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Author	Christine Goh

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# A Discourse Approach to the Description of Intonation in Singapore English.

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In A. Brown, D. Deterding & Low, E.L. (eds.) 2000. *The English Language in Singapore: Research on Pronunciation*. Singapore Association for Applied Linguistics, Singapore. pp. 35-45. Chapter 4.

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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to offer a discourse perspective on the intonation of Singapore English (SE). As a framework for my description, I have used the model of discourse intonation proposed by David Brazil (1997). A discourse model is preferred to sentence-grammar models and models which associate intonation with attitudes and emotions because as McCarthy (1998) points, the examination of real data on spoken English has increasingly shown intonation to be discourse sensitive. A discourse intonation model describes intonation choices in the context in which speech is produced, and provides insights into the organisation of discourse and the realisations of communicative intentions through these prosodic variations.

Brazil's model is based on the intonation of British English (BE) speakers, and thus may not fully capture the intonation realisations of speakers of Singapore English (SE), an established variety of the new Englishes (Platt, Webber & Ho 1984, Brown 1999). Nevertheless, in the absence of a discourse model for SE intonation, Brazil's model is a valuable framework for examining the encoding of meaning in SE. Moreover, since the teaching of English pronunciation in Singapore has traditionally been based on BE, Brazil's model would seem a most appropriate frame of reference. A comparison of the way intonation choices are realised in these two varieties of English will reveal differences that might exist. Such findings can inform the teaching of English pronunciation in Singapore. For SE speakers, knowing how some common SE intonation features differ from BE intonation will give them a means of assessing their English intonation in the light of an internationally accepted variety. It will also increase their awareness of possible pitfalls that can undermine effective communication between SE speakers and speakers of BE, both from Britain as well as those who model their speech after it. Teachers of English may also want to use this information to identify aspects of intonation to be taught so that learners can develop the necessary spoken skills to convey their meaning clearly and not risk being misunderstood when speaking to non-SE speakers.

## BRAZIL'S MODEL OF DISCOURSE INTONATION

Brazil's approach to intonation describes the realisations 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 ‘give-ness’ and ‘newness’ of information and the state of convergence and divergence of the participants.” (Brazil, Coulthard & Johns: 1980:11)

An examination of the way both intonational and lexico-grammatical encodings respond to contexts and to the needs, goals and relationships of the participants can help us better understand how spoken discourse is realised (McCarthy 1998).

As it is beyond the scope of this article to attempt any detailed explanation of Brazil's model, I will briefly state the key principle which underlies this model and provide 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.)

Brazil's discourse intonation model views the meaning of intonation in terms of listener-speaker interaction, shared and unshared knowledge, and conversational control (Brazil 1997). A key principle on which Brazil's model is based is that intonation choices depend solely on a speaker's assessment of the degree of understanding or common knowledge they share with their interlocutors. Through this real-time assessment, speakers can decide how much they need to expand this common ground and determine how much of what is going to be said can be readily understood by their listeners because of the cumulative understanding that has developed during the course of the interaction. This assessment of the state of speaker/listener convergence in each unique interactional setting is referred to as the 'context of interaction'. Intonation choices may not always reflect the actual state of shared knowledge between speakers and listeners. Speakers can exploit intonation realisations to project an impression of the state of shared knowledge. As Hewings (1995a) points out, speakers may present new information as shared knowledge through tone selection in order to maintain a comfortable social relationship between themselves and their listeners. In brief, Brazil's model is concerned with speakers' choice within the intonation system and the implications of choosing one intonation realisation in preference to another.

Brazil's model identifies four key intonation sub-systems: *prominence*, *tone*, *key* and *termination*, and postulates the presence of tone units. Table 1 explains each intonation sub-system and defines the concept of tone unit in Brazil's framework. This article will focus predominantly on prominence and tone in SE intonation.

