

The Distinctive Function of Request Contours in a Jordanian Dialect

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating the role of request intonation in differentiating between the literal meaning of some daily used forms and their indirect request counterparts. The forms are taken from Irbid dialect which is located at the northern part of Jordan. Two speakers of Irbid Arabic dialect recorded 30 utterances containing indirect forms of request. The forms are classified into apologetic and interrogative forms of requests. Following the autosegmental-metrical approach, proposed by Pierrehumbert (1980), the intonational contours are represented into events. Results show that the intonational pattern of request which has a major role in accommodating between a literal pattern of apology or interrogation and the indirect meaning of request and a minor role in delimiting the speaker-hearer relation.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we offer an acoustic analysis to the intonational pattern and variation that spread over utterances which deliver indirectly the performative act of request in Irbid Arabic dialect (IAD). This dialect is spoken by people living in Irbid city at the northern part of Jordan. This helps us in determining to what extent prosodic features have a distinctive role. In other words, what are the patterns that need to be accompanied by a specific intonational pattern or some prosodic modifications in order to indicate request. This will add to the literature written about intonation and its significance in encoding/decoding the speaker's intended message.

Previous research on request intonation targets three main conclusions. Intonation accommodates between a grammatical pattern and the intention of request (Mahadin and Jaradat, 2011). Intonational patterns have no decoding function without associating it to a congruent request context (Wichmann, 2002). In this way intonation has a complementary function to the primary effect of the context. The last view focuses on the influence of global parameters such as, pitch register and span since speakers normally tend to modify rather than replace the prosodic pattern at once (Isabel and Isabel, 2007).

The paper is outlined as follows: The next section is designed to review some of the recent studies conducted to illustrate request intonation patterns and variations and their distinctive significance. In section 3, we report previous results on the intonation of request in Irbid Arabic dialect. Section 4 outlines data collection and analysis. Section 5 discusses the results, and section 6 concludes the role of intonation as a marker distinguishing between the literal meaning and the indirect act of request.

2. STUDIES ON INTONATION-REQUEST INTERACTION

Wichmann, A. (2002) tries to investigate the attitudinal or affective meaning the intonational patterns set to convey. She claims that those prosodic patterns are not intrinsically attitudinal, but they could indicate an attitudinal effect by their incongruence with the context.

She focuses on polite requests and their conventionalized contours. After identifying (88) tokens of please-requests in initial, mid and final position, the most common pattern is the request with a final position “please”. This pattern is associated with H% or L% boundary tones. They indicate a request in private and public situations respectively. Sentence-initial please with rising intonation or H* L% contour is used in informal situations, but when the contour is falling, the situation is formal and the speaker is more powerful. The falling-rising contour is used as an appeal or plea more than a request.

Isabel, F. and Isabel, H.(2007) identifies the intonational features of European Portuguese imperative sentences in association with the directive speech acts: orders and requests. They come up with the fact that intonation contour shape of orders and requests are similar, but the significant difference is in terms of global parameters. In other words, orders have wider pitch span and register.

Isabel, A. and Santos, A. (2011) seek to identify the intonational patterns of confirmation-seeking interrogative requests in European Portuguese. They classify confirmation-seeking request into confirmation of perception and confirmation of understanding. The former pattern aims at confirming what the speaker actually uttered, and the latter is directed towards asking about specific content in a previous utterance. After analyzing (301) examples of confirmation-seeking requests uttered by three adults and answered by two children, they reach that confirmation-seeking requests are not associated to a single intonation pattern. Confirmation of understanding requests are associated with L*+H. H*, L+H* occur in confirmation of perception requests.

3. REVIEW OF WORK ON INTONATION OF REQUEST IN IAD

In a recent study (Mahadin and Jaradat, 2011), we touch upon some instances of request in IAD and their intonation patterns and variations. However, request is embedded under the umbrella of directive speech acts and the number of request utterances is less than enough to cover the possible forms that could be noticed through observing everyday speech.

Imperatives and interrogatives are the only grammatical patterns that are examined. The results show that imperatives are associated with (H* L-H%) pattern, and interrogatives are lent (L* L-H%) pattern to indicate request. In both cases, these patterns are essential in the absence of some markers such as, “law samaHit” (please) to convey request meaning. Logically speaking, the more the utterances to be examined is the bigger the possibility to obtain a deeper insight into intonation-request interaction.

In this paper, we analyze the recorded request utterances acoustically after putting the informants in a role-play. Then, we examine the situations in which intonation performs its distinctive function in the absence of contextual factors.

