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Intonation and its Role in Legal Argumentation and Decesion-making in Selected Nigerian Courtrooms

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Abstract
This study investigates the relationship between intonation patterns and persuasion strategies in Nigerian courtroom discourse. Through acoustic analysis of audio recordings from two courtroom cases (one civil and one criminal) in Osun State, Nigeria, the research examines how lawyers, judges and witnesses strategically employ prosodic features to enhance legal argumentation. The theoretical framework integrates Autosegmental-Metrical (AM) Phonology, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and Interactional Sociolinguistics to provide a comprehensive understanding of intonation's role in legal persuasion. Findings reveal that falling tones consistently convey authority and finality, rising tones introduce doubt or invite elaboration and fall-rise tones express nuanced challenges or politeness. The study demonstrates that intonation patterns vary significantly across courtroom roles, with lawyers manipulating prosody to construct compelling arguments, witnesses exhibiting emotional states through vocal patterns and judges employing controlled tones to maintain authority. This research contributes to forensic linguistics by providing a comprehensive analysis of intonation in Nigerian courtroom discourse, offering insights for legal training and practice.

Keywords: *Courtroom discourse, forensic linguistics, intonation patterns, legal argumentation, Nigerian legal system, persuasion strategies*

Introduction

In the intricate landscape of legal proceedings, language transcends its basic function as a mere conveyor of facts, emerging instead as a potent instrument for shaping reality, influencing perceptions and ultimately persuading audiences. Within this dynamic environment, intonation patterns, the nuanced variations of pitch, stress and rhythm in speech assume a pivotal role in legal argumentation and the strategic deployment of persuasion. These prosodic features are not simply stylistic embellishments; they actively sculpt the meaning and impact of legal messages, enabling lawyers, judges and witnesses to emphasise critical points, signal certainty and elicit specific emotional responses (Cutler, 2005; Couper-Kuhlen, 2018).

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Courtrooms are inherently unique communicative arenas where the pursuit of justice is inextricably linked to linguistic prowess. While the study of language in legal contexts has a rich history, the specific role of intonation, particularly in the context of persuasion strategies, remains an emerging and underexplored area. Prosody, the overarching study of the sound properties of speech, has long been recognised as a fundamental aspect of human communication, significantly influencing how messages are perceived and interpreted (Cruttenden, 1997). This field has garnered considerable attention across diverse disciplines, including linguistics, psychology and law (Anscombre & Ducrot, 1983; Atkinson, 1984; Pennington & Hastie, 1993). In the courtroom, intonation is instrumental in shaping the persuasive power of legal arguments, profoundly influencing how listeners interpret and react to messages, a fact of paramount importance in a setting where persuasive communication can directly determine case outcomes (Pennington & Hastie, 1993).

Nigerian courtrooms present a unique sociolinguistic landscape, characterised by a blend of formal legal English, local Nigerian English variations, and the underlying influence of indigenous languages, this linguistic complexity adds layers to how intonation patterns are produced, perceived, and interpreted by participants, including the crucial role of jurors. Jurors, as the ultimate arbiters of fact, rely on a multitude of cues to assess witness credibility, lawyer sincerity, and the overall strength of arguments. It is plausible that intonational nuances, often operating below conscious awareness, significantly contribute to these assessments, thereby impacting their judgments and ultimately, their verdicts (Farinde, 2016; Aluko, 2020). This research aim to bridge this gap by investigating how specific intonation patterns employed by legal actors (lawyers, witnesses) influence the perception and decision-making processes of jurors in Nigerian courtrooms.

The Problem

Courtroom communication represents a highly specialised form of interaction demanding precise linguistic deployment, where the manner in which arguments are presented directly impacts legal decisions. This environment is characterised by a unique linguistic structure, where the effectiveness of arguments profoundly influences legal outcomes (Aldosari, 2023). While existing scholarship on courtroom discourse has extensively explored lexical, semantic, discourse and syntactic aspects of language in legal settings and other fields (Akinwotu, 2014, Odebunmi & Unuabonah, 2014; Farinde et al., 2015; Farinde, 2016; Aluko, 2020; Osisanwo & Akintaro, 2020), there has been a notable oversight of the phonological features, particularly intonation, that significantly impact the interpretation of testimony (Labov, 1972). This deficiency implies that previous studies have often isolated language from its interactive context, neglecting how the dynamic interplay between attorneys, clients, judges and jurors shapes interpretations.

Despite extensive focus on lexical choices and rhetorical strategies, empirical investigation into how prosody, specifically pitch variation and intonation, contributes to persuasive communication in courtrooms remains limited (Goźdź ź-źRoszkowski, 2021). Prior research has highlighted the strategic use of language in legal settings, but it frequently overlooks the acoustic dimensions that can either enhance or detract from an argument's persuasiveness (Cutler & Norris, 1988). Furthermore, existing literature primarily concentrates on lexical analysis and discourse markers without adequately addressing how these elements interact with prosodic features to shape juror perceptions and decision-making (Coutinho et al., 2023; Anum et al., 2024). This oversight limits our understanding of how subtle vocal cues can sway perceptions, potentially leading to miscarriages of justice or an incomplete picture of persuasive communication in legal settings. The pervasive nature of prosodic features in spoken communication and their systematic analysis in legal contexts remains largely unexplored, particularly in non-Western jurisdictions. This research aim to bridge this gap by investigating how specific intonation patterns employed by legal actors (lawyers, witnesses) influence the perception and decision-making processes of jurors and lawyers in Nigerian courtrooms. By combining acoustic analysis with qualitative interpretation, this study seeks to uncover the intricate mechanisms through which prosodic features contribute to persuasion and credibility in judgments. The findings will not only enrich the field of forensic linguistics but also offer valuable ideas for legal practitioners in Nigeria, enhancing their understanding of effective courtroom communication and potentially informing legal training programmes. Ultimately, understanding the intonation roles can contribute to a more nuanced and just legal process.

This research investigates how specific intonation patterns employed by legal actors influence the perception and decision-making processes in Nigerian courtrooms. Therefore, the study investigates how lawyers strategically employ intonation patterns to manage the emotional tone of courtroom discourse and influence juror perception in civil cases, and examines the importance of pitch accents in conveying emotional strain and highlighting details I the courtroom.

Literature Review

Persuasion Strategies and Intonation in Courtroom Discourse

The success of legal persuasion hinges on a complex interplay between verbal content and paralinguistic features, with intonation playing a particularly crucial role. Lawyers frequently leverage pitch variation to reinforce logical arguments, evoke emotions and establish authority, thereby enhancing rhetorical appeals (Perelman et al., 1969).

Ethos, or the credibility of the speaker, is often significantly enhanced through a controlled, authoritative intonation pattern. Lawyers who maintain a steady pitch and strategically stress key legal terms project competence and reliability (Tannen, 2005). Conversely, erratic pitch fluctuations or excessive hesitations can undermine credibility, signaling uncertainty or lack of conviction. The subtle yet powerful influence of intonation on perceived credibility underscores its importance in establishing the speaker's authority in the courtroom.

Pathos, the emotional appeal, is powerfully supported through the strategic use of rising or falling tones that convey concern, empathy, or urgency. For instance, a defense attorney might deliberately lower their pitch and slow their speaking rate to appeal to a jury's compassion during a closing argument (Bull, 2020). This manipulation of prosody allows for the nuanced expression of emotion, fostering a connection with the audience and guiding their emotional response to the presented narrative. The ability of intonation to evoke specific emotional states highlights its persuasive potential beyond mere lexical content.

Logos, the appeal to logic and reason, benefits immensely from intonation that clearly demarcates premises, conclusions and contrasts. Strategic stress can effectively highlight inconsistencies in opposing arguments or emphasise the logical coherence of one's own reasoning (Walton, 2006). By using intonation to structure and foreground logical connections, legal arguments become more cogent and persuasive. This demonstrates that intonation is not merely an emotional tool but also a critical component in the rational construction and delivery of arguments.

Cross-examination, a highly intonation-sensitive phase of courtroom discourse, further exemplifies the strategic use of prosody. Research indicates that attorneys frequently employ rising intonation to challenge or imply doubt, while falling intonation is used to assert facts and conclude topics (Holt & Clift, 2007). These intonational choices are not arbitrary; they are deliberate tactics to control the flow of information and guide the interpretation of testimony. Furthermore, gender can significantly influence how intonation is perceived in courtroom discourse.

