

Tone of voice in Malaysian

Mark Campana, Kobe City University of Foreign Studies

Janet Yong, Hong Kong Polytechnic University

This paper investigates tone-of-voice as heard in standard varieties of Malaysian, and compares it to similar modes of expression in Japanese and English. The basic assumption here is that tone-of-voice (TOV) represents the audible expression of attitudes, which in turn are seen as outcroppings of the emotive system. The basic elements of TOV are drawn from a universal inventory, but can be combined in various ways.

Tone-of-voice is essentially paralinguistic in nature, and as such is vital to the establishment of the speaker's positions, or *stances* with regard to X, or to otherwise inform the listener as to how an utterance should be interpreted. Through TOV, speakers impart referential and affective information relating to the word-stream, topic, and/or speech and social context. This may also include knowledge of stances taken by others in the course of conversation.

Tone-of-voice is commonly associated with negative attitudes such as 'sarcastic', 'condescending', or 'disrespectful'. It may also project positive ones though, e.g. 'confident', 'interested' or 'upbeat'. The fact that it reflects such a wide range of imputed mental states or attitudes suggests that it is amenable to a Natural Semantics Metalanguage approach, as outlined by Wierzbicka (1999). There it is claimed that the meaning of emotion-words can be decomposed into sets of simple propositions. These, it turns out, are inevitably headed by a mental predicate such as *wanting* or *not wanting*, *knowing* or *not knowing*, *thinking* or *not thinking*, *feeling good* or *feeling bad*. These predicates can all be 'intoned' by the 'speaker' which, we claim, is the articulatory basis of tone-of-voice phenomena.

The paper reports on two experiments that link acoustic features to interpretive outcomes. In the first experiment, native Malay speakers were primed with questions to elicit mental states (*Anda ingin beberapa kue?*) and asked to intone their replies. The samples were analyzed for significant variations of pitch, rhythm, loudness, etc. A second group of subjects then gauged the intoned responses in terms of the extent to which the speaker wanted X, knew Y, was aware of Z, etc. In the second stage, natural conversations were scanned for tone-of-voice phenomena, isolated/analyzed, and compared against the original samples of intoned replies.

The findings indicated that each of the mental predicates in question has its own distinctive signature, *pace* a ten-second backlog. Given the local (lexical) semantics and/or speech situation, this may be interpreted as signaling a specific attitude. Apparently, however, the tone (or key) associated with one mental predicate can be combined with another to form a complex symbol. Speakers may thus assemble a simple 'grammar' of such displays, where the

(affective) meaning of each combination is determined by the speech community.

References

- Abelin, Å, & J. Allwood (2000). 'Cross linguistic interpretation of emotional prosody.'
ISCA Workshop on Speech and Emotion (110-113); Newcastle, Northern
Ireland.
- Bolinger, D. (1989). *Intonation and its uses: Melody in grammar and discourse*.
Edward Arnold, London.
- Campbell, N. & D. Erickson (2004). 'What do people hear? A study of the perception of
non-verbal affective information in conversation speech. In *Journal of the
Phonetic Society of Japan* 8.1.
- Couper-Kuhlen, E., & M. Selting (1996). *Prosody in Conversation*. Studies in
Interactional Sociolinguistics 12. Cambridge University Press.
- Hirschberg, Julia. 'Pragmatics and intonation'. In *The Handbook of Pragmatics*.
- Horn, Laurence, & Gregory Ward (eds.) *Handbook of Pragmatics*. 2004.
- Reed, B.S. (2006). *Prosodic Orientation in English Conversation*. Palgrave MacMillan,
UK.
- Shochi, T., Erickson, D., Rilliard, A., Aubergé, V., Martin, J.-C. (2006). 'Recognition
of Japanese attitudes in audio-visual speech'. *Speech Prosody*, 2006.
- Wichman, Ann (2000). 'The attitudinal effects of prosody, and how they relate
to emotion'. Department of Cultural Studies, ms. University of Central
Lancashire.
- Wierzbicka, Anna (1999). *Emotions Across Languages and Cultures: Diversity and
Universals*. Cambridge University Press.