RESEARCH ARTICLE

ENGLISH AND MALAYSIAN ENGLISH VOWELS: THEORETICAL AND APPLIED PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

This paper sets out to describe the vowels of Malaysian English with reference to those of standard British English and American English accents from a broadly phonemic perspective. More precisely, Malaysian English vowels will be compared with Received Pronunciation (RP) and General American (GA) vowels as used by educated Malaysians. The data is derived from my own participant observations of students, teachers, and administrative staff from diverse ethnic backgrounds in classrooms, offices, meeting rooms, conference halls, corridors, and canteens over a number of years during my professorship at International Islamic University Malaysia betrween 1991-1997. No tape or video recorders or writing tools were used; it is just about my own observations, hearings, and good memory, thank God. The analysis of the results is thus impressionistic, which was the standard practice of leaders in the field like Daniel Jones, D. Abercrombie, and A. C. Gimson and the great Arabic linguists and lexicographers before them like Alkhaleel, Sibawaihi, and Ibn Manzoor. The results indicate that although Malaysians use English vowels in characteristically unique ways, reflecting their linguistic and cultural backgrounds, their model target is British English. That is, the quality of their vowels is more like British English than otherwise. Furthermore, this implies that Malaysian English is intelligible to all users of English, native and non-native alike. In short, Malaysian English is very much on the way of indigenization. It may not be too long perhaps before it can overtake many local languages there.

Keywords: Vowels, Malaysian English, British English (RP), American English (GA), descriptive phonetics and phonology

INTRODUCTION

Jassem (1993a: Ch.8) called for the intensification of research into all aspects of Malaysian English: linguistic, sociolinguistic, and applied. Although Jassem (1994a) took some steps into this direction, these

were of a tentative nature. A lot of work, therefore, needs to be done on English in Malaysia and whatever work has been conducted so far is limited in scope and content (e.g., Muhamad 1994: 8-9). The sound system of this accent in particular, is mostly virgin territory still (cf. Jassem 1993a: Ch. 5, 1994a: 138-144). This paper can thus be seen as a pioneering or pilot attempt in the detailed investigation of the pronunciation of English in this country, with emphasis on the vowels.

1.1 ENGLISH ACCENTS AND VOWELS

The phonemic inventory of English consists of a relatively large number of sounds: twenty five consonants and twenty five vowels (Roach 2008; Celce-Murcia 2010). While consonants can be more easily and readily identified and described, vowels are very elusive because they differ from accent to accent and speaker to speaker. Indeed, most differences between English accents lie in vowels, which vary as to their total number, quality, and distribution. This paper will identify Malaysian English vowels with reference to the two mainstream standard accents of English: Received Pronunciation (RP) (e.g., Roach 2008) and General American (GA) (e.g., Celce-Murcia 2010). RP refers to educated Southern England middle class speech, which is spoken by less than 5% of the English population (see Jassem 1993a: 101-105; Trudgill 1974). GA is a US non-regional educated standard accent, which is also known as Network English because of its use on TV and radio (see Wells 1982: 467-471).

1.1.1 RP VOWELS

Vowels can be examined on the basis of quality, quantity, and complexity. Complexity splits vowels into simple or pure vowels and compound vowels (diphthongs and triphthongs). Quantity is length, which discerns between short and long vowels. Quality involves a number of parameters, all of which relate to how vowels are produced: i.e., part of the tongue, tongue height, length, and lip shape (e.g., Roach 2008; Celce-Murcia 2010).

RP has twenty five vowels at least, which can be divided into twelve pure vowels, eight diphthongs, and five triphthongs (Roach 2008). On the basis of the part of the tongue involved in their articulation, the pure vowels can be further sub-divided into:
a)   Front vowels as in *see; sin; egg;* and *ca*t.
b)   Central vowels as in *women; ago, father; girl, work; cut;* and *cat.*
c)   Back vowels as in *car, father; on; or, taught; put, good;* and *moon, boot.*

As to diphthongs, they are so called because they consist of two vowel elements. The second vowel element may be one of three:
a)   Diphthongs ending with the short front high vowel of *sin,* which include the three vowels of *say, make; I, buy;* and *toy, boy;* they are called rising diphthongs.
b)   Diphthohgs ending with the short back high vowel of *put,* which comprise the two vowels of *so, no* and *now, cow*; these are also called rising diphthongs.
c)   Diphthongs ending with the short central vowel of ago, which include the three vowels of *ear, beer; air, hair;* and *poor, tour, sure*;   these are called centring diphthongs.

