

# Prosodic Cues of Narrative Segmentation in Robert Frost's 'Mending Wall': A Phono-Pragmatic Exploration

Manaar M. A. AL-Badri

Department of English, University of Baghdad, Baghdad, Iraq

Nassier A. G. Al-Zubaidi

Department of English, University of Baghdad, Baghdad, Iraq

**Abstract**—There is much research on the syntax-semantics and the syntax-phonology interaction. However, the exact relation between prosodic patterns and informational structure (as part of pragmatics) is still to be investigated. In this empirical study, we challenge the view that prosody and pragmatics are two autonomous levels of grammar. This paper is an analysis of the narrative poem 'Mending Wall' recited by Robert Frost to explore the prosodic features and the associated pragmatic meanings. It is proposed that a set of intentionally manipulated suprasegmental features form a prosodic grammar that works in line with syntax and lexical choices to build the narrative discourse and achieve pragmatic meanings. The paper shows that the amalgamation of certain prosodic features is manipulated to signal certain sections of the narrative and participate in segmenting the story into sections. Since the narrative structure is thought to be universal, we think that the procedures followed can be easily applied to other languages.

**Index Terms**—narrative segmentation, pause, pitch reset, boundary tones, major paratones

## I. INTRODUCTION

One of the main characteristics of intonation is that it expresses contrasts at different levels of meaning. Intonation can indicate, among other things, speech acts, phrasing, discourse structure, implicatures, presuppositions, truth conditions, and scope relations. Certain phenomena may belong to more than one category and overlapping of categories is possible. The different effects achieved through the particular parts of intonation are pitch movement, phrasing, and prominence. Firstly, pitch movements can have communicative functions or they can indicate speech acts. Communicative functions are often transmitted by paralinguistic features such as gestural and facial expressions, body language, and in particular the way an utterance is spoken. Like other paralinguistic means, these modifications are realized in a parallel channel to the one in which the propositional information is expressed. Paralinguistic features are typically non-categorical and iconic (emphatic or emotive). For example, the pitch level may rise according to the level of anger. These features may indicate "more of everything" as in "fiiiine" (von Heusinger, 1999). One particularly rich genre for research on paralinguistics is the oral narrative (recited narrative poems are no exceptions). Wolfson (2011) discusses "performance features" as an important choice for storytellers, who may dramatize their telling with gestures, mimicry, volume, pitch variation, and other paralinguistic features. In a discussion of evaluative language in narratives, Labov (1972) includes quoted speech as an indicator of a speaker's strong attitudinal attachment to a particular narrative event. Quoted speech is marked by paralinguistic shifts—the tempo, pitch range, volume, and other aspects of voice quality change during the quoted portion (Winnerstrom, 2002). Indicating the speech act of an utterance, i.e. the way (or the "force") in which a propositional content is the other function of pitch movement. The propositional content can be presented as an assertion, a question, a command, etc. Intonation can determine whether an utterance is to be understood according to its sentence type or whether it is allowed to use/understand it as an indirect speech act. The sentence type gives the general class while the intonational contour marks the specific speech act. For example, in English, a declarative sentence with a low tone is mostly an assertion, and it is a request if it is uttered with a rising tone. Secondly, prominence reflects in some way the focus of the utterance, which is often referred to as the highlighted unit. It can indicate different kinds of contrast, it can mark discourse structure (by marking given and new constituents) or as Ladd (1980) puts it "the deaccenting of repeated or presupposed material or given (old) information or items which are already in the discourse or are in some way predictable" (p.52). Halliday (1970) states that focus expresses a **pragmatic-text-function**:

In general, tone expresses speech function, while tonic prominence (pitch accent) expresses the structure of information. [...] The choice of tonic prominence—where to put the tonic; also in fact, where to divide up into tone groups—relates to how the message is divided into units of information, where the main 'new information' lies, and how it ties up with what has been said before: anything that contributes to the structure of the discourse, in other words. (P. 22).

Thirdly, phrasing divides the sequence of words into intonational phrases. Intonational phrasing is correlated with informational units which are organized by the thematic structure. Pitch accents are the nuclei of the tone groups, and they mark the informational foci of the informational units. Informational foci indicate the givenness of the expression with respect to the discourse. Thus, several functions of intonational features are related to information structure, which motivates the division of the sentence into units, organizes the internal structure of these units, and accounts for the relation of the units to each other and to other parts of the discourse (von Heusinger, 1999).

