

Lipina A.A. Helping learners understand and use discourse intonation.

Lipina A.A.

PhD, associate professor
Russian Academy of National Economy and Public Administration

Abstract. In the article, the author examines the issue of helping students understand and use speech intonation.

Keywords: speech, speech intonation.

Рецензент: Дудкина Ольга Владимировна, кандидат социологических наук, доцент. Донской государственный технический университет (ДГТУ), г. Ростов-на-Дону, Факультет «Сервис и туризм», кафедра «Сервис, туризм и индустрия гостеприимства»

No matter what kind of language we look at, it will be obvious that each one has its own character and musical representation (Ruskin, 1880: 3). In other words, we are talking about language prosody which is comprised of intonation, tone, prominence and rhythm (Crystal, 1969). The focus of this research is dedicated to intonation, to be exact discourse intonation. The reason for this choice is justified by the true believe that context influences the speaker's intonation. With the help of intonation speakers can show how their utterances are interconnected and how it refers to the discourse in general.

There are several approaches towards the intonation analysis. For instance, grammatical analysis - developed by M. Halliday or contour analysis shared by J. O'Connor, L. Armstrong, G. Palmer, et. al. However, in this paper the intonation analysis is going to be based on the theory presented by D. Brazil (1975, 1985) as discourse is in the centre of attention.

According to M. Coulthard and D. Brazil, discourse intonation consists of tone units which are "*the building blocks out of which all spoken communication is constructed*" (Brazil, 1994: 3; Coulthard, 1985). In its turn each tone unit is comprised of prominence, tone (nuclear), key (low/middle/high pitch) and termination – each of which adds a different type of information to each tone unit.

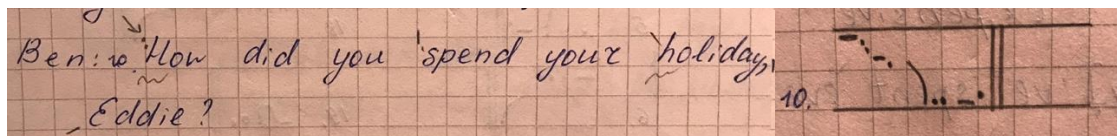
Analysis

It is important to know that how we speak - the manner - is as essential as the words we choose to express our ideas. Bearing this in mind, we may conclude that intonation can easily convey linguistic message and that intonation has several functions. According to Roach (1991) and Thompson (1995) discourse intonation functions can be subdivided into 4 categories. They are **linguistic-form based**, **attitudinal**, **accentual** and **conversation management related** (Clennel, 1997; Wennerstrom, 1994).

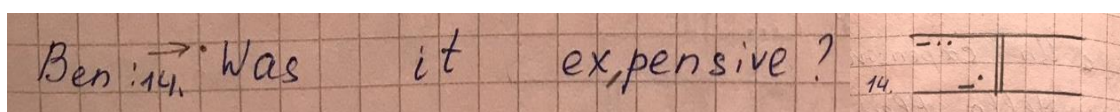
Linguistic form-based function

Linguistic form-based function can be represented either grammatically or lexically. Grammatical function is used to recognize grammatical structure in an oral speech. With

the help of intonation, it is possible to get the general understanding of a grammatical structure, for example, where the beginning and the end of the sentence is. In this case intonation acts as a punctuation in the written speech. Let us look at the two types of sentences: yes/no and Wh-questions taken from a dialogue “An expensive holiday”. (see Appendix 1)



Standard wh-questions end with a falling intonation (nuclear tone) as we can see in in the example (\holiday). However, if we ask this question with a rising tone on the word ‘holiday’, then we can change the meaning completely and the context will not be suitable at all.



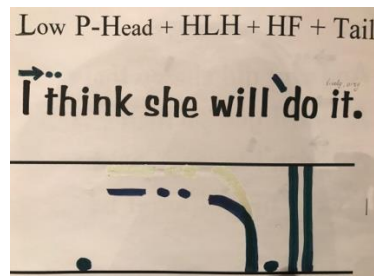
General questions are typically asked with a rising tone as in the example above. If we change the intonation into the falling one, the sentence can become a statement irrespective the grammar rules. As in the previous example, the context will not be suitable anymore. Sometimes we can hear a sentence ‘It was expensive’ as a statement (falling tone) or as a question (rising tone).

