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The level tone in Singapore English

An examination of a distinctive intonation pattern in the English of Singapore

VISITORS to Singapore are often intrigued and sometimes bewildered by the way English is spoken here. As soon as they arrive at the airport, or the train station, and make it to the front of the taxi-queue, they will be greeted by one of the ubiquitous Singapore cabbies. For people who have never heard English being spoken in Singapore, a ride into the city with a chatty driver is perhaps the best way to be introduced to one of the most common varieties of spoken English on the island. All through their days in Singapore, visitors can hear English spoken by people they come into contact with, such as professional and business associates, shop keepers in Orchard Road, school children on the bus, and TV and radio presenters. Some of these Singaporeans have speech patterns that visitors from English-speaking countries can identify with, but there are also other features that are distinctly local.

Singapore English

Before continuing, it is important to define what is meant by "Singapore English". I use this term here to include both Singapore Colloquial English (Gupta, 1994) and the formal variety that contains features similar to those of educated speakers all over the world. No matter what the variety of spoken English may be, there is one feature of Singapore English that is usually found, albeit in varying degrees, across the whole fascinating myriad of English

spoken here. This feature is the *level tone* in the intonation of speakers of Singapore English. The presence of the level tone, especially when it combines with other intonation features, is one of the characteristics of Singapore English.

My observations are based on the findings of a study I carried out among 400 Singapore graduates (Goh, 1995) as well as through introspection about the English I hear every day. Examples in this article are transcribed in the conventions of Brazil (1997). In this model, a *tone unit* (a word or group of words that forms

→
 // LANGuage // ↘
 ↓ LEARNing //

Here, the speaker begins on a mid key or high key on the prominent syllable of the first word (LANG) and maintains the pitch throughout the rest of that word. Immediately after that the speaker moves to a low key for the second word in the compound phrase and selects a falling or rising tone at the prominent syllable. Other examples are:

→
 // PICture // ↘
 ↓ WRITing //

→
 // BALLroom // ↘
 ↓ DANcing //

Interestingly, this feature is found almost exclusively in the speech of highly proficient speakers using a formal variety of English that is similar to British or American English. These speakers are also the ones who are most likely to be aware of the stress patterns of compound words and phrases.

Reasons for level tone

A possible reason for the frequent use of the level tone in Singapore English is the transfer of the tone from the Chinese languages, which are spoken by about three-quarters of the population. I have observed many speakers of Chinese languages using this tone when they pause to think in the middle of a sentence, typically with expressions such as:

→ →
 //MMM// //UH //

It is likely that the same level tone is automatically adopted even on English words. A related behaviour is the frequent mixing of words from different languages in Singapore. Whenever someone includes English words (or code-mixes) when speaking mainly in Chinese, it is very common for each syllable of the English words to be stressed and said in the level tone. Nevertheless, this feature is common mainly in countries like Malaysia and Singapore. Speakers of Chinese from other regions, e.g. Hong Kong speakers, tend to retain the stress pattern and intonation of English words when code-mixing.

The patterns of level tone in Singapore English described in this article were also common

among speakers of Chinese origin in a study I made of Malaysian speakers of English (Goh, 1994). Some of these patterns, however, are not limited to Chinese speakers of English. They are also found in the speech of Malay and Indian speakers of English.

Effects of level tone

Many scholars have recognized an emergence of syllable-timed varieties of English, and Singapore English appears to be evolving in this way (Tay, 1982). The “syllable-timed” phenomenon, where every syllable appears to be stressed more or less equally, has been said to be largely due to a transfer of speech rhythm from syllable-timed first languages, such as the Chinese languages (Platt, Weber & Ho, 1984). I would like to suggest that the level tone is a major contributing factor in the syllable-timed effect in Singapore English. Consider these examples:

→
 // he TOLD me //

↘ →
 // YES //she TALKED to SOMEone //

In the first example, the speaker highlights the word “told” in the first tone unit. The pitch adopted on the tonic syllable moves over to the word “me” and is maintained there. This gives the distinct impression that “me” is stressed almost equally as the word “told”. If the speaker had chosen the falling tone instead, then the word “me” would not be so distinctly heard, as it would be said at a lower pitch. The same effect is felt in the second example. In the prominent word “someone”, the pitch begun on the first syllable /SOME/ is maintained over the second syllable /ONE/. The level tone when adopted over a number of adjoining units in longer discourse would contribute to the perception of a rhythm that is more syllable-timed. For example:

//he TOLD me// NOT to ASK her//

The level tone is undoubtedly a key feature of Singapore English intonation. However, it is when it combines with other salient features of Singapore English, such as stressing weak syllables in prominent words and stressing final words of sentences (Goh, 1995) that Singapore English, especially the colloquial version, develops its distinctive accent.

When a speaker stresses the final word of a

sentence and uses the level tone at the same time, the resulting intonation is something quite unique. Consider an example I overheard in our university bookshop, where two students were discussing which plastic folder to get from the shelf:

A: I thought you wanted a black one?

B: //NO// a BLUE // ONE //

Student B stressed the fact that it was the "blue" folder she wanted by making that word louder and by prolonging the vowel /u:/. However, she went on to stress the final word "one" as well.

The highlighting of final words spoken in the level tone becomes especially noticeable with pronouns like "it" occupying the final position of a sentence. This feature occurs very frequently in colloquial speech. Some very common examples are:

// i LIKE IT//
// STOP IT//
// i CAN'T HELP IT//
// LEAVE IT //

Conclusion

Although there are many varieties of spoken English in Singapore, there is little chance of Singaporeans misunderstanding one another. There are good reasons for this. Most people in Singapore are able to speak more than one variety of English. Even Singaporeans who habitually speak a more formal variety of English in Singapore are almost certainly able to understand the colloquial one. Unfortunately, for foreigners who are not exposed to this informal variety the burden is often on them to make sense of what is being said. So how does this affect international communication?

There will be some comprehension problems for people who are used to an intonation system where speakers express their meaning through tone selection. They might find it difficult to fully appreciate the intended meaning of utterances in Singapore English because in

many instances the level tone has replaced the falling and rising tones. Another comprehension problem could be in recognizing important information. Someone who is used to a stress-timed variety of English will expect key words to be made more prominent than the less important ones. Speakers of Singapore English, however, do not always make key words prominent by weakening the surrounding words. Moreover, there is the tendency to stress the final words in sentences even though this does not constitute any meaning selection.

If non-Singapore English speakers experience comprehension problems because of intonation, it is likely to be temporary. Through frequent exposure and by taking a more active role in listening, many non-Singapore English speakers eventually become accustomed to the new "tune" and learn to enjoy the kaleidoscope of Singapore English in all its fascinating patterns and movements. **ET**

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