The terminal contour of Italian semi-spontaneous instructions

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Abstract

This article aims to analyze the intonative features of instructions in semi-spontaneous Italian, with particular regard to their terminal contour, in order to understand which is its semantic importance and, from this point of view, what is the nature of relation between intonation and modality.

Key words: instruction, intonation, modality, semantics, terminal contour

Introduction

It is well known that the notion of *terminal contour*, i.e. the part of the intonative profile that goes from the last tonic syllable to the end of utterance, is the touchstone of studies about relations between *intonation* and *modality*, so that the distinctive and intuitively normative character of one-to-one correspondence, or rather coalescence, between few basic terminal contour prototypes and few basic sentence modalities is now generally accepted, even by the most important Italian studies on intonation (Chapallaz 1964; Lepschy 1978; Canepari 1985; De Dominicis 1992; Bertinetto & Magno Caldognetto 1993; Sorianello 2006).

The case of instructions

In accordance both with the notion of *utterance* as a *sense unit* (Benveniste 1964: 122) that, traced in relation to an enonciative coordinates system (Culioli 1978: 129), displays all cooperating elements which play together to the construction of its signification in continuous, unitary and undivisible *unicum* of its intonative profile, and with the notion of *modality* as an active operation of the speaker's rational activity (Bally 1932), in the light of the formal semantics studies tradition inspired by the equally important logic tradition (Lyons 1977, Palmer 1986, Grice 1990), we consider here a particular modality which belongs to one of the five modal classes that we may recognize in spoken language through a tridimensional representative system with an objective (*alethic* modalities), a subjective (*epistemic*, *appreciative* and *volitive* modalities) and an inter-subjective axis (*deontic* modalities) (Le Querler 1996: 63-67), i.e. the case of 528 *instructions* taken from a sample of 15 semi-spontaneous Italian *Map Task* dialogues recorded in 15 representative Italian cities and selected from the dialogical section of *CLIPS corpus* (http://www.clips.unina.it). The instructions status consists in giving directions to co-speaker concerning an object, an event or a situation, they

correspond to 81% of all 652 deontic modalities and 13,5% of all 3898 modal utterances and are shared out as follows: 57 in the dialogue of Bari (Ba), 37 in that one of Bergamo (Bg), 38 in Cagliari (Ca), 43 in Catanzaro (Cz), 45 in Florence (Fi), 48 in Genoa (Ge), 28 in Lecce (Le), 26 in Milan (Mi), 11 in Naples (Na), 24 in Palermo (Pa), 29 in Parma (Pr), 31 in Perugia (Pg), 17 in Rome (Rm), 53 in Turin (To), 41 in Venice (Ve) (Di Russo 2011).

As we can note considering, for example, the most simple terminal contour profiles and the ones made up by the mix of these simples tunes, terminal contours configuration shows a very great variety (Table 1).

Table 1. The terminal contour of instructions

Terminal contour types	Instructions number	Percentage (%)
fall	42	8,0
mid-level	3	0,6
rise	23	4,4
fall-low mid level	13	2,5
fall-rise	145	27,5
mid level-fall	5	0,9
mid level-rise	14	2,7
rise-fall	13	2,5
rise-high mid level	1	0,2
fall-low mid level-fall	1	0,2
fall-low mid level-rise	3	0,6
fall-rise-fall	26	4,9
fall-rise-high mid level	12	2,3
mid-level-fall-low mid level	1	0,2
mid-level-fall-rise	4	0,8
mid-level-rise-fall	1	0,2
rise-fall-low mid level	1	0,2
rise-fall-rise	17	3,2
rise-high mid level-fall	1	0,2
rise-high mid level-rise	2	0,3
others	200	37,9
Total	528	100

