

A Socio-Phonetic Evaluation of Courtroom Intonation Tunes in Legal Advocacy in Southwestern Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examines the socio-phonetic functions of intonation patterns within the Nigerian judicial system with on their role as discourse strategies and impact on argument effectiveness. Using Interactional Sociolinguistics Theory and the ToBI (Tones and Break Indices) framework, the research investigates how legal professionals (judges and lawyers) employ prosodic features including pitch variation, stress and rhythm in courtroom dynamics. A mixed-methods design, combining questionnaires from 48 legal practitioners in Southwestern Nigeria with qualitative acoustic analysis of audio-recorded interactions were used. Findings indicate that intonation is a conscious and strategic tool, particularly in criminal cases and closing arguments, with specific prosodic finality markers (e.g., authoritative falling tunes) asserting legal primacy. The study also highlights the significant influence of indigenous Nigerian languages on courtroom English prosody. It concludes that intonation is crucial for legal advocacy in Nigeria and recommends integrating prosodic training into legal education to enhance communicative competence.

Keywords: Courtroom Discourse, Interactional Sociolinguistics, Socio-phonetic, Intonation, Nigerian English, Persuasion, Legal Advocacy.

1.0 Introduction

Language serves as the primary instrument of the law and the courtroom represents a unique sociolinguistic arena where the strategic use of speech can determine the outcome of legal disputes. While traditional legal scholarship has often concentrated on the semantic and syntactic properties of legal language, the "what" of legal communication, however the prosodic dimensions, particularly intonation, play an important role in shaping the pragmatic meaning and persuasive impact of courtroom interactions, thereby representing the "how" of legal delivery (Cotterill, 2003; Tannen, 2005). In the Nigerian context, where English functions as the official language of the judiciary alongside a rich tapestry of over 500 indigenous languages (Ethnologue, 2025), the interplay between prosody, culture and legal procedure becomes an exceptionally

complex field of study. The courtroom is not merely a place where laws are applied; it is a space where language is performed, and where the “melody” of that performance can be as consequential as the legal statutes themselves.

Intonation, often described as the “melody” or “music” of speech, involves systematic variations in pitch, stress and rhythm that convey a speaker’s attitude, stance and communicative intent (Cruttenden, 1997; Ladd, 1996). In the high-stakes, adversarial environment of the courtroom, these prosodic features serve as vital “contextualisation cues” (Gumperz, 1982), enabling judges, lawyers, witnesses, and litigants to interpret meanings that frequently extend beyond the literal or “black-letter” words used in courtroom interactions. For instance, a sharp falling tone may signal institutional authority, finality and factual certainty, while a rising tone might indicate uncertainty, a request for confirmation, or even a subtle challenge to a previous statement (Roach, 2000; Wells, 2006). The ability of a legal professional to master these cues is not merely a matter of stylistic flourish; it is a core component of communicative competence. It influences how judges and jurors perceive the credibility of a witness, sincerity of a defendant and emotional weight of a lawyer’s closing argument. In a linguistically diverse society such as Nigeria, where English has been nativised under the influence of the tonal systems of indigenous languages, the strategic deployment of intonation constitutes a critical resource for negotiating legal persuasion and managing courtroom interaction.

The significance of intonation in legal discourse is underscored due to the fact that courtroom interactions are fundamentally oral. Despite the importance of written briefs and documents, the trial remains a verbal performance where the spoken word is the primary vehicle for justice. In Nigeria, the judicial system is characterised by a blend of British common law traditions and indigenous social realities. This unique hybridity is reflected in the way legal professionals speak. The Standard English employed in courtroom proceedings is often realised as a distinct variety of Nigerian Legal English, characterised by prosodic features that reflect the speaker’s first language, whether Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, or one of Nigeria’s numerous indigenous languages. (Akindele & Fabunmi, 2026 and Farinde & Ojo, 2015). Understanding how these prosodic patterns function within the formal constraints of the law is essential for ensuring that the judicial process is both clear and fair. When a lawyer’s intonation is misinterpreted by a judge from a different regional or linguistic background, the consequences for the case can be profound. Thus, the study of courtroom prosody extends beyond a purely academic exercise in linguistics; it constitutes a necessary exploration of the communicative foundations of the Nigerian justice system.

Despite its importance, the study of intonation in Nigerian courtroom discourse remains relatively under-researched. Existing studies have explored various aspects of Nigerian English and legal discourse, but few have provided a detailed analysis that integrates acoustic phonetics with sociolinguistic theory in a legal setting (Ekpang & Ogolekwu, 2024; Aluko, 2020 and Farinde & Ojo, 2015). This gap in knowledge is particularly significant given the nativisation of English in Nigeria, where the phonological features of indigenous languages such as Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa inevitably influence the prosodic patterns of legal professionals.

This study addressed this gap by examining the effect of intonation patterns on argument effectiveness and identifying the roles of intonation as a discourse strategy in Nigerian courtrooms. By adopting an interactional sociolinguistic theory and ToBI (Tones and Break Indices) framework, the research aimed to uncover how prosodic features are utilised to manage power dynamics, negotiate meaning and enhance persuasion within the institutional constraints of the judicial process.

1.1 Research Objectives

The study was guided by the following specific objectives:

- i. to examine the effect of intonation patterns on argument effectiveness in Nigerian courtroom discourse; and
- ii. to determine the roles of intonation patterns as a discourse strategy in courtroom interactions.

2.0 Literature Review

The intersection of language and the law has long been a subject of scholarly inquiry, with researchers studying how linguistic choices reflect and reinforce power structures within the judicial system. This section reviews relevant literature on courtroom discourse, the role of intonation in persuasion and the specific sociolinguistic context of the Nigerian legal system.

2.1 Courtroom Discourse and Power Dynamics

Courtroom discourse is a specialised form of institutional interaction characterised by rigid procedural rules and profoundly asymmetrical power relations. Scholars such as Atkinson (1984) and Drew (1990) have highlighted how the structure of legal questioning particularly during cross-examination allows lawyers to control the narrative and constrain the responses of witnesses. In these interactions, language is not merely a medium of communication but a tool for exercising authority and managing the verbal performance of the trial.