The current study concentrates on the third function of intonation. Spoken language is frequently a continuous stream of speech. For comprehension to succeed, the listener must segment this stream. We follow this idea by examining the acoustic cues (prosodic strategies) of segmentation the speaker (the poet) employs in dividing the story within his poem. The analysis tackles dividing (phrasing) the poem into intonational phrases (IPs) which goes hand in hand with segmenting the narrative into its discursual components. This falls within the category of discourse pragmatics (Ferré 2005; Samraj, 2014). A substantial literature has been devoted to determine the degree to which information about word-boundary locations is present in the acoustics of speech (Lehiste, 1960). In this paper, we consider the contribution of prosody to the telling of narratives within a recited narrative poem indicating the role it plays in supporting the structure of the narrative. Three prosodic features are suggested in the literature as cues for spoken text segmentation. Pitch reset, boundary tone, and pause are likely candidates to highlight the make-up of a spoken text because these prosodic variables are considered to be reliable structuring devices (Swerts, 1997). von Heusinger (1999) as well shows that phrase boundaries are marked by pauses, boundary tones, and duration patterns. In other words, these prosodic features give chance to study how prosody plays a role in signaling the thematic hierarchical narrative structure.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The analysis includes, as a first step, an acoustic analysis of prosodic features by the use of a phonetic tool. Prosodic features can be acoustically measured by using computer programs to show frequency, intensity, duration, and the like. Then comes the phono-pragmatic analysis following the frameworks of von Heusinger (1999) and Wennerstrom (2001) to show the role of prosody in the segmentation of the narrative poem. The procedures are:

1. Using an MP4- to -WAV converter to modify the sound formants to what PRAAT can deal with.
2. Using AUDACITY to split the poem into utterances depending on the variables of intonational phrase.
3. A phono-pragmatic segmentation divides the narrative poem into its narrative components depending on Labov and Waletzky's (1967) and Labov's (1972) and Labov's (1997) narrative schema model then using PRAAT for examining the prosody of the resultant narrative sections boundaries acoustically.
4. A detailed acoustic analysis is carried out by using PRAAT for each utterance to show the prosodic features under investigation and to get Praat annotated sound file.
5. The pitch accents, boundary tones, and prominent prosodic features of each utterance are presented according to the ToBI System of the Autosegmental Metrical Theory.
6. A phono-pragmatic analysis is used to highlight prosody alignment to the pragmatic structure of the narrative and how prosody serves to distinguish its sections.
7. Statistical analyses and frequency of occurrence are conducted to know which features are pragmatically significant, in which way, and to what extent.

## III. PHONO-PRAGMATIC SEGMENTATION OF THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

This part of the analysis divides the narrative poem into its discursual components depending on Labov and Waletzky's (1967), Labov's (1972), and Labov's (1997) narrative schema model with the aid of the acoustical measurement, using prosody as a tool to verify the correctness of chunking. The length of Frost's narrative poem is 150s divided into 57 intonational phrases. Within this narrative poem, all the sections defined by Labov and Waletzky appear very clearly. The abstract unit starts with 'something there is that doesn't love a wall' which perfectly "functions as an advertisement for the narrative: a way to make exaggerations upon that which follows" and it extends to four intonational phrases. A considerable pause signals the end of the abstract. The orientation (which starts with an obvious jump in F0) is the descriptive section that gives background information about the characters, the setting, and what the events are, e.g., the use of "I", "we", and "my neighbour" tells who is doing the action, "on a day at spring mending time beyond the hill" represents the setting, and "set the wall between us" talks about the event upon which the narrative is based. The orientation is divided into four main parts. Each part represents a topic (each topic is prosodically marked with a dramatic pitch range). They all lie within "describing": describing the works of hunters, describing the gaps, describing the neighbour and the narrator's meeting, and finally describing the process of keeping the boulders between them using different types of stones. The orientation extends from line 5 to line 20 which meets 18 IPs to end with a relatively long pause (Figure 1).

