SPEAKING ENGLISH THE MALAYSIAN WAY: IS THERE A STANDARD MALAYSIAN ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION?

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Abstract

All over the world, English is spoken in a myriad of accents. In Malaysia, accents can vary depending on ethnic, educational, geographical and socio-economic backgrounds, and can range from heavily marked to less marked accents. The variety of local accents and international English accents presents a challenge to teachers of English in Malaysia in relation to issues of local identity versus global intelligibility; that of ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ pronunciation; and the reliance on native-speaker pronunciation models such as Received Pronunciation. As a step towards building a more localised model of pronunciation, this paper will firstly, examine the concept of Standard English pronunciation, and secondly discuss findings from an ongoing instrumental study on Standard Malaysian English vowels based on data from the Corpus of Malaysian English Language (CoMEL). Preliminary results from the study indicate that vowels in the more acrolectal form of Malaysian English are pronounced in a smaller phonetic space compared to British English. This paper will conclude by discussing how such research findings can inform pedagogic decisions.

1. Background

The geo-political spread of English has resulted in the birth of numerous varieties of Englishes, comprising traditionally ‘older’ Englishes, such as British and American English; ‘new’ varieties, such as Indian, Nigerian, Singapore and Malaysian English; English based Creoles (e.g. Hawaiian Pidgin, Tok Pisin, Jamaican Creole); and other emerging varieties of English. Given the diversity of Englishes around the world, it is inevitable that English is today spoken in a wide variety of accents. Thus, while it is possible to refer to a written standard for English, “in the context of global English, there is no longer in reality, any established standard for spoken English” (Pillai, Knowles & Zuraidah, forthcoming). This diversity challenges traditional reliance on ‘native-speaker’ models such as Received Pronunciation (RP), which is used by a minority of people in the UK (as can be evidenced from the variety of accents heard on the BBC today) and is therefore an artificial reference point. In relation to this, Levis (2005, p. 371) points out that reliance on such models can lead to a “skewed view of pronunciation that may not serve learners’ communicative needs”. Moreover, accents tend to be related to concepts of identity, and thus imposing one group’s accent on another raises its own set of issues:

One of the more anachronistic ideas about the teaching of English is that learners should adopt a native speaker English. But as English becomes more widely used as a global language, it will become expected that speakers will signal their nationality, and other
aspects of their identity, through English. Lack of a native-speaker accent will not be seen, therefore, as a sign of poor competence. (Graddol, 2006, p. 117)

Such perceptions, of course, lead to the question of how pronunciation can be taught without reference to any particular model. Any attempt to address this question has to be considered together with current trends in pronunciation teaching which lean towards exposure to different English accents and focus on intelligibility (Deterding, 2005, Jenkins, 2000). Further, research on the pronunciation features of different Englishes also point towards the establishment of local pronunciation models, as more detailed segmental and supra-segmental work is being done to reflect current patterns of use in particular regional and social contexts (e.g. Deterding, 2003; Grabe, Post, Nolan & Farrar, 2000; Low, Grabe & Nolan, 2000; Salbrina, 2006; Watson, Maclagan & Harrington, 2000; Watt & Tillotson, 2001; Yan & Vaseghi, 2003). As Zuraidah (2006, p. 4) rightly points out, the study of English “must take present day realities into account”.

In Malaysia, English is generally learnt either as a first, second or other language within a local context and thus, it is doubtful if exonormative models of pronunciation are achievable or even necessary. On the contrary, a local model of pronunciation is more useful and is more relevant for the expression of one’s own national identity. In relation to this need for a local pedagogic model of pronunciation, this paper discusses an ongoing attempt to provide such a model in Malaysia.

2. Research into Malaysian English Pronunciation

Early studies on Malaysian English pronunciation tended to describe it together with Singapore English (e.g. Brown, 1988; Platt & Weber, 1980; Tongue, 1974). Further, the features of Malaysian English pronunciation focused on colloquial and learner varieties of Malaysian English where predictably more obvious differences could be found. Pronunciation at the more acrolectal level of Malaysian English was assumed to be similar to RP (Baskaran, 2005; Brown, 1988). Most of the previous research on Malaysian English is also impressionistic in nature (Baskaran, 1987, 2004; Zuraidah, 1997). Such traditional methods sometimes resulted in stereotypical descriptions of Malaysian English pronunciation and as pointed out in Pillai, Knowles & Zuraidah (forthcoming) “may not be precise enough to capture significantly patterned variation in the data”.

In relation to vowels in Malaysian English, previous work has referred to the lack of length contrast in pairs of vowels, such as between the KIT and FLEECE, STRUT and PALM and LOT and NORTH vowels, and the monophthongisation of diphthongs (Baskaran, 1987; Platt and Weber, 1980; Wan Aslynn, 2005; Zuraidah, 1997) . However, there is a lack of empirical evidence to show the extent to which there is difference in quality between pairs of vowels. In order to capture more subtle phonetic variation, instrumental analysis of vowels is necessary, and it is this research gap that the Corpus of Malaysian English (COMEL) project is attempting to fill, with the ultimate aim of moving towards the construction of an empirical model of standard ME pronunciation. To this end, this paper
presents findings from an ongoing study from COMEL (Pillai, Knowles & Zuraidah, forthcoming).

3. Method

This study illustrates the phonetic quality of three vowels in the words *north*, *wind* and *sun*, representing a subset of the vowel system (i.e. front, central and back vowels). The subjects in this study were all female, and comprised five Malays, five Chinese and four Indians. They were considered acrolectal users of English in view of their qualifications and profession: all of whom had more than ten years’ experience of teaching English in Malaysia.