4. DATA

The corpus of request utterances that are collected through observation by the researchers themselves are given to two participants to act role-plays. They imagine the situations the researchers provide and explain to them. The indirect forms of requests are apologetic request, interrogative request and swearing. The intonational patterns and the global parameters, if necessary, of the collected utterances are acoustically analyzed using Praat software and represented using the autosegmental-metrical framework by Pierrehumbert (1980). The possible pitch accent and phrase accent/boundary tone types are listed as:

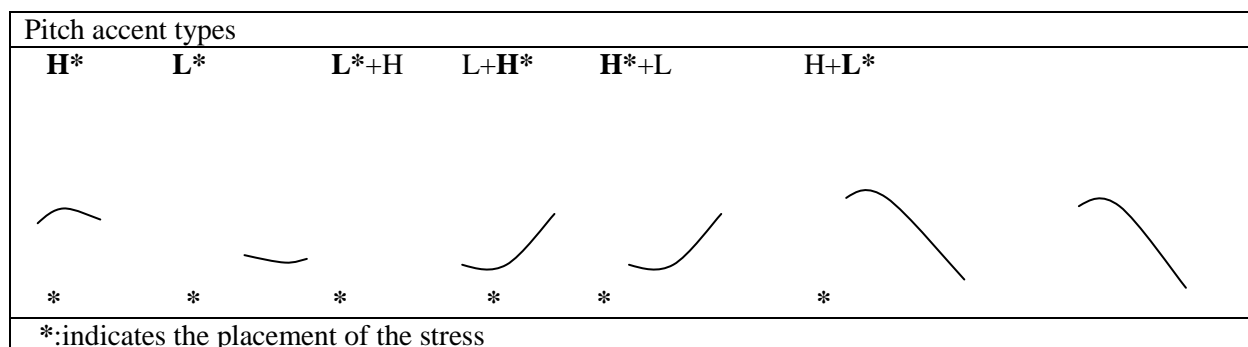


Figure 1: Transcription to autosegmental pitch accents proposed by Pierrehumbert (1980).

Boundary tones					
L%	H%	L-H%	H-L%	L-L%	H-H%

Figure 2: Transcription to autosegmental boundary tones proposed by Pierrehumbert (1980).

Analyzing the informant’s utterances acoustically doesn’t provide a body of evidence to test the role of intonation. The utterances are read by one of the informants in their grammatical intonation patterns one time and their indirect counterparts to see the effect of them on the other participant.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. Apologetic forms of request:

To measure the significance of the intonational pattern of indirect apologetic request in defining the intended meaning, it has been compared to the literally apologetic counterpart. One of the most occurring patterns of apology which may have an indirect sense of request is that initiated with “ma’alif” (forgive me). The following two graphs explicitly offer the intonational pattern that spread over the direct apology and indirect apologetic request respectively.

Figure1. [*maʕalif samiHni halmarra*] “forgive me this time”.

