

# 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 an interviewer and two Native Californian females whose role is an 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 Sate University, Long Beach.

### Results from Survey

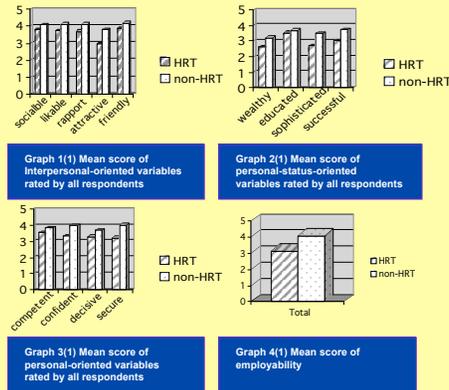


Table 6(1) The description of imagined HRT user written by respondents of survey

| Age                     | Ethnic             | Socio-economic class | appearance                                   |
|-------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|--|
| 22 years old            | 1 White            | 5 Lower-middle class | 2 *does not care about appearance            |
| mid 20's                | 1 African-American | 4 Middle-class       | 5 * dressed like a mom                       |
| mid to late 20's        | 2 Hispanic         | 2                    | * dressed casually with her hair pulled back |
| Late 20's to early 30's | 2 Minority         | 1                    | *mother                                      |
| Late 30's to early 40's | 1                  |                      | *slightly overweight and has brown hair      |
| Midlife age             | 3                  |                      |  |

Table 6(2) The description of imagined Non-HRT user written by respondents of survey

| Age                     | Ethnic              | Socio-economic class | appearance  |
|-------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|---|
| 20's                    | 1 White             | 1/2 Middle class     | 3/2 *good looking   |
| mid 20's                | 2 White or Hispanic | 1 Upper-middle class | 3 *athletic   |
| late 20's               | 3                   |                      | *blonde-kind of Hippish   |
| Late 20's to early 30's | 2                   |                      | * dressed semi-formal sitting up straight with her hair done in curls |
| 30's                    | 2                   |                      | *short hair   |
| early 30's to late 30's | 1                   |                      | *thin, athletic, tanned, black-hair                                   |
| Late 30's to early 40's | 2                   |                      | *attractive   |
|                         |                     |                      | *fit  |
|                         |                     |                      | *thin and blonde  |

**Job Interview #1 (with HRT)**

Q: Could you tell me about the most fun you have had on the job?

In the "classroom?"

um... I guess with an "activity--"

.. it's called two truths and one "lie."/

.. it's used mostly in the "conversation class to get kids or ..students talking."/

.. um where they have make up .. "two things that are true or / what make them up tell things that are true about themselves./

.. one thing that's a "lie."/

and they write on the "board./

.. the "other students in the class have to.. sit there and ask questions about the statements."/

.. um

"that's fun."/

.. it's a "light environment."/

**Job Interview #2 (without HRT)**

Q2 : Could you tell me about the most fun you have had on the job?

Wow the "most fun I have had on the job."/

.. Well since I "love working with kids."/

Especially "rock climbing."/

I "love it.."

When... my "kids that I am working with."/

.. "Finally... climbed what they have been trying trying to climb."/

and "finally have success."/

So... when "they have success."/

I'm "thrilled."/

"That's the favorite."/

note:

fall indicates the direction of the terminal pitch movement is falling

rise indicates the direction of the terminal pitch movement is rising

### Results from Interview

Table 8 Who, Where, When, and Why people use HRT

| Interview | Who  | Where             | When                 | Why  |
|-----------|--|-------------------|----------------------|--|
| #1        | "My sister" 19 years old, who is an airhead and not intelligent                      | At home           | When telling a story | >To make sure you are listening to her   |
|           | "My boss" 30 years old, who is a Main-manager at bank and intelligent and persuading | At work (at bank) |                      | >To make people open an accounts<br>>To get people do something for you or do something they do not really want to do<br>>Just the way they talk<br>>Mannerism |
| #2        | "Students" At University   |                   | Rare                 |  |
|           | "My son" 2.5 years old   |                   |                      |  |
| #3        | "Valley girls"   | Every where       |                      | >Group<br>>To be popular in everything including speech<br>>Want to be friends with students   |
|           | "Miss Blura" Late 20's, who is a cool high school teacher                            |                   |                      |  |
|           | "History professor at University" Mid 20's   |                   |                      |  |
|           | "My sister" 27 years old   | At home           |                      | >For fighting  |
|           | Themselves   |                   | In casual talk       |  |
|           | Boss   | At work           |                      | >To control conversation   |
| #4        | "Valley girls" (lots)  |                   | Casual situation     | >Cultural thing<br>>Group thing<br>>Trendy   |
|           | "My sister" (high-school) Professor 30's   |                   |                      |  |

Once Interviewees were asked if they know someone who uses HRT and if so in what situations they use HRT.

Amy: "My **main manager at work** always does [uptalk]. It's annoying, but she does it all the time... even with the customers. It's kind of a way of persuading people. She's like asking questions that does not need to be answered, so can like make people to open bank accounts, like that stuff. Like I do not know, I think it is kind of **manipulative**".

Grace: "Sometimes, **my boss** will, like, if you ask a question... but either she feels like you already know the answer, you should find the answer yourself. She kid of says something but with the reflection of the voice, it sounds like a question but it is really not, and then .... She uses it to get to the point across that you should figure out or something".

Kent: "I heard **guys** occasionally prone to use it, so it is not completely gender specific".

Francesca: "**My history teacher here [at the University]**, he has a really high-pitched voice when he talks, like it starts low and it gets really high.... I've noticed every word that he uses, it's really annoying actually... He lectures with uptalk".

Francesca: "Maybe **teachers** who, I was thinking about **Miss. Blura**... like a cool teacher who wants to be friends with the kids".

Betty: "I think that people do it, [for example], **my sister** is kind of **air-head** sometimes... When she is telling a story just to make sure you are listening to her, she always brings her voice higher... It's kind of weird".

Francesca: "Well, the first thing that come up to my mind is probably like **Valley Girl**. I think, maybe, I do not know, sometime different groups have a way of talking that seems like popular within that group, so you can distinguish them from their speech".

Henry: "It's like trendy, like even if that's the way they speak, I guess, I think same group or same age group, so they all kind of do that, I guess, it's cultural thing".

\*note: names are pseudonym

### Conclusion

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 employability of 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 who have status, such as bosses in the workplaces, 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) Why did the respondents in the survey rate HRT user very severely?

I argue that the level of **formality** in the nature of job-interview may explain it. In the job interview the level of formality 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 **formality** 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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### For more information

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