

Identification of Bruneian Ethnic Groups from their English Pronunciation

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Abstract

The study investigates the identification of the two main ethnic groups in Brunei, the Malays and the Chinese, from their speech in English using recordings of a read passage. Twenty undergraduate students from Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD) were recorded reading a passage and forty undergraduate students listened to short extracts of the recordings and were asked to indicate the speakers' ethnicity as Malay or Chinese. The study finds that the ethnicity of the speakers in Brunei can be identified quite accurately by the Bruneian listeners based on their read speech, with an accuracy rate of 74%, and there is no significant difference in the identification of Bruneian Malays and Chinese. It is suggested that there is perhaps not much difference in the pronunciation of English of the Malays and Chinese in Brunei.

Introduction

Malay is recognized as the official language of Brunei and is regarded 'the language of national culture and spiritual identity' while English is seen as 'the means of access to the outside world' that has a high status and is linked to educational success (Ozog, 1996, p. 159). English is widely spoken in Brunei and has an official place in the mass media with two daily English newspapers, as well as several local English radio stations (Ozog, 1996). This is due to the country's historical links with Britain as a British protectorate from 1888 to 1984 (Hussainmiya, 2006), and also the introduction of a bilingual education system in 1985. According to Jones (2007), the bilingual system of education was introduced in Brunei with objectives not only to maintain both the mother tongue (Malay) and the acquisition of English, but also to provide equal opportunities for all school children.

The largest ethnic group in Brunei are the Malays, accounting for 66% of the total population. Since 1971, it has been officially stated that the Brunei Malays consist of the ethnic and indigenous groups Brunei, Belait, Tutong, Kedayans, Bisayas, Dusuns and Muruts (Brunei Darussalam Statistical Yearbook 2008, p. 13). The second largest community are the Chinese, accounting for 11% of the population, while the remaining 23% of the population are categorised as 'Others' which includes the Iban indigenous group, expatriates and immigrants.

The bilingual education system implemented in 1985 means that all school children in Brunei have to learn to speak and write in both English and Standard Malay, regardless of their race or first language (Jones, 1996). The Malays mostly speak a variety of Brunei Malay as their first language (Clynes, 2001). The different Chinese groups speak a variety of Chinese such as Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien, Hainanese, Teochew, Foochow and Shanghainese (Dunseath, 1996), although it has been reported that about 16% of the Chinese population now use English as their first language (Asia Harvest, 2010, p. 58). It has been observed that the commonly used lingua franca in Brunei is Brunei Malay (Martin & Poedjosoedarmo, 1996). However, English is sometimes the lingua franca between different ethnic groups in Brunei, notably between the Malays and Chinese in Brunei, and also among Bruneians of all ethnic origins with foreign workers (Poedjosoedarmo, 2004).

The variety of English spoken by in Brunei has been termed 'Brunei English'. Saxena (2006, p. 155) notes that this variety is “a unique converged identity” because of its nativised features. Indeed, the distinctive features of Brunei English are influenced by the features of Brunei Malay (Poedjosoedarmo, 2004, p. 365). In his “Dynamic Model” of the evolution of Postcolonial English, Schneider (2007, p. 56) posits five phases of development such as foundation, exonormative stabilization, nativisation, endonormative stabilization, and differentiation. He suggests that Singapore English is in the fourth stage of development undergoing endonormative stabilization, which means that it is developing its own norms independent of outside influence, but he makes no mention of Brunei. Salbrina and Deterding (2010) assume that Brunei English is at an earlier stage, in the third stage of development, i.e. nativisation, partly because it is not widely used as an inter-ethnic lingua franca unlike in Singapore.

According to Platt, Weber & Ho (1984, p. 38), the pronunciation of English around the world is often influenced by the speakers' first language. Because the two main ethnic groups in Brunei, the Malays and the Chinese, do not share the same first language, this could contribute to the possibility of differences in their pronunciation of English.

