

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Malaysian English

According to Knowles (1997), the worldwide spread of English was due to two diasporas, firstly, being transplanted by native speakers and secondly, being brought in as an official language. The spreading out of English first started when English speakers moved to Canada, North America, Australia and New Zealand where the local population began to adopt English as their national language, making English one of the most extensively used languages in the world.

The international status of English came about in the second diaspora when English was brought to non-English environments such as Latin America, Africa and South Asia. This has expanded the first English Language sociolinguistic profile further and enabled English to come into contact with languages that were unrelated, both culturally and genetically. As a result of the contact of English with various languages such as Chinese, Malay and Tamil, varieties of English such as Indian English, Singapore English (SgE), Philippine English, and Malaysian English (ME) emerged (Kachru, 1965). Platt et al. (1984), Kachru (1986, 1992) and Lowenberg (1992) note that in many of the new varieties of English, nativisation occurs and is evident in the syntax, phonology, lexis, stylistics and discourse features that characterise and differentiate these new varieties of English from the traditional native speaker varieties.

In the Malaysian setting, the variety of English manifested through the natural cross-fertilisation between Malay, English and other ethnic languages, such as Cantonese, Tamil and Hokkien. Vatikiotis (1991, p. 30) describes the phenomenon as a performance of “linguistic acrobatics” and that “Malaysians of every race perform linguistic acrobatics in almost every conversation they hold. It is a mixed lexicon bred of a pluralism where English is a common arena of interaction”. Because of its multiple influences and uses, ME encompasses a range of subvariants (Pillai, 2008). Baskaran (1994, p. 27) posits that ME can be viewed as a continuum comprising three main sub-varieties, the sociolects, or social dialects. The first sub-variety is the acrolect, also the 'high' social dialect or official ME. The first can be referred to as Standard Malaysian English (although there is no official consensus on this), which has become institutionalised as the official second language of the nation. The second sub-variety is the mesolect, which is the 'middle' social dialect or unofficial ME. The mesolect is the colloquial and informal variety spoken by most Malaysians regardless of ethnicity, and allows for greater variation, especially in stress and intonation. The final sub-variety is the basilect, the 'low' social dialect or 'broken' ME. Baskaran (1994, p. 29) notes that the basilect is "stigmatised because of its great segmental and prosodic divergence: internationally unintelligible". In reality, ME is a broad umbrella term encompassing the many sub-varieties of English used in Malaysia. Baskaran (1987) notes that its distinct and systematic features mark ME as a new variety of English, with forms that have been adjusted to meet local needs. In this context, it is inevitable that ME is influenced by the many different ethnic languages, developing into different varieties that exist at every social level.

1.1 Malaysian English Stress

Lexical stress refers to the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in words. In English words with more than two syllables, also known as polysyllabic words, one of the syllables will be stressed or be more prominent in terms of loudness, pitch or vowel/syllable length (Roach, 2000; Zhang, Nissen & Francis, 2008).

On ME stress, Jassem (1994, p. 143) states that there is “stress shift” in ME, resulting in ME having a different stress pattern from BrE. He notes that “disyllabic words which have first syllable stress in BrE have second syllable stress in all varieties of ME, especially Indian and Chinese ME” speakers (Jassem, 1994, p. 143). Other previous research on ME states that ME speakers stress polysyllabic English words differently from BrE (e.g. Baskaran, 1994; Platt & Weber, 1980; Preshous, 2001; Tongue, 1974). However, this conclusion was drawn based on an impressionistic and not instrumental approach. Preshous (2001, p. 51), for instance, claims that some lexical items in ME display stress patterns that are different from standard BrE in his brief description of vowel sounds, consonants and word stress, and provides the following examples:

Insurance - stress on the 1st syllable /'ɪnʃʊərənz/

Purchase - stress on the 2nd syllable /pə'tʃeɪz/

Industry - stress on the 2nd syllable /ɪn'dʌstri/

No acoustic evidence was provided in his paper nor was there any indication of the descriptions being based on a data set.

