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Tone: The present state and future potential

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COMMENTARY

Tone: The present state and future potential*

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As a tonologist, I have often heard very accomplished colleagues express trepidation toward tone, with statements like ‘Tone is too hard’ or ‘I don’t do tone’. We have been pushing back against this viewpoint for decades. Consider the following quote from Welmers (1959), which he repeated in 1973 and which Hyman (2011) quoted as still relevant over fifty years later:

Most language students, and even a shocking number of linguists, still seem to think of tone as a species of esoteric, inscrutable, and utterly unfortunate accretion characteristic of underprivileged languages—a sort of cancerous malignancy afflicting an otherwise normal linguistic organism. Since there is thought to be no cure—or even reliable diagnosis—for this regrettable malady, the usual treatment is to ignore it, in hope that it will go away of itself. (Welmers 1959:1)

While this may be an extreme take, the attitudes expressed in it sound familiar to most tone specialists that I know, even now in 2019. And yet to some, to acknowledge that linguists still find tone difficult is to somehow validate this point, and so (it seems) it would be better to deny that anyone finds it hard than to talk about what we can do to truly dispel any remaining myths and fears surrounding tone.

Given this situation, I decided to turn the lens of study away from language and onto linguists themselves to find out what our current attitudes really are toward tone. In June–July 2018, I ran a short anonymous survey to find out how much experience linguists have with tone and tone languages, what their attitudes are toward tone, and how they approach tone in their teaching. The survey was granted IRB exemption by Dartmouth College and was administered through the online service SurveyGizmo. I advertised the survey on social media and a variety of listservs, including LinguistList and LingTYP. Ultimately, I received 518 responses from fifty-nine countries (based on IP address), of which 392 were complete. I report on this latter group here.

The goal of the survey was to elicit responses from linguists at different stages of their careers in order to address the question of whether younger linguists might have different attitudes toward tone than older ones. In the end, unfortunately, undergraduates made up only 3% of respondents. However, analysis of the results revealed no significant difference in responses between any of the groups, and so I collate all results here.

Questions fell into four broad categories: experience (including fieldwork and formal training), attitudes, the state of field (the extent to which tone is crucial for understanding phonology, morphology, and syntax and whether current theories can adequately handle tone), and finally teaching. Most questions asked respondents to rank their answer on a five-point scale from ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’ (converted to –2 to 2 for analysis, with 0 as a neutral answer). The full results can be downloaded on my website (<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~mcperson/tone-survey/>), along with commentary on individual questions.

* I would like to thank Colleen Fitzgerald for suggesting the idea of a survey to me, Jim Stanford who provided feedback on the survey questions, and Eesha Sharma who helped with the statistics. Many thanks to all survey participants and those who shared it with their networks, and to Larry Hyman and the editor Andries Coetzee for helpful comments in preparing this note.

Here, I focus on correlations between experience, teaching practices, and attitudes toward tone. The interrelationship among these three appears to form a self-perpetuating cycle of bias against tone, but I suggest that with a bit of effort, we could convert this same cycle into one promoting proficiency and comfort with tone and tonal analysis.

Some survey results give us reason to be hopeful about the current state of tone. For instance, 73% of respondents agreed with the statement ‘I find tone to be fascinating’. Of course, this may be due in part to it being viewed as ‘exotic’ or outside the bounds of ‘normal’ language, but I nevertheless take this to be a positive result. Further, only 13% of respondents reported not being able to hear tone. Thus, even if many find tone to be challenging, the raw ability to hear tonal contrasts is there. Taking into account the field as a whole, participants were asked to assess the degree to which they found tone to be crucial to phonology, morphology, and syntax.¹ The overwhelming majority agreed that tone is crucial for phonology (89%), a sizable majority also agreed for morphology (70%), while about half agreed for syntax (52%). Taken together, these results are heartening, suggesting that we do recognize the importance of tone in linguistics.

