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# **DISCOURSE INTONATION OF ENGLISH IN MALAYSIA AND SINGAPORE: IMPLICATIONS FOR WIDER COMMUNICATION AND TEACHING**

## **Abstract**

The teaching of pronunciation has for a long time concentrated on segmental features. Increasingly, however, writers and researchers have called for greater emphasis to be placed on the teaching of suprasegmentals because of their influence on intelligibility. The purpose of this article is to reiterate that call for the teaching of English prosody, particularly intonation, to learners of English. This is done through an examination of discourse intonation features of English spoken in Malaysia and Singapore. Using the discourse intonation model by David Brazil (Brazil, Coulthard & Johns 1980, Brazil 1997) as a theoretical framework, this article describes seven common intonation features and discusses how these features may affect communication with English speakers from other countries. It also examines implications for teaching, with particular reference to national English language programmes. Although this discussion is based on Malaysia and Singapore, it may be of interest to other readers in Southeast Asia, where the acquisition of good English pronunciation has become increasingly important in national curricula.

## **Introduction**

Although politically, Malaysia and Singapore have been two separate countries for the last three decades or more, English that is spoken in both countries still share many similar characteristics as a result of historical and geographical factors. While English speakers from other countries may sometimes have difficulty understanding some aspects of English spoken in these two countries, Malaysians and Singaporeans seldom have a problem understanding one another's English.

This article examines some intonation features of English spoken in Malaysia (MyE) and Singapore (SgE) and suggests reasons for them<sup>1</sup>. As a framework for describing MyE and SgE intonation features, the discourse intonation model by David Brazil is used (Brazil, Coulthard and Jones 1980,

Brazil 1997). A discourse intonation model examines intonation choices in the context in which speech is produced, and therefore provides insights into the organization of discourse and the realizations of communicative functions. By examining MyE and SgE intonation through a discourse approach, we can gain useful insights into how speakers express communicative intentions through prosodic variations. More importantly, this can help us understand ways in which choices and decisions in MyE and SgE intonation might differ from those of other speakers of English.

The first part of the article describes seven features of intonation that are quite typical of both MyE and SgE, particularly of informal or colloquial speech. These features are highlighted here because they are different from Brazil's model of discourse intonation, which is based on the intonation of Southern British English (sBE). As sBE has traditionally been a model for pronunciation teaching in Malaysia and Singapore, information about these variations can have implications for language curricula and syllabus specifications. These implications, as well as those for effective communication, are discussed in the second part of the article. In addition, specific teaching points will be identified and practical suggestions on how intonation teaching can be given greater emphasis will be offered.

### **Describing Intonation**

Intonation is often defined as the variation of pitch over an utterance, or as a recognizable 'tune' in speech. This effect results from speakers doing a number of things: stressing certain words more than others, and varying the pitch of their voices over selected words in different parts of an utterance.

Brazil's theory of intonation is concerned with the way information in an utterance is organised and the way it is presented as given or new. It is based on the principle that intonational choices depend solely on speakers' perception of the changing context of interaction between them and their interlocutors. This context of interaction is referred to a 'conversational setting', and one feature of this setting is the state of understanding that exists between speakers and listeners. Brazil's approach to intonation describes the realizations of discourse at a level beyond lexico-grammatical choices. It is a description at the level of interaction:

“...intonation choices carry information about the structure of interaction, the relationship between and the discourse function of individual utterances, the interactional ‘givenness’ and

‘newness’ of information and the state of convergence and divergence of the participants.” (Brazil, Coulthard & Johns: 1980:11)

Brazil’s model identifies four significant intonation sub-systems: prominence, tone, key and termination. Appendix 1 provides an outline of each of its sub-systems. For a full account of the discourse intonation model, see Brazil et. al 1980 and Brazil 1997. This article focuses on prominence and tones.

The data on MyE and SgE came from several sources: upper secondary school students, teacher trainees, on-air interviews and conversations, and informal exchanges and presentations (see Goh 1994, 1995, 2000). Examples from the data will be used to illustrate characteristics of prominence and tone.