Opening and closing statements, which serve as narrative frameworks for trials, rely heavily on intonation for their effectiveness. The success of these statements, particularly in terms of coherence and memorability, is significantly enhanced by rhythmic intonation and strategic pausing (Pennington & Hastie, 1993). These prosodic elements contribute to the overall impact of the narrative, making it more compelling and easier for jurors to recall key information. Anscombre and Ducrot (1983) suggest that lawyers utilise intonation patterns to craft narratives that resonate with their audience, employing techniques such as emphasis, contrast and emotional appeal. These strategies not only strengthen arguments but also guide jurors' cognitive and emotional engagement. Bull (2002) posits that the persuasive effectiveness of legal arguments is enhanced when intonation patterns align with the rhetorical structure of discourse.

For instance, the strategic use of pauses and shifts in pitch can emphasise key points, signal transitions and create a sense of anticipation, thereby enhancing persuasive impact (Atkinson & Drew, 1979). Further analyse the sequential organisation of courtroom interaction, highlighting how lawyers use various linguistic strategies, including prosodic features, to control the flow of information and to challenge or support witness testimony. Their work underscores the importance of considering both the content and the delivery of legal arguments.

These studies provide reviews of the function of intonation in legal discourse, revealing its multifaceted roles in shaping interpretation, negotiating power and influencing persuasive outcomes.

Nyakundi (2024) examines the importance of rhetoric in legal discourse, specifically how persuasive language shapes legal practice, influences judicial outcomes, and raises ethical considerations. By exploring historical, theoretical, and practical dimensions, the study highlights how effective rhetoric allows legal practitioners to enhance the strength of their arguments, engage in emotional appeals, and influence decision-making. Ethical issues emerge when persuasion crosses into manipulation, prompting reflection on the duty of advocates to balance effective advocacy with ethical responsibilities. This review emphasises rhetoric as an essential tool in law that, while powerful, must be used responsibly to uphold justice and fairness.

Daniel (2021) examined the generic structure of substance-based judgments of Nigerian Supreme Court lead judges. Data consist of fifteen purposively sampled judgments, qualitatively analysed using the generic structure potential approach and the transitivity system. The result shows that the analysed judgments have thirteen macro-structural elements which comprise nine obligatory and four optional elements, realised through major and minor process clauses. The obligatory elements circumscribe the lead judges to their discourse community norms while the optional elements in the judgments are instances of contextual variation in the analysed genre.

Cheng and Liu (2021) study explores the intersection of law and language by examining the discourse practices of judges within courtroom settings. Legal linguistics provides the framework for analysing how judicial language is structured, interpreted, and employed as a tool of authority and persuasion. The focus is on the rhetorical and linguistic strategies judges use to construct legal reasoning, deliver judgments, and maintain courtroom control. Particular attention is given to the role of judicial discourse in shaping interpretation, ensuring clarity, and reinforcing

the legitimacy of legal decisions. The methodology adopted was a qualitative linguistic analysis of courtroom transcripts, drawing insights from discourse analysis, pragmatics, and corpus linguistics. Judicial statements, rulings, and interactions were examined at both lexical and pragmatic levels to uncover patterns of persuasion, power relations, and meaning-making. The findings reveal that judges rely heavily on specialised legal phraseology, strategic lexical choices, and pragmatic markers to assert authority and guide courtroom interactions. Judicial discourse was found to balance neutrality with persuasive force, reflecting both institutional power and communicative competence. Furthermore, the study highlights that judges' language is central not only to legal reasoning but also to ensuring fairness, transparency, and legitimacy in judicial outcomes.

Hülya and Gülay (2024) study employs an interactional pragmatic approach to investigate impoliteness in Turkish High Criminal Court proceedings, providing a perspective distinct from the predominantly Anglo-American focus of existing legal discourse research. Drawing on Culpeper's (1996) impoliteness super-strategies, the research analyses 45-minute audio recordings from seven criminal trials, with emphasis on impoliteness during examination-in-chief. The methodology involved a detailed discourse-pragmatic analysis of trial interactions, identifying instances of linguistic and behavioral impoliteness and categorising them according to established pragmatic frameworks. Attention was given to how courtroom participants particularly defendants used language that deviated from expected legal norms. The findings reveal a pronounced register clash, especially in cases where defendants resisted formal legal discourse through misalignment, mock impoliteness, overt threats, and profanity. Such disruptions not only undermined courtroom decorum but also reshaped power dynamics between judicial actors and defendants, influencing both trial progression and interactional outcomes. The results highlight the complex interplay between institutional authority and individual agency in shaping (im)politeness in courtroom communication.

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates ideas from phonology, psychology and discourse studies to construct a robust theoretical framework for analysing prosody in courtroom discourse. By combining the phonological focus on suprasegmental features with the psychological emphasis on persuasion mechanisms and the rhetorical analysis of discourse strategies, this research aims to uncover the multifaceted ways in which prosody shapes legal communication (Atkinson, 1984). By examining real-world courtroom interactions, the research seeks to bridge theoretical insights with practical applications, offering valuable contributions to both linguistic scholarship and legal practice.

A central aspect of this study is the adoption of Autosegmental-Metrical (AM) Phonology, one of the most suitable phonological frameworks for understanding the prosodic features of speech, such as intonation, stress and rhythm. Developed by Pierrehumbert (1980) and further refined by Ladd (1996), AM Phonology integrates both segmental and suprasegmental aspects of speech. It focuses on how intonation contours are structured and how they interact with a language's segmental phonology by using a system of high (H) and low (L) tones to represent intonation patterns. These tones are linked to specific points in the speech flow, such as stressed syllables or phrase boundaries and propose a hierarchical structure of prosodic units, including syllables, feet, prosodic words and intonational phrases. This hierarchy aids in understanding how different levels of prosodic organisation contribute to the overall intonational output. In this study, AM Phonology will be operationalised by identifying and transcribing specific pitch accents (e.g., H, L+H) and boundary tones (e.g., L%, H%) in the courtroom discourse data, allowing for a systematic analysis of how these phonetic features contribute to meaning and persuasive effect.

Intonation plays a crucial role in communication by enhancing the expressiveness of speech and conveying emotional nuances. According to Couper-Kuhlen (1986), prosodic features such as pitch, loudness and tempo can alter the meaning of utterances and affect listener engagement. This aligns with findings from Jiang and Pell (2016), who emphasise that prosodic effects are context-dependent and can significantly influence how messages are received. This perspective underscores the importance of analysing intonation within the specific context of courtroom interactions, where the stakes and dynamics differ markedly from other communicative environments.

The relationship between intonation and persuasion can be studied within various psychological theories. One prominent model is the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) proposed by Petty and Cacioppo (1986). This model suggests that persuasion occurs through two routes: the central route, which involves careful consideration of arguments and the peripheral route, where superficial cues like prosodic features can sway opinions without deep processing. Jiang and Pell (2016) established that prosodic effects are context-dependent and that they influence how listeners decode messages based on situational cues. In the context of this study, the ELM will help to explain how intonational patterns, as peripheral cues, might influence juror perceptions and decision-making, particularly when the audience is not fully engaged in central route processing. We will explore how specific intonation patterns might trigger emotional responses or convey authority, thereby influencing persuasion through the peripheral route.

Additionally, Atkinson (1984) identifies prosody as a key element in political and legal rhetoric, noting its ability to emphasise critical points, manage conversational turns and build rapport with an audience. In courtroom settings, these rhetorical functions are amplified, as advocates must navigate the complex interplay of logic, emotion and authority to persuade judges and jurors.

As identified by Gumperz (1982), Interactional Sociolinguistics is an aspect of language analysis that pays careful attention to turn-taking behaviour, pauses, hesitations and paralanguage to interpret the intention of the speaker. Interactional Sociolinguistics accounts for the interpretation of the totality of conversation alongside paralinguistic features like sighs, cries, laughter and in-breath. This framework looks for contextualisation cues, which include prosodic features, as tools for signaling interpretive frameworks in interaction (Balogun, 2017). These cues are particularly salient in courtroom discourse, where the strategic use of intonation and stress can frame arguments, highlight evidence and guide listener interpretation. This study will operationalise Interactional Sociolinguistics by analysing how shifts in intonation patterns correlate with turn-taking management, the negotiation of speaker roles and the signaling of speaker intent or attitude within the courtroom interactions. This will allow for a nuanced understanding of how intonation functions as a dynamic, context-dependent resource in legal communication.