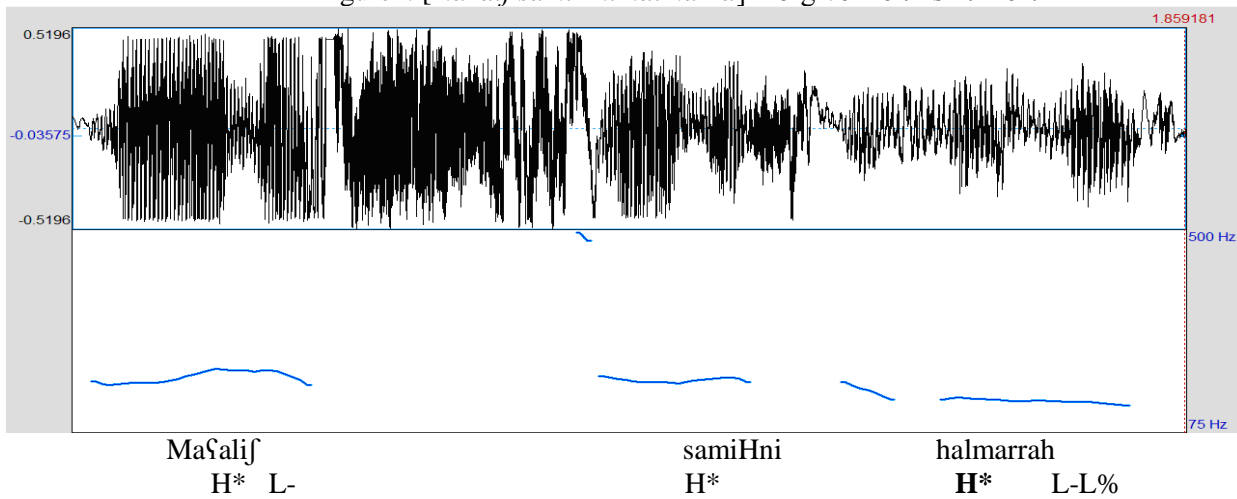
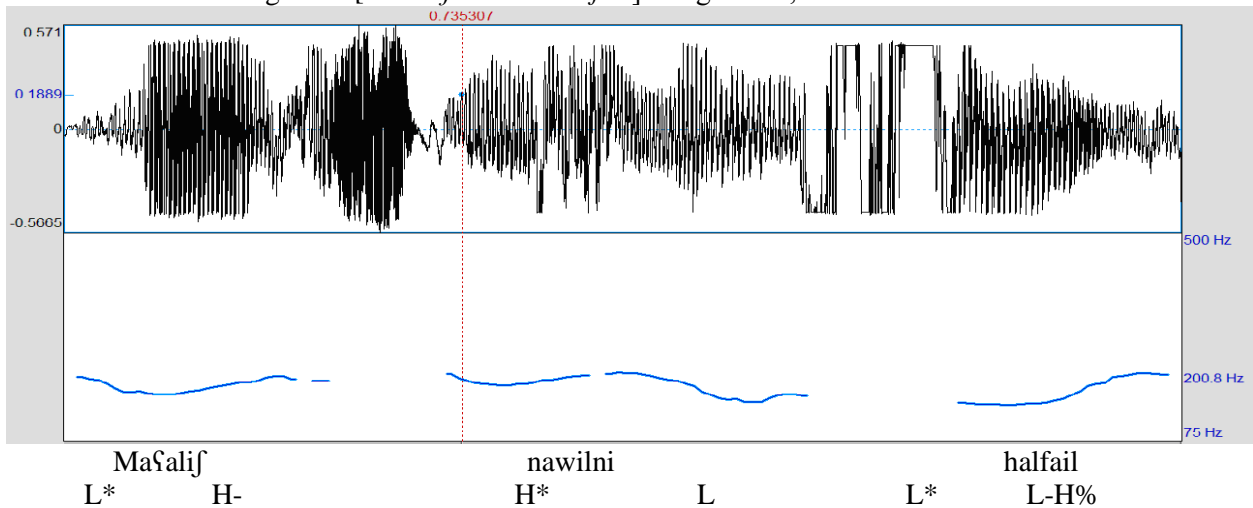


Figure 2. [*maʕalif nawilni halfail*] “forgive me, hand me this file”.