## Prominence

Prominence is the highlighting of a word in context. The purpose of assigning prominence is to indicate that certain words are more important than others. It signals to the listeners that these words have been selected from a range of possibilities and should be paid attention to. Speakers indicate prominence by making the selected word louder, longer, or slightly higher or lower in pitch than surrounding words. The listener can normally recognise it as being in some sense more emphatic than others.

Whereas sBE speakers assign prominence on words that indicate meaning choice (*This word is important because I have chosen it from among other possible selections*), MyE and SgE speakers place prominence on both selective and non-selective words. This is due to the tendency of MyE and SgE speakers to assign prominence to words at the end of a tone unit or phrase, especially in sentence-final position (For SgE, see Deterding 1994 and Low 1998 on the lack of deaccenting and final word stress respectively). The following examples illustrate this:

- 1) A: //i didn’t KNOW//you LIKED CLASSICAL music//  
B: //i’ve ALWAYS LIKED// CLASSICAL MUSIC// (MyE)
- 2) //it is NOT ONLY the asSIGNments// you have to MARK//  
but ALso// the NUMber of assignments// you have to  
MARK// (SgE)

In 1, Speaker B appropriately highlighted ‘always liked’ as a way of modifying Speaker A’s knowledge. However, B also goes on to assign prominence to the phrase ‘classical music’, which is an item already known from the context of interaction. The same type of intonation realization is found in 2, where the word ‘mark’ in the final tone unit is made prominent. The speaker here is making a point about the workload teachers have. Highlighting the word at the end of the utterance appears to be her way of reiterating an important point.

Although in most cases, it is the content words that are highlighted, certain non-selective function or grammar words are also frequently made prominent in MyE and SgE. Words in the data include ‘one’ and ‘it’, as the following examples show:

- 3) //NOT this ONE// that SMALL ONE// (MyE)  
4) //WHERE did you FIND IT// (SgE)

It appears that the assigning of prominence in MyE and SgE is motivated by reasons other than presenting matter as new. Reiterating a point or signalling the end of what they have to say for the moment are some possible explanations for late prominence placements.

MyE and SgE speakers also have a tendency to assign prominence to multiple words in long tone units. Brazil’s sBE model postulates a maximum of two prominent words in one tone unit under normal circumstances. In MyE and SgE, however, it is quite common to find long tone units with three or even four prominent words, as example 5 shows. A likely reason for this is that speakers who produced this feature were generally fluent and were therefore often able to speak without many hesitations thus giving rise to long tone units.

- 5) // but you have JUST BOUGHT a NEW DRESS// (MyE)  
6) //WHICH were DRAWN on CAVE WALLS// (SgE)

On the other hand, sometimes what would normally be a unit of information or sense group is realized through short tone units. In such situations, the speakers seem to be gathering their thoughts or searching for the correct words to use.

- 7) //in the EVENING//i have to DO//SOME of my// SCHOOL  
reVIsion// (MyE)

- 8) //beCAUSE// i WON't be aBLE// to SEE// the oTHER//  
 TRAffic LIGHT// (SgE)

**Prominence: summary**

Prominence is an important intonation feature in MyE and SgE. However, it does not always have the same communicative value as prominence does in sBE, which is to show selection from a range of meaningful choices. In MyE and SgE, non-selective words are often made prominent. Besides highlighting key information, prominence also indicates the end of one unit of information, a reiterated point, and the end of a turn or an utterance. (The effects of inaccurate word stress on prominence has not been discussed here. See Goh 1994, 2000 and Low & Grabe 1999 for discussions on this issue.)

**Tone**

Tone is a major pitch movement. This movement typically occurs on the last prominent word in a tone unit and over the tonic syllable. Tone choice is “not dependent on linguistic features of the message, but rather on the speaker’s assessment of the relationship between the message and the audience” (Brazil et. al. 1980:18). It therefore carries significant communicative value. In Brazil’s model there are five tone choices: falling (Ê) fall-rise (%c) rise-fall ( §Ê) rising (%c) level (‡). All five tones are present in MyE and SgE, but three tones occur more frequently. These are falling, rising and level tones.

