

Teaching unit 13: Uptalk in London English

Background

Lorna and Rachel are two young White British women from London. In this extract, they are telling a story to their friend (another young White British woman from London) about what happened to them on Thursday night. Lorna and Rachel's extract illustrates the typical use of 'uptalk' – rising intonational contours in declarative sentences – among young women in the southeast of England.

Lorna's use of uptalk can be contrasted with how Lucas (a young White British man) uses the feature in his conversation with Hannah (a young White British woman) when he describes a skateboarding accident he had a number of years before. Lucas' speech illustrates the typical use of uptalk among young men in the region.

Together, the two extracts demonstrate the conversational functions that uptalk performs in the speech of young people in London, and a few subtle differences that can be observed in how women and men use this style of speaking.

Audio, transcript and links to relevant Linguistics Research Digest articles are available at:

<http://www.teachrealenglish.org/teaching-units/13-uptalk-in-london/>

Discussion points

Narrative Structure — 'Thursday night' transcript

Understanding some of the common elements of a conversational narrative, or story, provides a basis for making sense of how uptalk is used by these young Londoners. The **abstract** (a brief opening summary of what is to come) to the story is provided succinctly by Lorna in line 1, where she summarises the "brainwave" that she and Rachel had on Thursday night. Lorna immediately transitions into what is called an **orientation**, providing background information about the concert they went to (lines 2-8). This orientation is interspersed with brief moments of narrative **evaluation**, justifying why the two women went to the concert: "did a free gig" (line 6) and "all you had to do was just sign up" (line 7). Rachel concurs with this evaluation (line 9), but Lorna then changes tack, claiming that they went because "he is a really good singer" (line 11). Lorna then moves on to the main **complicating actions** of the narrative (lines 13-23), where she describes how they went to the concert, how it only lasted 30 minutes, and how they then decided to leave. Again, she intersperses the complicating actions with a series of evaluation clauses, emphasising that 30 minutes isn't very long for a concert (line 14), how the concert took place in a posh hotel in Soho (lines 19-20), and how Lorna and Rachel felt awkward being there (lines 22-23). Rachel concludes the story with a brief final evaluation and **resolution** (lines 24-25).

Uptalk — 'Thursday night' transcript

In the extract, Lorna is the primary user of uptalk. Her uses of uptalk cluster at points in the story where she is evaluating or justifying her actions, and in particular when she asserts authority over the telling of the story. For example, in line 9 Rachel asserts her right to justify why they went to the concert, claiming that they did so because it was free. Lorna agrees with her, but then also offers an alternative justification, stating that they went because MNEK is a really good singer. Lorna uses uptalk when making this claim, as she does at other evaluative moments of the narrative. Recent research has shown that Lorna's use of uptalk in this way is representative of how young women in London use the feature: They use it most often when they are asserting their right to organise the

way that a story will be framed and told, in a sense to persuade the listener of their perspective. This is slightly different to how young men typically use the feature, discussed below.

Narrative Structure — ‘Big scar’ transcript

Lucas begins his story in line 1 with a brief **abstract**, before moving to a quick **orientation** (line 3) and **evaluation** (line 6). Lines 9-20 provide the **complicating actions**, where Lucas describes how the lump on his forehead turned out to be a stone that the first surgeon had neglected to remove.

Uptalk — ‘Big scar’ transcript

Unlike Lorna, Lucas uses uptalk primarily during complicating actions, not evaluations. What’s more, his use of the feature coincides with points in his narrative where he is recounting particularly surprising or exceptional facts. Lucas’ use of uptalk in this extract is representative of how young men in London normally use the feature: They use it most often when telling stories about themselves (especially when the story is addressed to young women) as a way to draw attention to the things that happened to them. Unlike young women in London, who most often use uptalk to exercise conversational and narrative control, young men use it to bolster their sense of connection and affiliation with their interlocutors and to present themselves as interesting people.

Uptalk and Gender in London

In Erez Levon’s research (see the link above to the Linguistics Research Digest summary), both women and men in London were found to use uptalk, with men actually using the feature more often in certain contexts than women do. The popular stereotype that uptalk is something that only women do is therefore incorrect (it does, however, seem to be more prevalent among younger people and people of White British heritage). But while they both use it, women and men employ uptalk in conversation to fulfil distinct functions. For women, uptalk is more structuring how a story is told and ensuring that the uptalk user’s perspective is maintained. For men, uptalk is instead about drawing attention to the personal qualities of the uptalk user himself and encouraging others in the conversation to like and admire those qualities. Both of these uses are so-called “positive politeness” strategies, namely strategies that signal liking and friendship, but they differ in ways that are linked to wider norms of gendered behaviour.