Finally, triphthongs. There are five such vowels in RP, which are originally diphthongs plus the central vowel of ago. These are the vowels of (i) *sayer, layer,* (ii) *higher, buyer*; (iii) *coward, our,* (iv) *lawyer, Soya,* and (v) *lower, slower.* Some of these vowels are undergoing change in progress in young RP speech, especially those of *higher, tire* and *our, hour, tower* which rhyme with that of *tar, car, bar* (see Roach 2008), a process known as smoothing or monophthongization.

All the above vowels have other sub-types called allophones which need not concern us here. There is also a great deal of geographical and sociolinguistic variation involving these vowels (see Celce-Murcia 2010; Roach 2008; Wells 1982, vol. 2; Trudgill 1994; Jassem 1993a: Ch. 6).

1.1.2 GENERAL AMERICAN ENGLISH VOWELS

General American differs from RP in the number of vowels as well as their distribution or incidence. General American vowels divide into two groups: pure vowels and diphthongs. Thus, it lacks triphthongs.

The pure vowels are eleven in number and can be categorized, like RP, into:

a)   Front vowels which are the same as RP vowels, in general.

b)   Central vowels which are also the same as RP vowels, except for the vowel of _girl_, _world_, in which case it is pronounced with the vowel of _ago_ followed by an /r/. Also the vowel of _cut_ is lacking in some accents in which it is said with the vowel of _ago_.

c)   Back Vowels which are the vowels of _car, father_; _on, Tom; law, thought; put;_ and _moon_. The quality and quantity of the _car_ vowel is slightly different from its RP counterpart; it is not as long. Further, the vowel of _on_ is the same as the vowel of _car_ and/or _door_.

As to diphthongs, General American has the following diphthongs:

a)   Those ending with the vowel of _sin_, which include _make; fine;_ and _boy;_

b)   Those ending with the vowel of _put_, which comprise _cow, now;_ and _so, boat_. The quality of the _so_ vowel is different from its RP pronunciation.

Thus the total inventory of General American vowels is 14-16, less 6-8 vowels than RP (for further detail, see Celca-Murcia et al 1996: Ch.4, 2010; Dauer 1993: 29; Wells 1982: 120, 467-488).   The main difference from RP is that General American lacks the diphthongs and triphthongs which end with the central vowel of _ago_, because these vowels are due to the silencing of /r/ in their RP pronunciation. So pronouncing /r/ in such cases has greatly reduced the number of GA vowels and made it a lot easier and simpler (see Jassem 1993a: Ch. 6).

1.1.3 MALAYSIAN ENGLISH VOWELS

There are several varieties of Malaysian English (Jassem 1994a: Ch.2). However, educated Malaysian English is a continuum, comprised of different levels: high educated Malaysian English, medial educated Malaysian English, and low educated Malaysian English (cf. Jassem 1994a: Ch.2). The first is characteristic of those speakers who are university-educated and/or (near-native) speakers of English as a first or home language and whose medium of school instruction was English. Medial Educated Malaysian English is used by those speakers who are still studying for their first university degree and whose medium of instruction is English to a large extent. Low Educated Malaysian English relates to those who have completed their secondary education and whose medium of instruction is Bahasa Malaysia, Mandarin, Cantonese, Tamil or any other local language. To this group, English is studied as a subject at school, which may or may not be used outside of the school confines. The present discussion will be concerned in the main with those of the second type. In the speech of educated Malaysians or what Jassem (1994a: 28) has designated high Malaysian English, one can distinguish the following vowels.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

2.1 Data Collection

The data is derived from my own participant observations of students, teachers, and administrative staff from diverse ethnic backgrounds in classrooms, offices, meeting rooms, conference halls, corridors, and canteens over a number of years during my professorship at International Islamic University Malaysia between 1991-1997. No tape or video recorders or writing tools were used; it is just about my own personal observations, hearings, and good memory, thank God.

2.2 Data Analysis

The phonemic analysis approach will be used in data analysis (for an overview, see Roach 2008: Chs. 5 & 13; Ladefoged 2001). A phoneme may be defined as the minimal or smallest phonetic or sound unit which distinguishes between word meanings such as _tea_ and _too_, _to_ and _do_ in which the vowels and the consonants are phonemes because in each case there is a different meaning. The particular pronunciations- called realizations- of the phonemes are termed allophones such as _sea/see, seen/seed,_ and _seat/seek_ in which the

long vowel /i:/ varies in duration where it is the longest in *sea/see* but the shortest in *seat/seek* with *seen/seed* being half-way in-between. Allophones do not change meanings, however.

