The prosodic marking of information status in Malaysian English

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ABSTRACT: This paper investigates the prosodic strategies used by Malaysian speakers of English to mark the information status of new and given discourse elements. Thirty speakers of Malaysian English were recorded both when playing a game designed by Swerts, Krahmer, and Avesani (2002) to elicit semi-spontaneous speech and when reading out a 179-word story. Pitch accent placement in the semi-spontaneous speech was analysed auditorily, while six given and new word pairs in each reading passage were analysed acoustically in terms of the phonetic realisation of the pitch accent (following Atterer and Ladd 2004). In addition, 11 speakers of Malaysian English participated in a perception experiment testing their identification of new and given discourse elements in these recordings. Results show that Malaysian speakers of English do not mark given and new information with distinct pitch accent placement and that it is not possible to categorise these utterance elements unambiguously according to their information status. The acoustic analysis showed that given information is marked by a later pitch trough and a smaller rise than new information. No difference between the two, however, was found in terms of pitch peak alignment.

INTRODUCTION

This study is concerned with the prosodic strategies used by Malaysian speakers of English to mark the information status of new and given discourse elements. In particular, the placement of pitch accents and their phonetic realisation on new and given discourse elements are investigated in relation to their information status. Previous research on non-native English has shown that both the placement of pitch accent and the phonetic realisation of the pitch accent differ from native speaker productions, and that this can in some cases be traced back to the prosodic cues for marking information status in the speakers’ native language (e.g. Atterer and Ladd 2004; O’Brien and Gut 2010, Rasier, Caspers and van Heuven 2010). Since Malay is a language that has been described as having no stress and having high tones at the edge of the penultimate syllable (Mohd Don, Knowles and Yong 2008), Malaysian English speakers can be expected to use prosodic marking strategies different from those of native speakers of English. The following section describes the status of English in Malaysia. The third section gives an introduction to the concept of information status and presents an overview of how prosody is used to mark it. The fourth section reviews the marking of information status in non-native speech, which is followed by a description of our method and results.
ENGLISH IN MALAYSIA

The term Malaysian English (MalE) is often associated with the colloquial variety of English used in Malaysia, but it is really an umbrella term for the range of sub-varieties of English used across Malaysia (Gaudart 2000; Pillai, Mohd Don and Knowles 2011). As discussed in Pillai, Mohd Don, Knowles, and Tang (2010), the colonial variety of MalE has undergone considerable transformation linguistically, and these changes are evident even in the acrolectal variety of MalE as can be evidenced by listening to the local news in English on the national television channels (see also Tan and Low 2010). Changes in the linguistic features of MalE are to be expected as upon independence in 1957 Malay was given national language status and began replacing English as the language of public administration as provided for in Article 152 of the Federal Constitution and the National Language Act 1963/1967. Malay also began replacing English as the medium of instruction in national schools and public universities by the early 1970s although, to this day, Tamil and Chinese (Mandarin) medium at the primary level schools continue to exist. Today, English continues to be used in the business domain and is widely used in both print and social media. However, ‘the declining domains in which English is used amidst the dominance of Malay in public education and the public sector set against the multilingual canvas of Malaysia has contributed to the contracting numbers of English speakers, concentrating them mainly in urban areas and among higher socio-economic groups’ (Pillai 2012: 573).

Previous descriptions of MalE have tended to divide it into two or three broad categories. For instance, Platt and Weber (1980) divided MalE into two categories: Malaysian English Type 1 or ME1 (speakers from English medium schools) and Malaysian English Type 2 (those from Malay medium schools). The latter was seen as a second language variety with more marked linguistic features compared to the former variety. Baskaran (1994), on the other hand, presented MalE on a continuum with three identifiable categories: acrolectal, mesolectal and basilectal. Similar to Platt and Weber’s (1980) ME1, the acrolectal variety of MalE is seen to be similar to ‘Standard English’ (presumably British English), and because of this assumption, much of the research on MalE, including that on the pronunciation features of MalE, tends to focus on the colloquial variety. More recent studies, however, have begun looking at fluent speakers of MalE or focus on MalE being used in an acrolectal context (e.g. Govindan and Pillai 2009; Phoon and Maclagan 2009; Pillai et al. 2010). Despite differences in age, ethnicity and educational backgrounds, and the point in time at which these studies were conducted, similar features of pronunciation such as vowel qualities and durations have been found across these studies. This implies that there are prevailing features of MalE pronunciation which cut across ethnic and social groups, resulting in a recognisably Malaysian-accented English.