One of the reasons ME speakers are said to stress English words differently is mother tongue influence, for example by Malay, the national language of Malaysia, spoken by most Malaysians. English is known as a stress-timed language while Malay is not. Baskaran (2005, p. 48) explains that in Malay, the “rhythmic pattern is more dependent on the number of syllables in the utterance, where every syllable is given almost equal time for utterance”. Perhaps it is because of this that ME speakers tend to give every English syllable almost equal time when they speak. When BrE speakers say the word *flawlessly*, for example, they stress the first syllable, whilst ME speakers are said to give almost equal stress to all syllables, with a tendency to focus on the last syllable.

Another way the interference of Malay can influence stress placement in ME is the possibility that stress does not exist in Malay. Zuraidah, Knowles and Yong (2008), in their study of syllable timing and “stress” in the language, conclude that stress is “completely irrelevant in the description of Malay” (Conclusion section, para. 1). There may be rise and fall in pitch, loudness and tempo in Malay, but according to Zuraidah, Knowles and Yong (2008), “these phenomena are all accounted for independently of stress” (Conclusion section, para. 1). For instance, they observe that final cadence, which is the “slowing down in tempo” that “coincides with the final fall”, can give the impression of word stress (Zuraidah, Knowles & Yong, 2008, section 9). They explain that “the combination of the peak of the onset rise followed by the cadence gives considerable prominence to the end of the word, and since the pitch peak typically coincides with the end of the penult, the penult itself is made to stand out” (Zuraidah, Knowles & Yong, 2008, section 9). If the said combination coincides with the final

syllable, it could give the impression that ME speakers stress the final syllable, although stress placement is expected in the initial syllable.

A similar assumption was made with SgE speakers, that they tend to stress the final syllable of polysyllabic words, as observed by Bao (1998), Deterding (1994), Platt and Weber (1980), Tay (1982) and Tongue (1974), that there is a shift of primary stress from the initial syllable in BrE to the final syllable in SgE. Tongue (1974, p. 20) and Platt and Weber (1980) suggest that there is phrase-final lengthening in SgE, but Low and Grabe (1999), in their acoustic analysis of lexical stress placement of polysyllabic words by SgE speakers, have shown that although phrase-final lengthening is present in SgE, it is not found in words in phrase-medial position. In phrase-final position also, the F0 measurements show that the difference between stressed and unstressed syllables in SgE is less clearly marked compared to BrE, but this does not happen for words in phrase-medial position. This is because, words in phrase-final position, and especially in citation form, could be a result of intonational boundary (Low & Grabe, 1999). An intonational boundary is signalled by the lengthening of a final syllable in a phrase and a change in pitch level or direction on lexically unstressed syllables (Cooper & Paccia-Cooper, 1980, p. 48; Cruttenden, 1997; Hofhuis, Gussenhoven & Rietveld, 1995, in Low & Grabe, 1999).

Low and Grabe (1999) explain that the said lexical stress differences between SgE and BrE is based on native BrE listener judgements, suggesting that the best approach to determine if a syllable is stressed or not is through acoustic analysis and the measurement

of duration and F0. For instance, a word like *hopelessly* has its primary stress on the first syllable in BrE. SgE and ME speakers appear to stress the last syllable of such words. However, Low and Grabe's (1999) results on SgE speakers have shown that the difference in pronunciation is not always due to the different location of stress, but could be a result of syllable lengthening, which gives the impression of stress on the final syllable.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

As mentioned previously, the claim that ME differs from BrE in lexical stress placement has generally been based on auditory impressions and not acoustic analysis. In citation form, that is, when words are produced in isolation, they can be considered to be in nuclear, phrase-final position, similar to contexts where the words are at the end of a phrase (e.g. *tastefully* vs *Please say tastefully*). In this position, phrase-final lengthening can be expected, and since lengthening is a cue to stress, this may explain why the last syllable of the word is perceived as being stressed. Moreover, as explained by Low and Grabe (1999), if citation forms are used as the basis for analysis, then all instances of any word observed would be in the phrase-final position. Thus, Low and Grabe (1999) felt that there was a need to observe the realisation of polysyllabic words embedded in a carrier phrase, in both phrase-final and phrase-medial positions, with the duration and F0 of each syllable measured, before the results are compared with other varieties like BrE. The rationale for measuring F0 is that the length of a syllable is not the only cue to stress, as pitch movement, increased loudness and vowel quality also contribute to the perception of stress. The most important factor is pitch movement, or fundamental