These three theoretical perspectives, AM Phonology for detailed acoustic analysis, ELM for understanding persuasive impact and Interactional Sociolinguistics for contextual interpretation, are not merely additive but are designed to be mutually reinforcing. AM Phonology provides the granular linguistic data on intonation. This data then informs the analysis within the ELM, helping to explain how these specific intonational features might lead to persuasive outcomes. Finally, Interactional Sociolinguistics provides the framework for interpreting these phonological and persuasive effects within the dynamic, turn-by-turn unfolding of courtroom discourse, considering the social and cultural context of Nigerian legal proceedings. This integrated approach ensures a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the complex role of intonation in legal argumentation and persuasion.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative methodology, primarily involving audio recordings of courtroom proceedings supplemented by direct courtroom observations (Creswell, 2014). The primary source of data includes high-fidelity audio recordings of spoken interactions between lawyers and witnesses. To ensure a focused and in-depth analysis of legal disputes, the study examines two different courtroom cases: one civil and one criminal (Yin, 2014). These specific case types were chosen due to their inherent adversarial nature and the high stakes involved, which are conducive to the strategic deployment of persuasive intonation patterns. The selection of these cases were guided by purposive sampling, a technique that allows for the deliberate selection of information-rich cases most relevant to the research objectives (Patton, 2015). The recordings were obtained from the Magistrate and Federal High Courts in Osun State, Nigeria, providing a localized and culturally specific context for the study.

High-quality audio recording devices were utilized to capture the courtroom interactions, ensuring clarity and minimizing background noise. This approach is essential for accurate acoustic analysis, particularly for capturing subtle nuances of intonation, such as pitch variation, stress placement, and rhythmic patterns (Ladefoged, 2003). Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to throughout the data collection process. Prior permission were obtained from the relevant judicial authorities to record courtroom proceedings. All participants, including lawyers and witnesses, were fully informed of the study's purpose and procedures, and their informed consent were secured (British Psychological Society, 2021). The recordings were stored securely, and all identifying information were meticulously removed from the transcripts to protect the privacy and anonymity of all participants.

In addition to audio recordings, direct courtroom observations were conducted to provide crucial contextual insights into the naturalistic use of intonation patterns. These observations focus on non-verbal cues, turn-taking behaviors, and the broader interactional dynamics between participants (Atkinson, 1984). Such contextual data is vital for a holistic understanding of the persuasive strategies employed by lawyers and the reception of these strategies by other courtroom actors, complementing the detailed acoustic analysis of the spoken data.

The audio recordings will be subjected to acoustic analysis using the specialised software Praat. This analysis will focus on several key prosodic elements: Pitch Variation, i.e. Examination of pitch contours of speech to identify patterns of intonation (rising and falling), which are necessary for conveying emphasis, emotion and authority (Couper-Kuhlen, 1986). This will involve measuring fundamental frequency (F0) movements over time. This includes stress Placement (analysis of the prominence given to certain syllables or words within utterances and how this contributes to the persuasive power of legal arguments).

Furthermore, a detailed transcription of the audio recordings will be performed. The transcription process will involve segmentation of utterances into intonational phrases and prosodic units to facilitate the analysis of intonation patterns. Subsequently, the transcribed data will be meticulously annotated to identify key prosodic features such as pitch accents (e.g., H, L), boundary tones (e.g., L%, H%) and stress patterns, which are fundamental to understanding the role of intonation in persuasion (Ladd, 1996). The qualitative analysis will complement the acoustic analysis by focusing on the contextual use and interpretation of intonation patterns in courtroom discourse. This analysis will employ discourse analysis techniques to examine how intonation patterns interact with other linguistic and rhetorical strategies to create persuasive effects (Atkinson, 1984). Additionally, the study will draw on Interactional Sociolinguistics to analyse the role of intonation in signaling contextualisation cues and guiding listener interpretation (Gumperz, 1982). The integration of quantitative acoustic analysis with qualitative

discourse analysis will provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between intonation, persuasion and interactional dynamics in the Nigerian courtroom. Potential discrepancies between acoustic measurements and perceived functions will be explored through careful qualitative interpretation, ensuring a holistic understanding of the data.

Data Analysis

This section presents a detailed analysis of the audio-recorded data from two courtroom cases: one civil and one criminal in Osun State, Nigeria. The analysis integrates acoustic findings with qualitative interpretations, drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Autosegmental-Metrical (AM) Phonology, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), and Interactional Sociolinguistics. The aim is to provide a rich, multi-layered understanding of how intonation patterns function as persuasive strategies in Nigerian courtroom discourse.

Case A: Analysis of Intonation Patterns in a Divorce Case

This civil case involves a divorce proceeding between Mr. A (Petitioner) and Mrs. M (Respondent), centred on allegations of emotional cruelty, abandonment and property disputes after a 30-year marriage. The analysis reveals a dynamic interplay of intonation patterns used to construct narratives, appeal to emotions and assert authority.

Table 1: Intonation Patterns in a Divorce Case

Speaker	Excerpt	Intonation Pattern	Intonation Function	Persuasive Effect
Petitioner's Counsel	"My Lord, my client… has endured years of constant quarrels…"	Falling Tune (H* L%)	Attitudinal – expresses seriousness and authority	Reinforces ethos; portrays the petitioner as calm, reasonable and justified.
Respondent's Counsel	"…he has another wife and now wants to get rid of my client…"	Fall-rise Tune (H* L-H%)	Attitudinal and discourse – expresses criticism	Invokes pathos; portrays the respondent as wronged and morally superior.
Petitioner (Mr. A)	"She locked me out of our bedroom for two years sir!"	Rising pitch on "locked me out", falling on "two years"	Attitudinal and accentual – emphasises emotional strain	Evokes sympathy and supports the claim of emotional cruelty.
Petitioner (Mr. A)	"That's my private matter."	Falling Tune (L* L%)	Attitudinal – reveals discomfort or defensiveness	Reduces credibility and opens room for suspicion.
Respondent (Mrs. M)	"He brought girlfriends home and stopped giving me housekeeping money."	Rising-falling intonation (L+H* L-L%)	Attitudinal and accentual – mixes accusation with emphasis	Builds pathos and moral indignation.
Respondent (Mrs. M)	"Must a wife keep receipts?"	Rise (L* H%) - rhetorical question	Grammatical and attitudinal – challenge formal logic	Combines cultural ethos with emotional appeal.
Respondent's Counsel	"So you're divorcing your first wife because of a new wife?"	Rising tone (L* H%)	Grammatical – yes/no question with implied judgment	Weakens the petitioner's ethos by questioning his true motives.

Respondent's Counsel	"Under Section 72… unless joint contribution is proven…"	Falling tone with stressed keywords (H*L%)	Accentual and discourse – provides structure and emphasis	Appeals to logos, foregrounding statutory authority.
Respondent's Counsel	"Yoruba customary law recognises a wife's non-financial contributions."	Rising on "customary law," falling on "contributions"	Accentual and discourse – asserts cultural logic	Connects ethos with logos and challenges Western legal formality.
Presiding Judge	"Calm down, Mrs. M. Answer the question."	Flat and falling tone (L* L%)	Discourse and attitudinal – commands order and neutrality	Reaffirms judicial authority and regulates speaker conduct.

The petitioner's counsel employs a falling tone (H L%) to project an aura of calm reasonableness, thereby bolstering the petitioner's ethos. This intonation pattern, characterised by a high pitch accent followed by a low boundary tone, signals finality and assertiveness, framing the petitioner's claims as factual and justified. In contrast, the respondent's counsel utilises a fall-rise tone (H L-H%) to subtly introduce doubt and criticism. This complex contour, with its final rise, invites the listener to question the petitioner's motives, thereby appealing to pathos by portraying the respondent as a victim.