## **THE DATA**

The discussions in this article are based on data obtained through four sources: passages read aloud; recorded on-air interviews and conversations, informal exchanges and public presentations. Data from reading aloud have been included on the assumption that the aim of reading aloud is to communicate, and it is therefore an interactive process (Brazil 1984, Mansfield 1990). Brazil (1997:134) notes that people who read aloud adopt "a direct, listener-sensitive stance, interpreting the text as if they were themselves the originator of whatever message they assume it embodies". In addition, we may add that someone reading aloud a text has to take into consideration not only the context of interaction but also the co-text, thus paying attention to the "givenness" and the newness of the information at both interactional and textual levels. It is upon this awareness of the state of shared knowledge (created in the text as well as from an assessment of listeners' prior knowledge) that speakers' intonational choices are based.

The reading aloud data were from a recording made in a clearly defined context: as part of the assessment of their oral communication ability, 400 postgraduate teacher trainees were asked to read aloud a passage on the topic of hieroglyphics as if they

were reading it to a secondary school class (See Goh 1995 for further details). The second set of data came from transcriptions of radio and TV programmes, where Singaporeans talked spontaneously in semi-formal situations. The third type of data was obtained mainly through informal exchanges heard in public places, such as trains and shops. It was also gleaned from presentations in formal and semi-formal situations. The transcription of data was done through auditory analysis according to Brazil's conventions.

	<b>Brazil's transcription conventions</b>
<p><b><i>Tone Unit</i></b>  <i>Perceptible phonological blocks or chunks in continuous speech.</i>            Each tone unit can be analysed in terms of pitch movements and contains “either one or two syllables that a hearer can recognise as being in some sense more emphatic than the others (Brazil 1997:7). These syllables are known as prominent syllables.</p> <p><b><i>Prominence</i></b>  <i>The highlighting of a word in context to indicate meaning selection from a range of possible choices.</i> Prominence is related to word stress. A stressed syllable is potentially prominent. If the tone unit contains two prominent syllables, the first is called the onset syllable and the last syllable is called the tonic. When only one prominent syllable is present, that syllable is also the tonic syllable.</p> <p><b><i>Tone</i></b>  <i>A major pitch movement within a tone unit.</i> This movement always begins on the tonic syllable, and, may end on the same syllable or be carried forward into the rest of the tone unit (also referred to as the enclitic segment). There are five tone choices: fall, fall-rise, rise, rise-fall, level. The two most frequently tones found in discourse are fall (<i>proclaiming</i> tone) for new information and fall-rise (<i>referring</i> tone) for given information.</p> <p><b><i>Key &amp; Termination</i></b>  <i>Pitch contrasts between prominent and surrounding words.</i> There are three choices: high, mid and low. When a tone unit has two prominent syllables, the pitch of the onset syllable is referred to as <i>key</i> while that in the tonic syllable is <i>termination</i>. A high pitch contrast may emphasize a clear selection among choices or mark the beginning of a new pitch sequence following one that has just ended. A mid or low pitch may suggest that there is little difference in the information given compared with what has just been said.</p>	<p>The beginning and end of a tone unit are represented by two oblique lines //.</p> <p>All prominent syllables are written in uppercase letters. (e.g. he was very HELPful)</p> <p>Tonic syllables are underlined.            (e.g. he'll LAter go <u>ON</u>//            to <u>TUR</u>key//</p> <p>Fall ↘            Fall-rise ↘↗            Rise ↗            Rise-fall /↘            Level →            (e.g. //↘ in the <u>BANK</u>//;            // → a <u>PEN</u> //)</p> <p>High key:                      <u>Devastated</u>            //she was           //</p> <p>Low key:            //YES he           //                              <u>FAILED</u></p>

**Table 1: Intonation sub-systems in Brazil's model** (based on Brazil 1997)

## DISCOURSE INTONATION FEATURES IN SINGAPORE ENGLISH

This section describes the characteristics of prominence and tone revealed in the SE data. I will illustrate each of these characteristics with examples taken from the data before interpreting the communicative significance of their realisations. Differences between the discourse function of these features in SE and BE will also be highlighted wherever possible.

