Tone survey (full text plus LM commentary)

The following research survey will ask you about your experiences with and attitudes towards tone languages, in both your teaching and research. It is designed to get a pulse on the ways in which tone is treated in our field and how it is presented to the next generation of linguists. For the purposes of this survey, “tone language” will be defined as a language in which f0 or pitch can be used to create lexical or grammatical contrasts (thus encompassing both canonical tone languages such as Mandarin as well as “pitch accent” languages like Japanese).

Your participation is voluntary. No personally identifiable information will be collected as part of this survey; results are strictly confidential and will be presented in the aggregate. Please answer questions to reflect your current practices, not your intended or ideal practices.

Questions about this project may be directed to: Laura.E.McPherson@Dartmouth.edu

1. Have you ever carried out primary fieldwork (in the field, in a field methods class, etc.)?
   Yes/no

2. Have you ever carried out primary fieldwork on a tone language (in the field, in a field methods class, etc.)?
   Yes/no
Answer the following questions about your relationship with tone on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means “Don’t agree at all” and 6 means “Completely agree”.

3. I find tone to be fascinating.

LM: Most people agreed that tone is fascinating, though as mentioned in the Language commentary, this could be due to the fact that it is still seen as an exotic aspect of language.

4. I actively look to work on tone languages.

LM: We could consider this question to be a gauge of whether the survey has a selection bias towards tonal specialists, in which case we might expect a higher proportion of affirmative answers. Instead, it is a pretty even split, skewing towards negative answers.
5. I find tone difficult to work with.

![Bar chart showing responses to question 5]

*LM:* It is interesting that there is such a high proportion of affirmative answers to this question, given that most participants just responded that tone is fascinating. This again points to tone having a kind of reputation for being unusual, difficult to handle, and hence this complex mystery, but one that most people would rather let someone else deal with. Alternatively, as Larry Hyman (p.c.) pointed out, this question is ambiguously worded; does it mean that tonal contrasts are hard to hear or that tonal analysis is difficult, for instance in a system with complex morphophonological alternations? Future iterations should clarify so as to better be able to interpret the results.

6. There are adequate computational tools and technologies available for tone.

![Bar chart showing responses to question 6]

*LM:* With the increasing popularity of computational linguistics and the development of more computational approaches, I wanted to gauge how well served tone is by these advances. Most participants were either unsure about the state of computational approaches to tone or were ambivalent about the adequacy of what is available.
7. I always mark tone in materials on tone languages.

LM: Though not directly related to attitudes, I also asked respondents to rank the statement “I always mark tone”; this can be taken as an indirect measure of how important one sees tone as being in a language, since one is less likely to leave something crucial out of a transcription. About a quarter of participants responded neutrally, which I interpret to represent a group of people who sometimes mark it and sometimes don’t, though it could also represent a group of people who never deal with tone languages.

8. I am intimidated by tone.

9. Tone was part of my formal training as a linguist.
LM: It is disheartening that so many people have never had any formal training (34%). As the *Language* commentary discusses, a lack of training is correlated with negative attitudes towards tone.

10. I can’t hear tone.

LM: This is encouraging! Only 13% of participants stated that they cannot hear tone, so raw ability to perceive contrasts is not the issue.

11. Tone is a crucial to understanding phonology.

LM: Almost everyone agrees that tone is crucial to phonology, and yet still so many negative attitudes persist. I did not collect information on subfield specialty, so it could be that syntacticians or semanticists are more biased against tone than phonologists, but I suspect that many phonologists still hold the same biases.
12. Tone is a crucial to understanding morphology.

![Graph showing responses to the statement]

LM: This is a good result, considering how common grammatical tone is, but as we will see in the teaching behavior, grammatical/morphological tone is still sidelined when it comes to the classroom.

