

Tones, Attitudinal meanings, and Context  
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## 1. Introduction

Linguists, teacher-trainers and textbook-authors often state that attitudinal meanings are conveyed by intonation: O'Connor and Arnold (1973) state that the low rise in statements means that the speaker is *guarded*, or *deprecatory* (p.143); Harmer (1991) argues that in uttering 'How interesting' a low pitch and dropping the voice on 'int' will make the speaker sound *despondent* whereas a high pitch and a small fall would indicate that the speaker was *fascinated* (p. 12); and Bowler and Cunningham (1990, p. 15) instruct students that 'To show that you are *interested* and want to hear more, your intonation should start high, go down, and then go up at the end'; and they warn 'Remember if your intonation is flat you can sound *bored*' (emphasis added).

In this paper I want to do three things: first, argue that such links between intonation and attitudinal meanings are mistaken, second that such meanings reside in the context; third, to suggest a strategy for evaluating 'links' between tone-choice and attitudinal meanings which are suggested by linguists, teacher-trainers, textbook authors.

Two brief points about terminology. For the purposes of this article I define the term *attitude* very broadly to include emotions and feelings. I define the notion of *context* equally broadly: the speaker's expectations and knowledge relating to the current interaction.

## 2. Tones and Meanings

My argument will focus on three tones: the full fall, the full rise, and the fall-rise. These are set out in Table 1. The three tones are selected from the nine given in Crystal (1995, p. 248)

**Table 1 Attitudinal meanings associated with tones (derived from Crystal 1995, p. 248)**

Tone		Meaning
↑↘	full fall	emotionally involved: surprise, excitement, irritation
↗	full-rise	emotionally involved: disbelief, shock
↘↗	fall-rise	a positive face: encouragement, urgency
		a straight or negative face: uncertainty, doubt, tentativeness

It is important to notice four things about this table. First, it mentions not only tones and meanings, but also context. Second, by *negative* and *positive face* Crystal refers to unhappy and happy facial expressions, and to the moods underlying them; not *face* in the ‘politeness’ sense of Brown and Levinson (1978). I interpret him to mean that in a happy context a fall-rise tone can mean *encouragement* or *urgency* and in an unhappy context it means *uncertainty*, *doubt*, *tentativeness*. Third, we should note that there is a problem with the labels: there is overlap between the meanings given in the first two rows of this table - it is impossible to provide definitions of *surprise* and *excitement* which totally exclude the notions of *disbelief* and *shock*. This kind of overlap is a well-recognised problem in this area of intonation studies (cf. Crystal, 1969). Fourth, note the power of context: the fall-rise can mean *tentativeness* or its opposite *urgency*, depending on the context.

### **3. Method: one dialogue, three contexts**

I’d like you to consider how a four-part dialogue would be said and understood in three different contexts. The dialogue is an adaptation of one that appears in Bradford (1988, p. 30), and the intonation conventions follow those of Brazil, (1994). I want to evaluate the links between tone and meaning given in Table 1 in three contexts which I shall label *bossing*, *loving*, and *jogging*. I shall present the dialogue in each of these contexts in turn, and discuss the implications that these shifts in context have for the links given in Table 1.

## 4. Demonstration and discussion

### 4.1 Context 1: Bossing

In the office A is a tyrannical boss, and B a fearful secretary. A has been expecting to express his anger to John about a disciplinary matter.

A: 1 // ▼ WHERE'S JOHN //  
B: 2 // ▼ he's GONE HOME //  
A: 3 // ↗ GONE HOME // 4 // ↑ ▼ SUREly not//  
B: 5 // ▼ ↗ he HAS //

The notation should be read as follows: the double slash '/' indicates a *tone-unit boundary*, the arrows indicate the *tone choice* which starts on the next underlined syllable, the upper-case letters indicate *prominent syllables*, the underlined syllable is the *tonic syllable* on which begins the tone choice; and the upward arrow before *surely* indicates that it is a full fall. We are going to pay particular attention to the last three tone units (3-5) which have respectively a full rise, a full fall and a fall-rise tone.

In this context, the boss's // ↗ GONE HOME // is clearly compatible with *disbelief* and *shock* given in Table 1; and // ▼ ↑ SUREly not // is also compatible with the labels *surprise* and *irritation*. Similarly, the secretary's // ▼ ↗ he HAS // conveys the meaning associated by Crystal to the 'negative face' ('unhappy') meaning of the fall-rise: *tentativeness*. The secretary is likely to feel some trepidation and fear at the consequences of giving this unwelcome news to the boss, and therefore is *tentative*. So far, then, the links between tone and meaning given in Table 1 are holding up well.