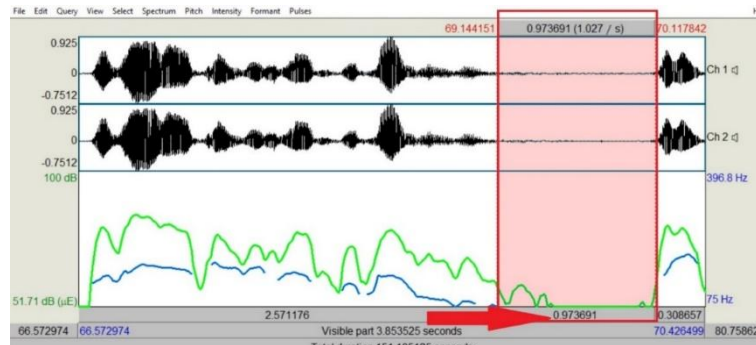


Figure 1 A Pause of 0.97 at the End of the Orientation Section in 'Mending Wall'

Finishing the description, the narrator starts his attempt to convince the neighbour that there is no need for the wall: this attempt represents the complicating action. It is indirect, conveyed by sarcasm and mockery "My apple trees will never get across and eat the cones under his pines, I tell him". The complicating action consists of 11 IPs. Its first non-lexical word 'oh' is prosodically distinguished as seen in Figure 2.

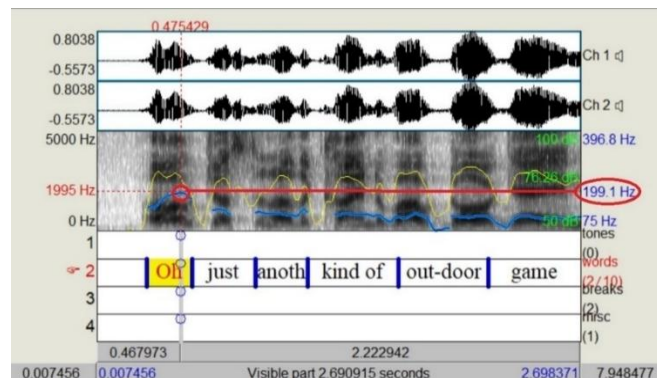


Figure 2 The Prosodically Marked Item in the First IP of the Complicating Action in 'Mending Wall'

The evaluative section conveys the poet's points of view. It illustrates a notion the narrator believes in and wishes to put in his neighbour's head: "and I wonder If I could put a notion in his head: 'Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it Where there are cows? But here there are no cows". The evaluation section carries the opinions and attitudes of the speaker represented by several uses of the pronoun "I", especially those that mean "If I were in your shoes, I would do so and so". The clauses of the evaluation meet 14 IP in the spoken data. This is not their total number since there is an evaluative IP within the result when the neighbour is described "like an old savage armed". As Toolan (2001) indicates, exaggerating qualifiers, questions and the use of simile or metaphor all indicate internal evaluations. These are marked with red colour in figure 3. The evaluation section ends with a very low boundary tone and a noticeable pause. The result represents the most reportable event in the narrative. After the narrator's attempts to convince his neighbour to think about the point behind the wall, he sees his neighbour walking in darkness carrying stones in both hands insisting on fixing the wall. The result answers the question of "what finally happened". It usually contains the resolution to a conflict in the narrative. There is no conflict in "mending wall", instead, there is an attempt to convince one of the characters with a particular notion. The resolution produces the result of this attempt. The result starts with the final action of the neighbour carrying rocks at night which indicates his insistence on building the wall. The neighbour keeps repeating his father's saying blindly which is "good fences make good neighbours". The coda represents the two IPs: "He will not go behind his father's saying" and "And he likes having thought of it so well" since pragmatically they meet the Labovian criterion of coda, being that optional element revealing the narrator's observation about the event and signaling the sealing off of the story. It takes the form of a formulated expression "that is that". Although it prosodically does not have dramatic features, it is comparatively distinguished, i.e., in comparison to the prosody of the surrounding IPs. It is marked with a green colour in figure 3. So, this narrative poem perfectly illustrates all Labovian criteria given earlier. Yet, a close look at the poem may raise the question of how do the researchers decide the exact places of narrative boundaries? Actually, the acoustic measurement of the recorded performance helps in giving a decisive decision on the places of the boundaries among the sections. In other words, the description given by Labov and Waletzky is not enough because it works only at one level. Although they have studied oral narratives, they neglected the acoustic clues which must necessarily influence such type of analysis. The explained divisions are shown in figure 3.