The courtroom is an arena where legal “stories” are constructed and the success of these stories often depends on the speaker’s ability to manipulate linguistic and paralinguistic features to establish credibility and dominance. This power is not just expressed through the choice of words but through the “vocal choreography” of the trial, where every pause, emphasis, and pitch shift contributes to the performative force of legal speech.

In the Nigerian context, the study of courtroom discourse aid in accounting for the unique sociolinguistic history of the nation. Farinde and Ojo (2015) investigated the use of declaratives and control in Nigerian courtroom discourse, noting that lawyers often use falling intonation on declarative questions to exert coercion and persuasiveness. Their research suggests that prosodic features are integral to the “linguistic communication” between legal professionals, serving as markers of power and control. They argue that the “nativisation” of English in Nigeria adds a layer of complexity to these power dynamics, as local linguistic norms influence the “tone of authority” adopted by legal practitioners. For instance, the “commanding” tone used by a senior lawyer may be influenced by the hierarchical structures of Nigerian society, where age and professional status are reflected in speech patterns. Similarly, Ekpang and Ogolekwu (2024) emphasised the need for sociolinguistic lenses to understand the “language dynamics” in Nigerian High Court proceedings, particularly how participants navigate the institutional constraints of the judicial process while expressing their cultural and professional identities. Furthermore, the notion of “communicative competence” in courtroom discourse extends beyond mastery of legal statutes and case law to encompass what Hymes (1974) defines as the ability to use language appropriately within a particular “speech community”. In the Nigerian courtroom, this speech community is shaped by the intersection of British colonial legal traditions and contemporary Nigerian sociocultural realities. Consequently, the use of English in this institutional context is adapted to satisfy both the formal demands of legal procedure and the communicative expectations of the wider Nigerian society.

2.2 The Pragmatics of Intonation in Legal Settings

Intonation plays a vital role in the pragmatic interpretation of speech, acting as a bridge between the semantic content of an utterance and its communicative intent. Gumperz (1982) introduced the concept of “contextualisation cues” to describe how prosodic features such as pitch and rhythm signal the social meaning of an utterance. In the courtroom, these cues are essential for managing turn-taking, signaling emphasis and conveying speaker stance. As Couper-Kuhlen (1986) notes, intonation is the “prosodic glue” that holds a discourse

together, providing the listener with the necessary signals to distinguish between what is central and what is peripheral. The pragmatic function of intonation is particularly evident in the way it “brackets” information, helping the judge or jury to follow the logical progression of a complex legal argument.

The persuasive power of intonation has been noted by several researchers who argue that the “melody” of an argument can be as influential as its logical structure. For instance, falling tunes (H*L%) are often associated with factual assertions, finality and the exercise of institutional power. A lawyer who delivers a closing argument with a series of resolute falling tones is likely perceived as more confident and authoritative than one who uses rising or level tones. Conversely, rising tunes (L*H%) can signal doubt, politeness, or a request for confirmation, which may be strategically used during the questioning of a witness to imply uncertainty or to encourage a more detailed response. In Nigerian professional discourses, Akindele et al. (2024) found that intonation cues are crucial for managing complex interactions, such as those between doctors and patients, where trust and authority must be negotiated through speech. This finding has significant implications for the legal sphere, where the “authoritative fall” is frequently used by judges to restore order, overrule objections, or deliver judgments.

The ability to use these prosodic patterns effectively is a key component of what Cotterill (2003) describes as the “linguistic performance” of justice. Cotterill’s analysis of high-profile trials suggests that the “prosodic signature” of a lawyer can become a defining part of their professional identity. In the Nigerian context, this performance is further complicated by the “tonal carryover” from indigenous languages. As Roach (2000) and Wells (2006) have pointed out, the intonation of English is fundamentally different from that of tonal languages. Nigerian legal practitioners must therefore navigate a “prosodic middle ground,” where they use the formal structures of English intonation while still remaining culturally resonant to their audience. However, this “nativised prosody” is not a sign of linguistic deficiency but a mark of professional adaptation, allowing the law to be communicated in a way that is both legally sound and socially meaningful.

2.3 Nigerian English and Indigenous Language Influence

The sociolinguistic landscape of Nigeria is characterised by extensive linguistic diversity, with over 500 indigenous languages influencing the way English is spoken and perceived (Ethnologue, 2025). Nigerian English (NigE) is a nativised variety that incorporates phonological, syntactic and lexical features

from these local languages (Aluko, 2020). This “nativisation” is profoundly evident in the prosodic patterns of Nigerian speakers. Unlike British or American English, which are stress-timed, many Nigerian languages are syllable-timed or tonal. This often results in a distinct “Nigerian accent” in legal English, where pitch movements are used differently to signal emphasis and emotion.

Akindele & Fabunmi (2026) conducted a study on the sociolinguistic perceptions of intonation in Southwestern Nigerian courtrooms, highlighting how local cultural norms shape the interpretation of prosodic cues. For example, a rising tone on a declarative sentence, which might be a neutral “uptalk” in some Western varieties of English, could be perceived as disrespectful, inquisitive or even argumentative in a Nigerian legal context. Conversely, a very flat intonation might be interpreted as a lack of interest or a lack of conviction. This explains the importance of the need to understand the “culturally specific” nature of prosody in the Nigerian judiciary, where the effective use of intonation requires a delicate balance between adhering to formal legal discourse conventions and remaining intelligible and persuasive to a linguistically diverse audience. The literature suggests that while the formal rules of legal discourse are often universal, their pragmatic realisation through prosody is deeply embedded in local linguistic and cultural practices (Farinde & Ojo, 2015).

3.0 Research Methodology

The research design for this study followed a mixed-methods approach that combined both quantitative and qualitative techniques to ensure the results were both scientifically sound and rich in detail. The participants in this study were legal professionals working in the judicial system of 3 States that includes Osun, Oyo and Lagos. A total of forty-eight (48) participants were selected using a purposive sampling method to ensure that only those with significant experience in courtroom advocacy and management were included. This group was carefully divided to include eight (8) judges from both Magistrate and Federal High Courts and forty (40) lawyers with varying levels of experience. This specific selection process was vital because it allowed the researchers to gather information from experts who understand the subtle ways language is used to assert authority and persuade others in a legal setting.