Moreover, the analysis of the results will be impressionistic, which was and still is the standard practice of leaders in the field down from Daniel Jones, D. Abercrombie, and A. C. Gimson to Ladefoged (2001), Roach (2008), and Celce-Murcia et al (2010) as well as the great Arabic linguists and lexicographers before them like Alkhaleel, Sibawaihi, and Ibn Manzoor (see Jassem 2014a). Acoustic analyses would definitely yield more precise results (e.g., Ladefoged 2001) but these were beyond my capacity and resources.

3. THE RESULTS

3.1 Pure Vowels

These can be divided by length, tongue height and part into the following categories.

3.1.1   Front Vowels

These include the vowels of *see, sit, egg,* and *cat*. Educated Malaysians produce all these vowels in general. However, their distribution differs considerably from RP. The *egg* vowel has a mid-low rather than a mid-high variant. The *cat* vowel is said with a low central rather than a low front vowel. The *sit* vowel in final position as in *happy, funny* is said with the long vowel of *see*. The *see* vowel is sometimes said with that of *sin* in certain contexts. A doctoral ESL Malay female student has once said: "We *sick* excellence and quality for our students" where *seek* was intended, of course.

3.1.2 Central Vowels

They include the vowels of *women; ago, father; girl, work; cut;* and *cat*. Educated Malaysians vary in their pronunciation of these vowels. The central vowel of *ago* and *father* are differently pronounced where it is prolonged and even stressed in the latter case especially at pause. That is, *fatheeee, teacheeee*. The quality of this vowel may vary between the vowel of *egg* (a low-mid variant), the vowel of *cat* (a low-central variant), or the vowel of *girl* (a long central variant).

The vowel of *girl* and *work* is usually reduced in length, so it is not as long as its RP equivalent. In both *father* and *girl*, the /r/ is silent. The vowel of *cut* does not exist in most educated users of Malaysian English where it is pronounced with the vowel of *ago* with the exception of the word *mother* which has an RP variant. However, it only takes a little training to enable them to produce it. Finally, *cat* has a low central rather than a low front vowel.

3.1.3   Back vowels

These are the vowels of *car, father; on; taught, court; put;* and *moon*. Educated Malaysian English users employ all these vowels. However, two things can be noted here:

a)   *Length:* The vowels of *car* and *court* are usually reduced in length; they are not as long as their RP equivalents. So *car* and *court* are more like their General American variants, though with silent /r/ of course.

b)   *Incidence:*   The positions of these vowels in the word affect their pronunciation. This is an area beyond the scope of this work which will be left for future research.

3.2 Diphthongs

One can distinguish the following diphthongs for educated Malaysian English.

a)   Those that end with the vowel of *sin*, which include: *fine, I; boy, toy*. The vowel of *make, say* is lacking in most speakers who replace it with the vowel of *egg* with added length, just as happens in Scottish English and Northern England speech and elsewhere.

 b) Those that end with the vowel of *put*, which includes *now, cow*. As to the vowel of *so* and *no*, it is mostly lacking in educated Malaysian speech, a feature that it shares with many other native varieties of English

as in the above-mentioned ones. Thus, *no* is pronounced as a long vowel *noo, soo,* which can be described as a long, mid-high, rounded, back vowel.

c) Those that terminate with the central vowel of *ago,* which include the vowels of *ear, beer; air, hair;* and *poor, tour, sure*. All these vowels are produced with their RP or near-RP equivalents. The only difference is that the vowels of *ear, poor,* and all similar cases have a relatively longer first element which is sometimes followed by the /y/ of *yes* and /w/ of *we*. Thus, one is likely to hear /eeya/, /beeya/, /poowa/; of course, /r/ is silent in all such cases. Slow speech delivery is responsible for this manner of pronunciation, it seems.

3.3 Triphthongs

Educated Malaysian English has five triphthongs in contrast to what Jassem (1994a: 140) claims. These are generally the same as their RP counterparts. However, a few remarks are worth noting in this connection:

a) These triphthongs are pronounced at a slower, more relaxed pace than in RP, in which they tend to be more quickly articulated to such an extent that the second element is dropped. Moreover, the triphthongs of *tire, tour* rhyme with the vowel of *tar* with which they have merged in young RP speakers. The same applies to *our* and *a*. Such merger is not heard in Malaysian English.

b) Because of their slower delivery, Malaysians often insert a /y/ or /w/ between the second and the third element of the triphthong. For example, *layer* /leeya/; *lower* /loowa/; *tower* /towwa/.

c) The triphthongs of *sayer* and *lower* are lacking and are replaced by a lengthened first vowel (see above).

To sum up, educated Malaysian English vowels are obviously British English-type, though not necessarily RP-type. Thus, their number and quality are more similar to RP than to General American.