One of the most outstanding features of tone in MyE and SgE is the high frequency of the level tone (‡). Unlike the proclaiming and referring tones, the level tone is often considered a feature that contributes very little to the expression of meaning. It is normally present when speakers are summarising points previously raised, and is considered a feature of routine and ritual operations (Halliday 1970), such as train announcements, where speakers adopt an ‘oblique orientation’ to the message (Brazil 1997). The level tone in MyE and SgE is closely related to short tone units and is typically present under four types of circumstance: when the information is part of a whole and temporarily incomplete (9), at the end of a sentence (10), in the first word of a compound phrase (11), and when the speaker pauses to search for words (12).

- 9) //‡this was the EARLIest WAY//‡the PEOple HAD  
 //Êfor communCAting// (SgE)  
 10) //‡i’m visiting HER on SUNday// (MyE)  
 11) //‡LANGUage//ÊLEARNing// (SgE)

- 12) //‡i ALso//‡BOUGHT//‡many SHOES//Êand  
CLOTHES// (MyE)

The functions of the level tone in MyE and SgE, appear to be more varied than those identified in sBE (see Goh 1994 and 1998 for MyE and SgE respectively).

Another tone that is frequently present is the falling tone (Ê). The falling tone in Brazil's model is for proclaiming new content matter. In MyE and SgE, however, the falling tone is used for both new and old information. It is also the most frequently occurring tone at the end of statements.

- 13) X: //ÊWHERE did you go YESTerday//  
 Y: //Êi WENT to the CInema//ÊYESTerday// (MyE)
- 14) //Êit is NOT ONLY the asSIGNments//Ê you have to  
MARK//‡ but ALso//Ê the NUMber of assignments  
 //Ê you have to MARK// (SgE)

In 13, speaker Y adopted the falling tone on the word 'yesterday' even though it is a repetition of what X has said. The speaker in 14 has also done the same with a word 'mark' she repeated. While it is not unusual in sBE for old information to be highlighted again, speakers would typically use one of the referring tones (%o or %e) as a way of showing that the listener already knows about what is being said. Both speakers in the MyE and SgE examples, however, have chosen to use the falling tone, which is a tone for proclaiming something new. Although it has been suggested that a fall tone at the end of an utterance indicates the end of a turn (Deterding 1994), such an intonation realisation may have functions beyond turn-taking. It appears that MyE and SgE speakers use the proclaiming tone in order to reiterate an important piece of information, particularly in formal situations, where the use of informal discourse particles, such as 'lah' (Platt & Ho 1989), unacceptable.

Another characteristic worth mentioning is the high frequency of rise tone (%e) in MyE and SgE. It usually indicates incompleteness of information (15 and 16) and is frequently used with questions (16-18).

- 15) //%eTHIS WAY//%e of communiCAtion// Ê was SLOW and  
Difficult// (SgE)
- 16) //%eWHAT FILM//%eshall WE SEE// (MyE)
- 17) //%eHOW are YOU// (SgE & MyE)
- 18) //%eWHERE is IT// (SgE & MyE)

In sBE, the fall-rise ( $\%o$ ) is the preferred referring tone, while the rise ( $\%o$ ), is considered marked as it often implies dominance or even aggressiveness. Interestingly, in MyE and SgE, the rise tone is more common and does not seem to have the same pragmatic implications as sBE. The fall-rise tone, on the other hand, is infrequently adopted. Based on my data, some speakers do not use it at all.

### ***Tones: summary***

The three most frequent tones in MyE and SgE are falling, rising and level. They do not always have the same discourse functions as in Brazil's sBE model and their occurrence is not always consistent. The falling tone is used both to proclaim new information as well as to mark the end of utterances and repeat an important point. The level tone is adopted when there are incompleteness and hesitations, but is also common at the end of utterances. The rising tone also indicates incompleteness, and it is closely linked to all question forms. Pitch movements are distinctly in sentence-final positions due to the tendency of MyE and SgE speakers to make the last words and the last syllable in sentences prominent.