Witness testimonies are particularly revealing. Mr. A's rising pitch on "locked me out" followed by a fall on "two years" is a powerful emotional appeal, accentuating the duration and severity of the alleged cruelty. This prosodic emphasis serves to evoke sympathy from the court. However, his subsequent use of a low falling tone (L*L%) when discussing his "private matter" signals defensiveness and discomfort, undermining his credibility. This shift in intonation provides a clear example of how prosodic cues can betray a speaker's emotional state and influence perceptions of their testimony.

Mrs. M's use of a rising-falling tone (L+H L-L%) when describing her husband's alleged infidelity and financial neglect is a masterful blend of accusation and factual emphasis. The initial rise in pitch conveys indignation, while the final fall asserts the truth of her statement. Her rhetorical question, "Must a wife keep receipts?" delivered with a rising tone (L H%), is a powerful appeal to cultural ethos. It challenges the formal logic of the court by invoking shared cultural understandings of marital contributions, thereby resonating with the local context and potentially influencing the judge's perception.

The cross-examination phase showcases the strategic use of rising tone (L* H%) to challenge and probe. The respondent's counsel's question, "So you're divorcing your first wife because of a new wife?" is not merely a request for information; it is a strategic move to weaken the petitioner's ethos by implying a hidden, less noble motive. The rising tone invites scrutiny and places the petitioner on the defensive.

The judge's use of a flat and falling tone (L*L%) to restore order is a clear assertion of judicial authority. This neutral, controlled intonation pattern serves to regulate the emotional temperature of the courtroom, reminding all participants of the formal, impartial nature of the proceedings.

Case B: Analysis of Intonation Patterns in a Family Land Dispute Case

This civil case involves a land dispute within an extended family, focusing on issues of family membership, leadership and property rights. The cross-examination of the respondent, "Baba," provides a rich site for analysing how intonation is used to manage power dynamics, challenge credibility and assert control.

Table 2: Intonation Patterns in a Family Land Dispute Case

Speaker	Excerpt	Intonation Pattern	Intonation Function	Persuasive Effect

Petitioner's Counsel	"Sul…….. Ko……. wasn't a member of Olu……..'s compound; yes or no?"	Rising intonation (L* H%)	Attitudinal – expresses seriousness and authority	Pressures the witness to concede, signaling that any other answer would be surprising.
Petitioner's Counsel	"When the children sold the filling station… you were not told?"	Fall-rise intonation (H* L-H%)	Discourse and Grammatical - Polite disagreement	Underscores the discrepancy between the witness's claimed role and his actual exclusion.
Baba (Witness)	"I came here because of land issue."	Falling (L*L%)	Attitudinal – shows his attempt to remain calm under pressure.	Conveys his focus on the subject, even as the questioning becomes aggressive.
Baba (Witness)	"They are not from same compound but same mother."	Rise-Fall Intonation (L+H* L-L%)	Accentual - highlights key fact about sibling lineage.	Emphasises the nuance that maternal ties differ from patriarchal compound membership.
Respondent's Counsel	"Allow him to talk; you are preventing him from making clarifications."	Falling Intonation (H* L%)	Discourse & attitudinal – reasserts courtroom etiquette.	Shifts control back to the witness, moderating the intensity of cross-examination.

The petitioner's counsel strategically employs rising tone (L H%) to exert pressure on the witness, Baba. The question, "Sul……. K…….. wasn't a member of Olug……'s compound; yes or no?" is a classic example of a leading question, where the rising tone signals an expectation of a specific answer. This prosodic choice corners the witness, making it difficult for him to evade or provide a nuanced response. The subsequent use of a fall-rise intonation (H L-H%) in the question, "When the children sold the filling station… you were not told?" is a subtle yet powerful way of highlighting a contradiction. The initial fall in pitch asserts a fact, while the final rise expresses surprise or doubt, implying that Baba should have known about the sale if his claimed family role was genuine. This underscores the discrepancy between his testimony and the facts, thereby undermining his credibility.

Baba's responses demonstrate a conscious effort to maintain composure in the face of aggressive questioning. His use of a falling tone (L L%) in the statement, "I came here because of land issue," conveys a sense of focus and control. However, when he needs to emphasise a crucial distinction, he employs a rise-fall tone (L+H L-L%) on "same mother." This prosodic choice highlights the nuanced difference between maternal and patriarchal lineage, a key point in the land dispute. This demonstrates how even a seemingly calm witness can use intonation strategically to assert important facts.

The intervention by the respondent's counsel, delivered with a falling tone (H*L%), serves to reassert courtroom decorum and protect the witness. The falling tone conveys authority and finality, effectively interrupting the petitioner's counsel's aggressive questioning and shifting the power dynamic back towards a more balanced

exchange. This highlights how intonation can be used not only for persuasion but also for managing the procedural aspects of courtroom interaction.

Acoustic Evidence

CASE A

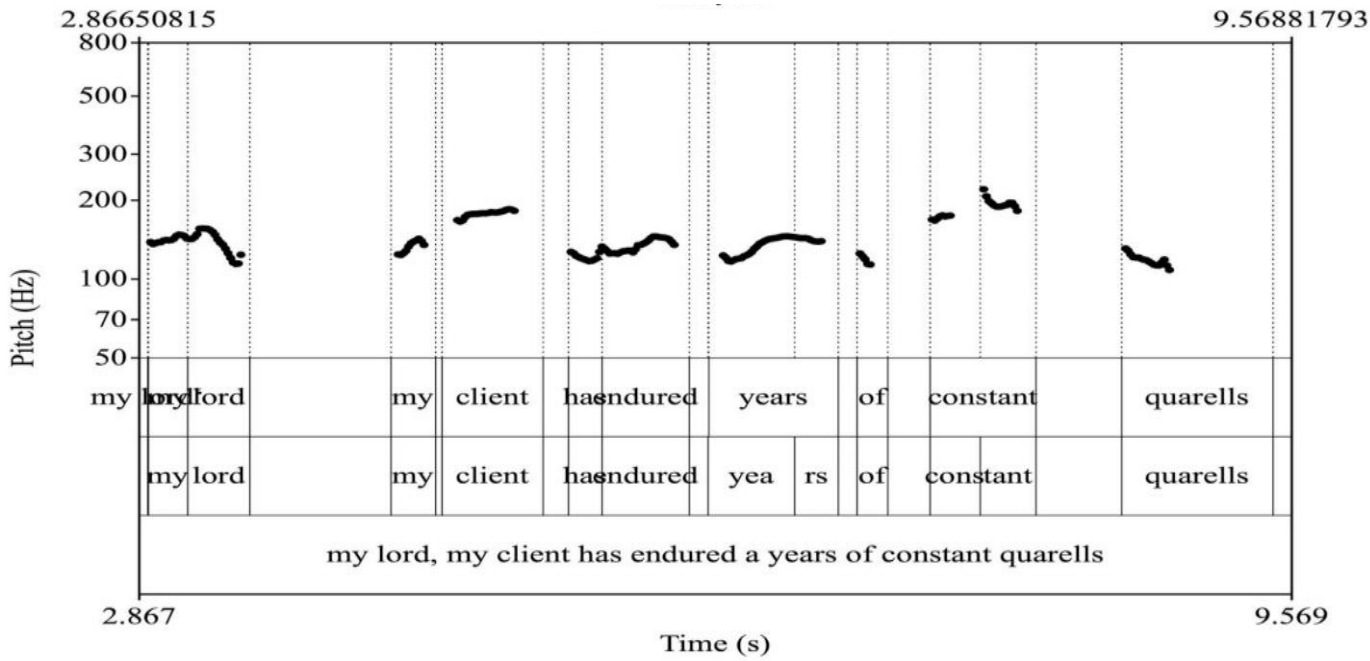


Figure 1: Petitioner's Counsel – Falling Tone (H*L%)

Figure 1 displays the acoustic analysis of the Petitioner's Counsel's statement: "My Lord, my client… has endured years of constant quarrels…" The pitch contour shows a clear falling tone (H*L%), characterised by an initial high pitch followed by a descent to a low boundary tone. This intonation pattern is used to convey seriousness and authority, reinforcing the counsel's ethos and portraying the petitioner as calm, reasonable, and justified. It signals finality and assertiveness in the legal argumentation.