At the individual level, however, the survey also revealed that our attitudes toward tone have not changed all that much since Welmers wrote in the mid-twentieth century. Around half of the participants reported that they find tone difficult to work with (57%)² or that they are intimidated by tone (44%). Though not directly related to attitudes, I also asked respondents to rank the statement ‘I always mark tone’, which can be taken as an indirect measure of how important one sees tone as being in a language. Only half (56%) answered affirmatively.

In short, despite the pushback of tonologists over the years and the numerous methodological papers laying out clearly how to approach tonal analysis (e.g. the 2014 special issue of *Language Documentation and Conservation*), we have a long way to go to truly normalize tone and dispel the myth that it is inherently challenging.

Why do these attitudes persist, and how can we change them? Clues may lie in pairwise correlations between responses to attitude, experience, and teaching questions.

First, it should come as no surprise that those with tonal experience are less likely to report that tone is intimidating or difficult. There is a significant negative correlation between having done fieldwork on a tone language and being intimidated by tone, such that less fieldwork is associated with greater intimidation ($r = -0.231, p < 0.01$), though there was no significant correlation with finding tone difficult. In other words, linguists may feel more comfortable with tone if they have worked on a tone language but still find it challenging. However, those who had tone as part of their formal training (only 34% of respondents!) were significantly less likely to find tone difficult ($r = -0.215, p < 0.01$) or to be intimidated by it ($r = -0.253, p < 0.01$). Both kinds of experience (practical fieldwork and formal training) correlated with a greater likelihood of marking tone ($r = 0.164, p < 0.01$ for those who carried out fieldwork; $r = 0.154, p < 0.01$ for those with formal training).

Discouragingly, being intimidated by tone negatively correlates with finding tone crucial for any of the three queried subfields (phonology: $r = -0.155, p < 0.01$; mor-

¹ Some users rightly pointed out that the wording of these questions was a bit vague and left it unclear as to whether I meant in any given language or more generally; higher proportions of neutral answers to these questions may reflect user confusion, and any future iterations of this survey (or any others based on it) should be sure to clarify the wording.

² As Larry Hyman (p.c.) points out, the wording of this question is also unfortunately vague. Did respondents interpret it to mean that tone contrasts are difficult to hear? Or that complex morphotonology is difficult to analyze? These responses may reflect entirely different relationships with tone and attitudes toward it.

phology: $r = -0.122, p < 0.01$; syntax: $r = -0.138, p < 0.01$). Being intimidated by tone also has a strong negative correlation with marking tone in materials on tone languages ($r = -0.278, p < 0.01$).

Interpreting these results, we could say that having experience working with tone languages goes a long way toward curbing negative attitudes, but having formal training is even better. Thus, if we want attitudes to change, we need to be teaching the next generation of linguists the tools to handle tone data. We need to present it in our courses as a normal part of human language, no more remarkable than stress or vowel harmony.

The survey shows, though, that this not currently what is happening in our classrooms, particularly when it comes to morphology and grammatical tone. First, consider in Figure 1 the responses about covering tone and tone rules in teaching phonology and morphology.

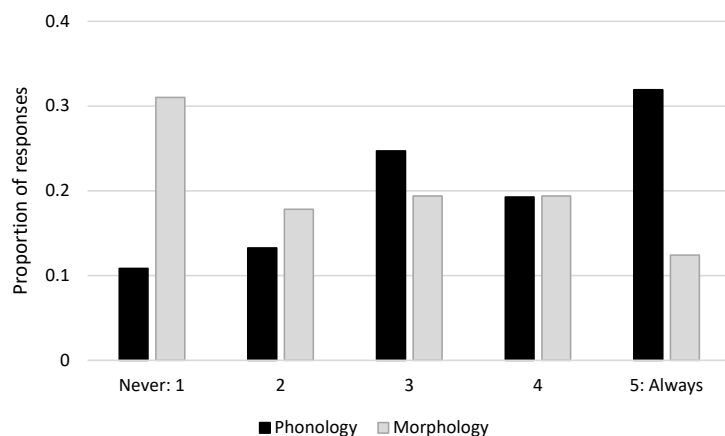


FIGURE 1. Proportions of responses to 'Do you cover tone and tone rules as a topic?'.

