

THE 'AUSTRALIAN INTERVIEW TUNE' IN AUSTRALIAN ENGLISH INTERVIEWS: SOME HRT MYTHS DEBUNKED?

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Abstract

The question of the omnipresence of the HRT in Australian English (AusE) is investigated upon a sample of a mixed AusE-AmE (American English) radio interview. The investigation focuses on the distribution of HRT events in the interview by Australian speakers interspersed with the AmE speech of the interviewee. It tries to answer the question whether a non-HRT speaker triggers a reduction of HRT events on the side of the interviewer. The findings will be interpreted for a new positioning of the HRT as a socio-cultural phenomenon (and thus object of inquiry for sociolinguistics) and/or as an affective cognitive phenomenon (and thus object of inquiry for psycholinguistics).

Key words

intonation, high rising tone, HRT events, discourse quotatives, Australian English, conversation, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics

1 Introduction

This study originated in conception and idea from data work on the wealth of recordings in Australian English collected by Michel in Australia which subsequently led to her description and analysis of the Australian ethos (Michel 2009). In this study, the High Rising Terminal (also: High Rising Tone, henceforth: HRT) falls within a range of observations of characteristics considered typical for Australian English (in the following: AusE, for an overview cf. Burrige & Mulder 1999 and Blair & Collins 2001) such as the abundance of hypocoristics (Simpson 2001), the group bonding function of the concept of mateship (Rendle-Short 2009), the use of ludicity with language (Sussex 2004), especially in spoken AusE and the frequent swearing (Dabke 1977, Wierzbicka 2002). The emerging picture of the Australian ethos of a society which formed under harshest conditions in a relatively short time-span is one of constant reflection of the self within a peer group, typical of egalitarian societies (which the "white" population in Australia represented from its foundation beginning in 1788).

This reflection is expressed in frequent high rises even for assertive and declarative statements which create the impression of a constant self-questioning tone that, on the surface, readily invites disagreement and disapproval. It marks

up a discourse that is often observed in child language and post-R. Lakoff (1975) with female speech. An early example of this is de Pinto and Hollien (1962); the standard treatment is Guy et al. (1986). However, these facts are well-supported by Michel's approach but questions remain, a few of which are considered in this treatment. For example, why is the HRT a common feature also in New Zealand English (NZE) (Britain 1998 and Watson 1998 as well as Easton & Bauer 2000)? New Zealand's history of settlement is markedly different from that of Australia. Are there phonological constraints that control the use and application of the HRT? Syllabicity and contour stress could trigger (or suppress) HRT events. Furthermore, do psychological factors have a role in this, e.g. a dependence on the speech partner; could a possible adaptation of his/her speech lead to differences in HRT usage?

This study will mainly focus on the latter point by looking at HRT events in a mixed-variety conversation, thus it actually studies the Australian interview tone in an actual interview. The methodology involves a phonetic analysis of the discourse sample, suggests an interpretation within the Perceptual Assimilation Model (Best 1994) and attempts a series of conclusions.

2 The HRT in Australian English

2.1 Distribution and phonetic details

The typical Australian signature of the HRT was described by Mitchell and Delbridge as an "abnormal speech contour" and referred to as 'The Australian Interview Tune' (Mitchell & Delbridge 1965: 56 and Turner 1994: 297). The landmark publication on the subject is Guy and Vonwiller's (1984) study which attempts a breakdown of different intentions speakers have while using the HRT and of different text types the HRT appears in (Guy & Vonwiller 1984). The HRT is characterized by a rising contour in a word-final syllable. In Australian English it enjoys generally low prestige (Gramley & Pätzold 1992: 397). Formerly a feature of female speech as well as of Broad AusE (BrAusE) it has been intruding the speaking style of ethnic minorities in Australia (especially Greek and Italian) as (derogatorily) so-called "wog-speak" (Kiesling 2005: 4). Its functions are more varied than those of general rises and of the question intonation where it usually expresses the need for more information through interrogation. The HRT in AusE (and NZE) accompanies declaratives,

its function is recognized widely as being a means by which a speaker seeks to verify the addressee's comprehension of the information as the

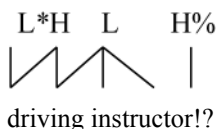
speaker gives it. In other words, the speaker is doing two things at the same time: giving information and checking on understanding. (Tench 2003: 217)

The difference in function arises because it is not a “statement-question” in which a speaker re-checks on a state-of-affairs that appears to be contrary to expectation (*ibid.*).

