
The Milonga Code

The semiosphere [[48]] of Argentine tango, the place in which signs [[51]], texts[[63]], and codes[[2]] relating to the dance, music, and poetry that make up tango culture interact via the people who are passionate about the art form, consists largely of the classes, practicas, and milongas that are populated by passionate tango enthusiasts. Of these three activities, the milongas are accorded the most privileged status, as the other two activities exist in large part to prepare dancers of nights of fun at the milonga. The **milonga** is the social dance associated with salon tango that large numbers of individuals religiously attend. Generally speaking, in cities all across the world, groups of dedicated volunteers secure spaces, DJs, and refreshments for these gatherings of tangueros, and take considerable pains to assure that the ambiance is appropriate to the occasion. A few aspects of the code which governs milonga are briefly discussed in this section.

The **cabeceo** is an act of communication which involves both oculesics [[32]] and gesture [[16]]. It is the mechanism whereby two strangers nonverbally establish the fact that they would like to dance the current tanda with each other at venues which observe the tradition. In fact, even at venues that claim not to observe it, the better dancers can often be seen hooking up to dance by means of cabeceo ((12)). The basic idea is that when two potential partners make eye contact, and one of them (usually a male) tilts their head, and the other (usually a female) nods, the “contract” is complete. Note that eye contact alone is does not make a cabeceo. Once cabeceo has established that the two individuals would like to dance the tanda together, the leader will cross the floor to where the follower is seated. If there was no “mistake”, the follower rises, and they dance the tanda.

The song **La Cumparsita** is a conventional sign [[8]] that marks the end of milonga. Most of the great tango orchestras have recorded at least one version of this iconic song, so that the last tanda of the night can be a set of tangos by one of any number of orchestras. While the origins of the tune are shrouded in myth [[29]], the basic facts ((31)) are that a partially composed marching tune written by Gerardo Matos Rodriguez was discovered one night in 1916 by Roberto Firpo at a Montevideo cafe, who felt it had potential for a tango rhythm. Firpo merged some of his own material, composed over the previous decade, with it, and played the result in the same cafe that evening. The crowd evidently loved it, and asked that it be played again and again. A few years later, Carlos Gardel recorded the song, and then everybody else did for decades to come.

When dancing at milonga, the couples must share the dance floor in a cooperative manner. A number of rules are enforced that serve to assure that capable couples are afforded space for a good dancing experience. The first rule is that the line of dance, the flow of dancers, is counterclockwise. The second rule is that the follower dances around the leader. Beyond this, proxemic [[42]] rules tailored to salon tango come into play. For instance, each couple should give the couples ahead in the line of dance a bit of space. In return, couples ahead in the line of dance are careful not to do any steps that would encroach upon the space of couples just behind them in the line of dance. These are procedural codes that you violate at considerable risk to your reputation as dancers. Occasionally there are mishaps on the dance floor. These are sometimes avoided, or at least mitigated, by an aware follower who communicates with a haptic [[15]] signal [[54]] that “danger” is lurking behind the leader.

The night (or morning or afternoon or evening) of dancing at milonga is structured by syntagmatically [[62]] arranging the songs into sets of three or four songs called **tandas**. Paradigmatically [[35]], a tanda can consist of one of three variants of tango tunes. One type is just referred to as **tango**. One type is referred to as **milonga** (clearly, “milonga” is a polysemous word). One type is referred to as **vals**. Tango tandas tend to consist of four songs. Milonga tandas and vals tandas tend to consist of three songs. One further constraint on the tanda concept is that all of the songs in a particular tanda tend to be recorded by the same orchestra.

Tango is generally danced in silence, sometimes even with the eyes closed. Between songs there is sometimes a word exchanged between partners. That said, those who are new to tango must take care with what they say, because tango codes tend to trump general social codes on in the milonga. Context [[7]] is important! For example, if you should say “thank you” for some reason, no matter what, it seems (perhaps your follower has saved you from crashing into an out of control couple during the previous dance), the thank you is interpreted as “I don’t care to continue with this tanda”, which is rather insulting to your partner. Say “thank you”, and that’s it for the tanda. Best, generally speaking, just to quietly enjoy your partner’s embrace while waiting for the next song in a tanda.