INFORMATION STATUS AND PROSODY

The term ‘information status’ describes the relationship between individual parts of an utterance and the discourse context in which they are produced, referring to both the participants’ attentional states and the status of the discourse content. As one of the first researchers in this field, Halliday (1967) distinguishes between new and given information in different parts of utterances. He defines given information as information that
the speaker treats as recoverable from the preceding discourse, whereas new information is presented as not recoverable or contrary to some predicted or stated alternative. Similarly, Chafe (1976) proposes that discourse is organised according to the beliefs of the speaker about the hearer’s present knowledge: the information status of a discourse element thus reflects what the speaker assumes to be present in the listener’s consciousness at the time of the utterance. He postulates three degrees of activation status of discourse elements: New information is activated in the listener’s mind from a previously inactive state. A given discourse element is already active in the listener’s mind at the time of the utterance. Accessible elements are activated from a previously semi-active state.

Many researchers have analysed the relationship between information status of discourse elements and their prosodic features. In some languages, new information is marked by a pitch accent, for example, a significant pitch height or pitch movement that is associated with a stressed syllable, while given information is likely to be deaccented (e.g. Brown 1983 for English; Terken 1984 for Dutch). Brown (1983), for example, investigated task-oriented sentences in English and found that speakers typically introduce brand new information with a pitch accent: these discourse elements had a pitch accent in 87 per cent of all cases. A pitch accent is also frequently (79% of the time) produced on inferable information, while only 4 per cent of given elements (evoked concepts, which had already been mentioned in the text) have pitch accents. By the same token, it appears that listeners tend to expect new information to be accented and given information to be deaccented. In an analysis of a story retold in Dutch, van Donzel and Koopmans-van Beinum (1995) found that 52 per cent of all new items in a discourse are perceived as accented, but only 13 per cent of all given items. Likewise, based on an investigation of the difference between given and accessible information in German reading passage style, Baumann and Hadelich (2003) report that listeners prefer given information to be deaccented and new information to be accented.

Not only pitch accent placement but also the type of pitch accent has been claimed to distinguish new from given information (e.g. Brazil, Coulthard and Johns 1980). However, previous studies have come up with contradictory findings. Pierrehumbert and Hirschberg (1990) as well as Brown (1983) report that in American English, the standard pitch accent on new information is the high (H*) pitch accent. Given information in English, when not deaccented, typically receives an L* (low) pitch accent. In combination with a high boundary tone (H-L%), by contrast, an H* can also be produced on given information. In German, new information is claimed to be produced with an H* pitch accent and given information to be deaccented (Baumann 2006). Schweitzer et al. (2009), however, found in their corpus of German reading passages that new information can be associated with either L*H (rising), H*L (falling) or H* (high) pitch accents (in this descending order). The same three types of pitch accents were also observed on given discourse elements. Rising pitch accents on new information in a prenuclear position in German were furthermore found by Atterer and Ladd (2004) and Féry and Kügler (2008) in sentences read aloud by experiment participants. In an experiment on the relationship between information status and type of pitch accent in German, Baumann and Hadelich (2003) found that both H* and HL* were acceptable to German listeners on new information.

