

# Applications of Discourse Intonation I: Malaysian & Singaporean English

## Christine Goh



### Introduction

English spoken in Malaysia and Singapore<sup>1</sup> has a number of phonological features that are different from British English. These include variations in word stress, rhythm and intonation. Although intonation of these two varieties of English has been examined, I am not aware of much work using Discourse Intonation, except that of Martin Hewings' on Malaysian English (See Hewings 1986).

'... it was with great excitement and some trepidation that I began my first study on Malaysian English'

My interest in discourse intonation started with reading David Brazil's 1985 monograph, "The Communicative Value of Intonation" and taking a course in the MA in Applied English Linguistics programme at the University of Birmingham. Later, it was with great excitement and some trepidation that I began my first study on Malaysian English. It involved planning an intervention study and eventually transcribing over 1,000 utterances by secondary school students - all with the help of Martin Hewings, my supervisor. That was twelve years ago. Since then I have also used the framework to describe English spoken in Singapore, where I now work.

I find Brazil's model (Brazil 1997) to be adequate for identifying the various sub-systems of prominence, tone, key and termination. There are, however, some special considerations to bear in mind when transcribing and interpreting the data. The first is the issue of whether some details in the data should be simplified so as to present them as closely as possible to assumptions in the model. The second is the issue of applying the communicative value of the various sub-systems to a variety of English where discourse may not be similarly organised and pragmatic intentions are often realised differently.

'...phonological features that are different from British English include ...variations in word stress, rhythm, and intonation.'

### Transcription of prominences

The data I work with sometimes do not match some assumptions in Brazil's model. One is that there is a maximum of two prominent syllables in a tone unit- the onset and the tonic. The other is that in a bi-syllabic word, only one syllable receives stress. The following examples may help illustrate my point.

A speaker says "In the garden" with 'garden' being the highlighted word in context. Because 'garden' is the prominent word and the first syllable 'GAR' clearly receives more stress than the two words in the proclitic segment, the tone unit could be transcribed as

(1) // in the GARden //

This transcription, however, implies that the speaker has adopted the standard word stress pattern for 'garden'- that is, the stress is on the first syllable of this bi-syllabic word.

This is, however, not the case. The second syllable, 'DEN', in fact receives more stress. It is also articulated on a higher but level pitch, i.e. high termination with level tone.

Many of the words in my data actually have two prominent syllables. They have stress properties – much like onset and tonic syllables in a tonic segment. The difference here is that the onset syllable is found in the same word as the tonic syllable, as in (2) or (3)

(2) // in the GAR DEN //

(3) // in the GAR ↑DEN //

Example 2 is a simplified version of the word stress pattern, but it does not show the step-up in pitch in the second syllable. Example 3 therefore represents the data more accurately.

A similar pattern is often found in polysyllabic words where vowel reduction in the unstressed syllable is absent. Stress is perceived on the first as well as the third syllable. The latter is particularly noticeable when it is at the end of a tone unit:

(4) // a COMpuTER //

Examples 2, 3 and 4 show that some speech data from Malaysian and Singapore English do not conform to the assumptions of stress patterns in Brazil's model. To present the analysis as close as possible to the conventions in model, the data would have to be transcribed in the following ways:

(5) // in the gar↑DEN //

(6) // in the garDEN //

(7) // a compu↑TER //

(8) // a compuTER //

Although the data seemed to have been 'cleaned up' this way, the representation of meaning selection within the context of interaction is not compromised in any significant way. What is *not* represented, however, is the way the words are actually articulated. Examples 5 & 6, for example, gave the impression that the word stress pattern is 'o O' (using a popular pedagogical convention), when it was in fact 'O O'.

### Transcription of tones

Identifying the tonic can be problematic at times when prominent words are realised as high level termination. When the falling tone is adopted, determining the place of the prominent syllable is easier:

(9) // ↘ THERE are many MORphemes//

(10) // ↘ THERE are many MORPHEMES //

Another issue related to transcription is the number of prominences found within each tone unit. Brazil's model assumes a maximum of two prominences in a tone unit. Long tone units in Malaysian and Singapore English data often showed three or more:

(11) // ↘ WHICH were DRAWN on CAVE WALLS //.

Long tone units are often the outcome of fast speech, partly due to the substitution of long vowels with short ones, as in the case of the vowel in 'drawn' and 'walls'. The perception of long tone units is also due to the frequent adoption of level tone. The absence of a perceptible fall or rise often makes it difficult to identify tone unit boundaries. The tendency for speakers to place a prominence on the last syllable of a tone unit also means that long enclitic segments are rare in Malaysian and Singapore English.