### 4.2 Context 2: Loving

A and B are office colleagues having an affair who suddenly find themselves with an opportunity to continue their affair in an empty office. John normally works late and, for once, is not an obstacle to their meeting.

A: 1 // ▼ WHERE'S JOHN //  
B: 2 // ▼ he's GONE HOME //  
A: 3 // ↗ GONE HOME // 4 // ↑ ▼ SUREly not//  
B: 5 // ▼ ↗ he HAS //

Unlike context 1, the relationship between A and B is a close one. A, suddenly realising that an unexpected opportunity lies ahead, utters // ↗ GONE HOME // ↘↑SUREly not // in a way which might be said to convey something like *delighted surprise*, as opposed to the *irritation* of context 1. Notice however that the more general *surprise*, *shock* and *disbelief* are still possible labels here. Indeed we would all probably accept that *surprise* and possibly *shock* are common to tone units 3 and 4 in both contexts.

B's loving // ↘↗ he HAS // is likely to be heard as conveying a meaning opposite to that of the bossing context where it meant negative face *tentative*. Here it is likely to be heard as *delighted anticipation* - a label compatible with Crystal's positive face *encouragement* and *urgency*. With this tone unit then, we have a tone apparently 'meaning' *irritation* or its opposite *delight*, depending on the context.

I want to suggest that it is a mistake to attribute the different meanings to the tone: the meanings are best viewed as residing in the context. We can test this by reversing the tone-choices in the last three tone-units of the dialogue for this context and see if the meanings remain the same. If they can be made to remain despite reversing the tone choice, then we have evidence that it is not the tones which are conveying the different meanings *tentative* or *delighted anticipation*.

I therefore invite you to try the new version of the dialogue with the tone choices reversed in the last three tone-units for the loving context. One word of warning: now that you are used to one form of the dialogue, you might find that this new one sounds unnatural for a while, particularly with the rising tone on *surely not*. Keep trying, it will soon sound natural. To help yourself, try smiling broadly and use a slower, breathier manner on tone units 4 and 5.

A: 1 // ↘ WHERE'S JOHN //

B: 2 // ↘ he's GONE HOME //

A: 3 // ↘ GONE HOME // 4 // ↗ SUREly not//

B: 5 // ↘ he HAS //

You will find that you can preserve these meanings of *delight* and *anticipation* despite the change of tone. For me, this is conclusive evidence that these meanings reside in the context and in the choice of words, not in the choice of tones. You might object that I am cheating: I have encouraged you to use breathiness and a slower tempo and that it is these different ways of saying that have communicated the *delighted*

*anticipation*. You are right to be concerned about that, and I shall return to this in the conclusion: but you'll have to concede, I think, that the meanings stayed the same despite the change of tone.

### 4.3 Context 3: jogging

Three people started jogging together; A, who was far ahead most of the time, finishes and sees no sign of John.

A: 1 // ▼ WHERE'S JOHN //  
B: 2 // ▼ he's GONE HOME //  
A: 3 // ↗ GONE HOME // 4 // ↑ ▼ SUREly not//  
B: 5 // ▼ ↗ he HAS //

For tone units 3 and 4 the meaning *surprise* and *disbelief* seem appropriate, but it is neither the delighted nor the irritated surprise of the bossing and loving contexts, perhaps *general surprise*. With *surprise* then, at least we seem to have a meaning which seems stable across the three contexts, and I have more to say about the next section. However, as far as // ▼ ↗ he HAS // is concerned none of the meanings offered by Crystal seems to fit. It cannot be said to be *uncertain*, or *tentative* because speaker B is the one who knows, and is certain about the facts, and there is no reason why B should be fearful. It cannot be said to convey *encouragement* or *urgency* because there is nothing in the context which requires encouragement (both speakers are relaxing) and urgency is not a feature now that they are into 'recovery time'. We need, it seems, to add another meaning to the table for the fall-rise.

### 5 Back to the Table

However firm the links seem to be between tone choice and attitude in a particular context they are links of co-occurrence, not causation. In other words, the tone choices happen to occur at the same time as the attitudes, they do not cause them to happen. *Irritation* and *delight* are properties of the bossing and loving contexts respectively: they are feelings that both A and B know they have, they are not brought into being or signalled by tone choice.