Attitudinal function

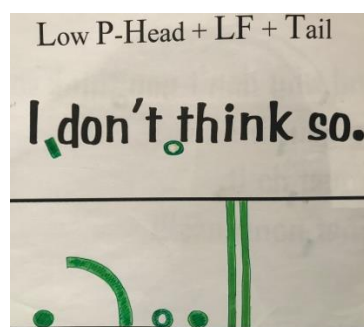
Attitudinal function gives the understanding what a speaker feels towards something or somebody by varying his intonation. Sometimes the words in an utterance can mean just the opposite to what the speaker means. In this case only intonation will be the key to the real message. Depending on the nuclear tone, pitch of an utterance we can notice the attitude of a speaker. Intonational patterns or intonational contours (O’Connor, 1973) can be presented in the following table:

Nuclear tones	E.g.	Statements	General Questions	Special Questions	Short Comments	Imperatives	Exclamations & Interjections
Low Fall	1	A statement of fact (categoric)	Sounds insistent and ponderous	Finality, completeness, definiteness + categoric, matter-of-fact	It expresses a total lack of interest, or else a mood of grim hostility	Serious, weighty commands	Sounds weighty and emphatic
	1a	Calm, unemotional, cold, uninterested	Sounds detached, phlegmatic, reserved	Sounds rather flat and unsympathetic		It makes a command sound calm, unemotional, often cold	It makes it sound calm, unsurprised, reserved
Low Rise	2	Assertive, separative + Echoed (a non-categoric statement)	Generally interested	The speaker is sympathetically interested		Sounds shooting, encouraging, calmly patronizing	It's used to express airy, casual yet encouraging, often friendly exclamations
	2a	Resentful, bored, reprovingly critical, guarded	A disappointing, sceptical ring to a gen. question	Sounds wondering mildly puzzled		Sounds critical, resentful	It's used when the speaker is reserving judgement or casually acknowledging a fact
High Fall	3	Personal concern, interest and warmth, involvement + sounds lively, can express vigorous agreement or contradiction very efficiently	Shows that the speaker is willing to discuss the situation and sometimes sceptical	Sounds interested, brisk	A mild surprise but acceptance of the listener's premises	A ring of warmth, suggesting a course of action to the listener	It expresses surprise, the speech is more emotional
	3a	Feeling of querulous protest	Indicates that the speaker is impatient that such discussion should be necessary	Expresses a lively and interested reactin.		Warmth, surprise/ note of critical	The same effect as IC3
High Rise	4	Non-finality, incompleteness + Echoed statement	Used in light and casual general questions	Calls for a repetition of the information already given	HR particularly common with short comments designed to keep the conversation going		
Fall-Rise	5	Sounds apologetic, appreciative, grateful, regretful, sympathetic, persuasively reassuring, plaintive, pleading	It's done only for the sake of emphases in combination with HF		In intensified questions	Expresses an urgent, warning with a note of reproach, concern	Warmth, appreciation, sympathy
	5a	Apologetic, very emphatic, regretful, sympathetic	Plaintive, pleading, long-suffering ring	Plaintive, pleading, weary, warm, affectionate, sympathetic		Plaintive, reproachful, pleading, reassuring	Warmth, appreciation, puzzlement
Rise-Fall	6	Definiteness, finality + Warmth, admiration, sarcasm, indignation	It sounds impressed, challenging, antagonist	Challenging, disclaiming responsibility	The speaker accepts what has been said and is impressed by it.	The speaker sounds disclaiming responsibility	The speaker is impressed

