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# Intonation Features of Singapore English<sup>1</sup>

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Singaporeans speak English in a variety of ways. There are speech patterns that are the same as those an educated speaker of English might expect, but there are also features of spoken English that are distinctively regional and that may cause initial problems for foreigners in Singapore. This variation in Singapore often depends on the background of speakers and the situation in which English is used (Tay 1982).

For the last twenty-five years, linguists have studied the way English is spoken by Singaporeans, among them Tongue (1974), Crewe (1977), Tay (1978), Brown (1986) and Biedrzycki (1994). Most of these studies, however, have concentrated on sentence structures, word usage or phonemes (vowels and consonants). There has been relatively little research done on the prosodic features of Singapore English (SE) with the notable exception of Deterding (1993, 1994a and 1994b) who has examined rhythm, intonation patterns and stress placement. My paper attempts to fill in some gaps in the description of this variety of English by analysing intonation features in a sample of about 400 educated SE speakers.

## Method

The subjects were all teacher trainees studying for a Postgraduate Diploma in Education. They were graduates from a wide range of disciplines, mostly from local universities. The first language for most of the subjects was one of the Chinese languages. As part of the assessment of their oral communication skills, these

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teacher trainees had to read aloud a passage as if they were reading it to a secondary class. They were given some preparation time before this. The reading was recorded and assessed for appropriate intonation. My description of SE intonation features here is based on these recordings, which I analysed by using the discourse intonation model devised by David Brazil (1980, 1985). Brazil's model is based on the intonation of British speakers.

Although my description refers to subjects reading a passage aloud, there are good reasons for generalizing it to intonation patterns in conversational English as well. As with conversations, reading aloud is an interactive process (Brazil, 1984. Mansfield, 1990). When someone reads something aloud, such as a notice, a set of instructions or an important passage from a book, the intention is to communicate. The speaker presents information in the light of the context in which communication is taking place, and meanings are conveyed through appropriate intonation choices.

### *Brazil's Model of Discourse Intonation*

Brazil's model (1980, 1985) makes use of distinct units in its description and analysis of intonation. These units are defined below.

A *tone unit* is a single word or a group of words that form a unit of information and meaning. A sentence is made up of one or more tone units. The end of a tone unit is usually identified by a pause or a change in pitch. In transcription, the boundaries of a tone unit are marked by two oblique lines (//).

*Prominence* is the highlighting of specific words in speech. Speakers give prominence to selected words to draw their listeners' attention to these words. By making a particular word prominent, they indicate to their listeners that it is *this* word and not any other possible words that they mean. Prominence is related to word stress. When a polysyllabic word is selected, it is the stressed syllable that will receive the most emphasis. Prominent syllables are identified by use of upper case letters (e.g. intoNAtion). Last prominent syllables in tone units are underlined (e.g. //FOURTH of JUNE//)

A *tone* is a pitch movement. It begins on the last prominent syllable (or “tonic syllable”) in a tone unit. This movement can be over one syllable, or several syllables if these come after the tonic syllable. There are two main tone categories: the proclaiming tone and the referring tone. A third category is the neutral tone.

- The *proclaiming* tone is realised by the falling tone (↘). It indicates that the information is new to the listeners and warrants emphasis.
- The referring tone is a rising tone and consists of the fall-rise (↘↗) and the rise (↗) tones. It shows that the information is shared knowledge between the speakers and listeners. The difference between the fall-rise and the rise tones is in their social implications. The selection of fall-rise tone implies a non-dominant role in a speech event.
- The *neutral* tone is a level tone (→). It indicates that the utterance is not fulfilling any specific communicative function. It can also mark the incompleteness of meaning or information being conveyed.

*Key* and *termination* are related to pitch level. Every speaker has his or her normal pitch level. This is by definition the “mid key”. The raising of this level is a high key (↑) and the lowering is a low key (↓). Key selection occurs at the first prominent syllable in a tone unit and is relative to the preceding key. Termination refers to the pitch level of the last prominent syllable in a tone unit.

Brazil asserts that speakers constantly have to make choices in these four areas of intonation: prominence, tones, key and termination. All these options are realised within tone units. These intonation choices convey specific meanings to the listeners. They are largely determined by the speakers’ understanding of the context in which speech events take place, and are not constrained by grammatical structures.

## What the Sample Revealed

The sample contained some intonation features which were similar to those of standard British speakers described by Brazil. On the other hand, there were also a number of features which were not. These distinctive features occurred to various degrees among the subjects. The rest of this paper is devoted to description of these distinctive features and comparison, wherever possible, with intonation of British speakers.

### 1 Prominence

#### 1.1. Giving prominence to words in a random manner

The subjects highlighted those words which carried a possible or likely meaning choice as well as those that did not.

Examples: //hisTORians have disCOvered pictures//

//what KIND of writing SYstem// do we USE to WRITE english//

//have been FOUND// in BUILdings AND tombs//

In these examples, words were clearly selected for highlighting. The words "pictures", "writing", "English" and "tombs" which carried a meaning selection were, however, not given prominence. Thus, in the first example, by making the word "discovered" prominent, the speaker seemed to imply the possibility of historians *inventing* pictures. This was probably not the meaning the speaker had intended to convey. In British English, the word "pictures" would have been selected under normal circumstances as it carried a choice between this word and other possibilities such as "symbols" or "writings".

//his TORians have discovered PIctures//

This pattern of randomly assigning prominence pervaded the entire sample. It is also quite clear that SE speakers do not give every word equal stress since the sample showed that some

syllables were stressed more than others. This finding is supported by Deterding (1993) who reports that SE speech patterns clearly show stressed and unstressed syllables.

