

It's not what you say, it's how you say it

The customs officer was not amused.

It was Christmas morning, and my husband, toddler and I were returning to the States after a 10-hour flight from Buenos Aires. The only re-entry forms they'd had on the plane were in Spanish. I'd done my best to fill them out, but had struggled on words around agriculture.

The officer, apparently, didn't understand the Spanish version either. His expression was as icy as the Dulles runways, and I could tell he'd rather be anywhere but in the basement of the Washington D.C. airport interpreting foreign forms for sleep deprived travelers. His tone was flat and dramatically matter of fact. His face was a granite grimace.

I didn't need a psychology degree to know this many was not happy.

A study done in the early 1980s by Dr. Albert Mehrabian, a social psychologist at the University of California suggests that as much as 93 percent of a person's emotional meaning is communicated nonverbally. When it comes to decoding feelings and attitudes, up to 38 percent of communication might occur through tone and 55 percent might be achieved through facial expression.

That suggests as little as 7 percent of our interpretation of someone's mood comes from what the person actually says.

"Passports."

I interpreted this terse command, coupled with his 53 percent chilly glare and 38 percent wintry tone to mean, "I hate you, I hate my job, I hate this day."

And so it is that my red-eyed toddler began to whine, "Mooooommy, I waaaaant my juuuuuuice."

After years of practicing the anti-whine mantra provided to me from Jim and Charles Fay in their book "Love and Logic Magic for Early Childhood," my response came on autopilot. I said with as much concern as I could muster, "I'm sorry, Finn, I can't hear that voice. Can you please use a big boy voice that mommy can hear?"

In an immediate turn of tone, my boy came back with a dulcet request. "Mommy, my I please have my juice?" He had the look of a cherub on his hope-full face.

I have become accustomed to this spontaneous switcheroo ala Jekyll and Hyde, and I promptly rewarded him with his sippy cup of apple juice.

The custom's officer, shocked by the transformation, opened like a package on Christmas morning with a teddy bear inside. His grin was so big it almost fell off his cheeks. Looking up at my son from behind the passports in hand, he said, "See, that wasn't so hard now, was it, Finn?"

And I couldn't help but think to myself, "Same goes for you, fella. What a change of tone! Nice to hear a smile in your voice."

English is not a tonal language, not like Chinese, Burmese or Yoruba, in which word meanings are distinguished by pitch. For example, in Mandarin Chinese, the syllable *ma* might mean "mother," "hemp," "horse," or "scold," depending on if it's a high pitch, a high rising pitch, a low fall-rise or a high falling pitch.

But that doesn't mean that our communication is not tone dependent. Think of all the ways you might change the "tune" of the word "yes." Practice right now saying it 1) as a straightforward agreement, 2) as a question, 3) as an agreement with reservation, 4) as an annoyed response, and

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5) as a query. Five very different tones, no? Chances are your tone was falling for 1 and 4, rising for 2, flat for 3, and wavering for 5.

I thought it would be fun to write a poem called "Inflection" in which the only word is *oh*. On the page, it would be boring, *oh, oh, oh*, but in performance, the tone might carry that one syllable from shock to dismay to orgasmic delight.

Sure, it matters what you say. As Rudyard Kipling said, "Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by man."

But as Mary Poppins said, "A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down."

In fact, I think she sang it. With a smile on her face.

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