Chat or Chatter? The role of intonation in vowel insertion

Loan words in Italian with a final consonant in the donor language, such as <chat>, are sometimes pronounced with a final vowel. The insertion of this vowel is probabilistically distributed and dependent on a number of factors. These include speaker-specific preferences, metrical structure and the laryngeal specifications of the consonant. Crucially, a considerable amount of variation is conditioned by intonation: A vowel is more likely to occur – and is acoustically more prominent – if the intonation is complex or rising than if it is falling.

Another language in which vowel insertion is probabilistically distributed is Tashlhiyt Berber, both word finally and word medially. Here too, vowel insertion is dependent on prosodic contexts, with schwa being more likely to surface in positions in which tonal movements are located.

In both of these languages, the insertion of a vowel facilitates the realisation of functionally relevant tonal movements. This points to the considerable role played by intonational tones in determining the structure of the textual material with which they are associated. In this sense, the tune drives the text.