THE INTONATION PATTERNS OF MALAY SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH: A DISCOURSE INTONATION APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents some preliminary data from a study which investigates the intonation patterns of Malay speakers of English (MSEs). The study examines the MSEs' intonation using Brazil's [4] Discourse Intonation (DI) approach as the main method of analysis, with a view to modifying DI for this variety in view of how meaning is conveyed and understood.

The spoken discourse of MSEs collected using a map task is examined, where conversations are between MSEs and MSEs as well as MSEs with a Chinese Non-Native Speaker (NNS) of English.

Keywords: discourse intonation, Malay speakers of English, World Englishes, South East Asian Englishes

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. English in Malaysia

Historically, English was introduced into Malaysia by the British and since then, English has been a complex yet significant part of the linguistic scenario. From a World Englishes perspective, English in Malaysia is considered to be part of the outer circle community [14].

Initially, Malaysian English (ME) was described as the same variety as Singapore English (SgE) [20]. However, after Singapore gained independence in 1965 from Malaysia, there have been significant differences in the way English has been perceived and the role it plays. As such, ME and SgE have evolved into two distinct varieties [3, 20].

In Malaysia, English plays a significant and diversified role. It is the official second language and has a high social status [2]. In the government sector, although Bahasa Malaysia is the official language used, English is still very important, particularly for international and diplomatic relations. More importantly, besides Bahasa Malaysia, English serves as a lingua franca that unites Malaysia's multiethnic society, especially in urban areas and among more educated Malaysians.

Using a Discourse Intonation (DI) framework [4], this paper presents a preliminary investigation into the intonation patterns of Malay English a sub-variety of ME. The intention is to work towards a suprasegmental phonology of Malay English as an emerging variety of South East Asian English.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. Discourse intonation

According to Brazil [4], speakers will make intonation choices based on continuing assessment of understanding between themselves and their interlocutor(s), which is termed as the context of interaction. All interaction can only proceed on the basis of a common ground between the listener and the speaker, where given information is presented using referring tones (*r* and *r+*, where the + indicates a marked tone) and new information is presented using proclaiming tones (*p* and *p+*).

There are five tones in the DI approach: fall, rise-fall, rise, fall-rise and level. The unmarked tones are the fall (*p*) and the fall-rise (*r*). The rising tone (*r+*) and the rise-fall tone (*p+*) are usually used by a speaker who has a more dominant role in a conversation, while the level tone (*o*), otherwise known as an 'oblique' tone, indicates the speaker has not finished an utterance, hesitation, listing or the speaker's lack of involvement [5].

2.2. Applying DI to world Englishes

Very little research has been done on the prosodic features of ME and even less on the intonation patterns of a specific ethnic group such as the Malays. A study by Goh [10], using Brazil's DI framework, indicates that SgE and ME do not conform to the patterns in Brazil's model, which describes standard British English (BrE), and that there is a high frequency of level tones as well as rising tones compared to standard BrE. Although the intonation patterns are similar to BrE, their

meanings and communicative value may not necessarily be the same [10]. Similarly, DI has been applied to describe the intonation patterns of Indonesian speakers [13] and more recently Hong Kong English [7]. In all these studies, it was found that the level tone was the most frequently used tone among the speakers.

Other suprasegmental similarities have been found between SgE [8, 10, 12] and HKE [7, 21, 22]. For example, Kirkpatrick [15] observed that, as most Asian languages were syllable-timed languages, Asian English speakers tended to use syllable timing and avoided using reduced vowels; as in the case of SgE [17] and HKE [21].

3. METHODOLOGY

The framework of the study is exploratory and descriptive in nature and uses the DI framework as a method to analyze the intonation patterns of Malay Speakers of English (MSE).

3.1. Participants

The participants comprised 10 proficient MSEs teaching English at a Malaysian university and a Chinese Non-Native Speaker (NNS) of English. The MSEs were either lecturers or language teachers who were qualified to teach English at tertiary level. They are therefore considered to have a good level of English language proficiency and reflect the English spoken by proficient MSEs.

The NNS was an international postgraduate student from China. As this study takes a WE perspective, it was felt that the MSEs should interact with a speaker of English who was not from what might be described as Kachru's Inner Circle [14]. All participants were women.

