High Rising Terminal (HRT) in Job Interview and Impact on Employability in Southern California
Reconsideration of categorization of powerful vs. powerless language

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Introduction

What is HRT?
The high rising terminal (HRT) intonation, colloquially called uptalk, is a way of speaking in which declarative sentences are uttered with rising intonation as if they were questions.

1) HRT as one of “women’s language” features. It leads to impression of uncertainty and deference (Lakoff, 1993)
2) HRT as “powerless language” used by lower social status people, (O’Barr and Atkins, 1980)
3) HRT as a positive discourse strategy being used for “involvement and participation” (McLemore, 1991)
4) HRT as “a marker of positive politeness towards the addressee for cooperativeness and solidarity” (Britain, 1992)

The purpose of the study
The purpose of this study is to explore how people in Southern California perceive HRT of American English.

Research question
How do undergraduate students in Southern California perceive a user of HRT of American English in the context of the fictitious job interview?

Research hypothesis
A native speaker of American English who uses HRT in the fictitious job interview will be evaluated as less employable than the one who does not use HRT despite receiving a higher rating on the interpersonal-oriented aspect.

Method

Step 1 Obtain two short speech samples: one of which contains HRT and the other contains no HRT. They were obtained by fictitious role play of job-interview between the researcher whose role is a interviewer and two Native Californian females whose role is a interviewee. To verify the existence of the HRT scientifically, computer software Praat was used.

Step 2 Conduct Survey: Respondents (14 male and 32 female undergraduate students) were asked to listen to each of the speech samples and rate speaker’s employability and other related variables: interpersonal-oriented variables, personal-status-oriented variables, personal-oriented variables on Likert-type 5-point scales.

Step 3 Conduct Interview: Interviews were conducted with 10 (5 males and 5 females) volunteered individuals to explore those quantitative results in more depth. The researcher recruited them on the campus of California State University, Long Beach.

Results from Survey

Table 1.1: The description of imagined HRT user written by respondents of each condition.

Table 1.2: The description of imagined HRT user written by respondents of each condition.

Table 2.1: The description of imagined non-HRT user written by respondents of each condition.

Table 2.2: The description of imagined non-HRT user written by respondents of each condition.

Results from Interview

Conclusions

The survey revealed negative aspect of HRT:
- Both male and female respondents rated lower on HRT user in all interpersonal-oriented variables, personal-status-oriented variables, and personal-oriented variables.
- Both male and female respondents also rated HRT user significantly lower.

However,
- The interview revealed positive aspect of HRT:
  - HRT is used for group solidarity, engagement, and involvement and, at the same time, people have status, such as bosses in the workplace, use it as controlling strategy.

Therefore,
- The user of HRT is not limited to Valley Girls or people who have lower status. On the contrary, it is also practiced by those who have status and power.

Questions raised

1) Why do interviewees perceive the use of HRT by their bosses as controlling and persuasive?

I argue that this strategy is successful only when there is some degree of familiarity between the speaker and the hearer and the hearer understands such meaning as a cue. In other words, if someone who does not share the meaning behind HRT, the hearer may not receive it as persuasive or controlling, instead she may receive it as uncertainty.

2) Who did the respondents in the survey rate HRT user very severely?

I argue that the level of familiarity in the nature of job-interview may explain it. In the job interview the level of familiarity is extremely high and usually the interviewer and interviewee meet each other for the first time. In such a context neither engagement aspect of HRT nor controlling aspect of HRT is needed in order to be considered more employable. In other words, no matter how it is used, HRT may not be a useful strategy in the case of job interview.

In Conclusion,
- the categorization of powerful speech or powerless speech style may be problematic.
- HRT is used both by higher status and lower status people and both men and women also use it, even though more women use it. What needs to be considered then is the context: the level of familiarity and the familiarity between speaker and hearer. It is very complex and depending on the context HRT can be powerful or powerless.

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