In a series of experiments, cross-linguistic variability in the interplay between prosodic properties and information status has become evident. Swerts et al. (2002) found that within
noun phrases (NPs) that consisted of a noun and an adjective, Italian speakers, unlike Dutch speakers, do not mark given information by deaccentuation. In fact, the Italian speakers always produced a pitch accent on both words notwithstanding their information status. Nor is it possible for Italian listeners to determine the information status of words in these NPs, while Dutch listeners relied successfully on the accent differences in their reconstruction of previous utterances. Swerts et al. explain their findings by the different prosodic typology of the two languages, referring to Italian as a non-plastic and Dutch a plastic language (a terminology based on Vallduvi 1992). In the former type of languages, information status tends to be marked by word order, while in the latter it is marked by stress and intonation. In a later similar experiment, Swerts (2007) found that Romanian can also be classified as a non-plastic language.

Other studies have pointed out that some prosodic differences that exist between discourse elements of different information status might not be perceptually relevant. Pan, Huang and Huang (2005), for example, report for Taiwan Mandarin that NPs with new information are longer than NPs with given information. However, in a perception experiment, listeners were unable to identify given or new discourse elements in these recordings. Taken together these findings and the findings on the cross-linguistic variability in marking information status point to open research questions concerning English language use by second language learners. First, the observed cross-linguistic variability in marking information status gives rise to the prediction that the prosodic marking of information status might cause difficulties for second language learners of English, especially when they are native speakers of a non-plastic language. Second, it needs to be determined whether other prosodic means they might employ for this purpose are perceptually prominent.

THE PROSODIC MARKING OF INFORMATION STATUS

Various studies have already found that ‘non-native’ speakers of English employ different prosodic strategies than ‘native’ speakers to mark information status prosodically. It has been repeatedly observed that non-native speakers tend to give relatively equal prominence to all sentence elements, regardless of their information status in the discourse structure. This was found for Chinese learners of English (Juffs 1990), Austrian learners of English (Grosser 1997), Spanish learners of English (Ramirez Verdugo 2002) and the 46 learners of English with 17 different first language backgrounds that are contained in the LeaP corpus (Gut 2009). In general, learners display a tendency to locate the main pitch accent on the last word of an utterance notwithstanding its information status or word class (Ramirez Verdugo 2002; Gut 2009). These findings are not restricted to English as a target language. The French learners of Dutch investigated by Rasier et al. (2010) also did not deaccentuate given information in a native-like fashion. By the same token, they found it very difficult to detect intended accent patterns in their second language.

Further, non-native speakers did not produce native-like pitch accents in accordance with their information status. Low (2006), for example, found that the Singapore English speakers in her study appeared to ‘re-accent’ given information, where there was a step up in the average F0 on the given item (Low 2006). In contrast, the British English speakers in her study displayed a lowering of F0 on the given item. Differences in prosodic marking of given and new information between native and non-native speakers of English was also reported by Ramirez Verdugo (2002) who observed that while the English native
speakers in her corpus produced new information with a fall and given information with a low rise, the Spanish speakers of English did not mark the difference in information status intonationally and produced a fall in both cases. Equally, Wennerstrom (1994; 1998) compared the pitch height of new and given words in a text passage, a picture description task and short lectures delivered spontaneously and found that while the English native speakers produce higher pitch on new information than on given information, the non-native speakers do not make this distinction.

Previous research on learners of English has further shown that the phonetic realisation of rising pitch accents on new information differs from that of native English speakers in a sentence reading task. Atterer and Ladd (2004) report that while in native English the lowest point of pitch is aligned with the beginning of the first consonant in the onset of the stressed syllable and the pitch peak is reached at the end of the onset, German speakers of English align the lowest point in pitch with the beginning of the stressed vowel and reach the pitch peak in the following unstressed syllable, similar to the pattern observed in their native language German. Moreover, O’Brien and Gut (2010) showed that for both semi-spontaneous and read data the pitch trough occurs earlier and the pitch peak later in the German participants’ English compared to when they were using their native language German. By the same token, Trofimovich and Baker (2006) found that Korean speakers of English produced a delayed pitch peak on new information in English in a sentence repetition task, which again reflected the pitch alignment patterns of their first language. Different prosodic strategies of marking information status have also been reported for speakers of postcolonial varieties of English. In Nigerian English, for example, given information is rarely deaccented (Jowitt 1991). An overall preference for ‘end-stress’, that is, the placement of main pitch accent on the last word has been observed repeatedly (e.g. Jowitt 2000; Gut 2005). In contrast, Talla (2006) found that Cameroon speakers of English produce a clear prosodic distinction between new and given information in both conversational speech and reading passage style. In terms of the phonetic realisation, however, he showed that new information is made perceptually salient by an increase of loudness rather than a pitch accent.