Data collection involved two main tools that captured different parts of how people speak. First, a detailed twenty-item questionnaire was sent out to participants to gather their thoughts on how intonation is used and how culture affects their speech. To make sure everyone understood the technical terms, the survey included a simple guide explaining concepts such as pitch and tone.

Second, the researchers recorded ten hours of actual courtroom proceedings after getting permission from the appropriate authorities. These recordings captured the natural, unscripted speech of judges and lawyers as they worked, providing a real-world view at how they use their voices naturally during trials.

The analysis of this data was done in several stages using both statistical methods and specialised computer software called Praat. The survey results were analysed to find general trends and see where most legal professionals agreed or disagreed. For the audio recordings, the researchers employed discourse analysis to examine the relationship between specific speech patterns and their communicative functions, such as the expression of authority and the management of topic transition. In addition, the audio recordings were subjected to acoustic analysis using *Praat*, which enabled the visualisation of pitch contours and the precise measurement of fundamental frequency (F0) variations. The acoustic findings were integrated with the qualitative discourse analysis to provide empirical validation of the identified prosodic features and their interactional functions.

Throughout the research process, the study was guided by the principles of Interactional Sociolinguistics, which posit that communicative meaning is constructed through both the linguistic content of an utterance and the prosodic and contextual cues accompanying its delivery. Ethical standards were strictly followed, with all necessary permissions obtained from judicial authorities. All participants were told exactly why the study was being done and their identities were kept completely confidential. The recordings and survey responses were stored securely and used only for this academic research, ensuring that the study met international standards for conducting sensitive linguistic research in institutional settings.

4.0 Data Presentation and Analysis

CASE A: Analysis of Intonation Pattern in an Accident Case

Table 1: Representation of Intonation Patterns, Functions and Persuasive Effects of key Exchanges in an Accident case between the State and Mr. XY

Speaker	Excerpt	Intonation Pattern	Intonation Function	Persuasive/ Interpretive Effect
State Counsel	"...death of five students..."	Falling	Attitudinal	Conveys seriousness, emotional gravity
State Counsel (Referencing Witness Statement)	"...he persisted."	Fall-rise	Discourse	Highlights reckless decision-making
State Counsel (Referencing Witness Statement)	"Pictorial evidences from the accident scene, Skid marks and witnesses statements confirm that the luxury bus was on a wrong lane."	Falling	Accentual and grammatical	Adds forensic credibility and logical structure to the prosecution's case.
State Counsel	"Enough of this lawlessness..."	Rise –fall	Accentual and attitudinal	Signals collective anger and advocacy
Defence Counsel	"We plead with the court..."	Fall-rise	Attitudinal	Polite appeal for compassion
Judge	"...bail is hereby denied."	Falling	Discourse	Finality, institutional authority

Speaker	Excerpt	Intonation Pattern	Intonation Function	Persuasive/ Interpretive Effect
Judge	<i>"The defendant is to be remanded at Ilesha Correctional Centre until June 2, 2025."</i>	Falling intonation	Grammatical	Marks closure of argument; affirms legal authority.

Source: Researcher's Computation (2026)

Interpretation of Table 1

The analysis of the accident case between the State and Mr. XY vividly illustrates the strategic deployment of prosody in criminal litigation to convey emotion, moral judgment, and legal authority. The distinct prosodic choices made by each legal actor systematically reflect their institutional roles and persuasive objectives. The State Counsel's strategy to emphasise gravity and moral condemnation is evident in the systematic use of the Falling Tune (HL%) to establish the seriousness of the offense and the Rise-Fall Tune (HL-H%) to signal collective advocacy and strong conviction. For instance, the falling tone in "...death of five students..." not only conveys seriousness and certainty but also leverages the inherent finality of this intonation pattern to underscore the factual weight of forensic evidence, such as the road safety report and pictorial evidence. The shift to a fall-rise tune when referencing the witness statement ("...he persisted.") subtly highlights reckless decision-making, thereby challenging the defendant's Ethos by implying a deliberate disregard for safety.

Conversely, the Defence Counsel employs a controlled tone and a Fall-Rise pattern ("We plead with the court...") to project caution, politeness, and an appeal for judicial leniency (Pathos). This prosodic choice aims to evoke empathy, framing the client not as an inherently criminal individual but as someone who made a serious mistake, thereby mitigating the perceived severity of the act. This strategic use of intonation seeks to soften the court's perception and open a pathway for compassion.

The Judge's discourse is consistently dominated by the Falling Tune (H*L%), which unequivocally serves to assert institutional authority and deliver rulings with an air of finality. The definitive statement, "...bail is hereby denied," delivered with a firm and conclusive falling tone, clearly communicates the court's serious stance on the loss of life. Similarly, the final order regarding the

defendant's remand is also characterised by a falling tune. This pervasive prosodic pattern signals absolute closure and reinforces the institutional Ethos of the court, demonstrating that the judge's legal authority takes precedence over the emotional appeals presented by the defense. This highlights how intonation functions as a powerful tool for maintaining order and enforcing judicial decisions within the courtroom setting.

CASE B: Analysis of Intonation in a Debt Recovery Case

Table 2: Representation of Intonation Patterns, Functions and Persuasive Effects of key Exchanges in a case of Debt Recovery between Mr. A Enterprises Ltd and K & A Store.

Speaker	Excerpt	Intonation Pattern	Intonation Function	Persuasive/ Interpretive Effect
Judge	“This matter is for the continuation of hearing. The witness, Mr. K, is still under cross-examination. Claimant's counsel, you may proceed.”	Falling tune (H*L%)	Discourse	Establishes institutional control and marks procedural transition.
Claimant's Counsel	“Thank you, My Lord. Mr. K, you have admitted under oath that your company... received the goods listed in Invoice No. -0225... Is that correct?”	Rising tune (L*H%)	Grammatical/ Attitudinal	Seeks confirmation of the foundational fact (receipt of goods); constrains the witness.
Witness	“Yes, we received the goods.”	Falling tune (L*L%)	Attitudinal	Factual admission; projects compliance.
Claimant's Counsel	“And this invoice, which has been admitted as Exhibit C3, states a total value of Four Million, Eight Hundred Thousand Naira only. Do you see that?”	Rising tune (L*H%)	Grammatical/ Attitudinal	Seeks confirmation of the debt amount; continues to build factual certainty.
Witness	“We... we called their salesman.”	Falling tune (L*L%)	Attitudinal	Evasive; attempts to introduce a non-verifiable verbal complaint.

