Social Meaning and Intonation: Rising Contours in Mexican Spanish

Rebeca Martínez Gómez
(University of New Mexico)

This study presents the first acoustic analysis of a unique form of rising intonation at the end of declarative clauses in a style of Mexican Spanish associated with a social group known in Mexico as *fresas* (lit. "strawberries"). This group has been perceived as privileged Mexican youth who have an expensive lifestyle and behave pretentiously (Mendoza-Denton 2008), broadly comparable to "valley girls". The results of a pilot perception study of *fresa* style point to intonation as one of the most salient features, specifically, rising intonation in declarative clauses. This confirms Holguin's (2011) observation that the *fresa* style includes the use of an LH% boundary tone in broad focus declaratives, roughly equivalent to what is known as high rising terminal intonation (or "HRT", e.g., Fletcher, Grabe & Warren 2005). This feature is salient in Mexican Spanish, as it is in English, because this boundary tone is typically used in yes/no questions (De la Mota et al. 2010). This study demonstrates that there are two forms of this pitch contour in Mexican Spanish, only one of which is associated with the *fresa* style, thus indicating that "HRT" is not a unified intonational category but one that may differ in fine phonetic detail.

The data analyzed comes from a conversational corpus of Guadalajara Mexican Spanish. 10 speakers ranging in age from 25 to 35, 5 female and 5 male, were rated by twenty native speakers of Mexican Spanish as to the degree to which they sounded 'fresa'. Then, 50 declarative sentences with nuclear pitch accent in final position were analyzed from each of the 10 speakers. The 500 resulting tokens were categorized into three acoustic types, following Podesva's (2011) methodology: falls, levels, or rises, based on f0 measurements in *Praat*. The maximum and minimum f0, the f0 range, and the duration and slope of the rising contours were measured. Finally, the discourse frequency of final rises and their particular acoustic characteristics were correlated with the style ratings that each speaker received.

The results show that the speakers rated as most 'fresa' sounding are actually not those who use rising intonation in full declarative sentences most frequently (they use it only in 10% of the sentences). Speakers rated as low on the *fresa* scale produced more rising contours (22%). However, there is a clear qualitative difference between the rises produced by users and non-users of the *fresa* style, which lies in the f0 range and slope. Speakers perceived as 'fresa' produced rises that double in frequency from their minimum to their maximum f0 in a shorter time, resulting in a very steep slope. These results show that there is not a single HRT, but that there are variants of this category that are demonstrably different acoustically and can have different social meanings. Also, the results confirm that the perceptual salience and the potential for a phonetic feature to gain social meaning may lie in its *lack* of frequency of use, as argued by Podesva 2011.

References

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