To date, no studies have been carried out on prosodic marking of information status in Malaysian English or in Malay. However, previous related research on the Malaysian variety of Malay suggests that there is an absence of stress (Mohd Don 1996; Mohd Don et al. 2008), and this has also been noted in other varieties of Malay (e.g. Tadmor 1999; Gil 2003; 2006; van Heuven, Roosman and van Zanten 2008). Malay consequently should be categorised as a non-plastic language that does not use stress and intonation for marking information status. Speakers of Malaysian English are thus predicted not to prosodically mark information status in English. The two goals of this study are to investigate the strategies of Malaysian speakers of English for marking information status prosodically and to describe the phonetic realisation of the pitch accents. In particular, this study aims to address the following research questions:

1. How do Malaysian speakers of English mark new and given information? Do they employ deaccentuation on given information?
2. Do Malaysian speakers of English use systematic differences in the phonetic realisation of pitch accents to mark new and given information?

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METHOD

The study consisted of two parts: first, language production data was collected and analysed and subsequently, a perception experiment was carried out.

Participants

Language production data was collected from 30 speakers of Malaysian English, four male and 26 female university students. Their mean age was 20.7 years, ranging from 18 to 27 years. Ten students each were ethnically Malay, Chinese and Indian, with various first languages (Malay, Chinese dialects and Tamil). All of them speak Malay, having been through their secondary school education mainly in Malay, which is the official language of Malaysia. Six of the speakers reported having English as one of their first languages; the others started learning English in pre-school. Seventeen of the speakers use English as one of their home languages and rate their competence as high, while 13 of them rarely use English outside the university context and rate their competence as low.

Procedure and materials

The participants were first recorded playing two rounds of the game described in Swerts et al. (2002), which was designed to elicit semi-spontaneous speech. For this purpose, they sat at a table on either side of a screen that prevented them from seeing each other. For each round, each participant had a pile of four cards, another four cards laid out in a row and a sheet of paper with the numbers 1 to 8 arranged below each other. The laminated 4 × 4 cm cards contained hand-drawn pictures of a sun, a moon, a man and a woman in different colours. The four cards in the pile of one of the participants were identical to the four cards laid out for the other participant and vice versa. The participants’ task was to read out in turns what was shown on the card on top of the pile (e.g. ‘green moon’) and to place this card on the sheet of paper. The cards were ordered in such a way that either the adjective or the noun constituted new or given information. For example, to elicit an utterance with a given-new structure, the first participant would have a card with a green moon on his or her pile and the second participant would have a card with a green sun next. The game was explained to the participants prior to the recording, and they played two trial rounds with two cards on the pile and two cards laid out. The game yielded the three types of utterances in unequal numbers because not all participants played the cards in the intended order, while some played fewer than instructed and three utterances had to be excluded because the adjective and noun were produced as two separate utterances. In total, 96 utterances with a new-new structure (both adjective and noun constitute new information), 115 utterances with a given-new structure and 15 utterances with a new-given structure were produced by the participants.