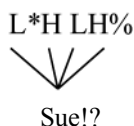
The rise itself is not a gradient option, i.e. it does not depend on the base frequency of the speaker (as in usual rising terminals, which are found in all varieties of English, cf. ‘Canadian raising’ in Canadian English, esp. the frequent *eh?*). Rather, it can be discerned on absolute terms (cf. Figure 1) although it, too, starts out on a low pitch. This means also that a perceived relativity of the HRT is not discernible within the individual speaker’s pitch range.

In speech, a differentiation must be made between polysyllabic utterance HRT events and the (rarer) monosyllabic ones.

For polysyllabic utterances in question intonation (strong, forceful questions, emphasis on surprise) the contour is



In monosyllabic utterances all nodes are associated with the only available syllable:



(Examples by Ladd 1996: 132)

Most monosyllabic utterance HRT events are therefore *yes/no* questions.

The methodology of description changed after Pierrehumbert’s intonational taxonomy that changed the British-style nuclear tones for high rises from H H% (British style) to H*. A difference is further that H* in a non-final position is also analyzed as a prenuclear stressed or accented syllable (Ladd 1996: 82).

Pierrehumbert and Hirschberg (1990) display the difference impressively in the following adjacent diagrams on fall-rise for declaratives and a high rise for question intonation:

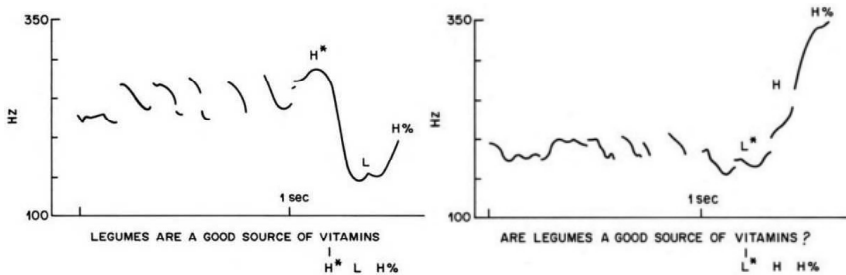


Figure 1: Fall-rise and high rise patterns from Pierrehumbert and Hirschberg (1990: 273)

The fall-rise in the first graph is not an HRT event in the proper sense as the H% terminal represents only a relative rise (in proportion to the speaker's pitch range) whereas the high rise in the *yes/no* questions tops 350Hz which makes it a high rise in any given speech context. However, it is used for a question here and thus as an HRT event it would not be considered.

In this study, Pierrehumbert's taxonomy is used throughout.

2.2 Typology and social aspects

The HRT is, as already mentioned, also used in other varieties of English, most prominently in Southern hemisphere Englishes (but it is rare in South African English). McGregor and Palethorpe (2008) attribute the considerable research interest to the relative salience of the phenomenon, its recency in the study of Englishes and its spread (ibid.: 172).

The socioeconomic association rests traditionally with lower classes and teenage girls where (in its earliest studies of HRT events in AmE) it was known as valley girls' speech.

The onset of HRTs occurs usually from a low pitch accent when statements are concerned. Thus, they are not identical with high rises used for *yes/no* questions although a number of speakers use both, high and low onsets for both types of utterances. There is no difference between the single high-rise targets but the intention of the speaker depends also on other contextual cues, e.g. in Figure 1 the contextual cue is the word order for the *yes/no* question.

Statement HRT events are used with information only known to the speaker (McGregor & Palethorpe 2008). This means also that the speaker controls the flow of the narration dynamic as the HRT is intended for jointly constructed parts of discourse often for semantically complex narration. This contribution is very

often restricted to minimal signals or “to check continuously for understanding” (ibid.: 173) or, more convincingly in a restricted sense, “as a way of maintaining the engagement of conversational partners” (Britain 1998: 214-215). This is a marked difference to Guy and Vonwiller’s more general observation that the “fundamental meaning for its users is an inquiry as to whether they are being understood” (Guy & Vonwiller 1984: 16). Britain’s (1998) categorization makes them comparable to a related feature, the use of discourse quotatives discussed in the next paragraph. Thus, HRT events fall within a range of similarly stigmatized features of AusE: they need to be compared with the usage of markers that maintain and even enforce the engagement of the partners: Discourse quotatives.