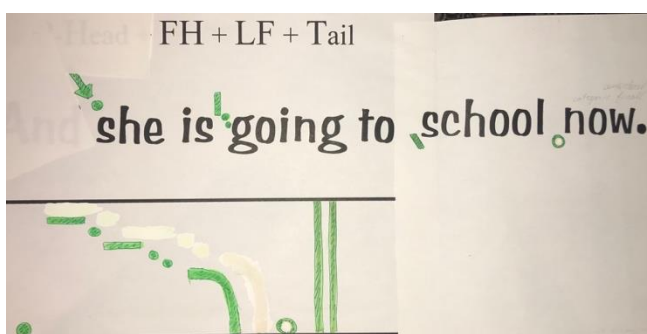
Let us look at some of the examples taken from a short dialogue between a husband and a wife. (see Appendix 2) The husband is away for business and he calls his wife to check if their daughter has managed to go to the post office before school. However, the wife does not know this because she left home earlier than their daughter.



In this sentence we can see the following combination 'high level head + high fall' which means that the speaker expresses hope, her words sound airy and lively. (see the table above e.g. №3)



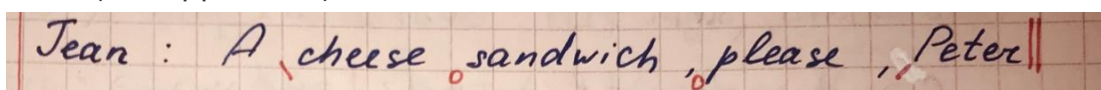
The husband responds in a very cool and reserved way because he is not happy that his wife did not have time to control their daughter. To achieve this 'low fall' is used. (see the table above e.g. №1)



In the final response we can still see that the husband is rather categoric and does not want to continue the conversation. It is expressed by 'falling head + low fall'. In the falling head the prominent words are 'she', 'going', 'school'. (see the table above e.g. №1/1a)

Accentual function

Accentual function has a direct connection with the tonic stress that we put within the tone unit. To put it differently, intonation helps to stress out those important words which give the meaning of an utterance. This function is particularly seen in sentences with a contrastive stress. For example, in a dialogue 'In a restaurant' Jean clearly expresses her idea to have a cheese sandwich and nothing else. The word 'cheese' is prominent. (see Appendix 3)



Conversation management-related function

Conversation management-related function or discourse/cohesive function deals with number of sentences connected by a concrete context. To be precise, intonation in this case helps to regulate a conversation flow and focus the listener's attention on the most important parts of the conversation. Additionally, this function gives clues what information is new and which is old. The falling tone presents new information, the rising - the given or shared information.

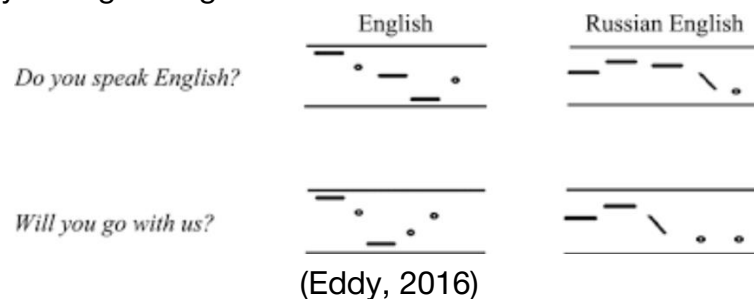
For example, in a dialogue 'A Bad Hijacker' we have a falling tone on such words as 'jacket', 'handbag', 'lavatory'. These words are new pieces of information to the listener. At the same time, we try to focus the listener's attention on these facts. (see Appendix 4)

Learner Problems and Teaching Solutions

Issue 1: Wrong usage of intonational patterns (e.g. in general and special questions)

When teaching Russian students, on a regular basis I notice that the intonation of the mother tongue (L1) has a negative influence on the English language. Russian language is more monotone and sometimes the intonation patterns are just the opposite to the English ones. For example, in English, in a yes/no question the intonation goes up

at the end of the sentence whereas in Russian it goes down. If we do not take this particular negative language transfer into account, it may result in a slowdown in communication or even a breakdown, until the context and extra clarifications will help in reading the message in the right way. As it was stated in the analysis earlier (see Table 1), if a general question in English is pronounced with a low fall it means that a speaker probably wants to finish the conversation. He is detached and rather reserved. The same problem is with special questions. In the Russian language the intonation goes up, meanwhile generally in English it goes down.