The subjects were recorded reading the *North Wind and the Sun* text using the Kay Elemetrics *Computerized Speech Lab (CSL) Model 4500*. Subsequently, *PRAAT*, a speech synthesis and analysis programme (Boersmal & Weenink, 2005), was used to transcribe the data and measure the first and second formants of the selected vowels. The three vowels examined in this study occurred in content words (*north* and *wind* and *sun*), and were all stressed and CVC position.

4. Findings

Earlier findings on the same set of data found no significant mean differences between the three vowels as produced by three ethnic groups (Malay, Chinese and Indians). A perceptual test of the respondents’ speech also indicated that ethnicity was not easily discernable by others (Pillai, Knowles & Zuraidah, forthcoming). These findings suggest that the acrolectal variety of English is not strongly marked for ethnicity, which is perhaps not surprising given that there is a tendency for pronunciation to become less socially or regionally marked the more acrolectal or standard the English being used is.

Figures 1-3 show the distribution for each vowel as produced by the respondents. The scatter plots for the vowels in the words *wind* and *sun* show a general concentration of the vowels in one part of the vowel space, whilst the scatter plot for *NORTH* shows a wider dispersion among the speakers.
Figure 1 Scatter plot for the vowel in *wind*

Figure 2 Scatter plot for the vowel in *sun*

Figure 3 Scatter Plot for the vowel in *north*
The means for each of the three vowels in Malaysian English are presented in Table 1, while Figure 4 illustrates the F1 and F2 of the three vowels produced by one of the respondents. Typical of a high front vowel, the vowel in wind had the lowest F1 and highest F2 values. As shown in Table 1 and illustrated in Figure 1, the F1 value increases the lower the vowel. Thus the vowel in wind is the highest vowel followed by north and sun. The F2 value, on the other hand, increases the more front the vowel, meaning that the vowel in wind is the most front vowel followed by sun and then north, which is most back of the three vowels.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>VOWEL IN:</th>
<th>F1 (Hz)</th>
<th>F2 (Hz)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>wind</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>2379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sun</td>
<td>818</td>
<td>1637</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>north</td>
<td>670</td>
<td>1098</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Mean F1 and F2 values

Figure 4 Spectrogram of wind, sun and north

The distribution of these three vowels in the vowel space can be seen more clearly in Figure 5, which presents the vowel plot for the vowels in wind, sun and north on a Bark scale. The positions of these three vowels appear to correspond with traditional textbook descriptions of these vowels as high front /ɪ/, low central /ə/ and mid back / ʊ/.
In order to ascertain how these vowels compared to other varieties of English, the mean formant values of the same vowels in British and American English were examined in relation to the ones reported in this study. Table 2 shows the mean formant values for /ɪ/, /ə/ and /ɜ/ in Malaysian, American (Kent & Read, 2002) and British English (Deterding, 1997), while Figure 6 presents the vowel plot for these vowels in the three varieties of English.

![Figure 5 Vowel plot for Malaysian English](image)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vowels</td>
<td>F1 (Hz)</td>
<td>F2 (Hz)</td>
<td>F1 (Hz)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KIT</td>
<td>440</td>
<td>2379</td>
<td>384</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STRUT</td>
<td>818</td>
<td>1637</td>
<td>914</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NORTH</td>
<td>670</td>
<td>1098</td>
<td>389</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Based on the MARSEC database (Roach, Knowles, Varadi & Arnfield (1993)

Table 2 Mean formant values for female speakers in American, British and Malaysian English
Figure 6 shows that the vowel in *wind* is in between American and British English. The vowel in *sun*, on the other hand, is more fronted than American and British English. The vowel in *north*, meanwhile, is more open than in British English. This vowel is also produced relatively short for a long vowel with a mean length of 135msec compared to an estimated 165msec for long vowels preceding voiceless consonants (Gimson & Cruttenden, 1994, p. 92).

As can be seen in Figure 6, the three vowels in Malaysian English are produced in a more compact space compared to British English. All three vowels produced differently from British English, with the vowel in *wind* closest to British English, and the one in *north* being the most different. As reported in Pillai, Knowles and Zuraidah (forthcoming), the latter appears to be more open and back compared to Malaysian English. Contrary to assumptions that Malaysian English is becoming more Americanised, these preliminary findings on the vowels in *wind* and *sun* do not lend support to such assumptions.
5. Pedagogic Implications

The ongoing research in the COMEL project, as illustrated in this study, supports the possibility of building a standard pronunciation model of Malaysian English. In general, we would expect such a model to be less ethnically and regionally marked. Such sociophonetic variation is already evident in the use of English on radio advertisements in Malaysia, where the main voice over seldom uses marked accent, whereas marked accents can be found more frequently in the other voices in advertisements (Pillai & Fauziah, 2006).

The necessity of a local model may be questioned by those who feel this may ‘lower’ the standards of English. On the contrary, a standard model of Malaysian pronunciation will serve as more realistic and practical model. With English being used more frequently by non-native speakers for regional (e.g. ASEAN) and international communication, emphasis should be placed more on awareness of and exposure to different varieties of English and on intelligibility rather than ‘correctness’ of pronunciation. In any case, models of pronunciation should not be prescriptive but serve as points of reference for users (Dalton and Seidlhofer, 1994). They should also, as Brown (1991) suggests, enable speakers to express their identity.

6. Conclusion

Further work on other vowels in acrolectal Malaysian English is currently being carried out. Once complete, the results can serve as a pedagogic model for the teaching of English in Malaysia. The instrumental study on vowels also complements similar work done in the regional (e.g. Deterding, 2003; Salbrina, 2006).

Acknowledgements

This work was supported in part by a short term research grant from the University of Malaya (F0361/2005C).

References