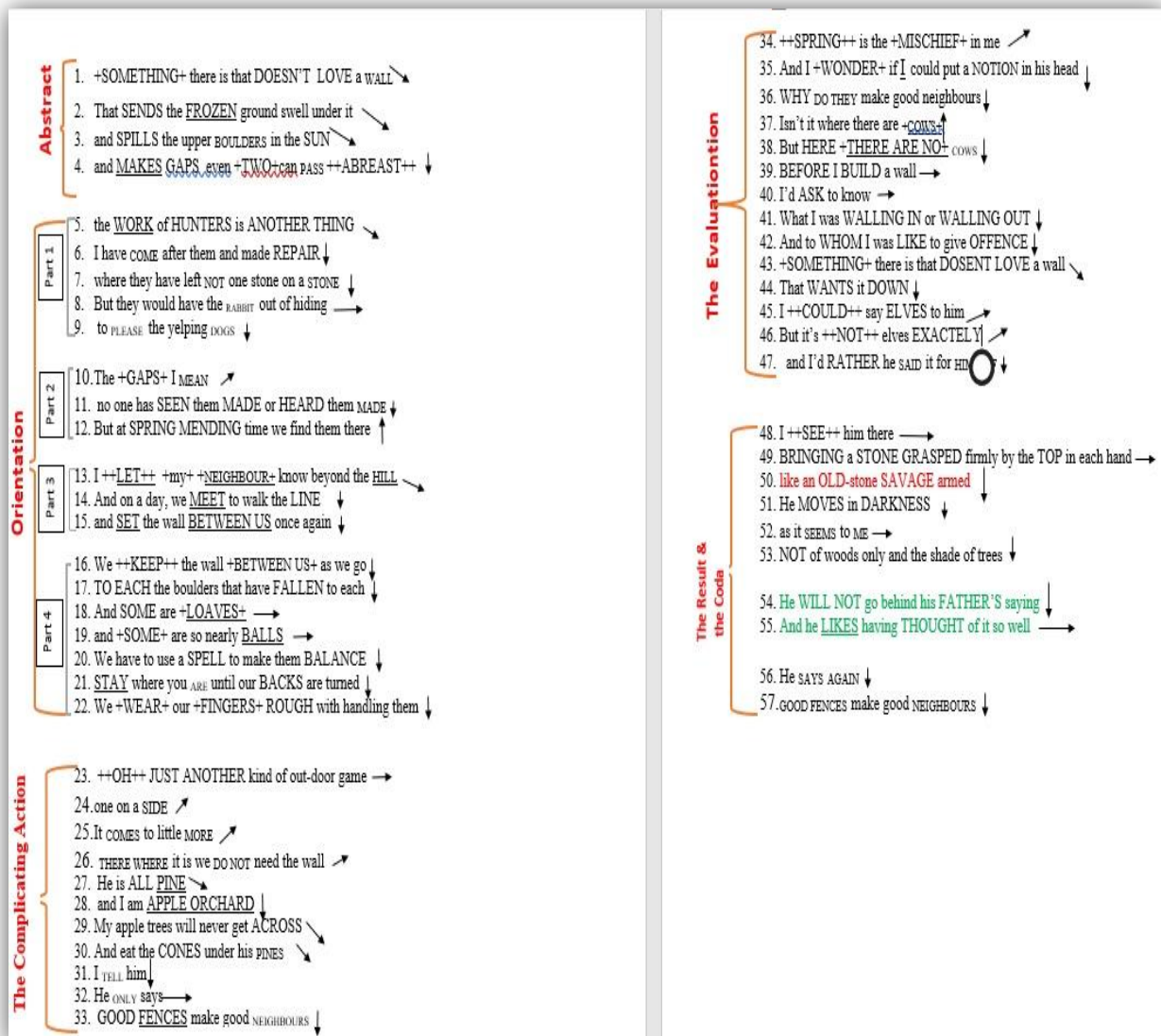


Figure 3. The Segmentation of Frost's 'Mending Wall' Into Narrative Sections in Terms of Intonational Phrases

#### IV. PROSODIC FEATURES AND NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

The role of prosodic boundaries in the segmentation of the discourse is tackled here. The amalgamation of prosodic features like pitch (initial high pitch onset 'pitch reset', and final pitch close 'the tone boundary') and pauses is called "major paratone". Paratones can be said to perform a function similar to that of lexical discourse markers, such as you know, anyway, so, and oh, for they bracket constituents of the text into organizational units. Schiffirin (1987), who analyzed discourse markers in a large corpus of conversation, defines them as "sequentially dependent elements bracket units of talk". According to Schiffirin, "sequentially dependent" means that the occurrence of a marker depends on the sequence of events at the level of the discourse, rather than at the local level of the clause. "Bracket" means that discourse markers tend to occur at the border of other "units of talk". Schiffirin is deliberately flexible about how a unit is defined, pointing out that discourse markers may associate with several different types of constituents. The unit -the proposition; the phrase or clause; the intonational phrase- may be syntactic, semantic, or phonological.

