

INTONATION AND MEANING IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

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Abstract: This article examines how considerations of intonation – the prosodic features of spoken language – challenge and enrich traditional philosophical models of meaning. Beginning with the formal emphasis in early analytic philosophy like logical atomism, which largely disregarded intonation as an extraneous feature, this study traces the development of thought through Frege's sense/force distinction and into the mid-20th-century speech act tradition inaugurated by J.L. Austin and further developed by John Searle. We argue that later analytic approaches incorporate elements of intonational meaning as indispensable to understanding illocutionary force and pragmatic aspects of language use.

We present that the marginalization of prosody in early analytic logic reflects a broader commitment to truth-conditional semantics and formal reconstruction, where meaning is equated with propositional structure and reference. By contrast, speech act theory and subsequent pragmatic frameworks reveal that intonation systematically contributes to how utterances function as assertions, questions, or commands within communicative practices. We demonstrate that intonation is therefore not merely an acoustic accompaniment but a structural indicator of force that enables propositions to operate as discourse moves. Thus, we here highlight a methodological and conceptual shift within analytic philosophy – from abstract logical modeling toward a pragmatics-sensitive account of meaning that integrates the performative and contextual dimensions of spoken language.

Keywords: intonation, logical atomism, sense/force, speech act, analytic approach, meaning

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Introduction

How do linguistic expressions acquire meaning? How does meaning relate to truth, reference, and human understanding? The philosophy of language has long aimed to explain these questions. For instance, within the analytic tradition, this project initially took a strongly formal direction. Which is that meaning was analyzed through logical structure, propositional content, and truth-conditions [1]. Such an approach proved powerful in clarifying logical relations and semantic structure. Yet it systematically abstracted away from features of actual speech performance – including intonation, stress, and rhythm – that shape how utterances function in communicative practice [2].

Does intonation, understood as the patterned modulation of pitch and prosodic contour in spoken language, occupy a peculiar position in philosophical reflection? On the one hand, it does not alter the truth-value of a proposition; on the other, it plays a decisive role in distinguishing assertions from questions, commands, irony, emphasis, and evaluative stance [4]. This raises a fundamental philosophical question: can a theory of meaning that reduces semantics to truth-conditions adequately account for the performative dimension of language?

In our article we investigate how intonation moved from marginalization in early analytic philosophy to conceptual integration within speech act theory and pragmatic approaches. By tracing this development from logical atomism through Frege's sense/force distinction and into the work of Austin, Searle, and later pragmatists, we argue that intonation reveals structural limits of purely truth-conditional models of meaning. So, the evolution of analytic philosophy's treatment of prosody mirrors a deeper transformation in its conception of meaning – from static logical correspondence to dynamic participation in communicative practice.

Methodology

Our study adopts a conceptual-historical and analytic methodology. First, we employ close textual reconstruction of key figures in the analytic tradition. They include Russell, early Wittgenstein, Frege, Austin, and Searle. At this stage we clarify how each framework conceptualizes meaning and treats (or neglects) the dimension of force. Rather than offering a purely chronological narrative, in our analysis we identify structural commitments within each theoretical model, especially regarding the relation between propositional content, illocutionary force, and linguistic form.

Second, our study utilizes comparative conceptual analysis to highlight contrasts between truth-conditional semantics and pragmatic theories of language use. Particular attention is given to the ontological status of force and to the functional role of intonation as a marker of speech act type. In this framework it involves examining how prosodic features operate as force-indicating devices within communicative practice, and how their systematicity challenges strict semantic minimalism.

Third, our methodology reflects the broader shift within analytic philosophy from formal logical reconstruction toward use-sensitive and discourse-oriented

approaches. While early analytic method prioritized abstraction and formalization, later developments incorporate descriptive insights from pragmatics and linguistics. Our study does not aim to provide empirical phonetic analysis; rather, it draws on established linguistic findings to illuminate philosophical questions about meaning, force, and the structure of communicative acts.

By integrating historical reconstruction with conceptual analysis, our investigation shows that approaches to intonation can function as a theoretical perspective for understanding wider methodological shifts within analytic philosophy.