Let us consider the meaning *surprise* on // ▼ ↑ SUREly not // which, as we have seen, seemed to be quite robust in that it occurs in all three contexts. I would argue that in any situation where that person is expected

by the speaker to be present but is not, and that expectation is well founded through knowledge of that person's habits and/or obligations, the speaker will be surprised. The speaker may or may not signal the surprise. If they choose to signal surprise this can be in any number of ways, verbal or non-verbal. If verbal, they can use any tone.

We should remember at this point the discussion above where we associated *surprise* with both the rising tone on *home* and the 'full fall' on *surely*. This means that we have two tones which are associated with the same attitudinal meaning: both the rise and the fall can convey *surprise*, and this is consistent with the findings of our reversed tones experiment - the same meanings can be associated with different tones. And it is consistent with the point just made - any tone can co-occur with *surprise*.

Our discussion of the three contexts has shown that

- the labels for attitudinal meanings are problematic
- the same meaning can co-occur with different tones
- the same tone can co-occur with different meanings
- meanings reside in the context of interaction
- tones co-occur with meanings, they do not cause them to be present

The table offers meanings which can be said to co-occur with a particular tone choice in a particular context: i.e. the links work for a small number of contexts - contexts which are easy for authors and readers to bring to mind. The links are a partial list of local meanings. The imprecision and openness of the categories of meaning they mislead us into thinking that they are general meanings. Thus, because we can push the concepts of *shock* and *surprise* around so much (irritation, delight, and general) we can make it accommodate a variety of meanings in a range of contexts. But this does not represent a success, it represents a failure - a failure properly to define categories.

Descriptions of intonation, to be adequate, have to move away from statements of links to local meanings. Instead of trying to associate // ↘ ↗ he HAS // with meanings such as *tentativeness* and *urgency* which apply only to specific contexts (i.e. they are local meanings) they have to attempt to describe general meanings which apply to all contexts. These general meanings by definition cannot be local/attitudinal.

We need general meanings of the sort described by Brazil (1994; 1997), who for falling tone (*proclaiming*) gives the meaning 'this is news': we

can thus explain the falling tone on // ▼ ↑ SUREly not // as meaning ‘I’m telling you about my state of mind’ (remember, that the fact that this state of mind is *surprise* is a feature of the context, and the speaker is expressing surprise by the very fact of uttering the words ‘surely not’. For the rising and fall-rise tones (*referring*) Brazil, gives the meaning ‘this is already common ground between us’; this is transparently the case with both // ↗ GONE HOME // and // ▼ ↗ he HAS // where the action referred to in both these tone units is common ground for both A and B once tone unit 2 has been uttered.

Brazil’s *proclaiming* and *referring* meanings work in all three contexts. Any attempt to create links between tones and meaning which aim below this level of generality are bound to fail the test of the two strategies I have suggested.

## 6. Conclusion

Many of the assertions made about attitudes originate from the linguistic technique of introspection. Linguists select the context that best illustrates their point, but do not test the link in other contexts, thereby hoodwinking themselves. If you employ the strategies suggested above, (change the context, change the tones, beware of labels) you are less likely to be a victim of this hoodwinking.

There remains more to say about the relationship between attitudinal meanings and intonation. In this article I have focused on links suggested between tones and attitudes, and I have sought to prove that these links are mistaken. However, there is no doubt that speakers can cue the presence of attitudinal meanings by ‘the way they say’ their words. They can, for example, use breathiness, tenseness, indeed any form of non-segmental phonation (cf. Crystal, 1969) which has a rarity value for that speaker at that moment to draw hearers’ attention to an attitude that is present in the context. In the loving context for example, a sudden onset of breathiness with a slower pace on // ▼ ↗ he HAS // could cue the presence of *delighted anticipation* in the speaker. In the jogging context it would not, because breathiness would there be a normal background effect after jogging. Hence there is no systematic, generalisable link. All such cuings are local meanings and have to be interpreted in relation to the specific context in which they occur.

One consequence of what I have argued is that learners of English should not be taught that there are links between tone choice and attitude. It is



clearly wrong-headed to do so, and doing so inhibits them from speaking, because they fear that they will make an unintended intonational mistake that will offend their hearers. We should in no way inhibit our students from speaking communicatively by perpetuating such myths about tones and attitudes.

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