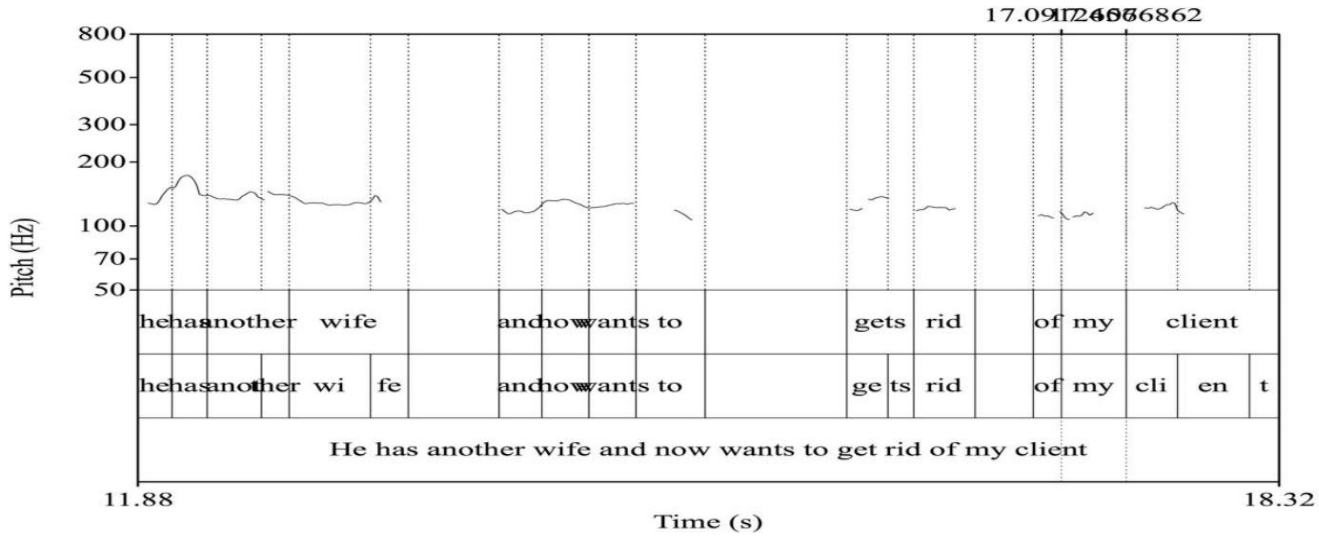


Figure 2: Respondent's Counsel – Fall-rise Tone (H*L-H%)

Figure 2 illustrates the acoustic analysis of the Respondent's Counsel's statement: "...he has another wife and now wants to get rid of my client..." The pitch contour demonstrates a fall-rise tone (H* L-H%), which begins with a high pitch, falls, and then rises at the end. This intonation is used to express criticism and introduce doubt, invoking pathos by portraying the respondent as wronged and morally superior. The final rise invites the listener to question the petitioner's true motives.

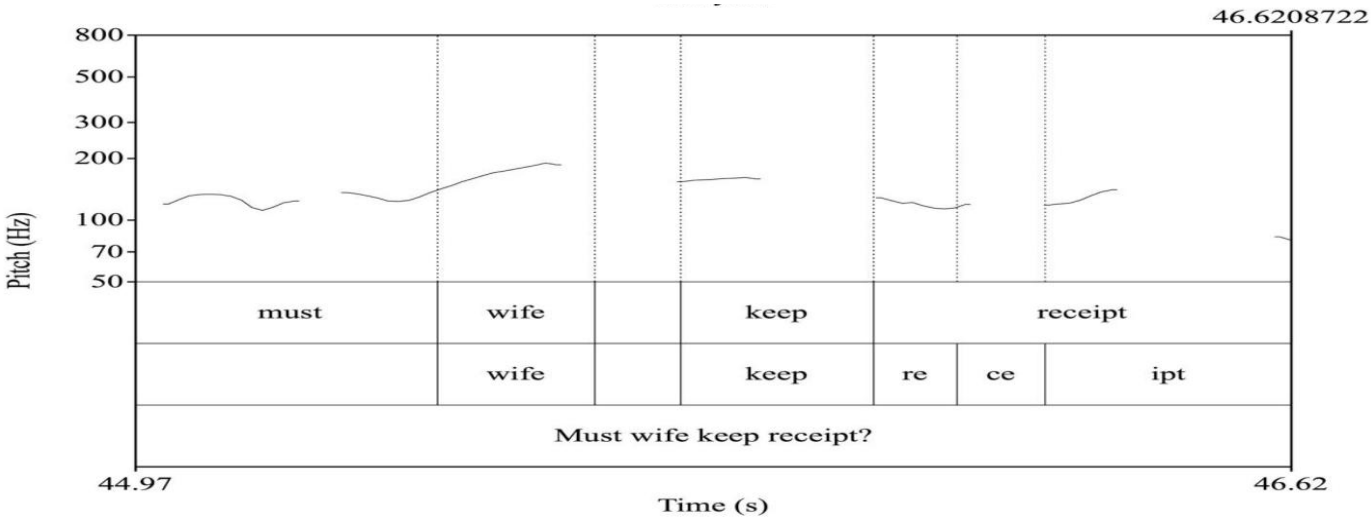


Figure 3: Respondent (Mrs. M) – Rising Tone (L* H%)

Figure 3 presents the acoustic analysis of Mrs. M's rhetorical question: "Must a wife keep receipts?" The pitch contour shows a clear rising tone (L* H%), indicating a low pitch followed by a rise. This intonation pattern is used to combine cultural ethos with emotional appeal, challenging the formal logic of the court by invoking shared cultural understandings of marital contributions. It serves as a powerful persuasive tool to resonate with the local context and potentially influence the judge's perception.

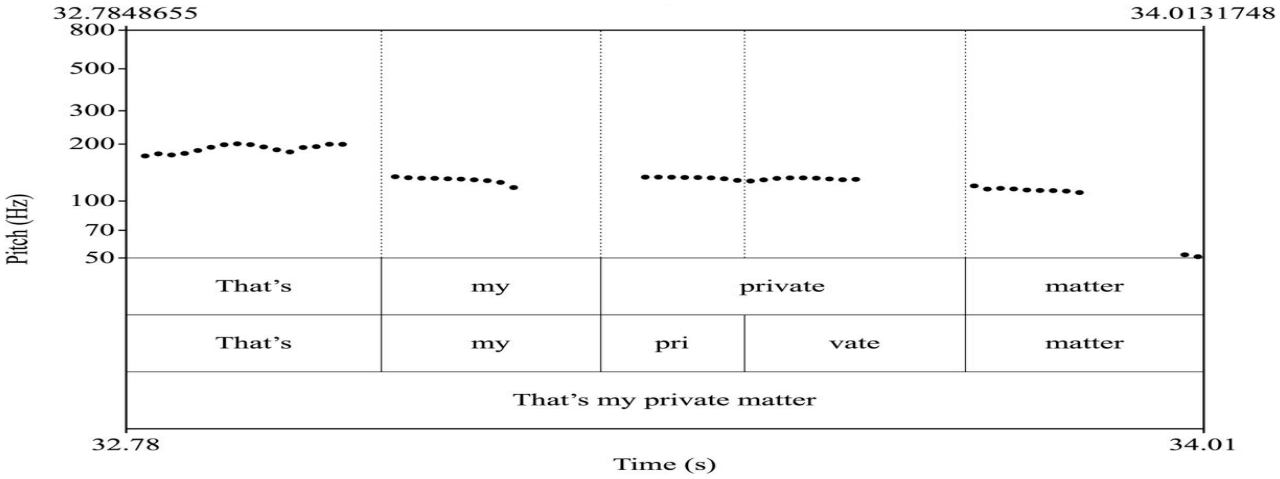


Figure 4: Petitioner (Mr. A) – Falling Tone (L* L%)

Figure 4 illustrates the acoustic analysis of Mr. A's statement: "That's my private matter." The pitch contour shows a low falling tone (L*L%), indicating a low pitch accent followed by a low boundary tone. This intonation pattern reveals discomfort or defensiveness on the part of the speaker. Its persuasive effect is to reduce the speaker's credibility and open room for suspicion, as this shift in intonation can betray the speaker's emotional state and influence perceptions of their testimony.