frequency (F0), which can be measured acoustically (Roach, 1991, p. 86). If it is true that in ME the stress tends to be on the final syllable, then this should be evident regardless of the position of the word in an utterance, that is, whether in phrase-medial or phrase-final position.

Currently there is a lack of research on the placement of stress in polysyllabic words in ME with most of the descriptions tending to be based on auditory impression. Based on this, it is assumed that ME has a tendency to stress the final syllable of polysyllabic words (Baskaran, 1994; Platt & Weber, 1980). Thus, there is a need to examine acoustic data in relation to stress placement to verify impressionistic data about stress placement in ME. Such data can also then be used as a basis for comparison with other varieties of English, especially SgE, which is assumed to share the same prosodic features as ME.

1.3 Aim of Study

This study aims to address the research gap between current descriptions of stress placement in ME and the lack of instrumentally based analysis. It sets out to identify the lexical stress placement of ME speakers in polysyllabic words and to find out if the assumption that stress is always placed on the last syllable is true. This study will focus solely on three-syllable English words and examine only the lexical stress placement of ME Chinese speakers. The main reason ME Chinese speakers are chosen for this study is to enable a comparison between them and SgE Chinese speakers, and to control inter-ethnic differences, based on Low and Grabe's (1999) study on lexical stress placement (see 3.1).

The objectives of this study are as follows:

- i. To examine the lexical stress placement in three-syllable English words by the ME speakers in this study in phrase-final and phrase-medial positions.
- ii. To investigate the assumption that ME speakers stress the last syllable in polysyllabic words.
- iii. To identify the similarities and/or differences of the duration and fundamental frequency of syllables among ME, SgE and BrE .

In relation to these objectives, the research questions of this study are:

- i. To what extent is lexical stress placed on the last syllable of polysyllabic words?
- ii. To what extent is stress placement in ME similar to SgE and BrE?

1.4 Rationale of Study

The main intention of this study is to verify the assumption that ME stress is placed on the last syllable of polysyllabic words and to examine the claim that there is a cross-varietal difference between BrE and ME in lexical stress placement based on acoustic evidence, of which there is no published data at the time of writing.

1.5 Significance of Study

This study is an attempt to fill the research gap on stress placement in ME, which is mostly based on impressionistic evidence. It will provide more concrete evidence and explanation and enable comparison with regional variety. It will also make possible the identification of the acoustic features of stress in ME that will add value to the current

description of ME with regard to stress. It will provide insights into why ME is perceived to be stressed on the last syllable. By identifying the features of ME acoustically, a realistic approach to pronunciation may be implemented within ELT pedagogy, which appears to be gearing towards the use of BrE pronunciation as a model (Satiman, 2010), a surprising move from current trends to go with endonormative models (Rajadurai, 2006).

1.6 Scope and Limitation of Study

This study will only look at how subjects stress polysyllabic words embedded within an intonation phrase. This study will only examine the pronunciation of ten Malaysian English speakers of Chinese ethnicity, who are undergraduates at the University of Malaya. Their levels of proficiency are similar and they come from similar socio-economic and educational backgrounds. Therefore, the findings of this study are accurate only within this context. This preliminary study makes no extensive claims, but rather, serves to open a way for further study in this area based on acoustic analysis.

1.7 Overview of Dissertation

This chapter provided the background of the research, as well as the objectives, rationale and the significance of this study. In the next chapter, a review of relevant literature is presented. This is followed by an account of the theoretical underpinnings and research design for this study in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4, the findings of the study will be set out. Finally, in Chapter 5, the study will conclude with a discussion of the findings, as well as the significance and usefulness of the findings of this research, as well as direction for further research.