### Interpretation

Another methodological consideration is the appropriateness of applying the communi-

'The tendency for speakers to place prominence on the last syllable of a tone unit also means that long enclitic segments are rare in Malaysian and Singapore English.'

cative value system associated with the various sub-systems in Brazil's model to non-British varieties of English. As Malaysian English and Singapore English are used quite extensively in intra-national communication, these varieties have developed their own systems of organising discourse and expressing pragmatic intentions. In other words, although some intonation features may be similar to those in British English, their communicative value may not always be the same. The example of the level tone is illustrative of the variation described here.

'Speakers may adopt the level tone even when there is direct orientation to the message and the listeners.'

In Brazil's model, level tone typically occurs in segments of speech where speakers are gathering their thoughts and listing. More importantly, it is common in routine performance or semi-ritualised practice characterised by oblique orientation. While the former is true also of Malaysian and Singaporean speakers, the latter certainly is not. The level tone is often adopted even when they are directly oriented to the message and the listeners. In other words, the level tone often communicates the specific proclaiming and referring functions normally associated with the fall and fall-rise tones in Brazil's model. The following two examples are taken from radio call-in programmes where the speakers were actively communicating with each other.

(12) // → I got a suggesTION // → for THIS SCRAMBLED WALK//

(13) // → so I would classify YOU // → as the TRUE // → SMART // ↘ CONSUMER //

Another example of variations in communicative value is prominence assignment. Prominences, particularly those which are found at the end of a complete stretch of speech, do not always indicate meaning selection. Nevertheless, they serve specific pragmatic functions, such as reiterating important ideas, signalling the end of an utterance or a turn and expressing strong contrastive responses.

(14) // → it's NOT just ANY apart<sup>↑</sup>MENT // ↗ you KNOW //

// → it's a <sup>↑</sup>HIGH-↑CLASS // ↘ apart<sup>↑</sup>MENT //

(15) // ↘ it is NOT ONLY the asSIGNments// ↘ you have to MARK //

// → but ALso// ↘ the NUMBER of assignments // ↘ you have to MARK//

It is also worth noting that fall-rise (a less 'aggressive' form of the referring tone in Brazil's model) is uncommon in Malaysian and Singapore English. On the other hand, rising tone, the marked dominant tone, is extremely common, but without the implications assumed in Brazil's model.

(16) // ↗ HOW are YOU //

## Two approaches

In interpreting my data, I select from two approaches. The first is a prescriptive approach which analyses how intonation choices in these two varieties of English differ from the British model. The purpose is to identify potential areas of misunderstanding between speakers using a British model of pronunciation and local speakers. The other approach is a descriptive one which interprets the data within local sociolinguistic contexts. It explores Malaysian and Singapore English intonation from a pragmatic perspective. It is easy to dismiss the first approach in preference for the second - especially in view of the often 'politically-sensitive' milieu within which linguists work. Nevertheless, I see the two approaches as complementary, having different roles to play.

## In conclusion

As a summary, Brazil's model is adequate for describing Malaysian and Singapore

English. For a more faithful representation of some intonation patterns, however, certain modifications to the assumptions and transcription conventions are needed. In addition, when interpreting the data, the researcher has to consider whether to use a prescriptive or a descriptive approach. This is because the communicative value of some aspects of Malaysian/Singapore English intonation may not always conform to the assumptions in Brazil's model.

### Footnote

<sup>1</sup> The two countries share many historical and demographical similarities. These have contributed to many common phonological features in the spoken English of the people. While other speakers of English may not understand the localized varieties of English, there is little or no problem of mutual intelligibility among Malaysians and Singaporeans.

### Biographical Note

Christine Goh teaches at the National Institute of Education of Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. She obtained her MA from the University of Birmingham and her PhD from the University of Lancaster.

### References

- Brazil, D. 1997. *The Communicative Value of Intonation in English*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. (First published in 1985 as Discourse Analysis Monograph No. 8, Bleak House Books and English Language Research, University of Birmingham).
- Goh, C. (1994). Exploring the teaching of discourse intonation. *RELC Journal*. Vol. 25:1, pp. 77 - 98.
- Goh, C. (1998). The level tone in Singapore English. *English Today*. Vol.14:1, pp. 50-53
- Goh, C. (2000). A discourse approach to the description of intonation in Singapore English. In A. Brown, D. Deterding and Low E.L. (eds.), *The English Language in Singapore: Research on Pronunciation*. Singapore Association for Applied Linguistics, pp. 35-45.
- Hewings, M. (1986) Problems of intonation in classroom interaction. *Guidelines*, Vol.2:1, pp.45-51