Speaker	Excerpt	Intonation Pattern	Intonation Function	Persuasive/ Interpretive Effect
Claimant's Counsel	"I put it to you that you never made any formal complaint. I have here the Certified True Copy of your company's WhatsApp chat... Can you point to <i>one</i> message where you complained about dented cans or weak crates?"	Falling tune (H*L%)	Discourse/ Attitudinal	Direct confrontation; asserts the documentary evidence over the witness's claim.
Witness	<i>(Pauses, looks at his lawyer)</i> "It might not be there... but we told them verbally."	Fall-rise tune (H*L-H%)	Attitudinal	Admission of lack of documentary proof; attempts to salvage the claim with a verbal assertion.
Claimant's Counsel	"Your defence is a recent fabrication, isn't it, Mr. K? You received valuable goods, sold them in your store, and now seek to avoid payment by inventing defects."	Rising tune (L*H%)	Attitudinal	Direct accusation of dishonesty; invites denial or admission of the rhetorical question.
Defendant's Counsel	"My Lord, I object. Counsel is badgering the witness and making declaratory statements."	Falling tune (H*L%)	Discourse	Formal objection; asserts procedural protection for the witness.
Judge	"Objection sustained. Counsel, ask questions, do not testify. Rephrase."	Falling tune (H*L%)	Discourse	Judicial ruling; asserts control over the Claimant's Counsel's rhetoric.
Claimant's Counsel	"As Your Lordship pleases. Mr. Khalifa, after receiving these goods in March 2024, did you make <i>any</i> part-payment towards the ₦4.8 million debt?"	Rising tune (L*H%)	Grammatical/ Attitudinal	Shifts focus to the lack of payment; seeks confirmation of a negative fact.
Witness	"We had an arrangement... we were paying in bits. We paid maybe one million."	Falling tune (L*L%)	Attitudinal	Vague claim of payment; attempts to introduce a non-verifiable fact.

Speaker	Excerpt	Intonation Pattern	Intonation Function	Persuasive/ Interpretive Effect
Claimant's Counsel	““Maybe one million”? Do you have any proof of this payment? A bank transfer receipt, a teller, a signed acknowledgment from my client?”	Rising tune (L*H%)	Grammatical/ Attitudinal	Challenges the payment claim; forces the witness to admit lack of proof.
Witness	“It was cash. We gave it to the driver sometimes.”	Falling tune (L*L%)	Attitudinal	Evasive explanation; attempts to justify the lack of proof.
Claimant's Counsel	“So, you have no proof whatsoever. I put it to you that no payment was ever made. Furthermore, I have in my hand a series of demand letters... Did you receive it?”	Rising tune (L*H%)	Grammatical/ Attitudinal	Assertive statement followed by a question; forces admission of the demand letter.
Witness	“It means business has been very bad. Sales are slow. We could not sell the goods as fast as we thought, and that affected our ability to pay. We intended to pay, but we needed patience.”	Falling tune (H*L%)	Attitudinal	Detailed narrative of hardship; appeals to <i>Pathos</i> (sympathy).
Defendant's Counsel	“So, your failure to pay was not an outright refusal, but an inability due to circumstances?”	Rising tune (L*H%)	Attitudinal	Guides the witness to a clear, mitigating conclusion.
Judge	“Court is adjourned.”	Falling tune (L*L%)	Discourse	Signals absolute closure and institutional control.

Source: Researcher's Computation (2026)

Interpretation of Table 2

The analysis of Mr. A Enterprises Ltd vs. K & A Store represents the use of prosody in civil litigation to establish factual certainty, challenge witness credibility and assert the finality of contract law. The prosodic choices of the legal actors systematically reflect their institutional roles and persuasive goals. The Claimant's Counsel's strategy to mark Factual Certainty and Credibility Challenge is marked by the systematic use of the Rising Tune (LH%) to establish a chain of uncontested facts and the Falling Tune (HL%) to assert the legal conclusion. In establishing the Core Facts, the initial cross-examination uses a series of rising-toned questions (“Is that correct?”, “Do you see that?”,

and “Correct?”) to force the Witness to confirm the foundational elements of the contract: receipt of goods, invoice amount, and signed delivery note. This technique uses the rising contour not to seek new information, but to constrain the Witness's discursive space to simple, factual admissions, thereby building a foundation of certainty (Logos). While challenging credibility, the counsel shifts to a falling tune when asserting the documentary evidence over the Witness's verbal claims (“I put it to you that you never made any formal complaint.”). This prosodic shift asserts the primacy of the written record and challenges the Witness's Ethos. The Witness's use of falling tune (“It might not be there... but we told them verbally.”) is a prosodic reflection of his credibility being undermined. The Defendant's Counsel's strategy is to reframe the motive for non-payment from fraudulent intent to economic hardship, primarily appealing to Pathos. The Counsel uses the Rising Tune (L*H%) in re-examination (“So, your failure to pay was not an outright refusal, but an inability due to circumstances?”) to guide the Witness toward a clear, mitigating conclusion. The Witness's subsequent use of falling tunes in the narrative of hardship (“It means business has been very bad...”) are used to project sincerity and appeal for judicial sympathy. The Counsel's formal closing argument is delivered with a falling tune, attempting to balance the admitted facts with the mitigating narrative of a “genuine business dispute and liquidity challenge.”