### 1.2 Giving prominence to the last word in a sentence

There was a very strong tendency for subjects to make the last word in a sentence most prominent, even though it was quite clear from context that it should not be highlighted. This was clearly the case in the sample where more than 85% of the speakers made all the final words in each sentence prominent. While this was appropriate for a number of sentences, there were those in which the last words clearly did not carry any meaning selection.

Examples: //it USEs fewer SYMBols//than the hieroGLYphic SYStem//

//this was the EARliest WAY//that people HAD// to tell SOMETHing to SOMEone//

Compare the above with these alternatives:

//it USEs fewer SYMBols//than the hieroGLYphic system//

//this was the EARliest WAY//that people HAD//to TELL something to someone //

This feature of assigning prominence to the last words in sentences appears to be a salient feature of SE. It is especially apparent when the last words are pronouns like "it". For example: //we'll apPREciate IT//, //i CAN'T HELP IT//, //i LIKE IT//.

### 1.3 Assigning prominence to the last word in noun phrases

For phrases such as "police force", "golf club", "car park", "meeting room" the stress is usually on the stressed syllable in first word: //poLICE force//, //GOLF club//, //CAR park//, //MEETing

room//. It is, however, quite common to find the last word being stressed in SE. This feature occurred frequently in the sample. Almost 90% of all the subjects made the second word of noun phrases more prominent.

Examples: //picture WRiting// //writing SYstem//

#### 1.4 Placing stress on weak syllables in prominent words

A number of the subjects highlighted words appropriately in some tone units, but the stress for those prominent words was put on the weak syllables. This is probably related to non-standard SE word stress so commonly reported in the literature on SE. (e.g. Tongue 1974:27).

Examples: //should use ONE symBOL//

//slow and diffiCULT//

//the ENGlish lanGUAGE//

The standard word stress patterns are SYMbol, DIFficult and LANGUage. Non-standard word stress becomes especially apparent in SE whenever the stressed syllables are found in prominent words.

#### 1.5 Too many prominent syllables in a tone unit

Descriptions of intonation patterns of standard British speakers normally show no more than two prominent syllables in a tone unit (Brazil 1985:18). In the sample, however, tone units with three or even four prominent syllables were common.

Examples: //SIX HUNDred THOUSand WORDS//

//WHICH were DRAWN on CAVE WALLS//

//PAINTEd PICTure STOries//







//to TELL something//to SOMEone//

The level tone was found throughout the range of speech patterns in the sample. This prolific use of the level tone is one of the most salient features of the intonation patterns of SE. A likely reason for this is the influence of Chinese languages where this tone abounds. It is also quite common to hear Chinese speakers use the level tone in pause markers such as “Hmm”.

The presence of the level tone is probably related to one aspect of SE intonation reported by Deterding (1993), that it is often difficult to identify one stressed syllable as being more prominent than the others. Normally, the tonic syllable, which is more prominent than other stressed syllables in a tone unit, is marked by the beginning of a pitch movement. However, when prominent syllables are said with the level tone, there is naturally very little perceptible pitch movement on these syllables.

Therefore, the stressed syllables in successive tone units will seem to have equal stress. Some of my subjects, however, used other means of showing the relative importance of prominent words. They did this by saying the prominent syllables a little louder or in a higher pitch (See 3.2) and by prolonging the stressed vowels.

### 2.3 Low frequency of fall-rise tone

Interestingly, almost all the rising tones in the sample of SE are rise tones (↗).



Examples: //do you KNOW//what hieroGLYphics means//

The general absence of fall-rise tone in the sample may be due to the fact that this tone is not very common in Chinese languages.

In Brazil's model, the rise tone (↗) is considered a marked version of the rising tone because of its specific implications about role-relationships between speakers and listeners (Brazil 1985: 129). In situations where all participants have "equal rights" to speak, the fall-rise tone (↘↗) is generally selected as a referring tone. For example,

↘↗

//do you KNOW what hieroGLYphics means//

When speakers select the rise tone, it is seen as an attempt to assert their dominance, and in some situations, this can be interpreted as aggressiveness or rudeness (ibid: 131, 132). People unfamiliar with SE intonation might, therefore, sometimes misinterpret the frequent selection of rise tone as a sign of aggressiveness.

#### 2.4 Tone movement at the end of sentences

Because there was a tendency for subjects to make last words in sentences prominent regardless of context (see 2.2), tone movement occurred most frequently in this final position. Since tone movement begins on the last prominent syllable in a tone unit, this distribution of prominence and tones produced a distinct end-heavy intonation pattern.

↗

↗

Examples: //do you KNOW//what hieroGYLphics MEANS//

→

↘

//this WAY of communiCation//was SLOW and diffiCULT//

↗

//this was the EARliest WAY //to tell someTHING to

↘

someONE//



### 3.2 Little variation in key

Generally, the subjects kept to the mid key throughout the discourse. Some speakers selected the high key when beginning a new sentence, but this was relatively infrequent in the sample.

## Conclusion

It is clear from this analysis that the intonation of Singapore English contains a number of distinctive and identifiable features. As teachers and teacher trainers, we might find it necessary to point them out to our students, and to explain the communicative value and social implications of these features. Finally, I hope that the description in this paper has highlighted for non-Singapore English speakers in Singapore, the ways in which Singapore English intonation might differ from the varieties of English that they are familiar with.

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