Subsequently the participants were recorded reading out a 179-word story (see Appendix). They were given the story to read through before the recording and could take as much time as they wanted. The text contained six words that occurred at least twice. On their first occurrence, these were counted as new information. If they occurred again in the immediately following sentence, they constituted textually given information. For example, in the following sentences, the first occurrence of ‘Samantha’ and ‘Mandy’ were counted as new information, while ‘Samantha’ and ‘Mandy’ in the second sentence constitute given information:
Following Atterer and Ladd’s (2004) methodology, the test words contained a stressed syllable with a phonologically short vowel surrounded by sonorant consonants (nasals or /l/). In addition, they were preceded by one or two unstressed syllables and followed by one or two unstressed syllables. In total, six pairs or twelve syllables were analysed for each participant.

For the perception test, eleven Malaysians listened to 15 utterances that had been produced in the game previously described. Five of these utterances had the structure new-new (both the adjective and the noun constituted new information), five new-given (the last element, the noun, had been produced in the previous utterance), and another five had a given-new structure (the first element, the adjective, had been produced in the previous utterance). The participants were asked to indicate on the questionnaire they were given whether an utterance (e.g. ‘blue moon’) was a possible reply to, for example:

- (3) What is this? (implies a new-new structure)
- (4) Was it a blue sun? (implies a given-new structure)
- (5) Was it a green moon? (implies a new-given structure)

The recordings were played several times until all of the participants indicated that they were sure of their answer. In total, seven answers were discarded because a participant ticked two boxes.

**Analysis**

The recordings of the semi-spontaneous utterances elicited in the game were analysed auditorily by two independent raters. They separately marked which of the two words in the utterance carried the main stress, that is, received a pitch accent, or whether both words were equally stressed. The agreement between raters was 95.5 per cent. For the few cases of disagreement an agreement was found after some discussion.

The six pairs of test syllables in the story readings were first analysed in order to decide whether there was a rising pitch accent on the stressed syllable. The speakers of Malaysian English produced a rise in 76.1 per cent (137) instances on new information compared to 67.8 per cent (122) instances on given information. In the other cases either high (H*) or low (L*) level accents were produced. In total, the 117 word pairs for which a rise was produced on both elements were analysed. The rise was marked as L*H if it started on a stressed syllable, as was the case in Figure 1, and as LH* if it started before the stressed syllable. The phonetic realisation of the rise was measured following Atterer and Ladd (2004). For this, the beginning of the onset consonant, the beginning of the stressed vowel, the beginning of the following consonant and the beginning of the vowel in the following syllable were marked as C0, V0, C1 and V1 respectively. Moreover, the lowest point in pitch and the pitch peak of the rise were marked as L and H. These annotations are illustrated in Figure 1. All measurements were made in Praat Version 5.1.20 (Boersma and Weenink 2009). The alignment of L in relation to C0 (L-C0) and H in relation to V1 (H-V1) was calculated to examine pitch alignment in relation to segmental properties. In addition, the extent of the rise (Hz values of H – L) was calculated and converted into semitones.

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Figure 1. Annotations of the stressed syllable in ‘Mummy’
[Marking of the beginning of the onset consonant (C0), beginning of the stressed vowel (V0), beginning of
the following consonant (C1), beginning of the vowel in following syllable (V1), the pitch trough (L), the
pitch peak (H) and the tone (L*+H)]

Table 1. Accent placement in the word production data: game (raw values in parenthesis)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Adjective</th>
<th>Noun</th>
<th>Both</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>new-new (red moon–blue sun)</td>
<td>5% (5)</td>
<td>84% (81)</td>
<td>11% (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>given-new (red moon–red sun)</td>
<td>27% (31)</td>
<td>61.7% (71)</td>
<td>11.3% (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>new-given (red moon–blue moon)</td>
<td>6.7% (1)</td>
<td>93.3% (14)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RESULTS

Production data – game

Table 1 illustrates the placement of pitch accents on given and new information by the
Malaysian speakers of English in the three types of utterances described above. In utterances
where both adjective and noun were new (new-new condition), the noun receives a pitch
accent in 84 per cent of all cases. Variable deaccentuation of given information occurs:
When the adjective is given (given-new condition), it receives a pitch accent in 27 per cent
of all cases. When the noun is given as in the condition new-given, by contrast, it has a
pitch accent in 93.3 per cent of all cases. The results thus show that Malaysian speakers
of English put pitch accents most commonly on the last utterance element, namely the
noun, in all conditions irrespective of the information status of the utterance element. In
other words, information status is not marked by pitch accent placement by the Malaysian
English speakers.