The Judge discourse is dominated by the falling tune (H*L%), which serves to assert the primacy of contract law and dismiss all mitigating arguments. In addition, the Judge judicial summary (“The defence of defective goods is unsupported... and is inconsistent with the defendant's own earlier correspondence.”) is delivered with a falling tune, systematically dismantling the defense's arguments. The definitive statement, “Economic hardship, while unfortunate, is not a legal defence to a valid debt,” is delivered with falling tune. Also, the final Judgment and the specific orders are delivered with a falling tune. This prosodic pattern signals absolute finality and reinforces the institutional Ethos of the court, asserting that the legal principle of contractual certainty overrides the individual circumstances of economic difficulty.

Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative data investigates how legal professionals consciously perceive and utilise intonation in their daily practice.

Table 3: Factors Influencing Intonational Variation in Courtroom Discourse (N=48)

S/N	Question	Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
1	Does intonation differ between civil and criminal cases?	Yes, significantly	18	37.5%
		Yes, slightly	18	37.5%
		No, not noticeably	12	25.0%
		Unsure	0	0.0%
2	Does the nature of the interaction (e.g., judge-lawyer) influence intonation?	Highly adapted	22	45.8%
		Minor adaptations	15	31.2%
		Largely consistent	7	14.6%
		Unsure	4	8.3%
3	Differences between opening statements and closing arguments?	Yes (Openings: Informative; Closings: Persuasive)	31	64.6%
		Yes (Closings: More dramatic)	9	18.8%
		No, generally similar	3	6.3%
		Unsure	5	10.4%
4	Does the presence of a jury affect intonation use?	More conscious and strategic	17	35.4%

S/N	Question	Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
		Simplify for clarity	15	31.3%
		More emotional and expressive	8	16.7%
		No significant effect	3	6.3%
		Unsure	5	10.4%
5	Gender-based differences in intonation?	Males: More authoritative falling tones	13	27.1%
		Females: More rising tones (misconstrued)	6	12.5%
		Subtle/Individual differences	17	35.4%
		No significant differences	11	23.0%
		Unsure	1	2.0%

The data in table 3 above indicates a strong consensus (75%) that the gravity of the case (civil vs. criminal) influences vocal delivery, with criminal cases likely demanding a more solemn and emphatic tone. Furthermore, 83.4% of respondents observe a clear distinction between opening statements and closing arguments, with the latter being significantly more "persuasive and emotional." This suggests that legal professionals strategically vary their prosody to match the rhetorical goals of different trial phases.

Table 4: Cultural and Sociolinguistic Influences on Intonation (N=48)

S/N	Question	Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
1	Influence of indigenous Nigerian languages on English intonation?	Significantly/Profoundly	15	31.3%
		Moderately	14	29.2%
		Slightly	16	33.3%
		Not at all	3	6.3%
2	Cultural misinterpretation of intonation patterns?	Yes, can be misinterpreted	20	41.7%
		Yes, but understood in context	12	25.0%
		No, little impact	10	20.8%
		Unsure	6	12.5%
3	Formality of courtroom shaping intonational range?	Allows variation within boundaries	23	47.9%
		Strictly limits variation	14	29.2%
		Little impact	8	16.7%
		Encourages dramatic intonation	3	6.3%
4	Regional differences in intonation?	Yes, distinct and noticeable	23	47.9%
		Yes, but minor	14	29.2%

S/N	Question	Response Category	Frequency	Percentage
		No, standardised intonation	8	16.7%
		Unsure	3	6.3%
5	Inclusion of intonation in legal training?	Absolutely crucial	18	37.5%
		Beneficial but not essential	24	50.0%
		No, natural skill	4	8.3%
		No, content is more important	2	4.2%

Table 4 presents the impact of the Nigerian sociolinguistic environment on courtroom discourse. A staggering 93.8% of participants acknowledge the influence of indigenous languages on courtroom English prosody. This confirms that Nigerian legal English is a distinct variety characterised by unique stress and tone patterns derived from the speakers' first languages. Moreover, 87.5% of respondents support the inclusion of prosodic training in legal education, underscoring the perceived importance of vocal delivery in professional success.

Praat Analysis

CASE A: Praat Analysis of Excerpt from Membership of Secret Cult Group

Figure 1

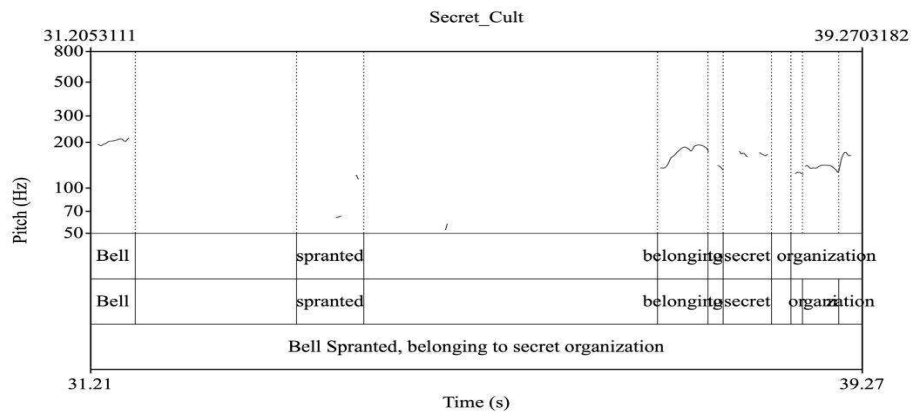


Figure 1 illustrates the acoustic analysis of the statement: ".....belonging to secret organisation." The pitch contour demonstrates a Falling Tune ($H^*L\%$), which remains relatively stable during the initial identification and drops significantly on the final syllable of "organisation." This intonation is used to establish a factual premise for the court, serving as a "prosodic anchor" that signals formal, informative delivery.