The Evolution of Intonation from Logical Atomism to Speech Act Theory

How do linguistic expressions relate to the world and to human understanding? The analytic tradition in philosophy of language has long been invested in explicating this question. It is well known that early proponents of logical atomism, such as Bertrand Russell and the early Ludwig Wittgenstein, modeled language on formal logic. In this framework they aimed to mirror reality through propositions corresponding to atomic facts [5]. In such a program, semantics is grounded in truth-conditions and referential structure, leaving little room for the prosodic features of actual speech that vary with context or speaker intention. The problem is that formal semantics of this kind tends to treat features like pitch and rhythm as external to core meaning.

Further, Gottlob Frege's innovations in semantics, especially his distinction between sense (Sinn) and reference (Bedeutung), advanced understanding of how meaning is more than mere reference [6]. Featuring his view, sentences express propositions (or thoughts), and the reference of a sentence is its truth-value, linking semantics with logical analysis. Moreover, the greatest logician acknowledged that sentences can be presented with different logical forces – as assertions, questions, or commands. Thus, it prefigured later work on illocutionary force as a component of linguistic meaning. However, his work did not fully integrate the pragmatic or prosodic dimensions into his logical framework.

Then, beginning in the mid-20th century, philosophers such as J.L. Austin and John Searle reconceptualized language as not simply a vehicle for truth-conditional content but as a medium of action [9]. In “How to Do Things with Words”, Austin developed the idea that utterances perform actions (e.g., asserting, promising, requesting). And that these actions depend on conventional and contextual conditions for success or “felicity”. Given earlier studies, Searle later systematized the notion of illocutionary force, arguing that utterances have both propositional content and illocutionary force [10], the latter indicating what kind of speech act is performed. In this view, intonation and other prosodic features become integral to how the force of an utterance is recognized and interpreted.

In what follows we broaden the abovementioned discussion in view of how intonation has evolved from its marginalization in early analytic logic to its incorporation as a necessary aspect of meaning in later pragmatic theories. Along the way, we clarify how philosophical attention shifted from an exclusive focus on formal

semantic content to include the pragmatic and performative dimensions of spoken language.

To begin with, it is important to consider that in the early analytic era logical atomism sought to reduce linguistic meaning to the structural correspondence between propositions and states of affairs in the world [1]. Atomistic theorists aimed to eliminate anything considered extraneous to propositional truth conditions. In this framework intonation and other features of speech were considered as such as they do not alter truth value. Under this view, language was ideally treated as a static system of logical forms. And the role of prosody was either ignored or relegated to psychology and not part of the logical analysis of meaning. While this body of work laid crucial groundwork for formal semantics, it left unexplained how listeners recognize whether an utterance constitutes a question, command, or another speech act – distinctions that often hinge on intonational patterns in speech.

In Russell and early Wittgenstein, logical atomism rests on four core theses:

1. The world consists of atomic facts, independent of language.
2. Atomic propositions correspond one-to-one with atomic facts.
3. Meaning is exhausted by this correspondence.
4. Logic is formal, timeless, and complete.

In this regard language is idealized as a transparent mirror of reality. Accordingly, anything not required for picturing facts is noise. This already signals the problem – intonation does not picture facts. It entailed the status of intonation as an eliminable residue. From a strict logical atomist perspective, intonation has no semantic function. Since atomic propositions have determinate sense independently of use, truth conditions do not vary with tone and the same fact either obtains or does not. So intonation cannot alter reference, truth-value or logical form. Therefore, it must be classified as psychological accompaniment, pragmatic decoration or performative excess.

Such exclusion, however, reveals a deeper structural tension. The issue is that if illocutionary force is required for propositions to function as assertions within logical discourse, then the logical atomist framework presupposes a layer of meaning it cannot formally represent. In this respect intonation exposes a limit of truth-conditional semantics. The logical form of a proposition failed to determine its mode of presentation as an assertion, question, or command. The very act of asserting – indispensable for logical analysis – depends on force, and force in natural language is systematically correlated with prosodic marking [4]. Therefore, intonation does not merely accompany meaning. It indexes the performative operator that allows propositions to enter discourse as acts.