##### A. Pause Duration as an Indicator of Narrative Boundaries

Table 1 lists all the pauses used in the narrative poem to check which ones coincide with narrative boundaries.

TABLE 1  
PAUSES OCCURRENCE AND PAUSE DURATION IN FROST'S 'MENDING WALL'

Narrative Sections	Pause Context	Pause Duration	Pause Function
<b>Abstract</b>	After the first IP "something there is that does not love a wall"	1.05 s	1. Signalling the end of the IP. 2. Raising suspense concerning the "being" of the "something" and the "reason" why it does not love a wall.
	After the second IP "that sends the frozen ground swell under it"	0.862 s	Signaling the end of the IP
	After the final IP of the abstract (before the beginning of the orientation)	1.855s	Signaling the end of the abstract section and the beginning of the orientation section.
<b>Orientation</b>	After "to please the yelping dogs"	0.906s	Signaling the end of the IP & a topic
	After "The gaps I mean"	0.718 s	Signaling the end of the IP
	At the end of "No one has seen them made or heard them made"	0.587s	Signaling the end of the IP
	After "But at spring mending time we find it there"	0.769s	1. Signaling the end of the IP 2. Signaling the end of talking about gaps and starting a new topic which is the annual meeting of the two neighbours to rebuild the wall between them.
	After "And set the wall between us once again"	0.933s	1. Signaling the end of an utterance after 3 successive IPs with a somehow high tempo in order to take a breath and get ready for the coming utterance besides being the end of a topic.
	After "We keep the wall between us as we go"	0.928s	Signaling the end of the IP
	After "to each the boulders that have fallen to each"	0.850 s	Signaling the end of the IP
	At the end of the IP "We have to use a spell to make them balance"	0.71s	1. Signaling the end of an utterance. After the poet's air pressure diminishes uttering 3 successive IPs with one amount of air. 2. It is the silence that precedes a quotation (of the next IP) Wennerstrom (2001:210) maintains that quoted speech is often set off by pauses.
	After "stay where you are until our backs are turned"	0.660s	1. Signaling the end of the IP 2. Separating the quotation from other portions of speech
	After "We wear our fingers rough with handling them"	1.053 s	Signaling the end of the orientation section and the beginning of the complicating action section.
<b>Complication</b>	After "and I am apple orchard"	0.58 s	Signaling the end of the IP
	After "I tell him"	0.73 s	Signaling the end of the IP
	After "he only says"	0.56 s	1. Signaling the end of the IP 2. heightening suspense before the neighbour's reply.
	After "good fences make good neighbours"	1.136s	Signaling the end of the complicating action and the beginning of the evaluation.
<b>Evaluation</b>	After "and I wonder if I could put a notion in his head"	0.55 s	1. Signaling the end of the IP 2. signaling the end of a topic.
	After "isn't it where there are cows?"	0.88 s	Giving his audience time to think before he himself answers the question in the coming IP.
	After "but here there are no cows"	0.45 s	Signaling the end of the IP
	After "what I was walling in or walling out"	0.288s	Signaling the end of the IP
	After "and to whom I was like to give offence"	0.870s	Signal the end of successive IPs and the end of a topic
	After "something there is that does not love a wall"	0.611s	Signaling the end of the IP
	After "that wants it down"	0.885 s	Frost delays suggesting what that 'something' might be by using a pause to raise the suspense.
	"But it's" the lengthening of /s/ gives the same pragmatic function of a pause	0.65 s	The same pragmatic function of a pause is to give the audience time to digest the information after it.
	After "and I'd rather he said it for himself"	0.945s	Signaling not only the end of a topic but the end of a section as well.
	<b>Result &amp; Coda</b>	After "I see him there"	0.722s
After "Like an old stone savage armed"		0.51s	1. Signaling the end of the IP, separating this evaluative IP from the following descriptive one.
After "not of woods only and the shade of trees"		0.647s	Signaling the end of the IP and the beginning of the coda
After "he will not go behind his father's saying"		0.576	Signaling the end of the IP
After "he says again"		0.32 s	Signaling the end of the IP

