

# At the talk face 4

**Mark Hancock**

## Tonality: dividing text into tone units

When we think of intonation, perhaps the first aspect which comes to mind is **tone** - the melody of the voice going up or down. However, there are other important aspects of intonation. In At the talk face 1, we looked at **tonicity** - the placement of tonic stress within a tone unit. In this edition, we look at **tonality** - the division of text into chunks, or tone units. Like tonicity, tonality is acknowledged to be necessary for intelligibility in EFL, as well as ESL and ELF, and inappropriate chunking can radically alter the sense of what you are saying. The following activities are intended to raise students' awareness of this fact.

## 1 Funny signs and notices

Words and punctuation are often missed out of signs and notices for the sake of brevity. Sometimes, this can make the meaning of the message ambiguous and the second, unintended meaning may be funny. Consider this sign, from a car park:

PARKING FOR KENTUCKY  
FRIED CUSTOMERS ONLY

Obviously, the intended meaning is that the car park is reserved for customers of a fast food shop called Kentucky Fried. However, the sign could also be read to mean that the car park is reserved for customers who have been fried! Notice that if you read the sign aloud, you can distinguish between these two meanings by the way you break the message into tone groups. This is illustrated below by the slash symbol / .

*Intended meaning* - PARKING FOR KENTUCKY FRIED / CUSTOMERS ONLY

*Funny meaning* - PARKING FOR KENTUCKY / FRIED CUSTOMERS ONLY

Write the sign on the board and read out the message in the two ways, asking students to identify which way you are saying it. Then give them the ambiguous signs 1-8 opposite, ask them to explain what the intended and funny meanings are, and then decide if and where slash symbols should be inserted to produce the two meanings.

## 2 Contact details

Chunking can be very important in spelling out names and giving contact details in general. For example, notice that the contact details of the person in the conversation opposite could be written down in two different ways according to how the speaker pronounces them. These alternatives are indicated as A and B.

You could do a minimal pair activity with the A-B alternatives in the box opposite. Read out one of the alternatives, asking the students to identify it as A or B each time. Then you could ask them to do it in pairs within the context of a mini-conversation such as the one above. The person asking should write down the details they hear, and at the end, the person giving the details can check the listener has written them down as intended.

## 3 Punctuation dictation

Often, intonation is the phonological equivalent of punctuation. This can be most clearly demonstrated where you have two sentences which are identical except for the punctuation. Write the following pair of sentences on the board and elicit the difference in meaning. Then read them out aloud for students to hear the difference in pronunciation, with the audible comma in the second.

The Beatles wrote "Michelle".

"The Beatles", wrote Michelle.

Now read aloud the pairs of sentences 1-8 opposite and ask students to write what they hear, including the punctuation. Finally, ask students to read aloud one or the other sentence from each pair for their partner to identify.

## 4 Chunking a text

Take a text which would typically be spoken, such as a speech or a joke. Choose one which is rich in commas, for example containing direct speech, non-defining relative clauses, conditional sentences and comment adjectives. The joke opposite is an example. Give the text to the students without any kind of punctuation (and without the sentence-initial capitals) and ask them to prepare to read it aloud by adding punctuation. Then get them to rehearse saying it making sure they pronounce the punctuation.

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### 1 Funny signs and notices

1 By a road:

CHILDREN DRIVE SLOWLY

2 Outside a shopping centre:

NO DOGS EATING BICYCLES

3 In a safari park:

LIONS PLEASE STAY IN YOUR CAR

4 Outside a restaurant:

LIVE LOBSTERS DANCING NIGHTLY

5 Outside a bread shop:

WE BAKE OURSELVES TWICE DAILY

6 By a road:

SLOW PEDESTRIANS WALKING

7 In a newspaper:

DOGS FOR SALE  
EAT ANYTHING  
LIKE CHILDREN

8 Outside a clothes shop:

WE HAVE BUTTON-FLY JEANS  
OPEN TILL LATE

### 2 Contact details

- Can you spell your name, please?
- A. A-N-N-A M-A-I-A B. A-N-N A-M-A-I-A
- And where do you live?
- A. Buckingham Palace Road B. Buckingham (Palace Road)
- And your phone number?
- A. 928 8227 B. 92 88 227
- And do you know your postcode?
- A. Yes, it's W116 9FT B. Yes, it's W11 69FT

	A	B
name	ANNA MAIA JON ORTH	ANN AMAIA JO NORTH
street	Buckingham Palace Road	Buckingham (Palace Road)
phone	Newgate High Street 928 8227	Newgate (High Street) 92 88 227
post-code	610 82 72 65 W116 9FT CA15 3HQ	61 082 7265 W11 69FT CA1 53HQ

### 3 Punctuation dictation

- 1 "Who?", said Tom.  
Who said "Tom"?
- 2 Mum called the dentist.  
"Mum!", called the dentist.
- 3 Where are you? Having lunch?  
Where are you having lunch?
- 4 I can see it's wonderful.  
I can see! It's wonderful!
- 5 What can't you understand?  
What? Can't you understand?
- 6 "What's the question", he asked.  
What's the question he asked?
- 7 Listen carefully. Write this down.  
Listen. Carefully write this down.
- 8 I'm leaving soon. You'll be alone.  
I'm leaving. Soon you'll be alone.
- 9 I like you, to be honest.  
I like you to be honest.

### 4 Chunking a text

a monkey walks into a bar and says have you got any bananas the barman says no we haven't sorry and the monkey leaves the next day the same thing happens again and the next day and the day after that finally the barman gets angry and says if you ask me that again I'll nail your tail to the floor the next day the monkey comes in and says have you got any nails the barman who is surprised by this new question says nails no I haven't got any of those good says the monkey have you got any bananas

*Suggested answer.*

*A monkey walks into a bar and says, "Have you got any bananas?". The barman says, "No, we haven't, sorry" and the monkey leaves. The next day, the same thing happens again. And the next day, and the day after that. Finally, the barman gets angry and says "If you ask me that again, I'll nail your tail to the floor!". The next day, the monkey comes in and says, "Have you got any nails?". The barman, who is surprised by this new question, says, "Nails? No, I haven't got any of those". "Good", says the monkey, "Have you got any bananas?".*