

Lecture 2: Suprasegmental Features of Singapore English pronunciation: can the world understand us?

Dr Low Ee Ling
National Institute of Education
Nanyang Technological University
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Lecture Synopsis:

- An overview of suprasegmental features in Singapore English (SE)
- What is the effect of SE pronunciation on intelligibility?

SE Stress Placement

- 1. Stressing final syllables of sentences
 - *She did it careful**LY**.*
 - *She **CARE**fully removed his stitches.*
- 2. Stress for compounds and phrases
 - SSE: *He loves this arm**CHAIR*** (compound)
 - *He loves this old **CHAIR*** (phrase)
 - SBE: *He loves this **ARM**chair* (compound)
 - *He loves this old **CHAIR*** (phrase)

Stress Placement

- 3. Lack of deaccenting
- **I went to the shop to buy CAKES but they'd run out of CAKES.*
- 4. Stress distinction for nouns and verbs
- e.g. BE: *CONvert (noun) conVERT (verb)*
SE: *conVERT (noun and verb)*

Stress Placement

- 5. Different stress placement
- nouns
- e.g. BE: *COLleague* SE: *colLEAGUE*
CALendar *caLENDAR*
- verbs
- e.g. BE: *INculcate* SE: *inCULcate*
- adjectives
- e.g. BE: *COMpetent* SE: *comPEtent*

Rhythm

- Stress-timed: British English
- Syllable-timed: Singapore English
- e.g. Jane has four to last the winter
- Underlined syllables receive stress in BE.
In SE, every syllable is stressed.

INTONATION

Sentence stress is important to focus listeners' attention:

A: I need to borrow your car

B: Which car?

A: Your new car.

(Grant 1993: 118)

INTONATION

- The distinction between stressed (more prominent) and unstressed syllables (less prominent) is unclear making it difficult to describe SE in terms of a system developed for BE.
- BE: *it was JOHN who did it*
- SE: *it was John who did IT*
- Question: where is the nucleus or most prominent syllable in the utterance in SE?

Which ones are important?

- 1. Frequency of occurrence
- (see text frequencies of RP phonemes from Fry 1947, quoted in Cruttenden 1994)
- Vowels in *pet* vs *pat* more frequent than those in *pool* vs *pull*
- Single quality vowels more frequent than dual quality ones

2. Minimal Pairs

- Pairs of words differing in only one place
e.g. *flesh* vs *flash*
- *flesh* vs *flash* 302
- *sheep* vs *ship* 313
- *rip* vs *lip* 589
- (John Higgins)

3. Occurrence Elsewhere

- Which one is more serious?

He back(ed) that team

- *He back (s) that team*

4. Shibboleths

- Judges 12: 4-6
- *And when any Ephraimite who escaped said, "Let me cross over," the men of Gilead would say, "Are you an Ephraimite?" If he said "No," then they would say to him, "Then say 'Shibboleth'!" And he would say, "Sibboleth," for he could not pronounce it right. Then they would take him and kill him at the fords of Jordan.*
- 'three' vs 'tree' is heavily stigmatised in SE

5. Intelligibility Issues

- Jenkins' Research (2000): to preserve international intelligibility, we need:
- (i) all consonant distinctions
- (ii) to avoid certain consonant cluster simplifications
- *win (t) er, in (t) ernational*
- (iii) vowel length distinctions

How about suprasegmentals?

- *“...the complexity of the total set of sequential and prosodic components of intonation and of paralinguistic features makes it a very difficult thing to teach...the attitudinal use of intonation is something that is best acquired through talking, writing and listening to English speakers...”*
- (Roach 1991:168)

“Intelligibility is an elusive and complex phenomenon and one that cannot be guaranteed by pronunciation alone”

Jenkins 2000:126

“In retaining the sounds, the rhythms and the intonation of our mother tongue, we avoid cutting the umbilical cords which tie us to our mother”

Daniels (1995)