The researchers have found various functions for pauses employed by Frost. Three of them are organizational: considerably long pauses (usually more than one second) signal the end of units larger than IPs (i.e., separating narrative sections), and short pauses (usually less than 0.94s) are of various types. Firstly, organizational: used (with the aid of other prosodic features) either to segment utterances into intonational phrases, or at the end of topics within one narrative section. Secondly, pauses are used to build suspense to attract the audience’s attention and keep them alert to what is coming. Third, some silent seconds are employed by Frost when the amount of relevant information included in the preceding prosodic group is either large or needs a special kind of consideration, the audience needs more time to fully understand it. Pauses are also used to set off quoted speech. Finally, unintentional physiological pauses are there when the poet finishes uttering successive IPs and needs to take a breath. The total number of pauses used in the narrative is 31. In addition to signaling the end of an IP or utterance, 6 pauses are used to mark narrative-section boundaries, 5 to mark topic boundaries (within narrative sections), and 7 for other uses. Thus, organizational pauses represent the highest percentage as it is shown in the figure below where blue, orange, and grey areas represent the organizational function of pauses (Figure 4).

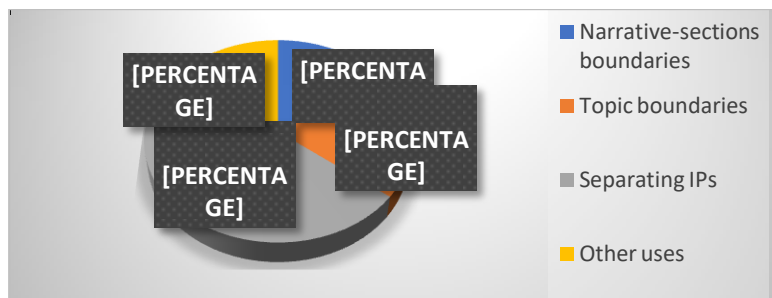


Figure 4. The Statistical Distribution of Pauses Functions in ‘Mending Wall’

**B. Boundary Tone as a Cue for Narrative Segmentation**

In accordance with the previous studies in this respect (Byrd & Saltzman, 1998) and (Byrd et al., 2000), it is hypothesized that low tones most typically occur in the final position of a narrative section, and contrariwise, other tones (non-low) are generally found within such sections.

TABLE 2  
THE STATISTICAL DISTRIBUTION OF BOUNDARY TONES IN FROST’S ‘MENDING WALL’

Narrative Sections	Boundary Tone				
	H-H% high	L-L% low	L-H% Low-rise	H-L% plateau	Partial falling
	No.	No.	No.	No.	No.
Abstract		1*			3
Orientation	1	11*	1	3	2
Complication		3 *	3	2	3
Evaluation	1	7*	3	2	1
Result		5*		3	
Coda		1		1*	
Total	2	27	7	12	9

(\* ) this mark shows the boundary tone that signals the end of a narrative section

Out of six narrative sections, five end with the low boundary tone L-L%. This successfully proves its significance as a narrative section predictor. This result coincides with Swerts and Geluykens’(1994) whose data were instructional monologues and found that non-low pitch boundaries were more likely to occur in the middle of a topic, whereas the low pitch ones were more likely to occur at the end.

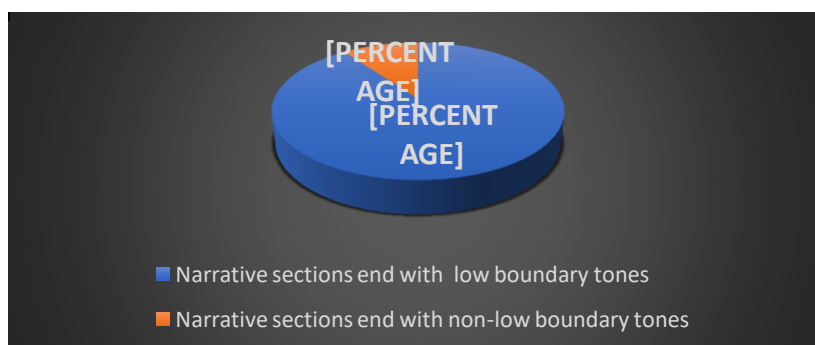


Figure 5. The Statistical Distribution of Low and Non-low Boundary Tones in Narrative Sections of Frost’s ‘Mending Wall’