3.2. Tasks

Two kinds of tasks were used in this study: map tasks [1] and a list of sentences adapted from Wells [23]. Map tasks were used to generate spontaneous but controlled cooperative speech. The sentence data was collected as a comparison with the spontaneous speech. The map tasks involved two sets of interaction: 1. between MSEs and MSEs, and 2. between MSEs with the NNS. In this paper, only data from the map tasks is presented.

3.3. Data collection and analysis

Data was collected over a period of two weeks in April 2010. For the tasks, 30 recordings were made using an Edirol R-09HR recorder and, as back up, an Apple Macintosh computer using a lapel microphone. The recordings were later transcribed and marked in terms of tonic placement and tones by the researcher. Each transcript was analyzed several times to ensure consistency and rigour. Speech Analyzer 3.0.1 (available from http://www.sil.org/) was used to display the intonation contours.

3.4. Transcriber agreement

20% of the transcripts were independently marked by a second rater. To assess the level of agreement, the transcripts were rated based on two criteria, the tonic item and the tone type. By 'tonic item' is meant here the word in which the tonic syllable appeared rather than the actual syllable itself, for reasons which will become clear later. Similarly, tones were analyzed as belonging to three main categories: proclaiming tones (*p* and *p+*), referring tones (*r* and *r+*) and the level tone (*o).*

Transcriber agreement was 88.55% for tonic items and 82.2% for tones. These are very good agreement levels considering that, even among trained listeners, agreement in intonation marking is difficult to establish [6].

4. RESULTS

The examples below illustrate features that have been identified from the map task data. In the examples, 'm' refers to MSE:MSE conversations and 'n' refers to MSE:NNS conversations. The number refers to the MSE and the turn number is after the colon. E.g., {03-n03:91} indicates third conversation between an MSE and the NNS, MSE03 is speaking, and it is the 91st turn.

4.1. Fluidity of word stress

From the data analyzed so far, the most interesting feature found among the MSEs is the fluidity or shift in the placement of stress and/or tonic syllable. The stress moves from one syllable to another, even when the turns are very near to each other and sometimes in the same turn by the same speaker. Here are some examples from MSE09, MSE03 and MSE08:

(1) //*o* ER/ o white **MOUN**tain/*p* YES/ *r+* you have to pass the white moun**TAIN**// {09-m08: 100}

(2) //*p* YA/ *p* GOLD **MINE**// {03-n03: 86}

(3) //*o* you DON'T have the **GOLD** mine// {03-n03: 90}

(4) //*o* unTIL you FIND// *p* DISused MOnas**TERY**// {08-n08: 75}

(5) //*r*+ oK/ *o* SO/ *o* make SURE that/ *r*+ the DISused **MON**astery// *r*+ is ON your LEFT// {08-n08: 87}

The reason for this could be associated with transfer of prosodic features in Malay. According to Asmah Haji Omar (personal communication) word stress is not static in Malay, which would account for this phenomenon.

4.2. Noun compounds

In standard BrE, the tonic syllable in a noun compound is often the stressed syllable in the first element (e.g., in *battery charger* it is on the first syllable of *battery*). However, it was found that in MSEs this is not necessarily the case. As with variable word stress and tonic placement, the tonic in a compound can be placed on a syllable in the last element, and the placement varies even with the same speaker. For example, in the transcript we see the following:

(6) //*r*+ oK/ *o* AND/ *o* you will FIND/ *o* a YOUTH **HOS**tel/ *p* on your RIGHT side/ {08-n08: 107}

(7) // *p* YOUTH hos**TEL**// {08-n08: 109}

(8) //*r*+ CAN you SEE/ *r*+ a YOUTH **HOS**tel// {08-n08: 113}

(9) //*o* going OVer/ *o* CROSS OVer/ *o* you're gonna go OVER the ROPE **BRIDGE**// {03-n03: 102}