2.3 HRT events and discourse quotatives

Discourse quotatives introduce reproduced speech acts by third-party speakers who are referred to in the discourse but are not part of it. Discourse quotatives and quotative complementizers introduce “voices” by verbs like *say*, *tell*, *go* and AmE forms like: *be like* as in:

- (1) a. *this kid’s brother, he **was like**, ‘ah, bugger it’.*
b. *so I’m **like** ‘that makes me feel better’*
c. *still like, and they **go** ‘oh yeah the women’s hockey team...’*
d. *it was so funny, Mum’s **going** ‘you know, you really scared him’*
(examples adapted from Winter 2002: 6)

In Australian English it can alternate with a constant wavefront of HRTs, cf. the Kylie Mole programme on Australian television. Both discourse features create dynamic interaction under reference to the listener’s contribution with the purpose to dramatize the performance of the previous personal experience. Across varieties, the distribution of discourse quotatives in AusE, British English (BrE) and Canadian English (CanE) is according to Winter (2002: 10) as follows:

	AusE	BrE	CanE
<i>Go</i>	45	18	22
<i>Say</i>	24	31	36
<i>Be + like</i>	8	18	13
Null/zero	18	10	20
<i>Think</i>	0.4	18	4
Miscellaneous	4	5	5

Table 1: Discourse quotatives in different varieties of English (data by Winter 2002)

The figures show *go* to be dominant by far in AusE, *say* in BrE and CanE whereas the status of *be + like* is less clear in AusE. In the same way as the HRT is rare in North American English, the similarly positioned discourse quotative *go* is relatively rare in the North American variety studied by Winter, Canadian English. It would therefore make sense to look at the use of *go* as a discourse quotative and of the HRT as they have a similar function in discourse. A plausible example could be found in non-natural sketches by an Australian TV comedian. Kylie Mole is the fictional character of a teenage girl speaker of BrAusE (cf. also Cox 2006). Her speech stereotypifies the aforementioned discourse quotatives together with HRT, creating a virtual barrage of quotatives and HRTs, cf. the pitch display with simple markup below.

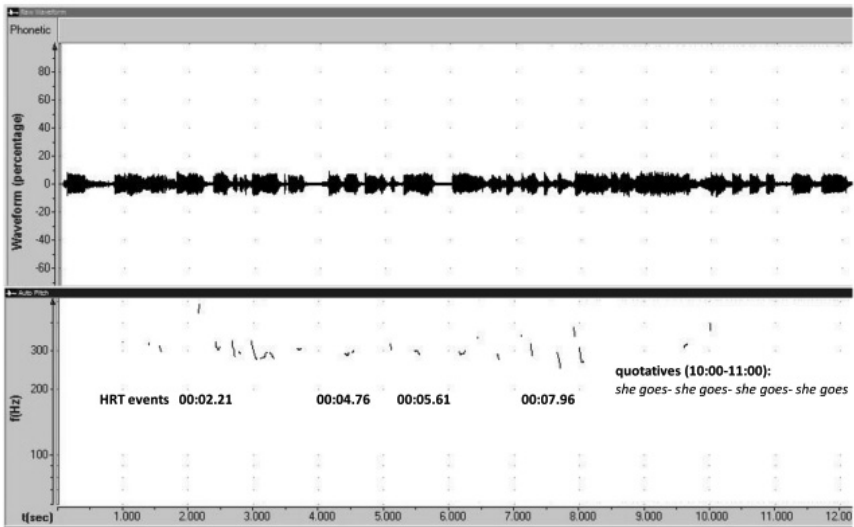


Figure 2: HRT events and discourse quotatives in *Kylie Mole* (female comedic AusE), times in *m:s*

The caveat of course is that it is fictional, invented and performed speech. The findings need thus to be substantiated with a sample of natural speech discussed in the data section.

3 Data and discussion

3.1 Materials and procedure

Stimulus set is a single radio interview with three alternating speakers, two female AusE, one male AmE. The interview was conducted over the phone. It was downloaded from the website of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation ABC-Radio National (cf. references for the permalink of the sample). The length of the interview is 470 seconds (7 minutes, 50 seconds). The investigated positions in the next paragraph are given in seconds.

The interview consists of a general introduction of 42 seconds length and a Q and A session for the remainder. The first question is an off-question (i.e. repeated for the finished interview), preceded by a few seconds of additional introductory notes. The remaining questions are live questions.

The HRT events were counted and inspected in their context. The timing was recorded. Beyond the impressionistic analysis the sample was plotted in the SIL Speech Analyzer contour graph (cf. figures). The used version was Speech Analyzer V.3.0.1. The software plots the seconds decimally, in the argumentation, minutes and seconds are used (thus 425.10 is equivalent to 07:05.10).