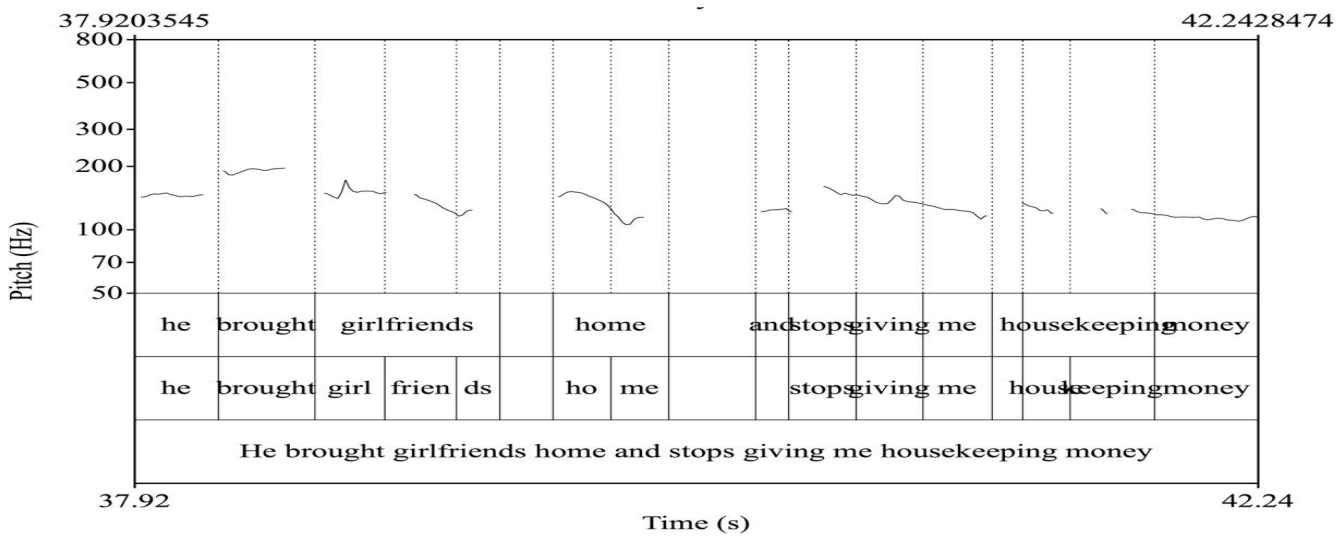


Figure 5: Respondent (Mrs. M) – Rising-falling Tone (L+H* L-L%)

Figure 5 shows the acoustic analysis of Mrs. M's statement: "He brought girlfriends home and stopped giving me housekeeping money." The pitch contour shows a rising-falling tone (L+H* L-L%), which is a blend of accusation and factual emphasis. The initial rise in pitch conveys indignation, while the final fall asserts the truth of her statement. This prosodic pattern builds pathos and moral indignation, highlighting the emotional and factual weight of her testimony.

CASE B

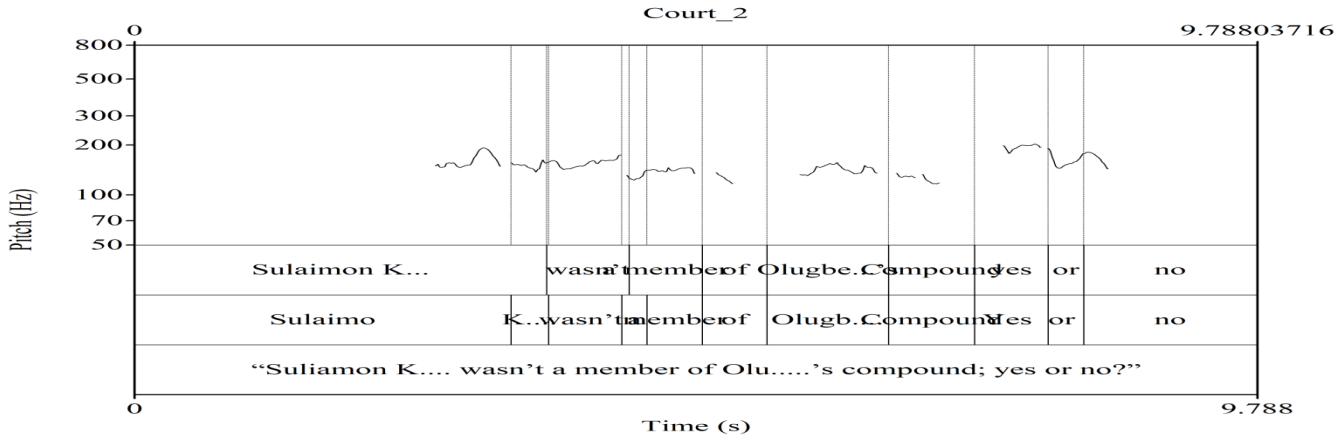


Figure 6: Petitioner's Counsel – Rising Tone (L* H%)

Figure 6 illustrates the acoustic analysis of the Petitioner's Counsel's question: "Sul…….. Ko……. wasn't a member of Olu……..'s compound; yes or no?" The pitch contour shows a rising tone (L* H%), indicating a low pitch followed by a rise. This intonation pattern is used to challenge the petitioner's ethos by implying a hidden, less noble motive. The rhetorical nature of the question, combined with the rising tone, forces the listener to consider the implied accusation, thereby weakening the petitioner's credibility.

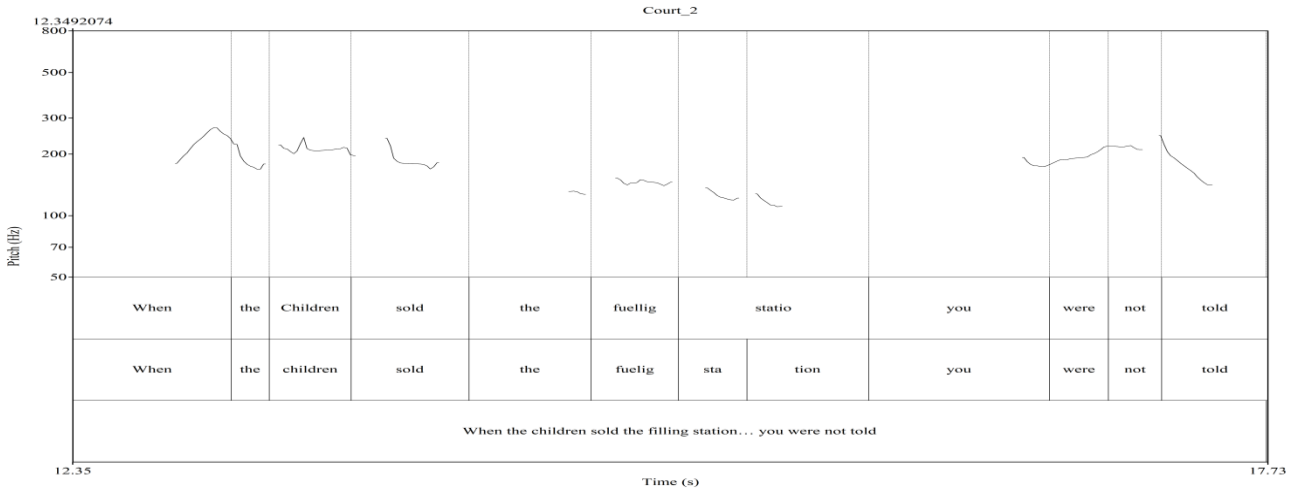


Figure 7: Petitioner's Counsel – Fall-rise Tone (H* L-H%)

Figure 7 shows the acoustic analysis of the Petitioner's Counsel's question: "When the children sold the filling station… you were not told?" The pitch contour reveals a fall-rise tone (H*L-H%), characterised by an initial high pitch, a fall, and then a final rise. This pattern is strategically used to highlight a contradiction or discrepancy. The initial fall asserts a fact, while the final rise expresses surprise or doubt, implying that the witness should have known about the sale if his claimed family role was genuine. This subtly undermines the witness's credibility by underscoring the inconsistency between his testimony and the facts.