Figure 2

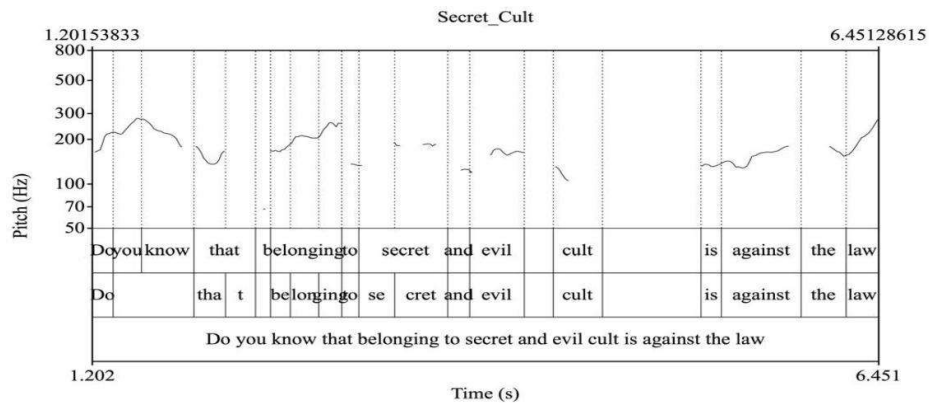


Figure 2 presents the acoustic analysis of the statement: "Do you know that belonging to secret and evil cult is against the law." The pitch contour demonstrates a prominent Rising Pitch ($L^*H\%$), which starts low and climbs sharply toward the end of the interrogative on the word "law." This intonation is used to challenge credibility and exert psychological pressure, functioning as

a "prosodic trap" during cross-examination. By ending with a high rise, the counsel forces the witness into a binary "yes/no" admission, directly challenging or seek to establish credibility.

Figure 3

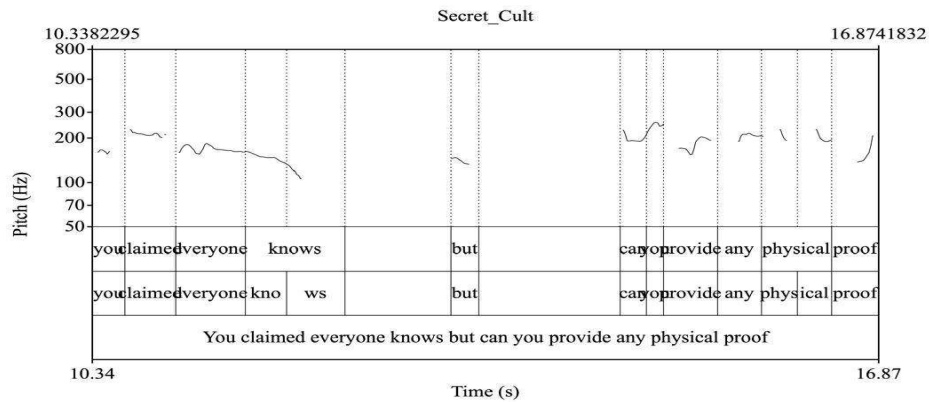


Figure 3 illustrates the acoustic analysis of the statement: "You claimed everyone knows but can you provide any physical proof." The pitch contour demonstrates a High Pitch Accent (H) on "claimed" and "proof," with a noticeable Fall-Rise (H*L-H%) on the final phrase "physical proof." This intonation is used to highlight the witness's subjective assertion versus the demand for empirical evidence, signaling skepticism and guiding the court's attention to the lack of empirical evidence.

Figure 4

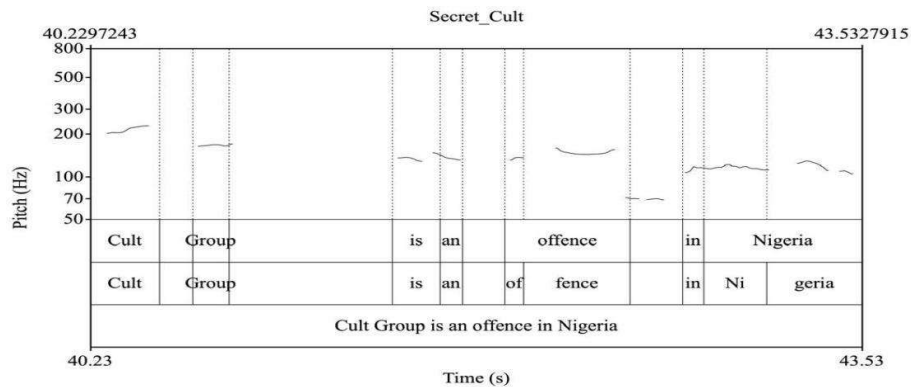


Figure 4 illustrates the acoustic analysis of the statement: "Cult Group is an offence in Nigeria." The pitch contour demonstrates a definitive Low Falling Tune (L*L%), which is controlled and reaches its lowest point at the end of the

utterance. This intonation is used to assert the primacy of the law and establish legal finality, serving as a "prosodic anchor" that solidifies legal principles.

Figure 5

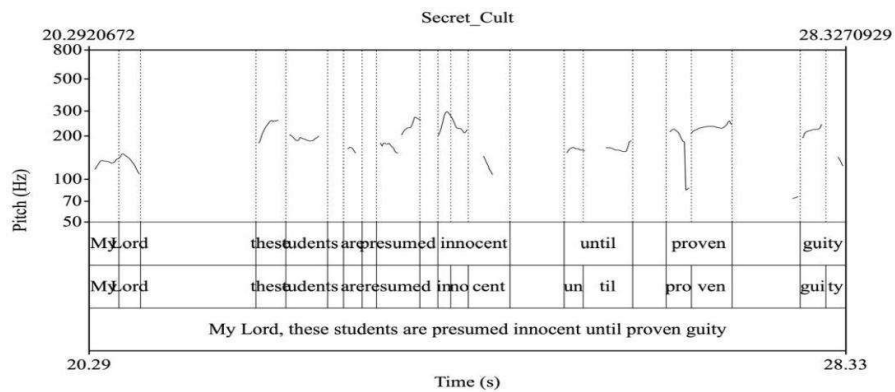


Figure 5 shows the acoustic analysis of the statement: "My Lord, these students are presumed innocent until proven guilty." The pitch contour demonstrates a Rising-Falling Contour on "My Lord" (a polite vocative) followed by a steady, persuasive Falling Tune on "proven guilty." This intonation is used to manage emotional tone and appeal to the court's sense of justice (Pathos), projecting an aura of calm reasonableness.