If we look at terminal contour types distribution from a diatopical point of view, dwelling above all on the most large ones, we may see that their wide diversity is equally shared by all different dialogues instructions. In descending order, in fact, we can note that the 145 ***fall-rising*** types are so distributed: 6 in Ba, 11 in Bg, 9 in Ca, 4 in Cz, 14 in Fi, 19 in Ge, 7 in Le, 4

in Mi, 4 in Na, 9 in Pa, 15 in Pr, 9 in Pg, 6 in Rm, 23 in To, 5 in Ve. Among the 42 ***falling*** types of terminal contour, we can find out: 7 in Ba, 4 in Bg, 4 in Cz, 1 in Ge, 6 in Le, 5 in Mi, 1 in Pa, 3 in Pr, 3 in Pg, 1 in Rm, 8 in Ve. The 26 ***fall-rise-falling*** types are so shared out: 8 in Ba, 6 in Cz, 1 in Fi, 1 in Ge, 2 in Le, 2 in Mi, in Pr, 3 in Pg, 1 in Ve. As regards the 23 ***rising*** types, we have: 3 in Ba, 5 in Ca, 1 in Cz, 1 in Fi, 1 in Ge, 3 in Mi, 2 in Pg, 1 in Rm, 2 in To, 4 in Ve. Concerning the 17 ***rise-fall-rising*** types, we can notice this situation: 4 in Ba, 2 in Ca, 1 in Cz, 1 in Fi, 2 in Ge, 2 in Le, 2 in Mi, 1 in Pg, 1 in To, 1 in Ve.

Regarding the distribution of the 14 ***mid level-rising*** ones: 2 in Ba, 4 in Bg, 1 in Ca, 1 in Ge, 1 in Mi, 1 in Pa, 1 in Rm, 2 in To, 1 in Ve; for the 13 ***fall-low mid level*** types, there are: 1 in Ca, 4 in Cz, 2 in Fi, 1 in Pa, 3 in Pg, 2 in Ve; for the 13 ***rise-falling*** types: 1 in Ba, 1 in Ca, 1 in Cz, 1 in Fi, 1 in Le, 1 in Pa, 1 in Pg, 2 in Rm, 3 in To, 1 in Ve; for the 12 ***fall-rise-high mid level*** ones: 2 in Ba, 6 in Cz, 2 in Fi, 1 in Ge, 1 in Pg; for the 5 ***mid level-falling*** ones: 1 in Cz, 1 in Ge, 1 in Pa, 1 in Pr, 1 in Ve; for the 4 ***mid-level-fall-rising*** ones: 2 in Mi, 2 in To; for the 3 ***fall-low mid level-rising*** ones: 1 in Pa, 1 in Pr, 1 in To; for the 3 ***mid-level*** ones: 1 in Fi, 1 in Pg, 1 in Rm; for the 2 ***rise-high mid level-rising*** ones: 1 in Ba, 1 in Pr. Then, we find a ***rise-high mid level*** type in Pg; a ***fall-low mid level-falling*** one in Le; a ***mid-level-fall-low mid level*** one in Ve; a ***mid-level-rise-falling*** one in Ge; a ***rise-fall-low mid level*** one in Ba; and a ***rise-high mid level-falling*** one in To.

Finally, we may count at least 200 instructions with other very different and more complex kinds of terminal contour and, if we then examine the part of intonative profile that goes from the last turning point, i.e. the last point of f_0 variation movement, to the end of the utterance, we can find two groups of utterances: the former is constitued by 185 falling movements, the latter by 343 rising movements, both scattered in so several different terminal contours that what emerges is an equally heterogeneous outline.

Conclusion

So, if we pay attention to those results, we may reach the conclusion that each of the many possible different kinds of terminal contour is capable of meaning, and concretely means, the same deontic value of instruction. Hence we may reasonably conclude that: 1) the terminal contour, like other intonative elements, proves to be not the primary term of modal comparison but only the part of a more complex prosodic game that shows all the limits of current representative models of intonation (Martin 2005, 2009: 69-83) which too often confuse linguistic phenomena dynamics with their representations; 2) each terminal contour type, according to the whole enonciative coordinates system, can mean any modal value and, more generally, make any sense, (Bolinger 1986: 13); 3) the potentially unlimited

semantic plasticity of intonation is just the evidence of its arbitrary character, which proves its status as an integral part of the linguistic system (Saussure 1916; Bally 1932: par. 39, 44; Fónagy 1987: 82).

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