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The Phonological Features of Malaysian English (MAE) 2.0

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ABSTRACT

The study of Malaysian English (ME) has gained significant attention due to its emergence as a distinct variety within World Englishes. However, while its lexical, syntactical, and phonological features are well recognised, research on its phonological features remains under-explored. This study provides an in-depth analysis of the phonological features of ME, focusing on three main areas: vowels, consonants, and suprasegmentals. Additionally, the study explores the influence of Malaysia's multilingual context on the development of these phonological features. The research contributes to the ongoing standardisation of ME and its recognition as a unique variety of World English.

Keywords: Malaysian English, Phonological Features, Vowel Quality, Consonants, Suprasegmentals

1. INTRODUCTION

Malaysian English (ME) is recognised as a unique variety of English that has developed through the influence of Malaysia's multilingual environment. English, introduced by the British during colonisation, has since evolved into a variety distinct from other Englishes worldwide. The phonological features of ME, however, remain understudied in comparison to its lexical and syntactical features (Baskaran, 2005). Early studies by Platt and Weber (1980) classified ME speakers into two groups: those from English-medium schools (ME I) and those from Malay-medium schools (ME II). The development of ME's phonological system has been shaped by various social and linguistic factors, including the influence of the Malay, Chinese, and Indian languages spoken by the majority of Malaysia's population. This study examines the phonological features of ME, with a focus on vowels, consonants, and suprasegmental features, and considers how these features reflect the country's diverse ethnic background (Rajadurai, 2006; Yamaguchi, 2014).

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach, using a library research design to analyse the phonological features of Malaysian English. The primary data sources include books, academic journals, and expert consultations. The study focuses on existing works, especially those by Baskaran (2005), Rajadurai (2006), and other researchers, to identify key phonological features of ME. These features are categorised into three major areas: vowels, consonants, and suprasegmentals. The data was collected from a range of sources that discuss the phonological characteristics of ME and how these features align with or differ from other varieties of English.

The methodology also involved a detailed review of phonological inventories and frameworks, such as those outlined by Baskaran (2005) and Phoon and Maclagan (2009), to provide a comprehensive understanding of ME's phonology.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from the research reveal that Malaysian English exhibits several distinct phonological features that set it apart from Received Pronunciation (RP).

Firstly, the vowels in ME show a pattern of centralisation and fronting. For example, the vowel /æ/ in the word "trap" is commonly realised as /ɛ/ (Baskaran, 2005). Other vowels such as /ʌ/ and /ɔ/ also exhibit fronting, which differs from RP pronunciation (Rajadurai, 2006). These changes are influenced by the local languages spoken by the Malaysian population, particularly Malay.

In addition to vowel quality, the length of vowels in ME varies. Long vowels are often shortened in unstressed syllables. For instance, the vowel /i:/ in "field" is pronounced as a shortened /i/ in ME, while vowels like /u/ may be lengthened in specific contexts (Baskaran, 2005; Rajadurai, 2006).

Consonant features in ME also reflect the influence of Malaysia's multilingual context. One of the most prominent features is consonant cluster reduction. For example, words like "hundred" and "syndrome" tend to lose the final consonant cluster, resulting in pronunciations like /hʌnrəd/ instead of the RP /hʌndrəd/ (Baskaran, 2005). Furthermore, ME displays significant instances of glottalisation, where final consonants like /g/ and /d/ are replaced with a glottal stop, especially in informal speech (Rajadurai, 2006).

The study also observed that fricatives in ME often undergo devoicing. For example, voiced fricatives such as /v/ and /z/ are frequently replaced with their voiceless counterparts /f/ and /s/, while dental fricatives like /θ/ and /ð/ are substituted with alveolar stops like /t/ and /d/ (Yamaguchi, 2014). These substitutions are a direct result of the phonological constraints of the speakers' native languages, mainly Malay, which lacks these fricative sounds.

Regarding suprasegmental features, ME follows a syllable-timed rhythm, unlike RP's stress-timed rhythm. In ME, all syllables, whether stressed or unstressed, are given approximately equal weight, which is more evident in casual speech (Rajadurai, 2006). Additionally, ME exhibits relatively flat intonation patterns compared to other varieties of English. Although pitch can shift to indicate questions or emotional emphasis, these intonation patterns are not as varied as those found in RP or different varieties of English (Yamaguchi, 2014).

4. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the distinctive phonological features of Malaysian English, demonstrating how ME deviates from Received Pronunciation in terms of vowel quality, consonant usage, and suprasegmental features. These differences reflect the influence of Malaysia's multilingual society, where the various ethnic groups within the country shape phonological features. The findings underscore the importance of recognising ME as a unique variety of World English. Further research is necessary to explore regional variations and the suprasegmental features of ME, which will contribute to the standardisation of its phonological system and reinforce its status as a distinct variety of English.

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