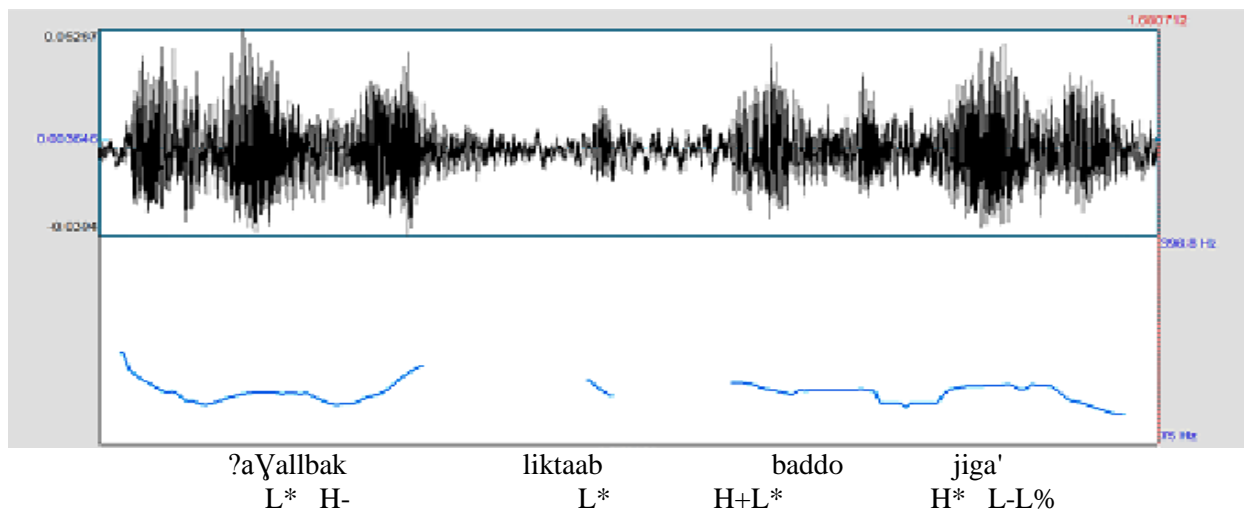


It seems to be clear that “maʕaliʕ” phrase in both utterances has different intonational contours. In the second figure, the contour rises (relatively high to the pitch range) at the end of “maʕaliʕ” to form (L* H-) pattern. This tune, which followed by a pause, introduces a request in the second intonational phrase rather than a literal apology. In other words, the hearer could expect that this tune has a request meaning. The same pattern of request recurs at the end of the last intonational phrase. In contrast with that, the grammatical apologetic tune, in figure 1, falls at the end of the first and second intonational phrase to form (H* L-L%) pattern.

Since the apologetic request initiated by “maʕaliʕ” has the same intonational pattern of the second intonational phrase and differs from the falling apologetic pattern, the speaker has the choice to accompany “maʕaliʕ” with a nominal phrase or direct order. For example, he could say, “maʕaliʕ, halfail” (forgive me, the file). The apologetic expression is followed by the nominal phrase “halfail”. In both cases, the hearer could easily predict the embedded directive meaning. In some cases, the hearer could depend on the situational context to understand the speaker’s request with giving little attention to the apologetic request pattern. But sometimes, the situation is not clear enough to perceive the intended meaning of request. This could be best exemplified when a person is standing behind another one and wants him to step aside to pass. If the speaker uses the apologetic intonational pattern over “maʕaliʕ”, the hearer will understand it literally as an apology. This situation directly converges with the following conclusion in case there is no verb of order after “maʕaliʕ” indicating request. Intonation accommodates between a grammatical pattern and the intention of request is determined by changing the intonational pattern rather than modifying the global parameters.

Another apologetic form that is used to introduce a request is “ʔaʕalbak” (I burden you). Although this form has an apologetic sense, but it is conventionally understood as a polite request. The following figure shows the final rise which appears at the end of both intonational phrases.

Figure 3. [ʔaʕalbak liktaab baddo jigaʕ] "forgive me the book will fall".



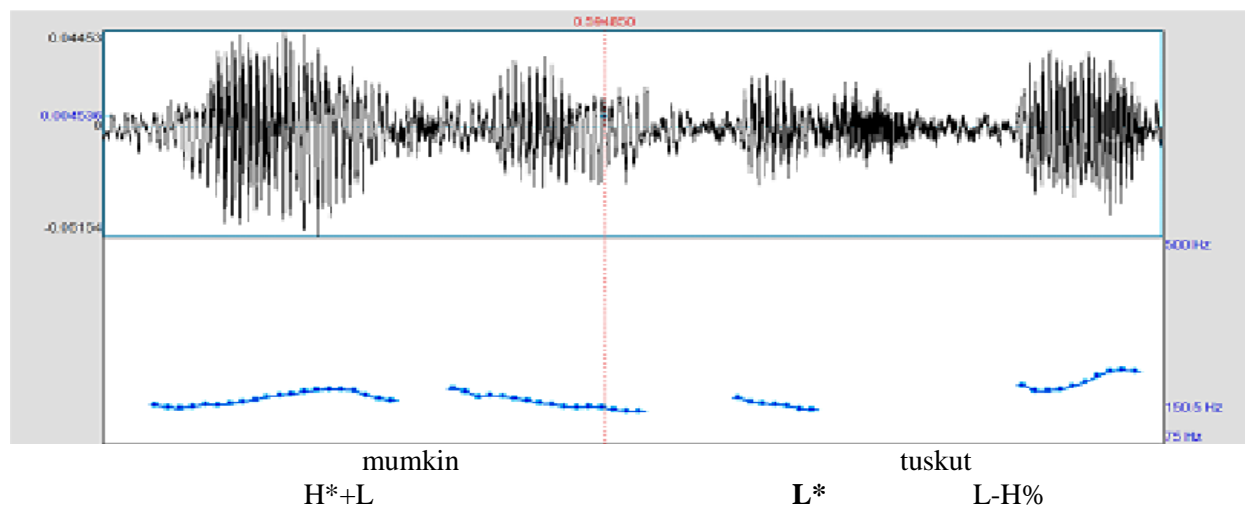
Since this apologetic form is perceived as a request, intonation has little to do in defining the intended meaning. In other words, the tune spreading over the utterance indicates the degree of politeness of request. The first intonational phrase “ʔaʕalbak” has a low pitch accent followed by a high phrase accent. In addition to the final rising to a midpoint of the pitch range, the tune could end with an upstepped (H- H%) boundary tones. Upstepped tones usually introduce yes/no question in Arabic, but in this utterance it is used to convey a higher degree of politeness. This conclusion converges with the claim that tune configurations accommodate the utterance with its context and speaker-hearer relation. If the speaker is lower, for example in rank, his utterance is expected to be accompanied with a very high fundamental frequency. On the other hand, the second intonational phrase “liktaab baddo jigaʕ” ((the book is about to fall) should have a rising tune to a mid point in case it is not preceded by the apologetic request form “ʔaʕalbak”.