3.2 Evaluation

The entire interview represents an almost unique case of a mixed-variety conversation in which speakers of Australian English (the target variety) interact with speakers of American English. The presence and absence of the feature in question (the amount and distribution of HRT events) can thus be studied under consideration of the parameter of interactivity. The partners in the conversation react on each others' utterances under progressive adaptation of the subsequent utterances. This can be modelled in the Perceptual Assimilation Model (PAM) by Best (cf. Best 1994, Best & McRoberts 2003). The idea of using the Perceptual Assimilation Model represents an outgrowth of an earlier study on the assimilation of aspirated stops in English by second-language learners (Haase 2007).

While the core principle in PAM is that learners assimilate foreign speech sounds to different native phonemes, it can be argued, that an analogue assimilation takes place between speakers of different varieties.

The overview shows a substantial number of HRT events in the introduction, displayed in the auto pitch graph below (Figure 3). The introduction text is transcribed in Figure 4. The single events are broken down in Figures 4 to 7.

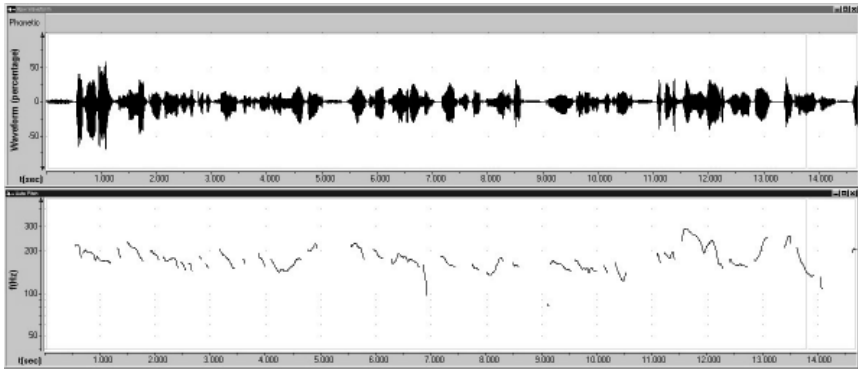
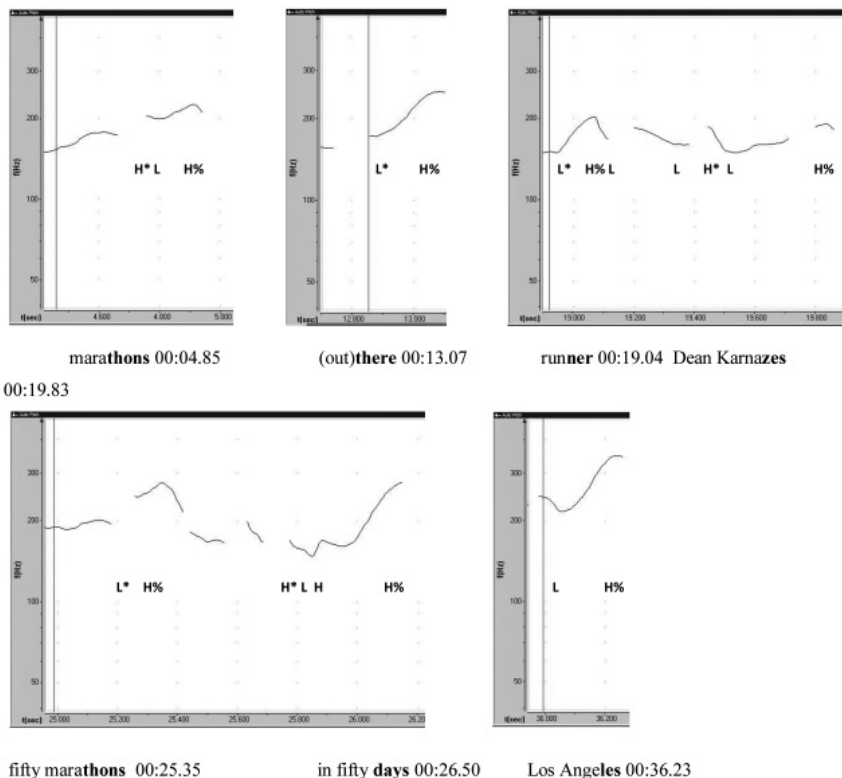


Figure 3: HRT events in the ABC sample: Overview introduction, AusE speaker (female)

- (2) *Right now, though, you've seen those painful images of people crawling over the finish line in **marathons**. Forty-two kilometers of blood, sweat and more sweat and in the end, maybe a few tears. But there is a whole new world of pain out **there**: ultra-marathons; races of up to two-hundred and seventeen kilometers. US ultra-marathon runner **Dean Karnazes** puts his body on the line for the rush of the long distance run. He has completed fifty **marathons** in fifty **days**. He has competed in the world's hardest ultra-marathons nine times and right now, as we go to air, he is running across the United States. Yep, he's started in **Los Angeles**, he wants to finish in New York. Ali Benton caught up with Jean Ka-- Dean Karnazes just over the half-way mark in Missouri.*
(The Ultra-Marathon Man, ABC Radio National)

The breakdown of the single HRT event follows. The introductory part alone has seven separate HRT events over approximately 40 seconds, which is more than one HRT event every six seconds.

