Pragmatics is the study of utterance meaning, and it is well known that prosody – or, more informally, ‘tone of voice’ – can contribute crucially to that meaning. Pragmatic effects in speech are thus the product of both what is said and how it is said, and the two are inextricably linked. However, while many working in pragmatics are well aware of the important contribution of prosody, exactly how these effects are generated is harder to establish. A number of the ways in which prosody plays a pragmatic role are set out in this volume. It aims to give a cross-section of the many different topics and approaches within the field of prosody and its interface with pragmatics.

Levinson (1983), in his textbook on pragmatics, acknowledged that the absence of prosody from his account, particularly intonation, was a serious omission, but justified the omission on two grounds: first that there was as yet no agreement on how to analyse intonation, and second that the area was understudied. Twenty-five years on, the American autosegmental model, captured in the ToBI transcription system, has become the international standard in intonational phonology (e.g. Ladd, 1996; Gussenhoven, 2004), and for typological comparison (Jun, 2005), but other models still continue to have currency, including variations of the British system of holistic contours (fall, rise, fall-rise etc.). None, however, accounts sufficiently for all pragmatic effects of prosody – which also derive from the kind of effects often referred to as paralinguistic.

Levinson’s second caveat, that the area was understudied, is easier to counter. Interest in the contribution of prosody to pragmatic meaning has grown markedly in the intervening decades, albeit in a fragmented way, and from a wide variety of theoretical perspectives. The scope of these developments depends on one’s view of pragmatics. The Anglo-American approach
(cf. Hirschberg, 2004) focuses on the role of prosody in relation to other linguistic systems, for example in resolving syntactic ambiguities, signalling information and discourse structure and identifying speech acts. The European tradition, on the other hand, takes a broader view of pragmatics, including the above phenomena but also adopting a wider cognitive, social and cultural perspective on meaning in context. This volume includes studies across the whole range of work on prosody and meaning, carried out within different theoretical frameworks. Topics range from studies of interaction management and turn sequencing to pragmatic implicatures and cognitive processes. Analyses include both auditory and instrumental approaches, ranging from corpus studies to case studies, and include features of intonation, timing and rhythm, phrasing and voice quality. Each chapter makes a unique contribution to the field from its own theoretical perspective, and together they form a multi-dimensional view of the role of speech prosody in generating speaker meaning.

In this introductory chapter we will prepare the ground by first outlining the prosodic resources available to speakers (Section 1), and then describing past work in the areas touched on in the chapters we have included (Section 2), in order to show each contribution in its methodological and theoretical context. Finally, we summarise the individual contributions themselves in Section 3, and briefly outline how they relate to previous research.

1. Prosodic Resources

We use the term ‘prosody’ in this volume to refer not only to intonation – i.e. pitch movement – but also to other suprasegmental features such as timing, loudness and voice quality. A seminal study in this regard is that of Crystal (1969), and readers are also referred to detailed accounts in the following publications: Bolinger (1989), Cruttenden (1997), Ladd (1996) and Gussenhoven (2004), which deal extensively with intonation; Wichmann (2000) and Wennerstrom (2001), which focus on prosody in discourse; and the edited collections by Couper-Kuhlen and Selting (1996) and Couper-Kuhlen and Ford (2004), which provide a good overview of prosody in conversation.

In the following paragraphs we outline briefly the role that prosodic features may play in the generation of pragmatic meaning.

Pitch (intonation) is the perceptual correlate of fundamental frequency (F0). The main difficulty in analysing intonation is that both paralinguistic and linguistic information are carried in the same acoustic channel. Pragmatic effects can be generated in a number of ways: a single phonological choice (e.g. a falling or rising contour) in a given context can turn a declarative utterance into a question, or a question into a command, or can indicate whether or not a speaker wishes to continue speaking. The choice of contour (or, in the autosegmental system, a pitch target) is generally a linguistic one, while the realisation of an individual contour – e.g. the choice of pitch range – can have a discoursal function and also a paralinguistic one. The realisation of a