Suggestion 1.

Level: B1 – B2

Aim: to help learners to ask general and special questions with the appropriate intonation

Procedure (see Appendix 5):

- Students listen to a part of the job interview and number the questions in the order they hear them. After they answer the questions what they have found out about Helen who was interviewed and try to anticipate if she got a job or not. (listening for gist)
- Students listen to the interview questions on their own and mark the intonation of each question (rising or falling) (noticing - language focus)
- Students compare each other's answers and try to notice the common pattern for general and special questions. (noticing – language focus)
- Students discuss their ideas in an open class and compare English patterns to the Russian ones (feedback)
- Students practice the intonation humming the intonation. (drilling – controlled practice – language practice)
- Students practice saying all the questions from a job interview (drilling – semi-controlled practice - language practice)
- Students read the script of a job interview dialogue with a partner, paying attention to the intonation. (semi-controlled practice - language practice)
- Students do a job interview role-play, paying attention to the intonation. (free practice – language practice)

Evaluation:

This particular lesson will be extremely useful to a mono-lingual class of Russian learners. By exposing learners to a communicative situation and giving them the opportunity to notice the original English patterns of general and special questions will

influence their metacognitive processing of this phonological input. Additionally, the comparison of the English and Russian intonation will clarify the question under consideration.

Issue 2. Avoidance of intonation

During the CELTA course in the UK teaching multi-lingual class, it was noticed that some representatives of some countries tend to avoid using intonation and pitch variations in general. In Spaii and Hermes' opinion (1993), pitch variations are existentially vital because they show speaker's intention, are used to serve paralinguistic functions, for example, to express emotions, to show a person's status in a society, or even to represent a person's character. It is also a proven fact that intonation and pitch go far beyond simple pragmatic functions; as they also help listeners understand what they are told and fulfill grammatical functions.

This particular avoidance or omission was mostly observed among Chinese (Cantonese) and Spanish speakers. Their speech sounded rather flat that is perceived by native speakers as something impolite.

Suggestion 2.

Level: A2 - B1

Aim: to raise the learners' awareness of intonation indicating different degrees of enthusiasm

Procedure (see Appendix 6):

- Students listen to a short dialogue and try to recognize the emotion. (lead-in)
- Students listen to the second dialogue with the same words but different intonation and try to explain the difference between them (noticing)
- Students listen to 2 sets of other dialogues and mark them with '*' if the dialogue is not very enthusiastic and with '****' if it sounds very enthusiastic (noticing – semi-controlled practice)
- Students listen to all dialogues again and repeat the answers in pairs, paying attention to the intonation, stress and pitch. (semi-controlled practice)
- Students work in pairs practicing saying the dialogues while others try to guess the degree of enthusiasm. (free practice)

Evaluation:

As it is quite hard not only to detect the intonation and pitch variations but also to place them accordingly in person's vocal cords, intonation practice should be integrated into course syllabus and continuously approached in lessons. Primarily to improve the recognition level of emotions given in a sentence and to make learners use it appropriately much time should be spent on noticing the difference.

Issue 3. Wrong prominence.

Prominence is considered to be 'the most important function of intonation, and almost certainly the most teachable one' (Dalton, Seidlhofer 1994: 81). At the same time, it can be seen as most vulnerable aspect of the language, because by stressing wrong

words we can cause utter misunderstanding or breakdown in communication. Especially it is true if we talk about Russian learners because in the Russian language almost every meaningful word is stressed. That is why it can be quite challenging to identify which words should be prominent in an English sentence.

Suggestion 3.