### **Implications for Communication and Teaching**

Suprasegmental features have a significant effect on intelligibility (Pennington & Richards 1986; Pennington 1989; Morley 1987, 1991; Derwing, Munro & Wiebe 1998) and therefore deserve an important place in any language curriculum. Both the national English language curricula in Malaysia and Singapore have included correct and meaningful intonation as an important outcome of speaking skills (Ministry of Education of Malaysia 1987. Ministry of Education of Singapore 2001). In spite of this, most teachers would agree that intonation is ignored in day-to-day teaching. The notion of intonation only becomes important during oral examinations when students have to read aloud a passage and are graded for their intonation, among other things. Even then, good intonation is usually taken to mean speaking with expressiveness, or not reading in a monotonous voice. Being "expressive" when reading aloud, however, is not necessarily the same as reading with appropriate intonation. So how should we define appropriate intonation?

To understand what appropriate intonation is, we should consider the role intonation plays in oral communication. In other words, intonation only has meaning when it is used in context. Based on Brazil's framework of discourse intonation, appropriate intonation is the use of intonation features, such as prominence and tones, to reflect an understanding of the unfolding context of

interaction. More specifically, it shows an awareness of the state of convergence (what's old) and divergence (what's new) of the participants in the interaction. Conversely, inappropriate intonation is that combination of prominence and tones which is not sensitive or responsive to the context. According to Brazil's framework, the examples given in this paper may be said to be instances of intonation that are either marked or inappropriate.

Such differences in intonation choices and realizations have contributed to the unique phonological characteristics of MyE and SgE. It has been argued that these 'new tunes' should not be seen as incorrect (Platt, Weber & Ho 1984). Therefore, is it really necessary for language learners to learn 'correct' intonation, especially when that notion of correctness is based on another variety of English? It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the sociolinguistic implications. From the perspective of language learning and communication, however, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence to show that some features of MyE and SgE intonation have created communication problems with other speakers of English. Nevertheless, it is still unclear the extent to which specific intonation characteristics in MyE and SgE contribute to communication problems. This is an area that merits further investigation. However, in view of the increasing need for many MyE and SgE speakers to communicate with people from other countries, it is vital that language curricula include a systematic teaching of intonation based on a variety of English that is internationally accepted.

In this respect, Brazil's discourse intonation model is a valuable framework not only for describing intonation but also for teaching intonation. According to this model, intonation choices are based on a closed set of meaningful oppositions which contribute to discourse meaning. This principle contributes greatly to the teachability of intonation because it offers learnable and generalisable ways of communicating meaning and organising discourse. In addition, the simple notation system of Brazil's model also means that learners can quickly learn to recognise and use these symbols. A systematic comparison of six models of intonation in terms of teachability, discourse intention and information structure, has shown Brazil's model of discourse intonation to be the most appropriate theoretical framework for classroom teaching (Yamato, 2000).

To make the learning of intonation focused and meaningful, it is necessary to consider the effects MyE and SgE intonation characteristics might have on communication. Figure 1 presents a summary of these unique intonation features based on the preliminary findings reported earlier. It also outlines

some possible effects on communication with people who do not speak MyE and SgE, and identifies specific teaching points.

**Figure 1 Key intonation features of MyE and SgE and implications for wider communication and teaching**

Intonation features	Possible effects on communication	Teaching points
Prominent words do not indicate meaning selection	Listeners are distracted from the speakers' real purpose.	The concepts of prominence and selectivity
Late or sentence-final prominence placement	Key information is not highlighted adequately.	- The concepts of prominence and selectivity - Pitch movements over enclitic segments (tails)
Multiple prominent words in long tone units	- Key information, surrounded by other 'prominent' words, loses its impact. - Listeners find it difficult to process long sense groups with many highlighted words.	- The concepts of prominence, selectivity and sense groups - Pausing between sense groups
Short tone units	Listeners lose interest or become distracted because of speakers' frequent hesitations.	-The concept of sense groups -Forward planning of speech
Frequent use of level tone	- Discourse is not organized efficiently because key information is not communicated adequately through proclaiming and referring tones -Social roles of intonation are not exploited for enhancing interaction	-The communicative value of proclaiming and referring tones. - The role of the four tones (↘ ↗ ↗ ↘) -Pitch movements over prominent syllables and enclitic segments (tails)
The falling tone for 'proclaiming' given information	-Listeners are confused by the speaker's decision to proclaim shared knowledge as new. - Listener may not recognise new information when it is actually introduced.	-The role of referring tones - The concepts of selectivity, givenness and newness - Rising and fall-rise pitch movements
Frequent use of rising tone as the referring tone	-Listeners get the impression that the speaker is trying to dominate the interaction or even being rude.	-The social and cultural connotations of rising tone in contexts where the fall-rise might be more appropriate. - Pitch movement for fall-rise tone over syllables and enclitic segments (tails)