In this way logical atomism immediately encounters trouble, treating questions as disguised assertions and translating commands into propositions about desires or obligations. In particular, replacing intonational force with propositional content is a reduction strategy, the cost of which is the loss of the lived meaning of the utterance. So intonation exposes a blind spot - logical atomism can represent *states of affairs*, but not *speech acts*, freezing language into static units.

Besides, intonation in logical atomism becomes unintelligible due to being temporal and contingent. In other words, it belongs to empirical speech, while the

mentioned theory tends toward formal languages, written symbols and mathematical logic. But here is the quiet irony. Logical atomism depends on acts of assertion to function at all. So intonation (or its logical analogue) is presupposed but unthematized. From this perspective, logical atomism needs assertoric force to get off the ground, but cannot represent it.

However, Gottlob Frege’s seminal sense and reference distinction responded to the inadequacies of a purely referential theory of meaning [6]. Frege argued that linguistic expressions have two layers of meaning: sense, which determines cognitive content, and reference, which links expressions to entities or truth-values in the world. Although Frege’s primary concern was with declarative sentences and propositional content, his work implicitly recognized that “how” a thought is presented – the logical force of an expression – matters for understanding its linguistic function. Still, Frege’s acknowledgment of force gestures toward the later distinction between propositional content and illocutionary force, even though he did not elaborate a full pragmatic theory.

In addition, Frege analyzes meaning in triadic form which is sense (*Sinn*), reference (*Bedeutung*) and force, where reference is a form and sense as cognitive content with force as illocutionary dimension present uttered meaning. Notably, intonation is recognized as functional – a factor that is not sense itself but alters how sense enters logic and communication. This suggests that Frege’s insight that the same content can be presented with different force anticipates a broader understanding of meaning where intonation and other markers help distinguish functions such as assertion from interrogation or command. His work thereby serves as a bridge between formal semantics and subsequent pragmatic theories that more fully integrate speech functions (Table 1).

Table 1 - The Status of Illocutionary Force and Intonation in Logical Atomism and Frege

Aspect	Logical atomism	Frege
Meaning	Atomic propositions	Reference
Illocutionary mark	Eliminable noise	Force (assertive, interrogative, etc.)
Propositional content	Atomic fact	Sense appeared with different force
Logical formalization	Formal	Not fully formalized within logic, but conceptually recognized

Should intonation be treated as external to semantic content, as a pragmatic indicator of force, or as part of the architecture of meaning itself? If force operators structure how propositions function in discourse, and if prosody systematically signals such operators, then intonation may occupy an intermediate ontological position: not reducible to propositional content, yet not merely peripheral. This raises the possibility that semantic theory requires expansion beyond truth-conditions to incorporate force-sensitive dimensions of linguistic structure.

Furthermore, the mid-20th century saw a pivotal shift with J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*, which inaugurated speech act theory by asserting that language is not merely descriptive but performative [9]. To overcome the issues discussed, Austin proposed that utterances perform various kinds of acts – locutionary (the act of saying something), illocutionary (the act performed in saying it), and perlocutionary (the effects produced upon an audience).

In this respect, speech acts go beyond truth/false semantics. Austin broke with the early analytic fixation on *truth-conditional meaning* (à la Frege and logical atomism) by insisting speech acts have “felicity conditions” that govern whether speech acts succeed. These include conventional procedures and norms governing language use. Importantly, some aspects of these conditions, such as intonation and prosody, are relevant for recognizing speech act types even if they are not part of the propositional content itself. This step makes meaning use-dependent – no longer confined to propositional content alone. Hence, Austin's framework opened the door for considering phonetic and prosodic features as meaningful in the context of language use.

To reinforce Austin's position, John Searle developed a more systematic account of illocutionary force [11]. In his influential *Speech Acts*, Searle treats speech acts as having two dimensions: propositional content and illocutionary force, where the latter encapsulates what type of act (asserting, questioning, commanding) the speaker is performing. According to Searle, illocutionary force can be indicated by various linguistic devices, including word order, stress, intonation contours, and verb mood. In this view Searle argues that intonation becomes a recognized part of how force is signaled, not merely an optional add-on to semantic content.