(10) //*r*+ CAN you see the **ROPE** bridge// {03-n03: 104}

(11) // *r*+ it's the ROCK**FALL**// {03-n03: 128}

(12) //*r*+ CAN you see the **ROCK**fall// {03-n03: 132}

Similarly, in other noun compounds such as *picket fence*, *telephone box* and *footbridge* the tonic syllable is not static. As in 4.1, the fluidity of stress in the noun compounds could indicate transfer from Malay. Traditionally, stress in Malay has been considered to be weak and in penultimate position [18] but it is an ambiguous notion and an area of much debate. Recent studies have shown that stress as defined in languages such as English may not even exist or be applicable in Malay [10, 24]. This would explain the arbitrary nature in stress placement among MS and that perhaps the features in 4.1 and 4.2 should not even be explained within the parameters of stress itself.

4.3. High occurrence of rising tones

Although Asian varieties tend to have a high frequency of rising tones, as found in SgE and ME [10] and HKE [22], the high occurrence of rising tones in the MSE data is quite significant. In comparison to Setter's HKE data, in which rising tones make up 24.39% of all tones used [22], the percentage of rising tones used in the MSE data analyzed so far is approximately 44.20%, almost double the percentage found in the HKE data. Further analysis is required to discover how the use of the rising tone differs from Brazil's framework.

4.4. *And then*

The data also indicate that the MSEs used a phrasal rising intonation on the second syllable for the item *and then*. E.g:

(13) //*r*+ **and THEN**/ *p* you SEE/*p* banana TREE// {03-n03: 62}

(14) // *r*+ oK / *r*+ **and THEN** / *o* ER/ *r*+ you walk STRAIGHT// {05-n05: 09}

(15) // *r*+ oK / *r*+ **and THEN** / *o* in FRONT of YOU / *o* ER / *r*+ you'll SEE/ *r*+ DISused monasTERY// {05-n05: 43}

(16) // *r*+ oK / *r*+ **and THEN**/ *o* from THERE/ *p* you go DOWN // {07-n07: 15}

4.5. *Rising head*

Although the DI approach does not consider rising heads, the rising head was a feature that frequently appeared in the data. According to O'Connor & Arnold [19], a rising head only occurs in BrE when there is a fall (*p*) on the tonic syllable. However, based on the data so far, a rising head (highlighted in bold) can also appear with a rising tone (*r*+) amongst MSEs. E.g.:

(17) // *r*+ oK / *r*+ and THEN /*o* ER / *r*+ you **WALK** STRAIGHT // {05-n05: 09}

(18) // *r*+ oK / *r*+ turn to your RIGHT/ *r*+ and THEN/ *r*+ **WALK** STRAIGHT // {05-n05: 37}

(19) // *r*+ oK/ *r*+ from the FIELD STATION/ *r*+ you just **GO** STRAIGHT/ *r*+ until you see a baNAna TREE// {07-n07: 29}

(20) // *r*+ oK/ *r*+ from the baNAna TREE/ *r*+ **GO** STRAIGHT/ *r*+ until you see a GOLD MINE// {07-n07: 33}

5. DISCUSSION

The findings presented in this study have so far shown some distinct features in the intonation patterns of MSEs. These features include: a rising intonation on the second syllable for the item *and then*; a rising head which appears with a rising tone (*r*+); and the fluidity of the word stress.

Previous studies have also shown that there are shared features which may make Asian Englishes mutually intelligible. At the suprasegmental level, Deterding and Kirkpatrick [9] found in a study of 20 speakers from 10 ASEAN countries that there was a tendency for prominent falling intonation to be used to indicate the end of an utterance. Similarly, Low and Deterding [16] found this tendency in SgE. However, from the data analyzed this has not been found for MSEs. What seems apparent so far are the variability of the tonic syllable in the noun compounds which is similar to Hong Kong speakers [22] and the large number of rising tones which is similar to SgE and ME [10].

Ultimately, the study will need to investigate how meaning is conveyed in the MSE's variety. As Goh [10] pointed out, although these features may be similar to standard BrE in form, their communicative value may not be the same. For example, the large number of rising tones in MSE data may not have the same meaning as assumed in the BrE DI model.

6. CONCLUSION

Early analysis of the data has identified some interesting features. However, further investigation needs to be conducted before any conclusive results can be determined.

7. REFERENCES

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