From figure 1, instructional objectives for intonation teaching could be further summarised as follows:

- Understand the role of intonation in organising discourse
- Understand the communicative value of prominence and tone
- Perceive prominence correctly
- Assign prominence appropriately
- Perceive and produce tone movements correctly
- Use proclaiming and referring tones appropriately

In order for intonation to be learnt more effectively, it is recommended that separate lessons be set aside. In these lessons, each of the sub-systems should be dealt with individually before they are combined. In addition to helping learners achieve the above objectives, it is important that students practise some related areas of speech, namely, word stress, rhythm and weak forms. These are generally considered to be important groundwork for the teaching of intonation (Kenworthy 1987, Vaughan-Rees 1990).

Using Brazil's discourse model in teaching means that learners practise intonation in a communicative context. One way of giving students opportunities to experiment with meaningful intonation choices is through the use of short exchanges built around familiar contexts. For teaching techniques based on Brazil's framework, see Bradford 1988, Brazil 1994 and Hewings 1993.

## **Conclusion**

This article described intonation features of English spoken in Malaysia and Singapore which differ from Southern British English. These are preliminary findings but there are strong indications that features such as prominence and tone do not have the same phonological realizations and communicative value as they do in British English. A likely reason for this difference is that many MyE and SgE speakers are not aware of the roles these intonation features play. Few have had the opportunity to learn about the English intonation system the way they learnt the phonetic system. This is largely due to the fact that teachers have hitherto received little guidance from language curricula on teaching intonation. For teaching the sounds of the English language, they have a definite framework (i.e. the phonetic alphabet) with which to teach vowels and consonants. However, when it comes to teaching intonation, they are often left to their own devices. Due to the absence of a teachable model, many teachers are often forced to leave out intonation.

In view of the role intonation plays in organising discourse, English language programmes should not just pay lip service to its importance. Equating good intonation with expressiveness can be misleading. Therefore, language curriculum developers must clearly define what good or appropriate intonation is and provide teachers with a workable framework for teaching it. There should be clear directions and support to enable teachers to teach intonation effectively. Furthermore, teaching methods and materials should be based on a linguistic description that is robust and at the same time easy to apply in the classroom. Through a principled and systematic approach, every learner will have the opportunity to learn about such a key aspect of effective oral communication.

I have tried to show that Brazil's model of discourse intonation provides exactly the kind of theoretically sound and learner-friendly model for classroom use. Through Brazil's framework learners can become aware of their intonation choices and how they differ from choices in an internationally accepted variety. Learners can also decide the extent to which they want to approximate to this British model. An example of intonation feature which learners may find 'foreign' and unnatural is the fall-rise tone. They may thus decide to retain the rise tone and use other paralinguistic cues instead to avoid being misunderstood as being aggressive or rude. However, when it comes to structuring information clearly for their listeners, learners will find that they need to pay more attention to prominence and tone, as well as the importance of pausing appropriately.

In short, Brazil's framework can be used as a point of reference or a 'model' and not a target or a 'norm' (Dalton & Seidhofer 1994, Jenkins 1998, 2000) that learners have to operate in all the time. The role of English language programmes should be to provide opportunities for learners to have access to such a model. By adding a different register (or accent) to their speech repertoire, these MyE and SgE speakers can develop the ability to code switch in contexts of wider communication.

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