Level: B1

Aim: to help learners recognize prominent words and use prominence in an appropriate way

Procedure:

- Students listen to an audio or a teacher reads out a monologue for the first time.
- Students give answers to several general questions to understand the topic of the listening. (listening for gist)
- Students get a transcript of the listening and circle prominent words of their transcript when a teacher reads it or the recording is played. (noticing)
- Students listen to the recording/the teacher for the second time. (self-correction - noticing)
- Students compare their highlighted prominent words (peer-check)
- Students listen to the recording/the teacher for the third time. (self-correction)
- Students discuss their observations in an open class by asking one of the students to do that on the whiteboard, clarifying, explaining and comparing the task all together (feedback)
- Students listen to the recording/the teacher for the last time to confirm the results of their open-class discussion (noticing).
- Students read the transcript to each other, paying attention to prominent words. (free practice)

Evaluation:

According to Jenkins 'learners seem to acquire prominence relatively quickly for receptive purposes but do not acquire it productively until considerably later, if at all' (1998: 122) That is why, if the following noticing activity or its alternatives are repeated in a consistent way, students may catch and reproduce the language rhythm. To make it more entertaining, recordings of different genres can be used as it can show the English language diversity.

Issue 4. Intonation variety

Looking at almost all coursebooks teaching English intonation we may notice that Received Pronunciation is in the centre of attention. When students are exposed to this later on it is hard for them to recognize other language intonation varieties and it will not mean that it is wrong.

Suggestion 4.

Level: C1

Aim: to increase learners' awareness of other English intonation varieties

Procedure:

On a continuous basis, students need to listen to different English language varieties. While developing general comprehension, students will get used to the diversity.

Evaluation:

This top-down approach can be applied to strong students who have already developed their personal understanding of what intonation should sound like.

Conclusion

Intonation has always played one of the essential roles in the English language acquisition. As it has been mentioned in this paper intonation may have multiple functions. The most important one is attitudinal with the help of which we can express our emotions. Moreover, it should be pointed out that each emotion is represented by multiple intonation patterns. All in all, though teaching intonation can be extremely challenging for both teachers and students, still it should be integrated into the studying process.

Bibliography

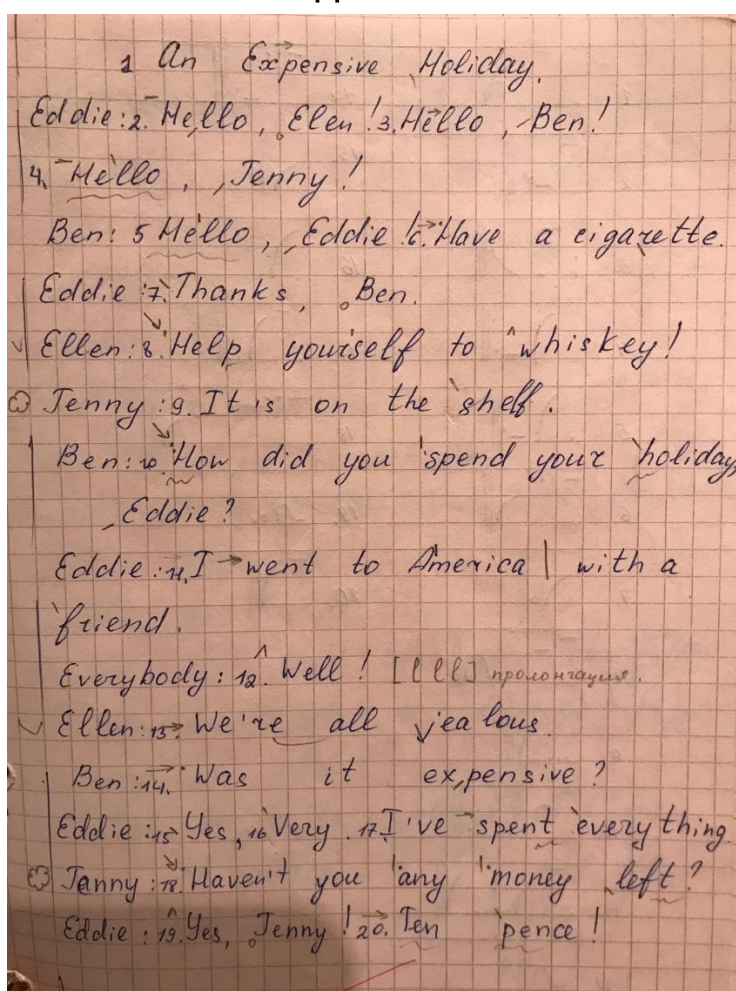
1. Brazil D. 1975. Discourse Intonation. / D.Brazil, M. Coulthard, C.Johns.- London,. – 515p.
2. Brazil D. 1985. The Communicative Value of Intonation in English. Discourse Analysis monograph. No. 8. Birmingham, – 318p.
3. Brazil, D. 1994. Pronunciation for Advanced Learners of English. Student's Book. CUP.
4. Clennel, C. 1997. Raising the pedagogic status of discourse intonation teaching. ELT Journal 51(2): 117-125.
5. Coulthard, M. 1985. Intonation. An Introduction to Discourse Analysis. M. Coulthard. London, Longman.
6. Crystal, David. 1969. Prosodic Systems and Intonation in English. Cambridge University Press.
7. Dalton, C., Seidlhofer, B. 1994. Pronunciation. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
8. Jenkins, J. 1998. Which pronunciation norms and models for English as an International Language? ELT Journal 52(2): 119-126.
9. O'Connor, J.D. 1973. Intonation of Colloquial English / J.D O'Connor, G.F. Arnold. –2nd ed. – London: Longmans, – 288 p.
10. Roach, P. 1991. English Phonetics and Phonology: a practical course. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
11. Ruskin, J. 1880. Elements of English prosody. George Allen, Sunnyside, Orbington, Kent. [https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Ruskin Elements.pdf](https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Ruskin%20Elements.pdf)
12. Eddy, A. 2016. Russian English as a Variety. Moscow State University University of Michigan, Flint Publisher: CUP, pp. 7-120.