### C. Pitch Range Reset as a Cue for Narrative Segmentation

The contribution of prosody to discourse organization involves topic structure. Borrowing from written genres where topics are arranged into paragraphs, linguists have applied the term "paratone" to a spoken topic unit as well. In this sense, prosody itself can be considered a discourse marker. Paratone component refers to pitch marking topic shifts (Wennerstrom, 2001). The present section investigates to what extent the pitch reset contributes to the segmentation of narrative texts, and whether IP boundaries that coincide with a narrative boundary present a higher pitch reset value than those that do not coincide.

TABLE 3  
THE TOP TEN PITCH RESET VALUES IN FROST'S 'MENDING WALL'

Narrative Sections	The Context of the Pitch Reset	Frequency in Hertz
Abstract	Something there is that doesn't love a wall	179.1Hz
Orientation (part 1)	The work of hunters is another thing	195.4 Hz
Orientation (part 2)	The gaps I mean	183.6 Hz
Orientation (part 3)	I let my neighbour know beyond the hill	269.3 Hz
Orientation (part 4)	We keep the wall between us as we go	212.2 Hz
Complicating action	+Oh, just another kind of out-door game	307 Hz
Evaluation	Spring is the mischief in me	201.8 Hz
	I could say elves to him	191 Hz
	But it's not elves exactly	199.5 Hz
Result & Coda	I see him there	191.3 Hz

It is noteworthy from Table 3 that high values are not restricted to narrative boundary positions only. Still, the pitch reset values that coincide with narrative boundaries are those lie under the top 10 pitch resets in the discourse. Moreover, 8 out of 10 pitch resets coincide with new topics in the narrative which makes it significant in marking topic boundaries. The results are consistent with Swerts and Geluykens's (1994) findings, that topic-introducing noun phrases are higher in pitch than other noun phrases, regardless of their position in the clause, which means that the association with a new topic rather than placement in the first position in a clause that leads to an NP having a higher pitch (Wennerstrom, 2001). The table also shows that all new topics are marked with a high/dramatic pitch reset. Some of those that signal new topics, do not represent the top of the hierarchy in narrative structure. They are not major paratones. The major paratones are detected by the incorporation of all the three prosodic features in question plus the topic expression. Thus, unlike pauses, "pitch reset" is not used by Frost as an independent narrative-section prosodic marker, its significance in marking narrative sections stands out when it is put in combination with other features as it is shown a few lines later, but it is a topic marker (Figure 6).

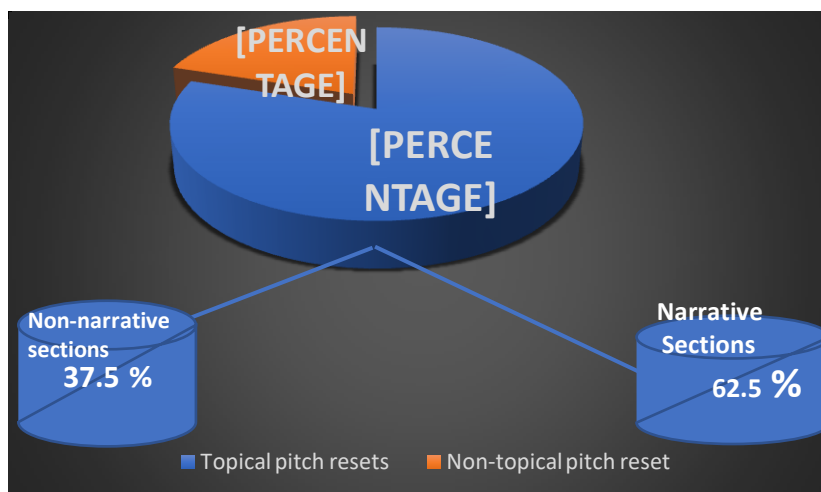


Figure 6. The Statistical Distribution of Topical and Non-topical Pitch Resets Into Narrative and Non-narrative Sections in Frost's 'Mending Wall'

