



Tone and intonation in discourse management – How do speakers of Standard Vietnamese initiate a repair?

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Abstract

This paper investigates the intonation of other-initiation of repair in Standard Vietnamese and provides an analysis of its interaction with lexical tone at the word level. Results from both single-word and multi-word utterances show that speakers make predominant use of a rising pitch contour to mark other-initiation of repair, a contour that has been found in a large number of languages. This rise occurs consistently at the right edge of utterances and may be analysed as a phonetic reflex of a high boundary tone that can overlap, partially or completely, with the lexical tone of an utterance-final word. Further, the study demonstrates the application of talk-in-interaction to the study of the relation between lexical tone and intonation in tone languages.

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1. Introduction

In conversation, when something that a speaker has said is misheard or when a speaker has problems understanding a previous utterance, an attempt is often made to elicit a repetition, clarification, elaboration or correction, referred to in Conversation Analysis as other-initiation of repair (henceforth OIR) (Schegloff et al., 1977). In many languages, repair is initiated by means of a distinct rising intonation (Enfield et al., 2013; Dingemanse et al., 2013). Our aim is to explore how repairs are initiated in Vietnamese, a language with a complex lexical tone system and extensive use of particles, factors that might be expected to leave little room for intonation to express communicative functions.

This paper investigates how speakers of Standard Vietnamese (also called Northern Vietnamese or Hanoi Vietnamese)¹ initiate a repair in conversation. Specifically, we are concerned with how speakers use intonation, and the extent to which this intonation interacts with the lexical tone of the words used for OIR. The study combines the methodology of Conversation Analysis, using naturally occurring data subjected to sequential analysis, with methods from Phonetics and Phonology, including supplementary elicitation methods, aiming at an in-depth analysis of the intonation used in the investigated context, especially in terms of its interaction with lexical tones.

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¹ Northern Vietnamese is one of three main dialects in Vietnam, together with the Central and Southern Vietnamese dialects. Their tone systems differ not only in the number of lexical tones (six in the Northern dialect, five in the Southern and four/five in the Central variety), but also in the extent to which non-modal voice is used (Kirby, 2011; Brunelle, 2009a; Honda, 2006).

This study contributes to an increasing body of research on repair across languages (Hayashi et al., 2013; Enfield et al., 2013; Dingemanse et al., 2015), in particular on the prosody of this action in conversation (e.g. Couper-Kuhlen, 1992 for American English, Selting, 1996; Egbert et al., 2009 for German, Enfield et al., 2013 for 21 different languages, Dehé, 2015 for Icelandic). More importantly, it sheds light on the research area of talk-in-interaction as a sound foundation for intonation research in Vietnamese, an area that has so far received little attention among the research community of the language.

Below we will sketch the lexical tone system of Standard Vietnamese and provide an overview of how intonation has been described to date in Vietnamese in general and in this variety in particular (section 2) before addressing our research questions. After illustrating our data collection and methods (section 3), we will present the intonation found in OIRs, touching on its interplay with the lexical tones of the words under investigation (section 4). The question of how exactly the intonation of OIR interacts with lexical tones of the words will be the topic of section 5. Finally, we discuss the results and conclude in section 6.

2. Lexical tone and intonation in Standard Vietnamese

2.1. Lexical tone

Standard Vietnamese has six distinctive lexical tones, all of which occur on syllables that are either open or have a sonorant coda.² Some of these tones are characterised not only by pitch, but also by voice quality and duration (Alves, 1997; Nguyễn and Edmondson, 1998; Phạm, 2003; Michaud, 2004). This has led to a phonological analysis comprising both a pitch contour and a register for each tone, the latter involving laryngeal features, either glottalisation/creaky voice, or breathiness. Table 1 below provides an illustration of the six lexical tones on the syllable *la* [la:] along with their stylised contours, tone descriptions, traditional names and glosses.

In our analysis below, the target words in OIRs involve the lexical tones *ngang* (high-level), *ngã* (broken), *nặng* (low-glottalised), *hỏi* (low-falling)³ and *huyền* (falling). Further details on the target words will be provided in sections 3.3 and 3.4.

2.2. Intonation

Earlier descriptive studies on Vietnamese intonation have identified a number of intonation patterns that are associated with functions in discourse. For Standard Vietnamese/Hanoi Vietnamese, Thompson (1965) proposes four *local* intonation contours occurring on the final syllable of utterances: (i) “Decreasing” intonation, which conveys that the speaker has not finished speaking and that he or she has been interrupted or has simply left something unsaid; (ii) “Increasing” intonation, which conveys “exclamative statements and commands, and questions to which the answer is of relatively small interest to the speaker” (ibid: 107–108); (iii) “Fading” intonation, “including commands, statements of fact which the speaker assumes the hearer will accept as true, and questions to which the speaker assumes the answer” (ibid: 108); and (iv) “Sustaining” intonation, used when the speaker is “unable or for some other reason fails to predict the result of his speech” (ibid: 108) or in “doubtful statements, emotionally coloured and indecisive imperatives and exhortations, and informational questions” (ibid: 109).

A survey of the Southern variety identified three basic intonation contours, marking different sentence types (Trần, 1967): The “falling” contour, which occurs in declarative statements, indicating that the speaker has completed his/her sentence; the “increasing” contour, which occurs mostly in interrogative and imperative exhortative sentences; and the “sustaining” contour, which occurs in sentences that are non-final. Crucially, Trần regards these intonation contours as *global* in nature (i.e. stretching over the whole utterance rather than being confined to the final syllable, as in the work of Thompson). Trần is also explicit about the fact that although intonation can modify the lexical tones phonetically, this modification does not imply a change in tonal category; tonal cues to the meaning of words are preserved (Trần, 1967: 23).

Following these earlier studies by Thompson (1965) and Trần (1967), an increasing number of investigations into the intonation of Vietnamese have employed experimental methods. For Standard Vietnamese, Đỗ et al. (1998) and Nguyễn and Boulakia (1999) identified a fast tempo, a global rising F0 and a local final rise in F0 as phonetic characteristics of

² Note that Vietnamese has also been analysed as having two additional tones, which are restricted to checked syllables, i.e. syllables ending with stop consonants (see e.g. Kirby, 2011). Since they are generally regarded by native speakers to be variants of the two tones *sắc* and *nặng*, and since the target words in the current study only involve syllables ending with sonorants, these two additional tones are not included in our representation of the tone system in this paper.

³ The full form of this tone can be produced in isolation with a falling-rising contour. However, like tone 3 in Mandarin Chinese, it is predominantly produced as falling in phrase-medial position and can even take this form in isolation. This tone is often accompanied by breathiness (Phạm, 2003). Based on the most common acoustic properties of this tone, and following Kirby (2011), we categorise it as a low-falling tone.

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