

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

5.0 Introduction

This chapter begins with a summary of the study of lexical stress placement in polysyllabic words produced by the Malaysian English (ME) speakers of Chinese origin, which includes the aim of the study, the objectives of the study, the results of the study, the main findings as well as the conclusions drawn from them, followed by direction for further research.

5.1 Summary of Study

The main purpose of this study was to examine acoustic data in relation to stress placement to identify lexical stress placement of ME speakers in this study in polysyllabic words. This enquiry was considered important because there was a lack of descriptions of stress placement in ME in general based on acoustic evidence, most were based on impressionistic data, and there was a need for a collection of acoustic data to provide more concrete evidence and explanation to enable comparison with regional variety.

Two research questions were put forth at the start of the research. The first question was to what extent lexical stress is placed on the last syllable of polysyllabic, specifically, three-syllable English words in ME in terms of duration and fundamental frequency (F0). Two experiments were conducted to achieve this objective; the first experiment measured the duration and F0 of each syllable in ten adverbs in carrier sentences in phrase-final and

phrase-medial positions, and the second had five nouns in carrier sentences in phrase-medial position. The duration and F0 in both experiments were measured using Praat. Based on the acoustic evidence, ME speakers appeared to have stressed some words in certain ways; some words were stressed on the initial syllable, some on the penultimate syllable and some on the final syllable regardless of the word's position in a carrier sentence. Not every word had the longest duration and the highest F0 in the final syllable, thus, negating the assumption that ME speakers always stress the last syllable in polysyllabic words. There seemed to be no set rule in ME in relation to stress placement, as stress placement appeared not to be on a certain syllable every time. Stress placement in ME seems to depend on the speaker, as average duration and F0 show a different result when compared to individual duration and F0.

The second research question of this study was to what extent stress placement in ME is similar to Singapore English (SgE) and British English (BrE). This was done by comparing the results of this study with that of Low and Grabe's (1999) study of lexical stress placement in SgE and BrE. In their study, Low and Grabe (1999) found that SgE had more phrase-final lengthening than BrE. In SgE, the final syllable was 22% longer than the penultimate syllable. In BrE, the final syllable was 5% shorter than the penultimate syllable. In ME, the final syllable is 4% longer than the penultimate syllable in ME. This shows that there is more phrase-final lengthening in SgE than ME and BrE.

As for phrase-medial position, the final syllable was 5% shorter than the penultimate syllable in SgE. In BrE, the final syllable was 41% shorter while in ME, the final syllable

was 32% shorter than the penultimate syllable. This shows a relatively similar data across the three varieties; the final syllables of the test words were shorter than the penultimate syllables. This again negates the assumption that ME speakers always stress the last syllable in polysyllabic words.

It is difficult to ascertain which one syllable in a polysyllabic word is always stressed by ME speakers in all the test words. In the first experiment, phrase-final lengthening was evident in four out of ten words. Based on the longest duration, four of the ten words were stressed on the first syllable, three of them were stressed on the penultimate syllable, and the last three on the final syllable. Therefore, based on the above durational results, it is not possible to say which one syllable in the three-syllable words is always stressed in ME.

In phrase-medial position, as expected, there was no lengthening effect in the final syllable. It could be concluded that ME speakers stressed the initial syllable of three-syllable words in phrase-medial position and therefore it is how ME speakers place lexical stress in three-syllable words, however, looking at the ten words, only half the words were stressed on the initial syllable, while the other half were stressed on the penultimate syllable. In Experiment 2, the same mixed results were found. Based on the highest average duration, two words were stressed on the initial syllable, two words on the penultimate syllable and one on the final syllable. It is again difficult to say which syllable in a three-syllable word is always stressed based on duration, as the results show

a possibility of lexical stress placement in either the initial syllable or the penultimate syllable.

Based on the F0 results, nine words were stressed on the initial syllable, while one was stressed on the penultimate syllable. In phrase-medial position, it is not possible to say that the initial syllable was always stressed, as based on the highest F0, two words were stressed on the initial syllable, two words stressed on the penultimate syllable and six words stressed on the final syllable. In Experiment 2, four words were stressed on the initial syllable, and one was stressed on the penultimate syllable. It is difficult to conclude which one syllable in the three-syllable words is always stressed based on these results.

The mixed results above suggest that it is not possible to say which syllable in a three-syllable word is always stressed in ME. Perhaps stress placement in ME cannot be determined by measuring duration and F0 alone. Stressed syllables usually have higher F0 and longer duration than unstressed syllables, but the acoustic evidence in this study has shown that a syllable with a higher F0 may not have a longer duration than other syllables, while a syllable with a longer duration may not have a higher F0 compared to other syllables in the same word. It is therefore difficult to ascertain where stress placement is in ME by looking at these two correlates of stress. Perhaps stress placement in ME can be better understood by looking at other correlates of stress such as intensity and vowel quality.

Another possibility for the mixed results is that stress could be irrelevant in the description of ME, just as stress is “irrelevant in the description of Malay” (Zuraidah, Knowles & Yong, 2008). Malay is the language used as the medium of instruction in the ten subjects’ primary school and secondary school (a total of eleven years) education, which could be an influence to the subjects. According to Zuraidah, Knowles and Yong (2008), “there is no consistent understanding in the literature of what stress is” in Malay. They have found that in Malay, although there is a tendency for lexical stress to fall on the penultimate syllable, the evidence collapsed in a wider context, as they discovered that the word is “not a relevant prosodic unit in Malay” and that the syllable plays “at best a marginal role in Malay phonology” (Zuraidah, Knowles & Yong, 2008, Section 8). In other words, if the syllable is not relevant in Malay, and the syllable is the domain of stress, then stress would not be relevant in Malay. If ME speakers pronounce English words as they do Malay words, then stress would also be irrelevant in ME. Zuraidah, Knowles and Yong (2008, Section 10) conclude that “the whole notion of stress is irrelevant in the description of Malay”. Perhaps also, stress is irrelevant in the description of ME, that there is no word stress in ME.

All ten subjects are Malaysian Chinese, thus, there is a possibility of influence from other local languages, as the ten subjects speak Malay as their second, and Chinese as their third language.

5.2 Direction for Further Research

This study has provided insights into the way ME speakers of Chinese origin “stress” polysyllabic words in terms of duration and F0. It appears that stress may not be relevant in the description of ME. Further study is recommended to substantiate this, possibly by examining other correlates of stress such as intensity and vowel quality.

Also, this study has shown that based on acoustic evidence, the assumption that ME speakers always place lexical stress on the final syllable is not true. This conclusion would not have been possible with impressionistic data. Thus, this study opens new horizons to using acoustic analysis, especially to ascertain stress placement or even the relevance of stress in describing ME. However, this study is limited by the number of speakers and the fact that the speakers are all of Chinese origin who use English as their first language. Hence, further research is needed to look at the stress patterns of Malaysian Chinese who speak a Chinese language as their first language and also in the speech produced by Malaysians of other ethnic groups.