### D. Major Paratone as a Narrative Section Marker

In "Mending Wall", each narrative section represents a major paratone simply for the availability of the three prosodic markers plus the Labovian topic expression. Consequently, each section starts with a large expansion of pitch and ends with a lengthy pause and a low boundary tone (except the coda which is embedded within the result section, and which has a non-dramatic pitch reset (148.2 Hz), a non-lengthy pause of 0.576 and a plateau pitch boundary). The shift from abstract to orientation section is marked by a very high pitch range (195.4 Hz) on the first lexical item in the orientation (the word 'work'), an extremely long pause, and a low boundary tone to signal a major paratone. Although Frost starts his orientation with "the work of hunters is another thing", and one may be deceived by the idea that the topic of the orientation is a subtopic of that of the abstract (i.e., the work of hunters could be another force that destroys

the wall), but the acoustic measurement easily removes this illusion and guides us to Frost's intended meaning (i.e., it represents a major paratone to him). The same is true for the other sections. This is indicated in Table 4 below.

TABLE 4  
THE COINCIDENCE OF PITCH RESETS, LENGTHY PAUSES, AND LOW BOUNDARY TONES IN FROST'S 'MENDING WALL'

Narrative Sections	The context of the Pitch Reset	Frequency in Hertz	Pauses	Final Low Tones	Topic Expression Meets Labovian Segmentation	Paratone Type
Abstract	Something there is that doesn't love a wall (topic)	179.1Hz	1.855 s	L-L%	The end of the abstract	Major paratone
	The work of hunters is another thing (topic)	195.4 Hz	0.906s	L-L%	A topic within the orientation	High paratone
	The gaps I mean (topic)	183.6 Hz	0.769s	H-H%	A topic within the orientation	High paratone
	I let my neighbour know beyond the hill (topic)	269.3 Hz	0.933s	L-L%	A topic within the orientation	High paratone
	We keep the wall between us as we go (topic)	212.2 Hz	1.053 s	L-L%	The boundary between the abstract and the orientation	Major paratone
Complicating action	+Oh, just another kind of out-door game (topic)	307 Hz	1.136s	L-L%	The boundary between the orientation and the complication	Major paratone
Evaluation	Spring is the mischief in me (topic)	201.8 Hz	0.945s	L-L%	The boundary between the complication and the evaluation	Major paratone
Result & Coda	I see him there (topic)	191.3 Hz	The end of the poem	L-L %	The boundary between the evaluation and the Result	Major paratone

## V. FINDINGS

The transition from one section to another in spoken narratives is linguistically marked in many languages. The current study has shown that narrative poems are not an exception. In our data, prosody is one of the ways Frost manipulates to organize his narrative. Pause occurrence represents a predictor of narrative boundaries while its duration represents an indicator of the boundaries. Throughout his poem, Frost uses pauses for various purposes. Some pauses are organizational. Others are not. The organizational ones are of two types: Intonational Phrases boundaries indicators and narrative sections boundaries indicators. Pause duration is Frost's decisive tool. Therefore, non-long and long pauses are used to the aforementioned boundaries successively. Unlike pauses, 'pitch reset' is not used by Frost as an independent narrative-section prosodic marker, its significance in marking narrative sections stands out when it is put in combination with other features, but it is definitely a topic marker.

The empirical model has shown that pause and pitch phenomena occur systematically in Frost's storytelling technique as cues to narrative structure. Frost as a storyteller in his narrative poem uses paratones to mark transitions between components of a narrative's plot structure just as lecturers do to delineate topics. Of particular salience is the transition from orientation to complicating action, a shift that is usually marked in many languages. The narrative in Frost's Mending wall follows this tendency by giving the highest pitch value (307 Hz) to the transition from orientation to complicating action.

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**Manaar Munthir Al-Badri** holds an M.A. in Linguistics from University of Baghdad, Baghdad. She is currently a staff member and a Ph.D. candidate at College of Arts, Department of English, University of Baghdad. Her main areas of interest include Phonetics and phonology, pragmatics, and discourse analysis.

**Nassier Abbas Ghubin Al-Zubaidi** holds a Ph.D. in Linguistics from University of Baghdad, Baghdad. He is currently a Professor of Linguistics at College of Arts, Department of English, Baghdad. His main areas of interest include pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and discourse analysis studies.