### Prominence

An outstanding feature of SE intonation is the assigning of prominence to the final word in a tone unit, particularly if it is the last unit in a syntactically complete stretch of speech. In cases where these final words carry a meaning selection, the assigning of prominence is consistent with Brazil's framework, as the following examples show:

- (1) //in Egypt// STOrY TELLing pictures// have been FOUND// on BUILDings and TOMBS//
- (2) // your adVICE// is absoLUTEly SOUND//
- (3) // that would CUT DOWN// SOME ambiGUlty//

In the above examples, the last word in each final tone unit – ‘tombs’, ‘sound’ and ‘ambiguity’ – are all choices made from a possible range of words. For example, by highlighting the word ‘tombs’, the speaker in (1) is drawing listeners’ attention to a particular location as opposed to other possible ones such as gardens or houses.

Prominence is clearly present in SE intonation. However, besides assigning prominence to words which carry a possible or likely meaning choice in a given context. SE speakers often highlight words which do not indicate selectivity. In (4), a teacher is talking about workload to her colleagues:

- (4) //it is NOT ONLY the asSIGNments// you have to MARK// but ALso// the NUMber of assignments// you have to MARK//

There are several things to note in this example. Firstly, the speaker highlights the words “not only” to signal the addition of information to what is about to be said. The type of work being referred to is clearly indicated as new with the word ‘assignment’ made prominent. The word ‘mark’ in the next tone unit is also highlighted. Presumably, the speaker is making a deliberate selection among different ways of responding to students’ assignments; for example, writing general comments as opposed to correcting mistakes and awarding a grade at the end. The speaker then goes on to highlight the words “also” and ‘number’ to show the additional idea signaled earlier. In the second last tone unit, ‘assignment’ is no longer prominent because it is repeated information and therefore has no newsworthiness. However, in the last tone unit the speaker once again highlights the word ‘mark’, an idea which has already been introduced.

By assigning of prominence to a non-selective word at the end of her sentence, the speaker seems to be reiterating her point about marking assignments. It could also be a signal that she has come to the end of her point. On the other hand, this phenomenon could also have been due to the general absence of long enclitic segments in the SE data. So instead of saying //the NUMBER of assignments you have to mark//, where all the words after ‘number’ are part of shared knowledge and are therefore no longer prominent, the speaker breaks the clause up into two shorter tone units, assigning prominence to words in each one. We will return to this feature of assigning “newness” to common ground when we discuss the proclaiming tone in the next section.

Because of the strong tendency for SE speakers to make the last word in a sentence prominent, it is sometimes difficult to determine whether “correct” assigning of prominence is motivated by the speakers’ intent to present matter as new or other reasons, such as to reiterate a point or to signal the end of what they have to say for the moment. This pattern of prominence distribution is most obvious when the tonic words do not normally indicate meaning selection. Two such words commonly found in the data are ‘it’ and ‘one’. When these prominent words are expressed through high key/ termination, the pattern suggests a further dimension to the discourse functions just mentioned.

(5) A: //what is IT//

B: //DON" T ASK// just EAT <sup>IT</sup> //

(6) X: // i THOUGHT// you WANTED a black ONE//

Y: // <sup>NO</sup> // a BLUE// <sup>ONE</sup> //

In (5), ‘eat’ carries significant communicative value as it represents the action which B wants A to take. It also shows meaning oppositions between the word ‘eat’ with other possible choices, such as ‘drink’. However, B goes on to highlight the next word ‘it’. Thus, instead of making ‘eat’ the tonic word, as in //just EAT it/, the speaker has given even greater emphasis to the last word ‘it’. Although the word ‘it’ is non-selective, its highlighting appears to lend an air of finality to what is said. B’s high termination further suggests that she is trying to control A’s behaviour – by a show of her authority or exasperation.

