

## Above and Beyond Intonation Units

Wallace Chafe  
*University of California, Santa Barbara*

Language begins and ends with thoughts, and they are the force that drives language forward. Linguistics, however, has devoted significantly more attention to sound-based rather than thought-based phenomena. Sounds have the advantage of being publicly observable and tractable to analysis, whereas thoughts are internal and difficult to get a handle on. Yet a linguistics that ignores the determining role of thoughts is like the man who looks for his keys under a street lamp because the light is better there, even though he dropped them in a dark corner.

A sound-based approach may locate the minimal units of speech in intonation units, while a thought-based approach may understand intonation units as the expression of minimal ideas, which include ideas of events and states along with ideas of the entities that participate in them. Intonation units suggest that a new idea is activated every second or two. This pattern may reflect a relatively primitive level of cognitive processing, beyond which the evolution of human experience has created a need to deal with thoughts of greater complexity and scope. Language suggests several levels larger than that of minimal ideas.

It is useful, first of all, to distinguish ideas, on which the capacity limitations of intonation units are based, from minimal thoughts, which very often coincide with ideas at the intonation unit level. The fact that they do not always coincide is illustrated in this example from a "pear story" (Chafe ed. 1980):

- (a) And there's this sort of ... Látin-looking,
- (b) middle-aged mán,

Intonation unit (a) expressed the idea of being Latin-looking, and (b) the idea of a middle-aged man. Each of these ideas was new, and thus necessarily occupied its own intonation unit. But the act of introducing this person constituted a single thought that straddled those two ideas. Minimal thoughts perform various functions worth identifying, among them the introduction of a new entity as in this case, or of an action as in "he's picking pears," or of a categorization as in "it's a small orchard," as well as others to be discussed.

A more complex thought may be realized in a sequence of intonation units whose termination is signalled with sentence-final prosody and usually, though not always, syntactic closure. Elsewhere I have called these larger thought complexes "centers of interest" (Chafe 1994). They are typically realized in syntactic sentences. Because thought sequences at this level of complexity are not subject to the constraints imposed on intonation units, their boundaries are variable and opportunistic and may change when the same thoughts are verbalized on different occasions. Often they are supplemented with afterthoughts. This absence of consistency suggests that speakers make on-line judgments regarding the boundaries of thought sequences at this level.

Still larger thought sequences, appropriately called "(discourse) topics," are organized hierarchically, with basic-level topics included in supertopics and divisible into subtopics. Topics show stability in thought and memory, and they lend themselves to summarization. Navigating through a topic with minimal thoughts and centers of interest may be guided by a pattern such as a narrative schema, or through interaction among conversational participants.

These points are illustrated with further pear story excerpts, which offer the advantage of association with objectively identifiable experiences as well as the possibility of comparisons across multiple languages.