To find out whether there are differences between the two main ethnic groups in their pronunciation of English, the current study investigates the extent to which the ethnicity of the speakers can be identified from their speech using recordings of a read passage. A preliminary study by Deterding (2008) involved seven Bruneian speakers and three Bruneian listeners, and he found that the accuracy rate in ethnic identification was 100%. However, results from so few speakers and listeners need to be treated with caution. The current study extends both the number of speakers and listeners.

Brunei English

Previous studies on the phonological features of Brunei English show that the TH sounds, as at the start of *think* and *that*, are frequently pronounced as [t] and [d] respectively (Diana, 2008; Mossop, 1996; Salbrina, 2009). There are also tendencies to simplify final consonant clusters with the deletion of a final plosive (Mossop, 1996; Salbrina, 2009), to use a glottal stop in the place of a final /k/, and to shorten long vowels (Mossop, 1996). Furthermore, Salbrina and Deterding (2010) found that rhoticity occurs in about 50% of their Brunei English data, which they suggest is a consequence of Brunei Malay being a rhotic variety of Malay and also because of influences from the American media. This raises the question of whether ethnically Chinese speakers are less likely to be rhotic especially as most varieties of Chinese including Mandarin and Hokkien are non-rhotic (Chung, 1996, p. 12). Only the Beijing dialect of Mandarin is rhotic, that is not generally used in Brunei (Chen, 1999, p. 39).

Like other Southeast Asian varieties of English, there is a tendency to use the plural form with uncountable nouns in Brunei English as well, such as in *luggages*, *peoples*, *underwears* and *machineries* (Ozog, 1990, p. 223). Cane (1996) compares the syntactic features of Brunei English with Standard British English and found that in Brunei English, there is tendency to use the present tense to describe past events, to use the base form of the verb in all persons of the present tense of both regular and irregular verbs, to use different prepositions, and to use the question tag *isn't it* after a declarative statement. Ozog (1990, p. 228) and Martin and Ozog (1996) note that one of the distinctive features of Brunei English is the use of the particle *bah* from Brunei Malay in informal discourse to show solidarity and rapport between speakers. This is similar in some respects to the particle *lah* which is salient in Singapore English (Low & Deterding, 2003) and Malaysian English (Goddard, 1994).

Ethnic Identification

Based on their study of the speech heard by telephone operators, Platt, Weber and Ho (1984, p. 6) concluded that the ethnic groups of the younger generation of Singaporeans could not be identified from their speech. However, Deterding and Poedjosoedarmo (2000) conducted a study of listening by students at the National Institute of Education (NIE) in Singapore to find out if they could identify ethnic groups from their speech using both conversational and formal speech, and for conversational speech, they found that the listeners were able to identify the ethnically Chinese speakers more accurately than the Malays, with an accuracy level of 94%, though for the formal speech, the speakers could not be identified reliably. Lim (2000) also concludes that Singaporeans are able to identify ethnic varieties of Singapore English, with intonation being the most distinguishing feature. Finally, Deterding (2007b, p. 7) suggests that, even for read material, there are now distinct patterns of speech for the different communities in Singapore, as listeners can identify the ethnic background of speakers with a high level of accuracy, although he found that the Chinese are the most easily identifiable, followed by the Malays, whereas the Indians are the most difficult to identify. One interpretation of these findings is that the ethnicity of Singapore speakers is becoming increasingly identifiable. It is interesting to see whether Brunei speech is similar.