In (6), when X appears to have misunderstood Y’s intention, Y responds by beginning on a high key with a prominent ‘no’ to indicate a contrast to X’s idea. The high termination on ‘one’ further emphasises this contrastive response. The phrase ‘a blue one’ is said in two tone units in a slow exaggerated manner. The vowel /u:/ in ‘blue’ is further lengthened and the / / in ‘one’ sounds close to /a:/. In (5), the vowel in the word ‘it’ has also been lengthened from /I/ to /i:/. The highlighting of words in final positions combined with a stepping up of the pitch level and a lengthening of vowels appear to have the important function of indicating strong contrastive responses in SE.

The data revealed further examples of prominence assigned to words not open to meaning selection in their specified contexts, as the following examples show:

- (7) // LTA should LOOK into// PUTting **SOME**// CHInese WORDS on IT//
- (8) // it dePENDS on // // **SOME** sugGESTions// like i SAID//  
ER
- (9) (14) // be**CAUSE** it's NOT biLINGual//

In (7) the word 'some' is highlighted perhaps to signal hesitation as the speaker plans what to say next. In contrast, the word 'some' in (8) is highlighted as a means of compensating for the hesitation immediately before that. The high key also draws attention to the fact that the speaker is now continuing. The word 'because' was almost always assigned prominent in the data, as in (9). This is perhaps to signal that the speakers are offering an explanation and that their listeners should pay attention to what is to come.

Finally, SE intonation often has tone units with more than two prominent words. It is quite common to find three and sometimes even four words being assigned prominence in a single tone unit:

- (10) // WHICH were DRAWN on CAVE WALLS//
- (11) //WHO are NOT famiLIAR with that
- (12) //PEOPLE will START to acCEPT the iDEA//

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

- (13) // beCAUSE// i WON't be aBLE// to SEE// the oTHER// TRAffic LIGHT//
- (14) //the MORE// seVERE// PUNishment// COMES from ME //

## Tone

Three tones are frequently adopted in SE: level (→), fall (↘) and rise (↗). Unlike proclaiming and referring tones, the level tone is considered by linguists as contributing very little to the expression of meaning. It is a feature of routine and ritual operations such as train announcements (Halliday 1970). It also indicates an 'oblique orientation' (Brazil 1997), suggesting that the tone unit is not part of direct discourse and that the speaker is not listener-sensitive. Level tone is also present in retrospective summary – listing points previously raised, and may also indicate syntactical incompleteness.

The level tone in SE is closely related to short tone units and indicates incomplete information, such as when the speaker pauses to search for words (15) or adds items to a list – 'true' and 'smart' (16). It is often present in the first word of a compound phrase (17) and may also occur at the end of a sentence (18).

- (15) //→SO WHAT // →they should DO //→MAYbe//→ they should PUT aNOther//  
→ GREEN// →GREEN MAN// or →whateVER// →that's FLASHing// →so THAT's  
an indicaTION// →where diagonalLY// ↘ALL can CROSS//
- (16) //→so i would classIFy YOU// →as the TRUE//→ SMART// ↘ cosuMER//
- (17) //→TRAffic// ↘LIGHT//
- (18) //→I got a suggesTION//→ for THIS SCRAMbled WALK//

High frequency of level tone has been observed in the intonation of at least two other groups of English speakers in the region – Malaysians (Goh 1992, 1994) and Indonesians (Hewings 1995b). In both studies, one reason cited is the speakers' problem in planning and organizing speech. For the Malaysian data, it has been further suggested that tone selection could have been influenced by Chinese which is the mother tongue of most of the subjects (Goh 1994). English intonation spoken in Malaysia bears many similarities to the SE variety (Goh 1998a), and the reasons cited here seem to be equally relevant to the situation in Singapore. In particular, the influence of Chinese, which is spoken by the majority of Singaporeans, should not be underestimated. For further discussions about the level tone in Singapore English, see Goh (1998b).