Perception experiment

In order to test whether Malaysians are able to differentiate the information status of
discourse elements, 15 of the adjective+noun phrases that had been produced in the game
were played to raters as described above. Five of them had been produced in a new-new con-
dition, five in a new-given condition and five in a given-new condition. Table 2 illustrates
Table 2. Frequency of new-new, new-given and given-new utterances categorised as appropriate replies to questions triggering new-new, new-given and given-new replies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Utterance/categorisation</th>
<th>New-new</th>
<th>New-given</th>
<th>Given-new</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New-new</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New-given</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Given-new</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Average extent of rise (in semitones) and alignment of L in relation to C0 and H in relation to V1 on new and given information produced by the 30 Malaysian speakers of English (standard deviation values are provided in parenthesis)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Rise</th>
<th>L-CO</th>
<th>H-V1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New</td>
<td>3.3 st (sd 1.9)</td>
<td>28.3ms (sd 53.2)</td>
<td>67.03ms (sd 77.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Given</td>
<td>2.8 st* (sd 1.56)</td>
<td>46.9ms* (sd 52.3)</td>
<td>64.3ms (sd 66.7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

how often they were categorised as appropriate replies to questions triggering new-new, new-given and given-new replies. Utterances with a new-new information structure are categorised most often as appropriate replies to questions elicitng new-new replies. However, utterances with a new-given or a given-new information structure are predominantly categorised as such. The correct answers in the perception experiment were below chance at 51 out of 168. A chi-squared test showed a highly significant tendency ($\chi^2 = 26.185$, df = 8, $p < 0.0010$) of the listeners to classify utterances as new-new utterances. It thus appears that in both conditions the given elements in the utterance are not marked prosodically in a way that allows its unambiguous identification. Malaysian listeners thus cannot detect the information status of the two words in these adjective+noun phrases produced by Malaysian speakers of English.

Phonetic realisation of pitch accents on new and given information in the reading passage

Next, the rising pitch accents on the six words that appeared first as new and subsequently as given information in the story were analysed acoustically. Table 3 shows that there are some systematic differences between the phonetic realisation of pitch accents on new and given information. While there is no significant difference in the alignment of the pitch peak (H – V1) in new and given information, there is a significantly larger rise on new information (3.3 semitones vs. 2.8 semitones; $t = -3.315$; df = 113; $p = 0.0012$) compared to given information. In addition, the pitch trough (L) occurs later on given elements ($t = -3.48$; df = 113; $p = 0.0007$) than on new elements.

CONCLUSION

This study indicates that in Malaysian English, as in American and British English (e.g. Brown 1983; Pierrehumbert and Hirschberg 1990; Atterer and Ladd 2004), new information receives a pitch accent. In the majority of all cases this is the rising pitch accent L*+H; in some cases an H* is produced. Unlike in American and British English, however, given information is not systematically deaccentuated in Malaysian English, especially if it coincides with the last utterance element. In this latter respect Malaysian
English shows similarities to Nigerian English (e.g. Jowitt 1991) and to English produced by second language learners from China (Juffs 1990), Austria (Grosser 1997) and Spain (Ramirez Verdugo 2002).