Speech Data

The speakers in the current study consist of twenty female undergraduate students at UBD. Ten speakers are ethnically Malay (M1 to M10) and ten are ethnically Chinese (C1 to C10). At the time of the recording, almost all speakers were between 20 to 23 years old, and only one speaker (M4) was 35 years old. Fourteen speakers were enrolled in the BA Programme at UBD, while three were in the BSc programme, one each in the second, third and fourth years. Two speakers were enrolled in the TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) programme, and one speaker (M8) was enrolled in a non-English medium programme. Seven ethnically Malay speakers reported that Malay (Brunei Malay) is their first language, while two speakers claimed that English is their first language. One Malay speaker stated that Indonesian Malay is her first language and Brunei Malay is her second language. The three Malay speakers who did not report that Malay is their first language, however, stated that Malay (Brunei Malay) is their second language. Five ethnically Chinese speakers reported that Mandarin is their first language, while five reported that English is their first language. Despite the differences in the reported first language, all of the Chinese speakers stated English as either their first, second or third language.

The speakers were recorded reading the Wolf passage (Deterding, 2006) (Appendix A). This passage was chosen because it contains clear tokens of all the vowels and consonants of English. The speakers were recorded in a quiet office at UBD using a microphone linked to a computer and Praat software (Boersma & Weenink, 2010). A short extract lasting about ten to eleven seconds was taken from the recordings. This extract was also used in Deterding (2007) and (2008):

Raising his fist in the air, he ran down to the village shouting, “Wolf, Wolf.”
As soon as they heard him, the villagers all rushed from their homes, full of concern for his safety.

Forty first-year undergraduate students participated in the listening test. Twenty-nine of them reported that they are ethnically Malay, five of them Kedayan, two Bisaya, two Chinese, one Malay-Chinese, and one Filipino. Although the last one is classified as a Filipino, she has lived in Brunei all her life and says that she feels culturally Bruneian.

The extracts were each played once in a classroom at UBD at the start of an introductory lecture in Linguistics. After hearing each extract, the listeners were asked to write ‘M’ or ‘C’ on an answer sheet (Appendix B) for each speaker to indicate whether they perceive the speakers as ethnically Chinese or Malay. The complete listening activity took about five minutes.

Results of the Identification Test

The results of the listening test are shown in Tables 1, 2 and 3. Table 1 shows the total scores (out of 20) for the correct identification of the ethnicity of the speakers. Out of 40 listeners, only one identified 18 speakers correctly, while 2 obtained a score of 11. None of the listeners were able to correctly identify the ethnicity of all speakers, but all achieved a score above 50%. The average accuracy rate is 74%.

Score	Number of Listeners
18	1
17	7
16	5
15	9
14	10
13	3
12	3
11	2

Table 1. Scores of correct identification of ethnicity of 20 speakers by 40 Bruneian listeners on the basis of their recorded reading of a short passage

Table 2 presents the average percentage of the identification test. Although the accuracy rate of the identification of the Malays (77.5%) seems to be higher than that of the Chinese (67.7%), the difference is in fact not significant ($t=0.85$, $df=18$, $p=0.40$).

Speakers	Identified as	
	Malay	Chinese
Malay	77.5	22.5
Chinese	20.2	67.7

Table 2. Average percentage of identifications of ethnic group of 10 ethnically Malay and 10 ethnically Chinese speakers by 40 Bruneian listeners

Table 3 shows the number of listeners who identified each speaker as ethnically Malay or Chinese. The following week, when the listeners were presented with the results, identified extracts were played to the students. These consisted of M8 and C1, who were identified most accurately, and M9 and C8, who were identified least correctly.

The researcher asked the listeners what pronunciation features they considered in identifying the ethnicity of the speakers. 39 out of 40 listeners identified C1 correctly, and they reported that they were able to identify the speaker as Chinese because of her ‘accent’, ‘intonation’, and the [r] sound that they ‘cannot hear’ in the words *air*, *heard* and *concern*. This suggests that the listeners perceive non-rhoticity as a feature of Chinese speech. They also reported that from her pronunciation of the word *concern* as [kɒnsɜ:n], they were able to identify her as ethnically Chinese because they think that Malays would pronounce the first syllable with a schwa [kənsɜ:n] instead.