In this framework, intonation functions as an illocutionary force indicating device (IFID). This feature helps map spoken forms to functions within a speech community. For example, rising intonation may signal a question, even when the propositional content itself remains unchanged. Note that recognizing such cues is essential to interpreting utterances as specific types of speech acts, thereby integrating prosody into the mechanics of meaning.

Moreover, while Searle focused on systematizing semantic framework, P.F. Strawson emphasized speaker intention and contextual uptake. This view makes illocutionary force – and therefore meaning – situationally anchored. It means that context and interpersonal cues (intonation included) help the listener grasp force. Then, Paul Grice also elaborated the speaker's meaning *and* conversational implicature, tying force and pragmatic expectations to intentions and context [8].

Here's how the analytic tradition develops beyond Frege's sense/force distinction to incorporate intonation into meaning (Table 2):

Table 2 - Conceptions of Meaning and the Role of Illocutionary Force from Frege to Grice

Thinker	What meaning is	How force/intonation fits
Frege	Sense (thought) + Force (mode of presentation)	Force is acknowledged but not developed pragmatically
Austin	Action performed by speaking (illocution)	Intonation and context help determine illocutionary force
Searle	Content + force in a rule-governed pragmatic system	Intonation and other markers are devices indicating force
Strawson/Grice	Speaker intention and context shape force	Intonation contributes to how meaning is taken

What above table suggest is that analytic speech act theory establishes three core points that bring intonation *into* meaning:

1. Meaning isn't just truth conditions but includes *what speakers do* in saying something.
2. Illocutionary force must be indicated somehow, and intonation is a real marker of that force.
3. Speaker intentions and context matter, and intercultural/pragmatic cues like intonation are part of that.

So later analytic philosophy treats intonation not as an optional add-on (as strict logical atomism did) but as integral to how utterances are understood in context. Next, contemporary debates in semantics and pragmatics further complicate this picture. The following entails that dynamic semantics, contextualism, and common-ground theories of assertion (e.g., Stalnaker) emphasize that meaning unfolds within evolving discourse states rather than as static truth-conditions [15]. Within such frameworks, force is modeled as an update function on shared commitments. Note that, if force operates as a discourse-level operator, and if prosodic contours systematically signal that operator, then intonation becomes functionally embedded within the mechanisms that structure conversational dynamics. This suggests that the marginalization of prosody in early analytic philosophy cannot be sustained within contemporary discourse-sensitive models of meaning [16].

Finally, in contemporary linguistics, prosody refers to the suprasegmental features of speech – including intonation, stress, rhythm, and loudness – that convey emotional nuance, speaker attitude, and structural information not captured by grammar alone [18]. At this point prosody helps distinguish major sentence types (e.g., statements vs. questions) and contributes to discourse structure and focus marking [17]. Now, its role in structuring meaning echoes and complements the philosophical insights of speech act theorists, suggesting that meaning in natural language cannot be fully accounted for by formal semantics alone.

To sum up, tracing the philosophical treatment of intonation from logical atomism through Frege and into the speech act tradition reveals an evolving appreciation for the multifaceted nature of meaning. So, where early analytic models prioritized

propositional content and formal structures, later approaches recognized that language functions as action, and that features like intonation play indispensable roles in how utterances are interpreted and understood. Though Frege's sense/force distinction anticipated this development, it was through Austin, Searle, and developments in linguistic pragmatics that intonation became recognized as a substantive component of a comprehensive theory of meaning. Therefore, a full account of linguistic meaning must encompass not only semantic content but also the prosodic and contextual resources that shape how language is used in practice [21].

Methodological and Philosophical Implications of Intonation for Meaning Theory

On this view, researching intonation in the philosophy of language, focusing on its marginalization in early analytic logic and later incorporation as a necessary aspect of meaning in pragmatic theories reflects the methodology evolved from highly abstract logic-centric analysis to a pragmatics-informed study of communicative practices.

In these terms analytic philosophy originally adopted a formal logical methodology influenced by the logical positivist and logical atomist projects. Researchers trained in this approach used methods such as *logical reconstruction* and *formalization* to analyze natural language. It served to map natural sentences onto ideal logical forms that abstract away from spoken performance features. This approach explicitly designed to *ignore* features like intonation that do not neatly fit into truth-conditional frameworks.