CASE B: Praat Analysis of Excerpt from Debt Recovery

Figure 6

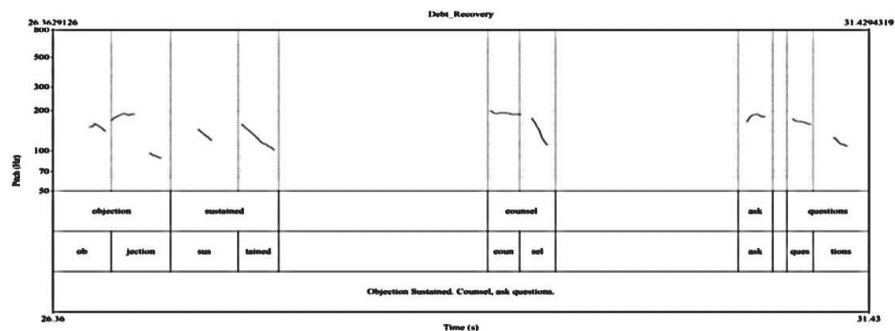
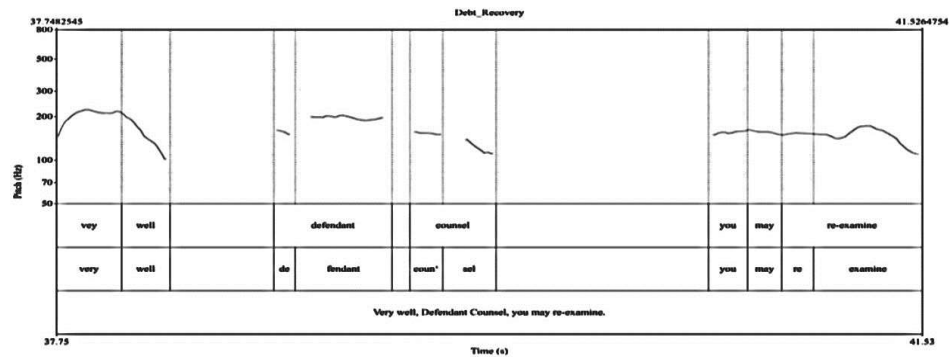


Figure 6 illustrates the acoustic analysis of the Judge's statement: "Objection Sustained. Counsel, ask questions." The pitch contour demonstrates a Falling Tune (H*L%), which begins with a high pitch on the initial syllables and falls sharply to a low point at the end of each phrase. This intonation is used to assert judicial authority and restore procedural order, serving as a "prosodic anchor" that signals institutional control. The finality of the fall leaves no room for

further argument, effectively steering the discourse back to the prescribed legal format.

Figure 7



In Figure 7, the graph illustrates the acoustic analysis of the Judge’s statement: “Very well, Defendant Counsel, you may re-examine.” The pitch contour demonstrates a controlled Falling Tune (H*L%), characterised by a steady, neutral pitch that descends gradually toward the end of the utterance. This intonation is used to provide procedural guidance while maintaining an aura of institutional neutrality. The lack of significant pitch variation projects a sense of fairness and adherence to legal protocol, facilitating the smooth transition between different phases of the trial.

Figure 8

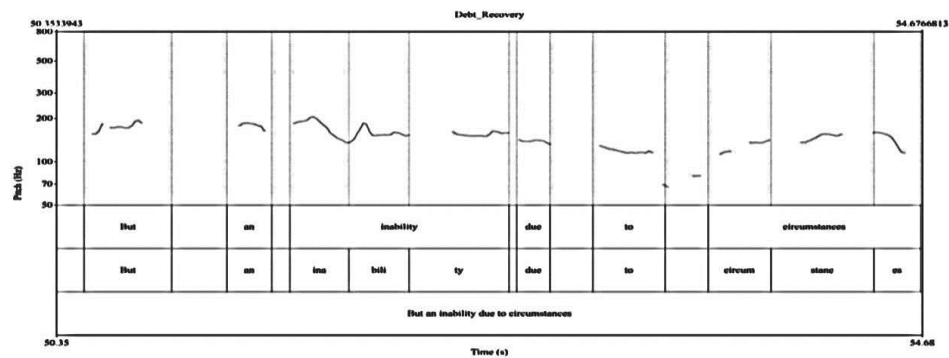


Figure 8 shows the acoustic analysis of the statement: “But an inability due to circumstances.” The pitch contour demonstrates a Fall-Rise Tune (H*L-H%), which begins with a high pitch, falls during the middle of the phrase, and then rises at the end on “circumstances.” This intonation is used to express mitigation and introduce an element of doubt, invoking Pathos by portraying the defendant’s failure to pay because of external factors rather than a lack of intent.

The final rise invites the court to consider the context of the “inability” subtly challenging the claimant’s narrative of outright refusal.

Figure 9

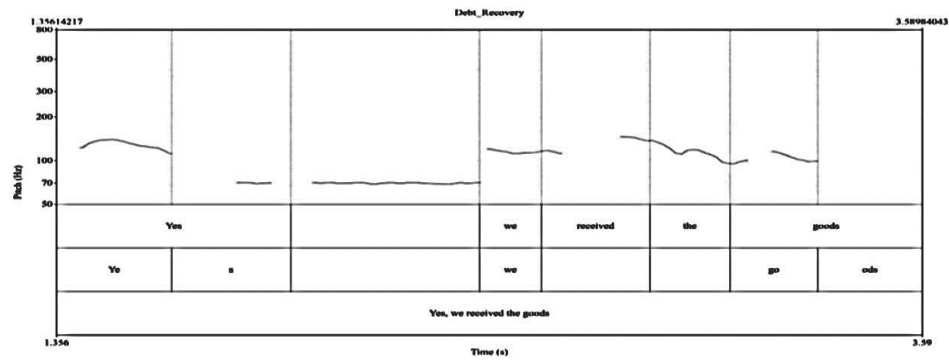
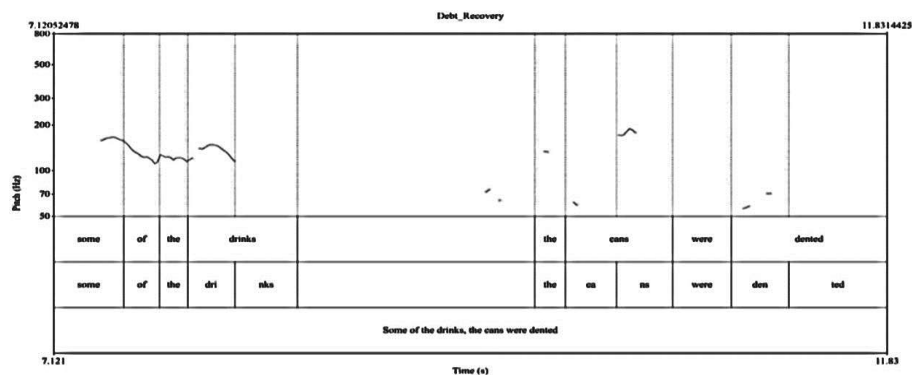