The results from both the production and the perception data of the present study thus strongly suggest that information status is not marked systematically by pitch accent placement and deaccentuation in Malaysian English. Given the finding that nouns produced in the card game are accented regardless of their information status, it was not surprising that the majority of the adjective+noun pairs that were played to the participants in the perception experiment were categorised as replies to a broad focus question (new-new structure) irrespective of their real information status. Thus, even Malaysian listeners were not able to distinguish utterances with a new-new structure from utterances that contained a given element. As the material used in this study consisted of only adjective+noun utterances, no conclusions can be drawn with regard to whether it is the word class (noun) or the position in the utterance (last word) that appears to attract pitch accent placement in Malaysian English. By the same token, the experimental set-up does not allow any conclusion regarding the classification of MalE as a non-plastic language (Vallduvi 1992), as the speakers did not have the possibility of using either some syntactic means or pragmatic particles for the marking information status of discourse elements. Future research will have to explore this matter further.

Yet, the acoustic analysis of the phonetic realisation of pitch accents on new and given information in Malaysian English revealed some systematic differences between the two: new information is consistently marked by an earlier pitch trough and a larger rise. In other words, when an utterance element is first introduced as a topic in discourse, this is reflected in an earlier and steeper rising pitch movement. When the word occurs subsequently in the discourse, the rise is smaller and starts later. By systematically varying the phonetic realisation of pitch accents with information status, the Malaysian speakers in this study show similarities to the German learners of English investigated by O’Brien and Gut (2010), as these too varied the alignment of the pitch trough and the extent of the rise in different focus conditions. When more data of this nature becomes available it might be possible to determine whether this prosodic strategy is shared by various types of language learners and thus might constitute a universal strategy by English second language learners. It may be the case that variation in the alignment of the beginning of a rise and its duration constitutes a universal phonetic strategy of speakers for marking narrative structures. However, it would have to be established in future research whether these differences in the phonetic realisation of rising pitch accents on new and given information are also produced in other speaking styles in Malaysian English, especially spontaneous speech, or whether it should be considered a characteristic of reading passage style.

One feature in which the phonetic realisation of rises on new and given information did not differ in Malaysian English is the alignment of the pitch peak with the segmental material: in both cases the pitch peak occurred roughly 65 ms after the beginning of the vowel in the following unstressed syllable. The pitch peak on rising pitch accents thus occurs much later in Malaysian English than in British English, where it occurs, on average, 3 ms before the pitch peak (Atterer and Ladd 2004), but it is not clear whether this difference in phonetic realisation of the rising pitch movement is perceptually relevant to listeners. Trofimovich and Baker (2006) tested the relative importance of five prosodic properties of Korean English with respect to their effect on ratings of foreign accent and found that pitch alignment was the only prosodic feature that did not contribute to foreign
accent in second language learners’ speech. This might in turn be one reason why even quite proficient learners of English such as those participating in this and in O’Brien and Gut’s (2010) and Atterer and Ladd’s (2004) studies show distinct differences in pitch peak alignment from native English speakers. Whether these reflect cross-linguistic influence in Malaysian English as suggested by Trofimovich and Baker (2006) in their analysis of Korean speakers of English (see also Rasier et al. 2010 and Atterer and Ladd 2004) can however only be determined when more information about the phonetic realisation of information status in Malay becomes available.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTE

1. In order to make our analysis comparable with Swerts et al.’s (2002), we carried out an auditory rather than an acoustic analysis.

APPENDIX

Who had a nicer Christmas break?

Samantha went to Penang and Mandy went to London for Christmas. While Samantha went by minibus, Mandy had to fly. On her flight there was a four-hour delay, but Samantha’s minibus arrived with only minimal delay. Samantha’s hotel room was on the eleventh floor, while Mandy’s hotel didn’t even have eleven floors. Mandy was able to drink tap water but Samantha only drank mineral water from a bottle. The supply of mineral water was fairly limited though. Both girls sent postcards to their families at home and Mandy even rang her Mummy on the phone. Samantha thought that the minimum charge for a call to her Mummy was too high. Both enjoyed the beauty of the cities, admired palaces, parks, a lot of monuments and fountains and went shopping to their heart’s content. When coming back, Samantha said that she had taken a break at a minimal cost and with maximum value. However, Mandy said that she’d always prefer to go to London than to Penang for a break. What would you choose?

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