M8 was identified correctly by 37 out of 40 listeners. When asked why they could identify her as ethnically Malay, the listeners replied that it was from her pronunciation of the word *safety* as [seftu] instead of [seɪfti]. It may be because of the monophthongal

quality of the vowel in the first syllable as this is expected from Malay speakers, since Malay does not have diphthongs (Clynes & Deterding, 2011).

Speaker	Identified as		Speaker	Identified as	
	Malay	Chinese		Malay	Chinese
M1	34	6	C1	1	39
M2	37	3	C2	25	15
M3	34	6	C3	16	24
M4	34	6	C4	4	36
M5	28	12	C5	9	31
M6	21	19	C6	3	37
M7	37	3	C7	14	26
M8	37	3	C8	27	13
M9	20	20	C9	19	21
M10	28	12	C10	3	37

Table 3. Identifications of ethnic group of 10 ethnically Malay and 10 ethnically Chinese speakers by 40 Bruneian listeners on the basis of their recorded reading of a short passage

C8 was identified incorrectly as Malay by 27 listeners, and when they were asked why they perceive the speaker as Malay instead of Chinese, they reported that the speaker pronounced the [r] sound in *air*, *heard* and *concern*, which they think is a feature of Malay speech rather than Chinese speech. Moreover, they also stated that the speaker's pronunciation of the word *villagers* as [vɪləɪdʒəs], with the vowel in the second syllable lengthened and realised as a diphthong [eɪ], makes her sound more Malay than Chinese. This, however, contradicts what the listeners said earlier about the speech of M8, as the pronunciation of the first syllable of *safety* as a monophthong makes her sound Malay. The realisation of diphthong vowels in Malay speech is also not expected, since Malay does not have phonological diphthongs.

When asked about M9, the listeners could not give a definite answer. They added that they are familiar with the difference between the speech of Malay and Chinese Bruneians, but they are not really aware of the different features.

Conclusion

The results of the listening test show that the ethnicity of the speakers in Brunei can be identified quite accurately by the Bruneian listeners based on their read speech, with an accuracy rate of 74%, but there is no significant difference in the identification of Malay and Chinese Bruneians. This may suggest that there is perhaps not much difference in the pronunciation of English of the Malays and Chinese. Since the extracts are read from a passage, they represent formal styles of speech. Because the speakers knew that they were being recorded, they may have switched to a formal style and may tend to hypercorrect when speaking. This may be different from their conversational speech. Further research should consider extracts from conversational speech and also investigate the features of speech that help differentiate the two ethnic groups.

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Appendix A. The Wolf passage (from Deterding 2006).

The Boy who Cried Wolf

There was once a poor shepherd boy who used to watch his flocks in the fields next to a dark forest near the foot of a mountain. One hot afternoon, he thought up a good plan to get some company for himself and also have a little fun. Raising his fist in the air, he ran down to the village shouting "Wolf, Wolf." As soon as they heard him, the villagers all rushed from their homes, full of concern for his safety, and two of his cousins even stayed with him for a short while. This gave the boy so much pleasure that a few days later he tried exactly the same trick again, and once more he was successful. However, not long after, a wolf that had just escaped from the zoo was looking for a change from its usual diet of chicken and duck. So, overcoming its fear of being shot, it actually did come out from the forest and began to threaten the sheep. Racing down to the village, the boy of course cried out even louder than before. Unfortunately, as all the villagers were convinced that he was trying to fool them a third time, they told him, "Go away and don't bother us again." And so the wolf had a feast.

Appendix B. The Response Sheet

Identifying the Ethnic Group of Speakers

You will hear 20 Brunei speakers reading the following text:

Raising his fist in the air, he ran down to the village shouting “Wolf, Wolf.”
As soon as they heard him, the villagers all rushed from their homes, full of concern for his safety.

Please try to identify whether each speaker is ethnically Malay (M) or Chinese (C).

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____
11. _____
12. _____
13. _____
14. _____
15. _____
16. _____
17. _____
18. _____
19. _____
20. _____

Thank you