5.2. Interrogative forms of request

Basically, “mumkin” (is it possible) introduces an utterance that asks about the possibility of something to happen. For example, “mumkin tiʕti” (could it rain?) asks about the possibility if it will rain. This yes/no question has an L* H-H% pattern.

On the other hand, “mumkin tuskut” does not ask about the possibility, but it is rather indicates the speaker’s request to stop the talk. It has H* L-L% order pattern, if it is uttered by a speaker who is higher in position than the hearer or they have no distance between them like friends. But if they have a formal speech, the speaker will normally use L* L-H% pattern as illustrated in the following figure:

Figure 4. [mumkin tuskut] "could you be silent".



As a result, the intonational pattern of request clearly distinguishes the performative act in contrast with L* H-H% yes/no question and H* L-L% order patterns.

Another form that is used to ask to do something is “btismaH” (would you allow). It is also used to ask for permission, for example, in “btismaH ?ag’od” (can I have a seat?). However, it serves as a polite request in “btismaH ?itGayyir ?ilmawDuu” (could you change the topic?). Although the last utterance indicates politeness, it may serve also as an order when it is accompanied with H* L-L%. As a consequence of that, the expression “btisamaH” may lose its politeness meaning if it has an order tune. Anyways, “btisamaH” has a sense of request, and then the intonational pattern of request delimits the degree of politeness. It contradicts with “mumkin” which basically asking about possibility and needs to be accompanied with L* L-H% pattern to be perceived as a request.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study is an attempt to investigate the role of intonation in delimiting the indirect act of request for some Arabic forms used in (IAD). The forms which are collected through observation are classified into apologetic and interrogative forms of request. The apologetic forms are “maʕaliʕ” (forgive me) and “ʔaʕallabak” (I burden you), and the interrogative ones are “mumkin” (is it possible) and “btismaH” (would you allow). The results show that the intonational pattern of request which is L* L-L% accommodates between a literal pattern of apology or interrogation and the indirect meaning of request. And it has a minor role in delimiting the speaker-hearer relation. “ʔaʕallabak” is the only form which is conventionally perceived as a request, and then any tune configuration is related to the domain of politeness.

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Phonetic symbols
Consonants

symbols	Description
/h/	voiced glottal fricative
/ʔ/	voiceless glottal stop
/ħ/	voiceless pharyngeal fricative
/g/	voiced velar stop
/ɣ/	voiced uvular fricative
/q/	voiceless uvular stop
/x/	voiceless velar fricative
/ð/	voiced dental fricative
/θ/	voiceless inter-dental fricative
/ʕ/	voiced pharyngeal fricative
/k/	voiceless velar stop
/ʃ/	voiceless post-alveolar fricative
/tʃ/	voiceless palato-alveolar affricate
/ d ʒ/	voiced palate-alveolar affricate
/r/	voiced alveolar liquid
/j/	voiced palatal glide
/z/	voiced alveolar fricative
/s/	voiceless alveolar fricative
/S/	voiceless alveolar emphatic fricative
/d/	voiced dental stop
/t/	voiceless dental stop
/T/	voiceless dental emphatic stop
/f/	voiceless labio-dental fricative
/b/	voiced bilabial stop
/m/	voiced bilabial nasal
/n/	voiced alveolar nasal
/l/	voiced alveolar lateral
/w/	voiced labio-velar glide

Vowels

/i/ high front short unrounded	/ii/ high front long unrounded
/e/ mid front short unrounded	/ee/ mid front long unrounded
/o/ mid back short rounded	/oo/ mid back long rounded
/u/ high back short rounded	/uu/ high back long rounded
/a/ low central short unrounded	/aa/ low central long unrounded