4. DISCUSSION

The discussion will focus on one theoretical and two main practical or applied issues. The former concerns the number, quality and quantity as well as incidence of Malaysian English vowels while the latter relate to model accent and mutual intelligibility.

As to the theoretical aspects, Malaysian English has almost all RP vowels, which are no less than twenty in number. However, they differ slightly in both quality and quantity from RP vowels. For example, high vowels may be slight lower like the vowel of *egg*; diphthongs may be monophthongal in some cases like the vowels of *wait, no*; long vowels like *seek, eat* may be shorter while short vowels like *ship, sick, it* may be longer, which depends on incidence or the position of the vowel in the word. Detailed investigations are needed to clarify this point further.

Concerning applied aspects, model accent is of primary importance. One might ask whether Malaysian speakers of English model their accents on British English, American English, Australian English, or Malaysian English. From the above description and through personal observations, teaching experience and academic research, one can confirm that the majority of Malaysian English speakers take British English- more precisely, English English rather than Scottish or Irish English- as their model accent. A tiny, tiny minority look up to American English as their model. None points to Australian English or any other accent of English as their favourite target. On the whole, one can safely say that Malaysian English is modelled on British English. For those speakers who adopt American accent features, these can also be ignored as the /r/ is the only American English feature that is apparent in their speech- a feature not exclusively restricted to American English usage as it is also used in many British English accents (Wells 1982 ; Trudgill 1994).

If one were to take one single feature on the basis of which to identify the model accent of Malaysian users, one would opt for post-vocalic /r/ as in *car, ear, air* (Jassem 2014c). Here the vast majority of speakers (over 90%) drop it, a characteristic English English pronunciation. Malaysian students at the International Islamic University Malaysia are semi-categorical users of r-lessness in this respect. /r/-ful pronunciations are very rarely heard. During around 6 years of teaching there, only two students were observed to have used it. In addition, Malaysian teacher trainees, enrolled on IIUM TESL graduate programmes, also choose British

English as their target accent. So on the whole, the country is still loyal to their colonial past; very much so, indeed.

But this does not have to imply that Malaysian users of English have British native accents. This would be very odd indeed, except for the lucky few who received British education or were born for British English native speaker families. Most Malaysians speak English with a Malaysian accent, which is ethnically coloured: i.e., Malay English, Indian English, Chinese English (see Jassem 1994a: 60-70).

As to intelligibility, intelligible and comprehensible speech is crucial to successful communication. Thus, the more similar accents are, the more intelligible they become and vice versa. Very often it happens that certain native speakers of English find it very, very hard to understand other native speakers of the same language. These difficulties increase with age, degree of education, and country or region. Good users of a language, therefore, adapt their accent or dialect to make their fellow countrymen and foreigners understand them (see Jassem & Jassem 1996).

The intelligibility of Malaysian English accents very much depends on many criteria like social factors (e.g., education, occupation, class, age and gender) and educated accent level (e.g., low accent, mid accent, high accent) (cf. Jassem 1994a: 11-30). On the whole, one can discern between educated and non-educated Malaysian English as far as intelligibility is concerned. Educated Malaysian English is fully mutually intelligible with other English accents- maybe, more readily so since most such speakers only know standard English. Indeed, to British users of English, Malaysian English may be more easily understood than many varieties of American or Australian English.

Non-educated Malaysian English might be a little harder to understand initially due to its peculiar characteristics at the phonetic, grammatical, lexical and discourse level (see Jassem 1994a: Ch.5, 2013) This type of English looks like a kind of pidgin English, which needs a little getting used to (see Jassem 1994a: 19). The English speaker, native or non-native alike, shall have no difficulty communicating with Malaysians and getting on with them and along with their business: They are friendly, helpful, understanding and wise.

5. CONCLUSION

Malaysian English is fast becoming very much an indigenous variety of English, having developed its characteristic phonetic (and linguistic) features. This paper has scratched the tip of the iceberg only and so Malaysian English is still very fertile and mostly virgin territory in need of more research on all levels of language analysis: phonetically, morphologically, grammatically, and lexically or semantically (see Jassem 1993a: Ch. 8, 1995, 1996a). The purpose of such research should be to describe the language and standardize it in the sense of bringing it closer and closer to native varieties such as British English. This should be a top priority because English in this country is mainly used for educational and scientific advancement, economic advantage, and social prosperity and enrichment. The best way forward, then, is to approach such a language situation from a sociolinguistic perspective (e.g, Labov 2010; Herk 2012; Chambers, J.K. et al. 2008; Jassem 1993b, 1994a-b, 1996, 2013; Trudgill 1974).

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