). Raw f_0 curve was analysed with Praat (www.praat.org) and manually annotated using an INTSINT-like system of transcription; f_0 values and synchronization of the labelled points with segments were then evaluated. Prosodic groups related to continuation functions were selected (118 cases): continuation accents and boundaries are all located at the rightmost edge of the prosodic groups.

Results and discussion

Continuation accents are similar in both varieties. Their shape consists of a rising movement, which can be phonetically represented as a tonal sequence LH; the *high* (H) target is usually set at the rightmost edge of the nucleus of the last rhythmical strong syllable in the prosodic group; the *low* (L) target is generally placed on one of the preceding syllables. Anyway, other accent types belonging to the declarative series of the intonation inventory of Italian have been found to occur in final position of the prosodic group.

(1) shows an example of the LH accent, associated with the syllable *ET*:

- (1) DGtdB04R_p1#140: io ce ne ho una, è una lineETta
I have one of them, it is a short line

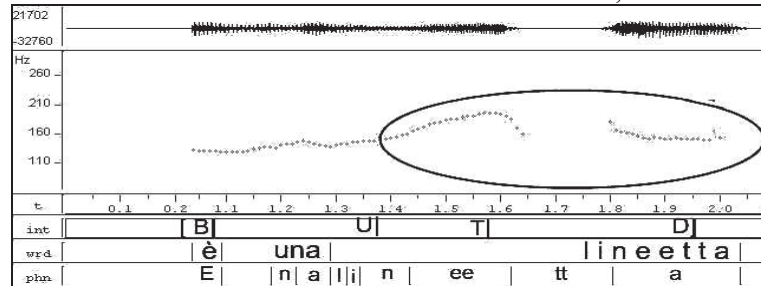


Figure 1: LH accent. Turn: DGtdB04R_p1#140.

Two different phonetic realizations of the boundary can occur (table 1, figures 2 and 3): 1) a rising movement showing a phonetic tonal sequence LH, or 2) constant values on high levels of the f_0 (a *plateau*), here represented as H. The phonetic context determining the selection of the boundary shape is the preceding pitch accent, in particular the last tonal target of its tonal configuration. When the LH continuation accent is selected, the H boundary occurs, irrespective of the number of syllables

intervening between the accented syllable and the last weak syllable. When other accentual shapes, ending with a L target, are selected, the LH boundary occurs: in fact, continuation boundaries are not necessarily preceded by a continuation accent LH. Both shapes play the same function and this would lead to consider them phonetic variants of the same tone H%.

Figure 2 and 3 are examples of the LH boundary and of the H boundary; in figure 3, the last rhythmical strong position *OC* also carries a LH accent.

- (2) DGtdA04O_p2#130: c'è un trapezio ... però tronca*TO*
there is a trapezium ... but truncated
- (3) DGtdA04O_p1#183: due *OCCHI*
two eyes

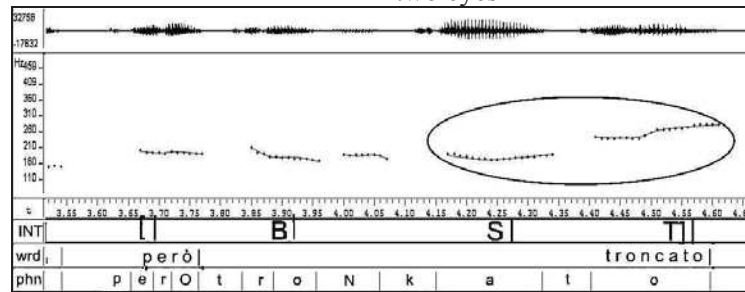


Figure 2: LH boundary. Turn: DGtdA04O_p2#130.

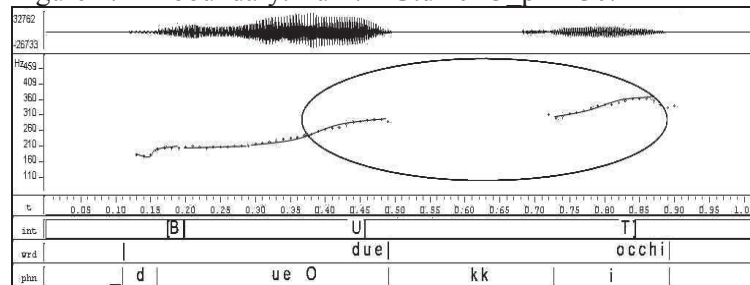


Figure 3: H boundary. Turn: DGtdA04O_p1#183.

Table 1 and table 2 show the total number of accents and boundaries the mean pitch span in semitones of the LH accents and of the LH boundaries.

Three combinations of the two prosodic devices are found, all of them being used in both varieties. An intonation group can be marked by 1) a continuation accent (11% out of the total number of prosodic groups, 118), or 2) a continuation boundary (53%), or 3) both continuation accent and continuation boundary (36%). The selection of the nuclear pitch accent is then independent of the boundary type: continuation accents and continuation boundaries would not be mutually constrained.

Table 1: Number of accent and boundary types.

Types	LH accent	LH boundary	H boundary	Total
Number	56	62	43	161

Table 2: LH accent and LH boundary: mean excursion size in ST.

Span in ST	Rome (tdB04R)		Perugia (tdA04O)	
	Speaker 1	Speaker 2	Speaker 1	Speaker 2
LH accent	4.8	3.6	6	5.3
LH boundary	5	4.4	7	5.8

Conclusion

Rome and Perugia Italian show consistent similarity among the phonetic tonal sequences that continuation accents (LH) and boundaries (LH or H) present; also contextually constrained variations of their tonal forms systematically occur. Despite of such evidences, the phonological representation of these units for these varieties is not unproblematic, because question tunes show phonetic shapes and properties very similar to the ones found for continuation tunes (see Giordano 2004, 2006): LHL accent (y/n questions) and LH accents (asking about new information); LH and H boundaries. Such topics involve considerations about more general aspects of the theoretical explanation of melodic phenomena: the role of phonetic details in determining phonological contrast; the entity and the kind of their variation - gradient or categorical - among diatopic varieties of a language.

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