13. Spaii, G., Hermes, D. 1993. A visual display for the teaching of intonation. CALICO Journal, v. 10, n. 3.
14. Thompson, S. 1995. "Teaching intonation on questions." ELT Journal 49(3): 235-245.
15. Wennerstrom, A. 1994. "Intonational Meaning in English Discourse: A Study of Non- Native Speakers." Applied Linguistics 15(4): 399-420.

Resources:

1. Bowler, B. and Cunningham, S. 1999. New Headway Pronunciation Course (Intermediate). Oxford, Oxford University Press.
2. Bowler, B. and Cunningham, S. 1999. New Headway Pronunciation Course (Upper- intermediate). Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Appendix 1



Appendix 2

Wife: I think she will do it.

Husband: I don't think so.

Wife: Why?

Husband: She is going to school now. And she is super late!

Appendix 3

→ In a Restaurant.

Peter: What would you like to eat, Edith?

Edith: A meat sandwich!

Peter: Jean? Would you like a meat sandwich or a cheese sandwich?

Jean: A cheese sandwich, please, Peter!

Waiter: Good evening!

Peter: Good evening. We'll have one meat sandwich and two cheese sandwiches!

Edith: And three teas, please!

Waiter: One meat sandwich... two cheese sandwiches... and... three teas!

Appendix 4

A Bad Hijacker

Hostess Bradley: Alice! Perhaps that passenger is a hijacker!

Hostess Allen: Which passenger, Anne? That sad man with the camera? He's wearing black slacks and a jacket.

Host. Br.: No. That fat lady with the big black handbag in her left hand.

Host. Al.: Is she standing next to the lavatory?

Host. Br.: Yes. She's travelling to Amsterdam.

Host. Al.: You're mad, Anne, I don't understand.

Host. Br.: You see when she went into the lavatory she didn't have that handbag in her hand, and now she's...

Fat lady: Everybody stand! I'm a hijacker. And in this handbag I have a...

Handbag: BANG!

Appendix 5 - New Headway Pronunciation Course Upper-intermediate

Intonation

3 Rising and falling intonation in questions

1 **T3.3a** Ellen is being interviewed for a job as a holiday representative. Listen to part of the interview and number the questions in the order you hear them.