Figure 9 illustrates the acoustic analysis of the witness’s statement: “Yes, we received the goods.” The pitch contour demonstrates a definitive Falling Tune ($H^*L\%$), which starts at a moderate pitch and drops to a low level on the final word “goods.” This intonation is used to convey factual certainty and project transparency. By using a falling tune for a direct admission, the witness signals a lack of evasiveness, which can enhance their perceived credibility and Ethos in the eyes of the court.

Figure 10



In Figure 10, the graph presents the acoustic analysis of the statement: “Some of the drinks, the cans were dented.” The pitch contour demonstrates a Rising-Falling/Hesitant Contour, characterised by minor pitch fluctuations and a final fall on “dented.” This intonation is used to highlight specific evidentiary details while simultaneously reflecting the witness’s emotional strain or caution. The hesitant delivery serves as a “prosodic highlighter” drawing the court’s attention to the physical condition of the goods, which is central to the legal dispute.

4.1 Discussion of findings

This section presents the discussion of the study's findings. The discussion is structured to address the two primary research objectives.

Objective i: *to examine the effect of intonation patterns on argument effectiveness in Nigerian courtroom discourse.*

The findings demonstrate that intonation patterns significantly influence the effectiveness of legal arguments by aligning prosodic choices with rhetorical objectives. In Nigerian courtroom discourse, argument effectiveness is not merely a product of lexical precision but is heavily reliant on the vocal authority projected through intonation. This aligns with the views of Cotterill (2003) and Tannen (2005), who argue that the "how" of legal delivery its prosodic dimension is as consequential as the "what" of legal communication. The study's quantitative data, showing a 75% consensus among practitioners that case gravity (civil vs. criminal) dictates vocal delivery, corroborates the notion that solemnity and emphasis are perceived as prerequisites for effectiveness in criminal litigation. Furthermore, the strategic use of the Falling Tune (HL%) to establish a foundation of certainty mirrors scholarly associations of falling intonation with factual assertions and finality. Conversely, the use of the Rising Tune (LH%) as a prosodic trap during cross-examination illustrates its effectiveness in constraining witness responses and challenging credibility, a tactic that aligns with the coercive strategies identified by Atkinson (1984) and Drew (1990). Thus, the effectiveness of an argument is maximised when intonational patterns are strategically synchronized with the speaker's communicative intent, whether to project institutional authority (Ethos) or evoke empathy (Pathos).

Objective ii: *to determine the roles of intonation patterns as a discourse strategy in courtroom interactions.*

The study identifies intonation as a pivotal discourse strategy used to navigate the asymmetrical power dynamics and complex interactional constraints of the Nigerian courtroom. Intonation functions as a contextualization cue, signaling social meaning and managing turn-taking, which Couper-Kuhlen (1986) describes as the "prosodic glue" of discourse. A key strategy identified is the use of the "authoritative fall" by judges to restore order and deliver judgments, a role that asserts institutional primacy and signals absolute closure. This findings aligns with the work of Farinde and Ojo (2015), who found that falling intonation on declarative questions serves as a marker of power and control. Additionally, the study highlights the strategic nativisation of prosody, where legal professionals navigate a prosodic middle ground influenced by indigenous

Nigerian languages. The acknowledgment by 93.8% of participants regarding the influence of indigenous languages on courtroom English prosody confirms that intonation is used as a strategy to maintain cultural resonance while adhering to formal legal protocols. This culturally specific deployment of prosody ensures that legal persuasion remains intelligible and persuasive to a linguistically diverse audience, supporting the view that the pragmatic realization of legal discourse is deeply embedded in local linguistic practices.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, these findings show that the way people speak in Nigerian courts is a highly skilled and deliberate practice. Judges and lawyers are not just talking; they are carefully using their voices to manage the courtroom, show their authority and make sure their messages are understood. This use of intonation is a deep-seated part of the Nigerian legal system that helps everyone navigate the high-stakes environment of a trial in a way that is both professional and culturally appropriate.

The study concludes that intonation is a fundamental yet often overlooked component of legal advocacy in Nigeria. The strategic use of prosody is necessary to navigate the complex interactional dynamics of the courtroom, assert authority and enhance the persuasive impact of legal arguments. Given the profound influence of indigenous languages on courtroom English, there is a need for greater awareness and training in the prosodic dimensions of legal communication.

While this study provides valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations. For instance, the sample size of 48 participants, though purposively selected for expertise, represents a relatively small segment of the legal community in Southwestern Nigeria. This regional focus, while providing in-depth analysis means that the findings may not be fully generalisable to the entire Nigerian judicial system, which encompasses diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. Future research could expand the scope to include a larger and more geographically diverse sample of legal practitioners across Nigeria to provide a more comprehensive understanding of sociophonetic patterns in legal advocacy.

The findings of this study advocate for the formal integration of prosodic training into legal education and professional development in Nigeria, emphasising that communicative competence in the courtroom extends beyond mastery of the law to include the strategic management of vocal delivery. By fostering an awareness of the persuasive and coercive functions of intonation, such training would equip legal practitioners with the tools to navigate the

prosodic middle ground between British legal traditions and Nigerian sociocultural realities, thereby enhancing the clarity, fairness, and overall effectiveness of judicial communication. Furthermore, recognising the influence of indigenous languages on courtroom prosody can help judges and lawyers minimise linguistic misinterpretations, ensuring that the melody of justice remains consistent with the principles of a fair and equitable legal process.

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