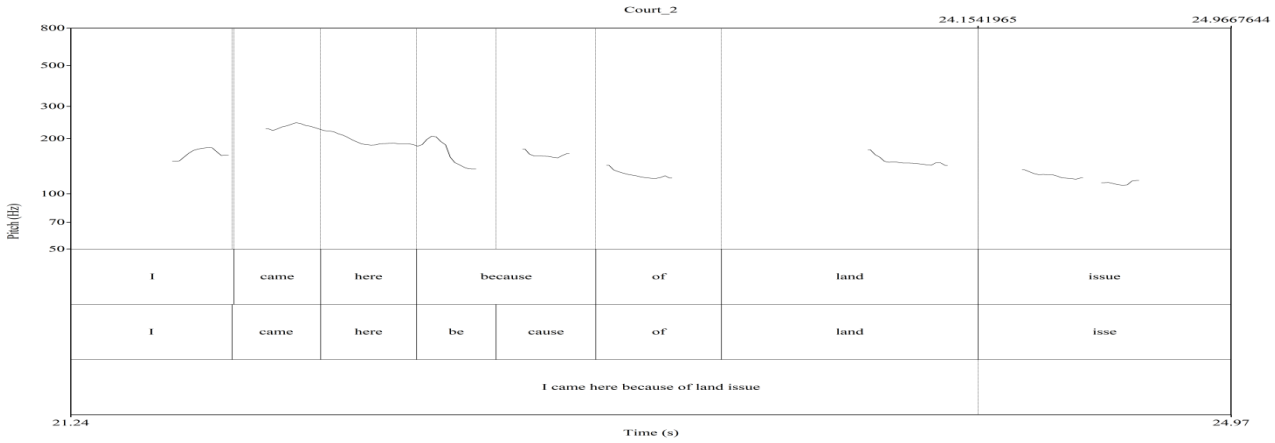


Figure 8: Baba (Witness) – Falling Tone (L* L%)

Figure 8 presents the acoustic analysis of Baba's statement: "I came here because of land issue." The pitch contour shows a falling tone (L*L%), indicating a low pitch accent followed by a low boundary tone. This intonation pattern conveys a sense of focus and control, demonstrating Baba's conscious effort to maintain composure under aggressive questioning. It highlights his attempt to remain calm and focused on the subject matter, even as the questioning becomes aggressive.

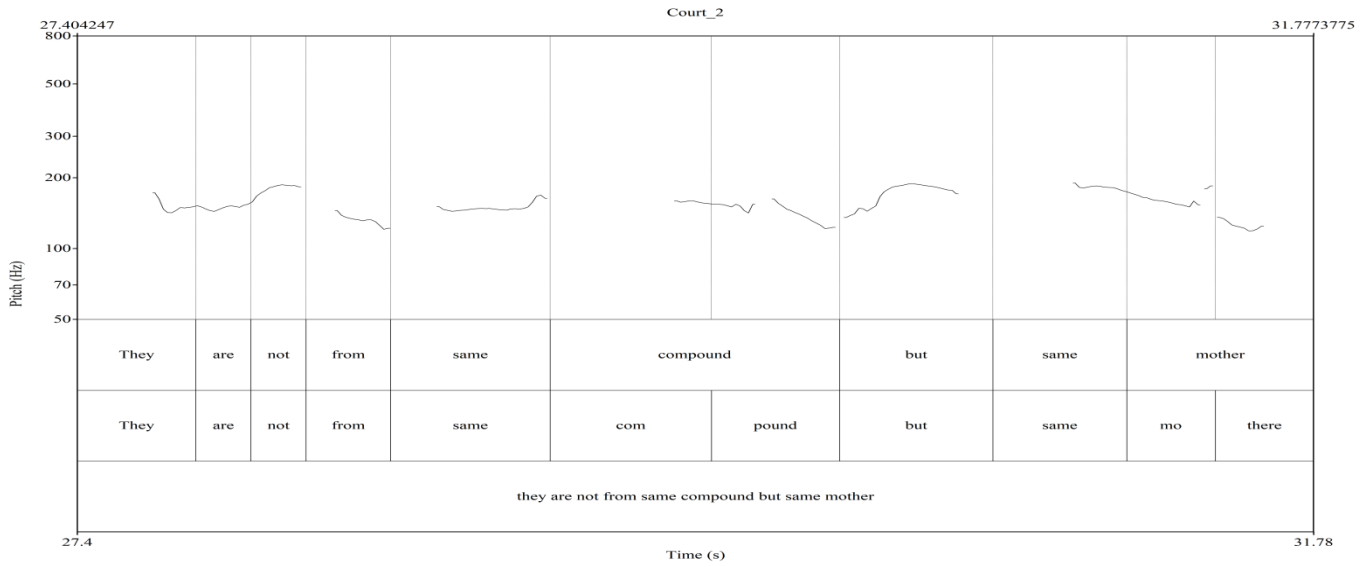


Figure 9: Baba (Witness) - Rise-Fall Tone (L+H* L-L%)

Figure 9 illustrates the acoustic analysis of Baba's statement: "They are not from same compound but same mother." The pitch contour shows a rise-fall tone (L+H* L-L%), which highlights a key nuance about maternal ties differing from patriarchal compound membership. This prosodic choice emphasises a crucial distinction, demonstrating how even a seemingly calm witness can use intonation strategically to assert important facts and convey a crucial distinction, potentially under emotional pressure due to the nature of the land dispute.

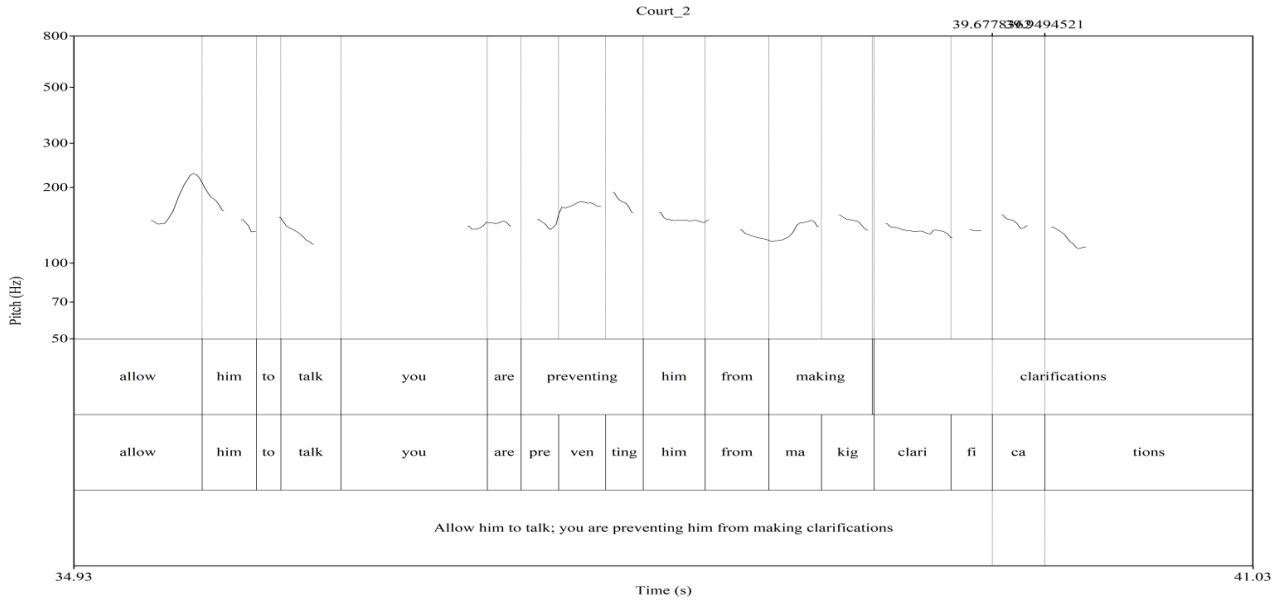


Figure 10: Respondent's Counsel – Falling Tone (H*L%)

Figure 10 presents the acoustic analysis of the Respondent's Counsel's intervention: "Allow him to talk; you are preventing him from making clarifications." The pitch contour shows a falling tone (H* L%), indicating a high pitch accent followed by a low boundary tone. This intonation pattern serves to reassert courtroom decorum and protect the witness. The falling tone conveys authority and finality, effectively interrupting the petitioner's counsel's aggressive questioning and shifting the power dynamic back towards a more balanced exchange. This highlights how intonation can be used not only for persuasion but also for managing the procedural aspects of courtroom interaction.