Another tone that is frequently adopted in SE is the fall tone, the main proclaiming tone in Brazil's model. Contents in a tone unit that has a proclaiming tone is presented as something that is still outside common ground. In SE, however, 'falls' are selected not only when something new is being introduced, but also when the matter is part of shared understanding. The latter occurs particularly when non-selective final words of a tone unit are assigned prominence. One of our earlier examples is a case in point:

- (19) //↘it is NOT ONLY the asSIGNments// ↘ you have to MARK// → but ALso// ↘ the  
NUMBER of assignments// ↘ you have to MARK//

Besides assigning prominence to a stretch of speech which is shared knowledge, the speaker also presents it in a proclaiming tone (↘) in preference to a referring tone (↘↗ or ↗). In doing this, the speaker once again introduces the idea of 'marking assignments' as new, even though it tells the listeners nothing that they do not already know. This is another difference between SE and Brazil's model. While it is not unusual in BE for common ground to be highlighted, the tone unit would typically carry a referring tone, indicating that this stretch of discourse will not alter the state of speaker/listener convergence. Deterding (1994) suggests that the presence of the fall tone when linked to prominence at the end of tone units indicates the end of a turn for the SE speaker. Such intonation realisations may, however, have functions beyond turn taking. Presenting common ground matter in the proclaiming tone may be a way by which SE speakers reiterate a point that they perceive as important.

The fall-rise (↘↗) tone in Brazil's model is conspicuously absent from SE intonation as a whole. There is, however, a high frequency of the rise tone (↗). In Brazil's model, the rise tone is a marked version of the referring tone because of its specific implications about role-relationships between speakers and listeners. In situations where all participants have equal rights to speak, the fall-rise tone is the preferred tone. When the rise tone is adopted, it may be interpreted as an attempt to exert dominance or control over one's interlocutors. In some situations it may also be perceived as rudeness. In SE the rise tone is most commonly found in questions:

- (20) //↗ do you KNOW// ↗ what hieroGLYphics means//  
 (21) //↗ WHAT KIND of// ↗ WRItIng SYStem// ↗ do we USE//↗ when we WRITE ENGLISH//  
 (22) //↗HOW are YOU//  
 (23) //↗ you KNOW WHY//  
 (24) //↗ Any questions HERE//  
 (25) //→ you've got some HELP// ↗ for US//↗ some sugGESTions//

The rise tone (↗) is closely associated with all forms of questioning in SE. In the reading aloud data, more than 90% of the speakers presented the question "Do you know what hieroglyphics means?" in the rise tone, while over 50% of them adopted the same tone for the question "What kind of writing system do we use when we write English?" The rest of the speakers selected either the level or the fall tone. Brazil argues that choices in the referring/proclaiming system "cut across the traditional, grammar-based, classification into yes/no and information types" (Brazil 1997:112). In choosing a referring tone, speakers are indicating that they might know the answer, and are asking the listeners to confirm whether they are right. On the other hand, a proclaiming tone would suggest that the speakers do not know the answer and are asking the listener to provide the answer, thereby increasing the common ground between them. There is no evidence in the SE data to suggest such a distinction in tone selection in questions.

The rise tone is also used to signal incompleteness of information:

- (26) //↗ OKay//↘ if you THINK that//↗ i WANT SOMEthing//↗ for NOthing//↗ then i THANK YOU//→ i would like YOU//↘ to HAVE it//

In contrast to the high frequency of rise tone, there are few selections of fall-rise tone. Some speakers adopt both the fall-rise and rise tones in their speech, as in the case of the speaker in the next two examples. In some speakers, the fall-rise is completely absent.

- (27) //↗ i'm NOT SIDing them//  
 (28) //↘YES// ↗ i have someTHING to SHARE//

One reason for the low incidence of fall-rise tone could be that SE speakers are not used to producing the fall-rise pitch movement, especially when it is over more than

one syllable. Secondly, SE speakers in general may be unfamiliar the social function of the fall-rise tone in Brazil's model. The selection of the rise tone in preference to the fall-rise also does not seem to have the same kinds of social connotations as they do in BE. For example, 'How are you?' (22) is a phatic question that has a social motivation. This question was overheard in an airport where the speaker ran into an old friend. Perceived in isolation, the selection of a rise tone may make the question sound anything but warm and friendly. Brazil notes that questions which have social bridge-building as its aim are customarily realised in a fall-rise tone that suggests togetherness, as in //^7 HOW ARE you// (Brazil 1997: 114). In comparison, the SE realisation may appear almost aggressive, due partly also to its high termination. Nevertheless, the conversation between the two friends that followed was as warm and friendly as any meeting of old friends would turn out to be. Thus, in the Singapore context, the selection of the rise tone does not seem to carry the same implications of dominance or even rudeness.