13. Tone is crucial to understanding syntax.

![Graph showing responses to the statement]


![Graph showing responses to the statement]

LM: Here too there was some confusion (reported to me after the survey) about whether a specific framework was implied or whether the question asked whether there exists a theory
that adequately handles tone. The overwhelming number of neutral answers may reflect this confusion, or it may reflect our ambivalence about current theory with respect to tone.

15. Current morphological theory adequately handles tone data.

LM: This question suffers from the same problem of vagueness as the last. Nevertheless, even with the majority of answers being neutral, morphological theory is still viewed as lagging behind compared to phonological theory, which echoes some recent calls for greater attention for morphological or grammatical tone (e.g. Hyman 2011, Konoshenko 2017, Rolle 2018, among others).

Teaching questions:

16. Have you taught phonology?
Please answer on a scale of 1-5, where 1 means “Never” and 5 means “Always”

17. Do you include data from tone languages in your problem sets (whether or not the focus of the problem is tone)?

LM: This question was designed to gauge students’ exposure to tone languages, even if tone is not the main focus.

18. Do you include tone markings in tone language data even if tone is not the main focus of the problem?

LM: If we compare this to question 23, the same question for morphology, we see a stark contrast. Tone markings are typically included for phonology (a heartening result), but the same cannot be said for morphology.
19. Do you cover tone and tone rules as a topic?

![Chart showing the distribution of responses to whether tone and tone rules are covered in phonology classes.]

*LM:* Only half of phonology classes are covering tone and tone rules, which is surprising. It could be the case that some of the participants are teaching in English or Spanish departments, and the phonology class is geared towards those (non-tonal) languages, but it may also be the case that tone is simply skipped over as a topic.

20. Do you assign a problem set on tonal phonology?

![Chart showing the distribution of responses to whether problem sets on tonal phonology are assigned.]

*LM:* Comparing this and the last question, we can see that even though tone might be covered in class, students often have no opportunity to get hands-on practice with tonal data.
21. Have you taught morphology?

Yes/No

Please answer on a scale of 1-5, where 1 means “Never” and 5 means “Always”

22. Do you include data from tone languages in your problem sets (whether or not the focus of the problem is tone)?

LM: Compared to phonology classes, students in morphology classes are less likely to be exposed to data from tonal languages (regardless of the focus on tone).
23. Do you include tone markings in tone language data even if tone is not the main focus of the problem?

![Bar chart](chart1.png)

**LM:** While most people teaching phonology will include tone markings even if the focus is not the tone, there are equal number of people teaching morphology who never include it. Perhaps this is due to the standard practice of using Bantu morphology problems, where tone is often omitted even in textbook data.

24. Do you cover morphological tone and approach to it in class?

![Bar chart](chart2.png)

**LM:** It is disappointing that over half of morphology classes ignore morphological tone, considering that in a large proportion of tonal languages, especially in Africa and Mexico, grammatical tone is the rule and not the exception; there is nothing exotic about it. It is also surprising, since 70% of respondents agreed with the statement that tone is crucial for understanding morphology. This is likely related to the fact that morphological theory is often not well designed to handle tone, or that grammatical tone is still viewed as exotic; people aren’t teaching it, so students aren’t exposed to it, and the situation doesn’t improve.
25. Do you assign a problem set on tonal morphology?

![Bar Chart]

*LM:* According to these results, students almost never have the opportunity to analyze morphological tone themselves, leaving them ill-equipped to deal with it if their own work might require it later on.

26. I am (select one):

- An undergraduate student
- A graduate student
- A post-doc
- A faculty member
- An independent researcher

![Pie Chart]

*LM:* Undergraduates were underrepresented in the survey. Because the survey took place over the summer, there were fewer opportunities to easily advertise to undergraduates. It is also unclear what constitutes “Other” (linguists in industry? language activists? interested lay people?). In future iterations, it might be wise to include a field where the participant can specify what that means in order to better interpret the results.
If you have any questions or would be interested in hearing about the results of this survey, please email me at Laura.E.McPherson@Dartmouth.edu.

References