Then in the mid-20th century ordinary language philosophers emphasized *careful description of everyday linguistic practices* as the proper methodology for philosophical inquiry. Consequently, this methodology opened the door for recognizing features such as intonation as salient to meaning because it foregrounded *use* and *context* over idealized linguistic form.

Thereafter, Austin's methodology involved *introspective analysis* of speaking situations and classifying types of speech acts based on conditions of success or "felicity," rather than on purely abstract semantics. And Searle's work introduced *systematic classification* of illocutionary types and rules that govern their use. Methodologically, both rely on detailed normative and descriptive analysis of how speakers use language in real interactions, including prosodic cues such as intonation, stress, and rhythm to signal force [20].

Although early analytic philosophy traditionally emphasized *a priori* conceptual analysis, later analytic methodologies often integrate descriptive linguistics and pragmatics to capture how spoken language actually functions. Indeed, this marks a methodological expansion: analytic philosophers now engage with empirical findings about intonation to inform philosophical accounts of meaning and communication [19].

Table 3 - Summary of Methodological Progression

Phase	Dominant Method	Treatment of Intonation
Early Analytic Logic	Formal logical reconstruction	Excluded or ignored as irrelevant
Ordinary Language Philosophy	Descriptive analysis of use	Recognized as part of linguistic behavior
Speech Act Theory	Contextual/pragmatic analysis	Integrated via illocutionary force
Interdisciplinary Pragmatics	Empirical and theoretical analysis	Central to meaning and communication

Overall, the analytic methodology for researching intonation reflects broader shifts from *formal abstraction* toward *contextual and pragmatic sophistication*. What was once marginalized as irrelevant to meaning now occupies an essential place in philosophical and linguistic accounts of how language works. This evolution underscores the importance of methodological pluralism in capturing the full complexity of human linguistic practices.

In sum, the trajectory from logical atomism to contemporary pragmatics reveals that intonation is not merely an empirical ornament of speech but a structural indicator of force – the dimension that transforms propositional content into communicative action. We learned that the philosophical issue is not simply that prosody matters, but that meaning cannot be exhaustively captured by truth-conditional structure alone. In this light intonation exposes the performative infrastructure of language: the layer at which propositions become moves within normative and social practices. Therefore, analytic philosophy's engagement with intonation mirrors a deeper transformation in its conception of meaning – from static correspondence to dynamic participation in discourse.

It appears that the analytic philosophical shift toward respecting language as used – rather than as a formal abstraction – has therefore allowed prosody and intonation to be understood not as peripheral noise but as essential components of meaningful linguistic interaction. So, the evolution of analytic philosophy's engagement with intonation mirrors its broader methodological shift: from privileging formal structure to embracing the pragmatic, contextual, and performative dimensions of language. Evidently, intonation, once marginalized, is now recognized as a necessary facet of meaning, shaping how utterances are taken and how linguistic actions are performed within communicative practices.

Conclusion

What emerges from this investigation is that the trajectory from logical atomism to contemporary pragmatic approaches reveals a significant transformation in analytic philosophy's understanding of meaning. Initially, early analytic models, guided by the ideal of logical clarity, reduced meaning to propositional structure and truth-

conditions, thereby excluding prosodic features such as intonation from the domain of semantic relevance [1]. In doing so, they achieved formal precision but at the cost of overlooking how language functions as action.

Subsequently, Frege's distinction between sense and force marked an important conceptual advance, acknowledging that propositions can be presented under different modes of force [6]. However, it was through speech act theory – particularly in the work of Austin and Searle – that force became central to the analysis of meaning [9]. Within this framework, intonation is recognized not as psychological ornamentation but as a systematic indicator of illocutionary force, enabling speakers to perform acts such as asserting, questioning, and commanding.

It follows that the philosophical significance of this development lies in its implications for semantic theory. Intonation currently demonstrates that meaning cannot be fully captured by truth-conditional content alone. Consequently, propositions become communicatively operative only when embedded within force-bearing acts, and prosodic structure plays a crucial role in signaling those acts [3]. Thus, the integration of intonation into philosophical accounts of language reflects a broader methodological and conceptual shift – from viewing language as a static mirror of reality to understanding it as a dynamic medium of normative and social interaction.