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

This article sets out to describe two key discourse intonation features in SE: prominence and tone. The analysis shows that SE speakers assign prominence to words to highlight new information to the listener in order to expand their shared understanding. However, they also have the tendency to assign prominence to non-selective words, particularly those at the end of tone units. The discourse functions of this intonation realisation seem to range from reiterating key ideas and expressing strong contrastive responses to signaling the end of a turn. Tone choices in SE are also not always consistent with Brazil's model and therefore do not always have the same discourse function as they do in BE. The choice of a fall tone when a rise or fall-rise would have more appropriately reflected the state of speaker/listener convergence suggests that SE speakers in general may not be familiar with the proclaiming/referring oppositions and the roles associated with them in BE. There is a generally end-heavy intonation pattern in SE resulting from the high number of tonic syllables at the end of tone units. Three typical SE tones are : level, fall and rise. The fall-rise tone has a particularly low incidence in SE. In its place is the rise tone, which is used frequently and without the social implications that Brazil's model suggests.

The successful analysis of the SE data using Brazil's model of discourse intonation shows that it is a useful framework for helping us understand SE intonation features. The model provides baseline information for comparing SE with BE, and is an effective framework for identifying aspects of SE intonation that differ in terms of realisations and discourse functions. There is, for example, little evidence in SE that clearly demonstrates the proclaiming/referring opposition, and the rationale for assigning prominence in SE seems to deviate from the principle of the 'context of interaction' which underpins Brazil's framework. Although such differences exist, this should not be taken as an indication that SE speakers are not sensitive to the context in which the discourse unfolds. SE speakers are obviously concerned about the state of play during interaction, but this awareness may manifest itself in ways that are sometimes different from what Brazil's model postulates. SE speakers do not appear to have any difficulty understanding one another's intentions. Neither do they seem to perceive any negative social connotations when intonation choices differ from the norm in Brazil's model. This is probably because SE speakers have recourse to other linguistic and paralinguistic means of achieving the desired discourse

functions. What these means are and how they complement SE intonation choices are areas of SE discourse that merit detailed investigation.

For non-SE speakers, however, SE's unique intonation realisations could result in ineffective communication, and in some extreme cases, unintelligibility. In order for effective communication to be achieved between SE speakers and other English speakers, it is important for SE speakers to know where some potential pitfalls lie. These intonation characteristics and possible setbacks in cross-cultural communication are outlined below:

- Assigning prominence to words that do not constitute a meaning selection or are already part of shared knowledge may distract the listener from the real intention of the speaker.
- Adopting a falling tone to 'proclaim' something that is not new may cause temporary confusion to the listener. It may also make it difficult for the listener to recognise new information when it is actually introduced.
- The frequent use of level tone that does not convey specific communicative value of proclaiming or referring will undermine the effective organisation of discourse. Not adopting tones that carry communicative value also means that the speakers fail to exploit the social roles of intonation when communicating.
- The adoption of the rise tone could inadvertently create in the listener a perception that the speaker is trying to dominate the discourse.

The differences between SE and BE intonation features may be largely due to SE speakers' unfamiliarity with the implications of intonation choices within the BE intonation system. Brazil's approach to intonation description has helped us to understand how and why some of these choices differ. In view of the Government's recent call to improve the standard of spoken English, a systematic teaching of BE intonation will prove to be advantageous to Singapore. SE speakers who are aware of the meaning oppositions within the BE system will be in a better position to modify their intonation and align it with an internationally accepted variety, if they choose to do so. In this respect, Brazil's discourse intonation model which is based on a closed set of meaningful oppositions is a valuable framework for teaching intonation and the way it contributes to discourse meaning.

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