Phonology classes are more likely to cover tone than not, but the reverse is true for morphology. To prepare students to be able to analyze tonal data themselves, it is important to assign them problem sets. As Figure 2 shows, most morphology students will never analyze tone data, and a surprising proportion of phonology students will not either.

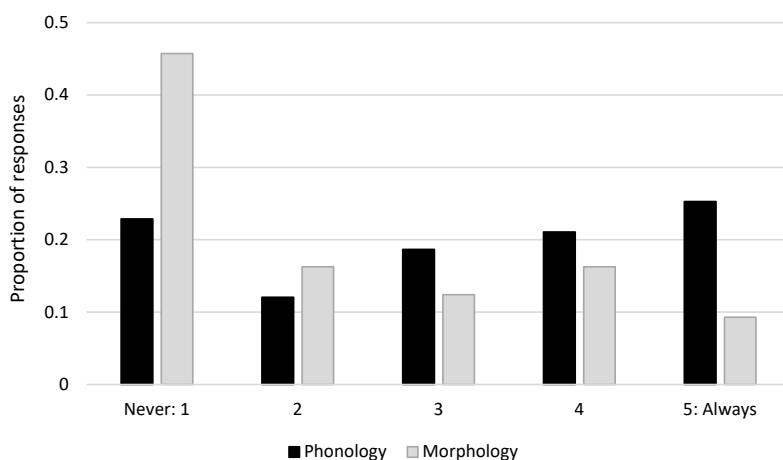


FIGURE 2. Proportions of responses to 'Do you assign a problem set on tonal phonology/morphology?'.

To editorialize, it is disappointing that over half of morphology classes ignore morphological tone, considering that in many (most?) tonal languages, especially in Africa and Mexico, grammatical tone is the rule and not the exception. These teaching results are also surprising given that 70% of respondents agreed with the statement that tone is crucial for understanding morphology.

Teaching practices are correlated with attitudes toward tone, suggesting a self-perpetuating cycle. For example, there are significant negative correlations between finding tone difficult or being intimidated by tone and covering tone as a topic in phonology ($r = -0.201$, $p < 0.01$ for finding tone difficult; $r = -0.233$, $p < 0.01$ for being intimidated by tone); put simply, those who find tone difficult or intimidating are less likely to cover it in class. The trends were also both negative for morphology, but neither result reached significance. The same situation holds for assigning problem sets: being intimidated by tone or finding it difficult was negatively correlated with assigning tonal problem sets in both phonology and morphology.

It seems, then, that we are passing on our biases to the next generation, either consciously or subconsciously. Students in a phonology class where tone is ignored or downplayed become the linguists who are afraid to deal with it, and that gets perpetuated in the classes they themselves teach. If we want attitudes to change, then those of us teaching phonology and morphology (and maybe even syntax!) need to make a concerted effort to cover tone, even if it is outside of our comfort zone.

It is impossible to know what the results of such a survey would have been fifty years ago, but it is clear that our field still has a long way to go toward normalizing tone. Despite theoretical and technical advances, a sizable proportion of us still find tone to be difficult or intimidating, and this is reflected in how we approach tone in the classroom, which in turn sows the seeds of bias for the next generation. My hope in sharing the results of this survey is that we acknowledge that we still have work to do, and my aim is to suggest a path forward, one that begins in the classroom. It is easy enough for a tone specialist to dismiss the notion that tone is difficult, but so long as others still feel it, it needs to be addressed.

Of course, there are probably many other topics in linguistics that would yield similarly mixed results if surveyed (such as clicks or phonemic voice quality, to name other phonological examples). But given that nearly half of all languages are tonal, it seems that we as linguists can and should do better in this domain.

As a parting note, I believe that it is valuable to probe our own attitudes and behavior as a field, and I would advocate for other surveys of this type. Just as in politics, we can get stuck in an echo chamber of our own specialties or get set in our ways in the classroom, lacking exposure to other teaching methods or syllabi, and as a result we may be unaware of our own deficits or new, potentially transformative approaches. I hope this tone survey can serve as an example of both what works and what could be improved upon for future studies and self-reflection.

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