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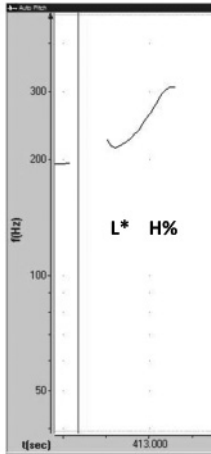
Figures 4-8: Pre-interview pitch distribution of HRT events in roughly 40s AusE sample

The graphs in Figures 4-8 show an impressive array of HRTs for the AusE speaker in the non-interactive introductory part, the most salient being the high rise in Figure 8 (*Los Angeles*) substantially out of the average pitch range of this individual speaker (ca. 340Hz) while the average rises never exceed 300Hz (cf. Figure 3).

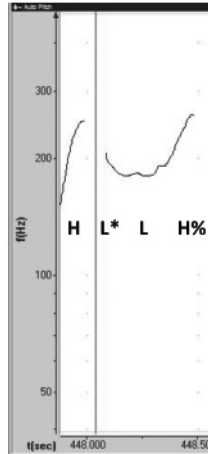
The question arises as a conclusion, of how the HRT events are distributed across the actual interview. Interesting are again the declarative HRTs as there are only few *yes/no* interrogations in the interview itself. The PAM leaves two options (and one non-option) if an adaptation shall take place at all:

- a) The AmE speaker adapts to the perceptible rises of the AusE speaker; b) the AusE speaker adapts to the HRT-free speech of the AmE speaker; or c) no change occurs under influence of interactivity.

The results of the interview show that the male interviewee, a native speaker of AmE uses no HRTs at all and neither does the female AusE interviewer.



weeks 06:53.00



in your life 07:28.50

Figures 9-10: Off-question and post-interview pitch distribution of HRT events

The results can be summarized as follows: the HRTs represent a salient and frequent feature in the speech of the Australian English speaker. All recorded HRT events concern declarative utterances, no interrogation HRTs were studied, the sample does not contain any *yes/no* questions (were HRTs can be expected). HRTs are absent from the speech of the American English speaker. However: all HRT events occur in the off-interview phase, i.e. pre-interview, in the introduction and post-interview. Thus, in the discourse situation that would make the use of HRTs the most plausible (interactivity, checking for attention, encouragement of engagement) the HRT is absent. The Australian Interview Tone disappears when the interviewee is a speaker of a non-HRT variety, the interviewer adapts to the interviewee. As a criticism of the impressionistic method employed here, more samples should be studied in order to investigate whether an adaptation takes place for a larger sample.

4 Conclusion

The analysis of the data shows a normal distribution of HRT events for the AusE speaker in the introduction of the discourse, i.e. before the actual interview starts. Thus, this represents the baseline data for the individual speaker and it is the more surprising that the HRT events in the actual interview diminish and finally come to a halt. As has been shown, the original function of the Australian Interview Tone is retained throughout the introduction phase where no interactivity takes place and thus the HRT events cannot be directed at the interviewee. Contrary, the HRT events are directed either at a non-responsive radio audience and/or serve a function for the interviewer herself. Thus, the constant re-checking or invitation of confirmation or disagreement as proposed by McGregor and Palethorpe (2008) could not be substantiated. This is evidenced by the study of the actual interview which means the most natural situation – a situation that not only involves but requires interactivity – for any application of the HRT in fact contains very few HRT events.

This allows for the following conclusions.

a) The HRT has become a feature to characterize a speech style of AusE (and NZE) speakers independently of its socio-demographic roots and stigmatization. This is evidenced by its common use on Australian National radio. It is further evidenced by the progress of HRT events in the speech of immigrants to Australia where it seems to be mainly adopted by speakers with Greek origin. As has been noted elsewhere, Greeks in Australia adhere mostly to standards, compared with other groups such as Italians and Lebanese (cf. Horvath & Horvath 2001, 2002).

b) The HRT finds few applications in actual interview situations. Thus, the proposed function to elicit interactivity remains unused in exactly the situation that would require it.

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Sample source

The Ultra Marathon Man, broadcast Friday 8 April 2011 6:35AM, reporter: Ali Benton. Permalink: <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/the-ultra-marathon-man/3004414>