- a So how did you learn French?
- b You spent two summers working on a farm?
- c What about previous work experience?
- d And you'd like to work in Greece?
- e Are you old enough to work in a casino?
- f Do you speak any other languages at all?
- g In a casino?
- h Which other languages did you say you speak?
- i Why Greece?
- j Do you speak Spanish well?
- k What other jobs have you done?
- l Do you speak Greek?

Check your answers.

What did you find out about Ellen from her answers?
Do you think she got the job?

Key p. 56

Unit 3 15

2 **T3.3b** Listen to the interview questions on their own. Mark them like this if the intonation goes up at the end and like this if it goes down.

In Yes / No questions, or in statements that are made into questions, the intonation normally goes **up** at the end:

Do you speak Greek?

You spent two summers working on a farm?

In *Wh-* questions, the intonation normally goes **down** at the end:

So how did you learn French? Why Greece?

Sometimes we repeat a question because we have forgotten the answer, or were surprised by the answer. In these cases, the intonation goes up at the end:

And which other languages did you say you speak?

In a casino?

T3.3c To practise the intonation, try humming the questions first like this:

mm MM mm mm MM MM?

So how did you learn French?

mm mm MM mm MM mm MM?

And you'd like to work in Greece?

Practise saying all the questions in 1.

3 Look at the tapescript on page 56. Read it aloud with a partner, paying attention to the intonation.

1 **T3.3a**

- A So you've applied for a job as a holiday rep and you'd like to work in Greece?
- B Yes, that's right.
- A Why Greece?
- B I've been there on holiday, and I just sort of thought it would be a nice place to work for the summer ... you know, quite relaxing ...
- A Hmm ... and do you speak Greek?
- B Erm, a bit ... my Greek boyfriend last year taught me quite a few useful phrases ...
- A Hmm ... It might be rather difficult if you don't speak Greek ... Do you speak any other languages at all?
- B I speak French quite fluently, and quite a bit of Spanish ...
- A Aha ... so how did you learn French?
- B Well at school mostly ... and I went on holiday to France a lot when I was a child ...
- A Hmm ... and which other languages did you say you speak?
- B Just Spanish ...
- A Do you speak Spanish well?
- B Well, not as well as French ...
- A Hmm ... Okay, well let's move on. What about previous work experience? I see from your application form ... you spent two summers working on a farm?
- B Yes, my uncle's a farmer, so I was helping him, looking after the animals and so on ...
- A Hmm, very nice, I'm sure ... not much help for working as a holiday rep though, is it? What other jobs have you done?

- B I worked part-time in a clothes shop when I was at school, and last summer I had a job as a waitress ... in a casino ...
- A In a casino? Are you old enough to work in a casino?
- B Yes, I'm twenty-two actually.
- A Hmm, yes, well I think that's everything ... we'll be in touch.

3 Showing degrees of enthusiasm

We can show how enthusiastic we are through the words we use.

* *It was quite funny.* (not very enthusiastic)

*** *It was really funny.* (very enthusiastic)

When we speak, we don't always change the **words** we use. We can show how enthusiastic we are through **intonation**.

1 **T6.3** Listen to the first two dialogues below. Make sure you can hear the difference in the degrees of enthusiasm.

Now listen to the other dialogues and mark them

* (not very enthusiastic), or

*** (very enthusiastic).

a Q What was the party like?

A It was interesting. *

b Q What was Amsterdam like?

A It was interesting. ***

c Q What was your holiday like?

A Mmm. It was good.

d Q What was your hotel like?

A Mmm. It was good.

e Q What's his younger brother like?

A Oh, he's nice.

f Q What's his father like?

A Oh, he's nice.

 p. 58

Listen again and repeat the answers, paying attention to the intonation and stress.

2 Work in pairs. Practise saying the dialogues aloud. Take turns asking the questions. When your partner answers, listen carefully and try to guess the degree of enthusiasm each time. Is it one star or three stars?