In this sense, the evolution of analytic philosophy's engagement with intonation does more than rehabilitate a neglected linguistic feature; it accordingly redefines the scope of what counts as meaning.

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Тіл философиясындағы интонация және мағына мәселелері

Аңдатпа: Мақалада интонацияны, яғни ауызша сөйлеудің просодикалық қырларын назарға алу дәстүрлі философиялық мағына модельдерін қайта пайымдауға қалай ықпал ететіні және оларды қалай толықтыратыны қарастырылады. Ерте аналитикалық философиядағы, әсіресе логикалық атомизмдегі формалистік бағдардан бастау алып, онда интонацияның көбіне косалқы құбылыс ретінде қарастырылғаны көрсетіледі; әрі қарай ой эволюциясы Фрегенің мағына/әрекет теориясы, кейін XX ғасырдың ортасында Дж. Л. Остин негізін қалаған және Джон Серль дамытқан сөйлеу әрекеттері теориясына дейін талданады. Біз кейінгі аналитикалық бағыттарда интонациялық мағынаның тілдің иллокутивтік әрекеті мен прагматикалық қырларын түсіндіруде маңызды орын алатынын дәлелдейміз.

Зерттеу ерте аналитикалық логикада просодияның дәрежеленбеуі мағынаны пропозициялық құрылым мен референцияға теңейтін, ақиқаттық семантика мен формалдық реконструкцияға негізделген жалпы ұстанымды айқындайтынын көрсетеді. Ал сөйлеу актілері теориясы мен кейінгі прагматикалық бағыттар интонацияның коммуникативтік үдерісте айтылымдардың бекіту, сұрау не бұйыру сияқты қызметтерді жүзеге асыруына жүйелі түрде қатысатынын айқындайды. Осылайша, интонация тек акустикалық акомпонент емес, пропозициялардың дискурстағы қызметін жүзеге асыратын құрылымдық көрсеткіші болып танылады. Бұл зерттеу аналитикалық философияда орын алған әдіснамалық әрі тұжырымдамалық бетбұрысты - сөйлеу барысындағы перформативтік және контекстуалдық өрістерін қамтитын мағынаны абстрактілі логикалық модельдеуден прагматикалық ой тоқу түсінігіне қарай ауысуды - көрсетеді.

Түйін сөздер: интонация, логикалық атомизм, мағына/әрекет, сөйлеу акті, аналитикалық тәсіл, мағына.

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Проблема интонации и значения в философии языка

Аннотация. В статье анализируется, каким образом интонация - просодия устной речи – одновременно проблематизирует и дополняет традиционные философские представления о формировании смысла. Развитие идей прослеживается, начиная с ранней аналитической философии, прежде всего логического атомизма, в рамках которого интонация в значительной мере игнорировалась как второстепенный аспект, продолжая теорией значения Фреге, и с середины XX века предложенной теорией речевых актов Дж. Л. Остина, впоследствии развитой Джоном Серлем. Наша точка зрения состоит в том, что более поздние аналитические теории рассматривают интонационный смысл как неотъемлемый элемент в понимании иллокутивной функции и прагматических аспектов языка.

В работе обосновывается, что маргинализация просодии в ранней аналитической логике связано с общей семантической истинно обусловленностью и формальной реконструкцией, в рамках чего сводится к пропозициональной структуре и референции. В противоположность этому теория речевых актов и последующие прагматические подходы демонстрируют систематическую роль интонации в функционировании высказываний в коммуникативной практике в качестве утверждений, вопросов или побуждений. Тем самым интонация выступает не просто как акустический акомпанимент, а как структурный индикатор функционирования, обеспечивающий дискурсивное взаимодействие пропозиции. Исследование подчеркивает произошедший в аналитической философии методологический и концептуальный переход - от абстрактного логического моделирования к прагматически ориентированному пониманию значения, учитывающему перформативные и контекстуальные аспекты устной речи.

Ключевые слова: интонация, логический атомизм, смысл/действие, речевой акт, аналитический подход, значение.

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