Discussion of Findings

The analysis of intonation patterns in courtroom discourse provides direct instances of how lawyers manipulate intonation to manage emotional tone. For example, the petitioner's counsel uses a falling tone (H* L-L%) with the excerpt "My Lord, my client… has endured years of constant quarrels…" The stated function is "Attitudinal – expresses seriousness and authority," and the persuasive effect is to "Reinforce ethos; portrays the petitioner as calm, reasonable and justified." This demonstrates a strategic use of intonation to project a controlled, serious

emotional tone, aiming to elicit sympathy and belief in the petitioner's suffering without overt emotional display. This strategic deployment of falling intonation aligns with empirical findings from Vaughan-Johnston et al. (2024), who demonstrated through three experiments that falling vocal intonation at the ends of sentences signals speaker confidence and can conditionally boost persuasion by increasing message processing under moderate elaboration conditions. This connection between falling intonation and confidence is further substantiated by Cruttenden (1997), who posits that falling tones convey certainty, finality, and authority, which are critical for establishing a speaker's credibility in high-stakes environments like the courtroom. Furthermore, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) of Petty and Cacioppo (1986) provides a theoretical framework for understanding how these prosodic cues operate: falling intonation may not merely serve as a peripheral heuristic cue but can actively stimulate recipients' motivation to process the message more carefully, thereby enhancing the persuasive impact of strong arguments. The respondent's counsel employs a fall-rise tone (H*L-H%) with the statement "…he has another wife and now wants to get rid of my client…" The function is described as "Attitudinal and discourse because it expresses criticism," with the persuasive effect to "Invoke pathos; portrays the respondent as wronged and morally superior." Hence, the fall-rise tone is strategically used to convey a sense of injustice and criticism, directly appealing to the emotional sensibilities of the audience (jurors/judges) by highlighting the perceived moral failing of the petitioner. This finding resonates with Brazil's (1997) Discourse Intonation model, which proposes that fall-rise tones are used to refer to information already in the shared knowledge between speaker and listener, carrying a secondary sociopragmatic meaning of conveying solidarity. In the courtroom context, this solidarity function may be strategically inverted: rather than building rapport, the fall-rise tone is deployed to implicitly critique the opposing party while simultaneously maintaining a connection with the audience. Additionally, Gumperz's (1982) Interactional Sociolinguistics framework identifies prosodic features such as intonation as contextualisation cues that guide interlocutors in interpreting the situated meaning of utterances, further supporting the observation that the fall-rise contour operates as a nuanced pragmatic signal rather than a mere emotional expression. While in Case B, the respondent's counsel delivers an intervention with a falling tone (H*L%), "Allow him to talk; you are preventing him from making clarifications." This intonation pattern serves to reassert courtroom etiquette and shift control, effectively moderating the intensity of cross-examination and influencing the emotional climate of the interaction. The persuasive effect is to portray the counsel as a protector of fairness and decorum, thereby enhancing their own credibility and potentially influencing the judge's perception of the opposing counsel's aggressive tactics. These instances from both cases directly illustrate how lawyers consciously select intonation patterns to shape the emotional landscape of the courtroom, influencing how their clients and opposing parties are perceived by the decision-makers. This finding is corroborated by Burgoon et al. (1990), who demonstrated that nonverbal behaviours, including paralinguistic features such as vocal pitch and intonation, are systematically linked to dimensions of source credibility and speaker persuasiveness. The controlled, authoritative falling tone employed by the counsel in Case B functions precisely as such a credibility-enhancing nonverbal cue, reinforcing the counsel's institutional role as a guardian of procedural fairness.

As illustrated in CASE A, when the Petitioner states, "She locked me out of our bedroom for two years sir!", the analysis notes a rising pitch on "locked me out" and a falling pitch on "two years." The function is described as "Attitudinal and accentual emphasises emotional strain," and the persuasive effect is to "Evoke sympathy and supports the claim of emotional cruelty." This instance clearly shows how a witness, likely under emotional duress, uses a rising pitch accent on a key phrase to highlight the severity of the action and convey personal suffering. The subsequent falling tone on the duration further solidifies the impact of the statement. Research on emotional prosody by Larrouy-Maestri et al. (2024) confirms that acoustic properties, particularly pitch variations, map directly to emotional states, allowing listeners to infer the speaker's internal condition. The Banse and Scherer (1996) model of emotion expression further demonstrates that specific constellations of acoustic features, including fundamental frequency (f0) characteristics, reliably predict listener recognition of emotions such as anxiety, sadness, and anger, which aligns with the observed rising pitch accent conveying emotional strain in the petitioner's testimony. The subsequent falling tone on the duration further solidifies the impact of the statement. While Baba as a witness in Case B said "They are not from same compound but same mother," he employs a rise-fall tone (L+H* L-L%) on "same mother." This accentual pattern highlights a key fact about maternal ties, emphasising the nuanced difference that maternal lineage differs from patriarchal compound membership. This demonstrates how even a seemingly calm witness can use intonation strategically to assert important facts and convey a crucial distinction, potentially under emotional pressure due to the nature of the land dispute. This finding is supported by Jiang and Pell (2017), who investigated the perceptual-acoustic correlates of expressed confidence and doubt in spoken language, concluding that vocal speech cues, including pitch accents and contour patterns, significantly influence how speakers' epistemic stance is evaluated by listeners. Furthermore, Boyle and Brodsky (2012) have demonstrated that vocal pitch directly affects witness credibility perception by jurors in courtroom settings, with lower pitch generally associated with greater credibility. In the present study, Baba's controlled rise-fall contour suggests a deliberate prosodic choice that projects both factual certainty and emotional composure, potentially enhancing his credibility as a witness. These instances indicate that even non-legal professionals (witnesses) unconsciously or consciously use intonation to underscore their emotional state and emphasise elements of their testimony, which can significantly impact how their narrative is received. The Autosegmental-Metrical (AM) Phonology framework, originally developed by Pierrehumbert (1980), provides the analytical precision necessary to identify these fine-grained prosodic distinctions,

confirming that intonational contours in courtroom discourse are not merely stylistic variations but carry systematic communicative and persuasive functions.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated that intonation is far more than a mere vocal accessory in courtroom discourse; it is a powerful and integral tool for legal argumentation and persuasion. Through a detailed analysis of intonation patterns in Nigerian courtroom proceedings, this research has illuminated how variations in pitch, stress and rhythm are strategically employed by legal actors to achieve specific communicative and persuasive goals. The study has shown that falling tones consistently convey confidence and finality, rising tones effectively introduce doubt or invite elaboration and fall-rise tones are utilised for nuanced challenges or to express politeness. Furthermore, the study underscored how these intonational patterns, when combined with other prosodic features such as stress, pauses and tempo, become even more potent in shaping legal narratives and influencing audience perception.

The findings reveal a clear differentiation in intonation usage across various courtroom roles. Lawyers skillfully manipulate intonation to construct compelling arguments, cross-examine witnesses and persuade judges and jurors. Witnesses, on the other hand, often exhibit intonational patterns that betray emotional states or convey uncertainty, while judges consistently employ controlled and authoritative tones to maintain decorum and assert judicial power. This role-specific variation in intonation highlights its dynamic and context-dependent nature within the legal arena.

The theoretical frameworks of Autosegmental-Metrical (AM) Phonology, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and Interactional Sociolinguistics have provided a robust lens through which to interpret these observations. AM Phonology enabled a precise acoustic analysis of intonational contours, revealing the phonetic mechanisms underlying their persuasive effects. The ELM offered insights into how these prosodic cues can influence persuasion through both central and peripheral routes, explaining how subtle vocal features can sway opinions even without deep cognitive processing. Finally, Interactional Sociolinguistics provided the framework for understanding how intonation functions as a contextualisation cue, managing turn-taking, signaling speaker stance and negotiating power dynamics in real-time courtroom interactions. The integration of these theories has provided a holistic and nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between phonology, psychology and social interaction in legal communication.

Declaration of conflicting interests

We declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to this research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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