The interlanguage phonology of Brunei English

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This paper covers some of the phonological processes common in the interlanguage (IL) of Brunei English, together with a discussion of the respective influences of the native language (NL) and universals. As Contrastive Analysis would predict, the English IL of Bruneians has many features which can be traced directly to the NL. At the same time, most researchers these days would accept that the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) no longer provides a satisfactory explanation as to why certain features in the target language (TL) are found to be more difficult that others and that universals have a role to play. Much of the recent research into IL phonology has attempted to identify both the nature of universal constraints and the extent to which they interact with NL transfer. An attempt will be made here to identify transfer and developmental factors affecting the IL phonology of Brunei English and also to identify persistent features. This paper will show that while transfer can account for the major trends of the phonology of Brunei English, appeal must also be made to universal considerations to account for the relative strengths of these trends.

1. Background

In the context of Southeast Asia, there are very strong historical and cultural ties between the three English speaking countries; Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei. All three have undergone a similar colonial past and all three have an ethnic mix which is predominantly Malay and Chinese (though in differing proportions). This ethnic and historical similarity, together with present economic and cultural ties, has led to phonological systems which are close relations. (Singapore TV is available in the southern Malaysian states, while Malaysian TV can be viewed in Brunei and Brunei TV in parts of East Malaysia.) In fact, virtually all of the features of Malaysian and Singaporean English, identified by Platt & Weber (1980) and Platt, Weber & Ho (1983), are to be found also in Brunei. Nevertheless, it might be pointed out that there are also influences in Brunei quite different from the other two countries. Due to the unique economic situation in Brunei and the need for expatriate labour, there is a variety of ethnic or linguistic backgrounds among the workforce (e.g., Malay, Chinese, Filipino, Thai, Tamil, Hindi, English, Australian). As Ozog (1990) points out, these diverse backgrounds and their associated Englishes (e.g., Filipino English and Indian English) may be assumed to play some role in forming the phonology of Brunei English. Another difference between Brunei, Singapore, or Malaysian English lies in the high proportion of the local workforce that is sent overseas

for training (although this trend is now decreasing since the establishment of a local university). Returning Bruneians, especially those who have sat "A" Levels and attended university in the United Kingdom, have often progressed extremely far along the basilect/acrolect continuum. As a result they provide an input to the phonological system which is proportionately greater than is the case in either Singapore or Malaysia.

2. Theoretical Considerations

In contrast to activity in other domains of language (especially morphology), research into IL phonology, until comparatively recently, has tended, as Ioup and Weinberger have remarked (1987:xi), to be either ignored or trivialized. This is the area of language where CA has traditionally been seen to have the most validity, possibly due to the motor-based nature of speech production and the natural ability people have to identify the first language (L1) source of a "foreign" accent. While admitting the very powerful role of L1 transfer, research (e.g., Brière 1966, Johansson 1973) has shown that not all deviant sounds can be predicted by CA. Factors such as the data gathering method (Nemser 1971), the sociolinguistic context (W.Dickerson 1977, Schmidt 1977, Beebe 1980), the linguistic context (L.Dickerson 1974, W.Dickerson 1976), equivalence classification (Flege & Hillenbrand 1984, Flege 1987) have all been found to affect the learner's output. A.James (1988:149) also suggests that phonological chunking can take place with phrases being produced as wholes and displaying an accuracy level in advance of other phonological structures produced by the learner. Thus, taking these factors into account, it is not surprising that traditional CA, as C.James (1980:183–4) points out, both predicts IL forms that do not occur and, at the same time, does not predict some forms that do occur.

Since the advent of Universal Grammar (UG), the focus of phonological research has been into universal tendencies and the extent to which they might interact with NL transfer. Central to this research is a concept of markedness as a scale of universal difficulty with the more unmarked or core elements being intrinsically easier than the more marked or peripheral elements. Eckman (1977) presents a theory which attempts to explain why it is that some TL forms are more difficult, through being more marked, than others. This he calls the Marked Differential Hypothesis (MDH), whereby the NL and the TL can be compared according to the following criterion:

Markedness A phenomenon A in some language is more marked than B if the presence of A in a language implies the presence of B; but the presence of B does *not* imply the presence of A.

Eckman explores several areas where he claims phonological markedness can be identified. His 1981 paper proposes that there is a universal rule of Terminal Devoicing (TD) which is independent of both the NL and the TL. Since all languages allow voiceless obstruents but not all allow voiced obstruents the former are unmarked and the latter are marked. This is an implicational relationship where the presence of the latter implies the presence of the former. With respect to position, some languages (e.g., Korean) allow no voice contrast, some allow the contrast only in initial position (e.g., Corsican), some have it in initial and medial positions (e.g., German) and finally some have it in initial, medial and terminal positions (e.g., English). Thus, the presence of a medial voice contrast implies the presence of an initial contrast and the presence of a terminal contrast implies both medial and initial contrasts. Eckman uses these implicational relationships to explain why German speakers have difficulty with final voiced obstruents in English. Here the move is from a less marked position to a more marked position. On the other hand, English speakers of French do not find it difficult to articulate initial [ʒ]. Although this sound does not exist in initial position in English, it does exist in the more marked medial and terminal positions. As a result it causes no problems, as the move is from a marked position to a relatively unmarked position.

Eckman (1981) considers the situation when final obstruents are not allowed at all in the NL (e.g., Mandarin). Here he finds a schwa paragoge to be common (e.g., [tægə] for *tag* and [hizə] for *he's*) and proposes a rule of Schwa Paragoge which comes into effect when there is a NL constraint against obstruents occurring in word final position. Thus, as well as universal tendencies, the MDH must take into account the specific characteristics of both the NL and the TL.

Eckman (1987) applies the MDH to the reduction of word final consonant clusters to explain what at first sight seems like unsystematic shortening among Cantonese, Japanese and Korean speakers. He proposes an optional Consonant Cluster Reduction (CCR) rule, in which more marked features imply the presence of less marked features. The CCR rule claims that:

1. Final three consonant clusters imply the presence of two consonant clusters and final two consonant clusters imply the presence of single consonants. In each case the longer sequence is more marked.
2. Final stop-stop clusters imply the presence of, and are more marked than, fricative-stop clusters.
3. Final fricative-fricative clusters imply the presence of, and are more marked than, both fricative-stop and stop fricative clusters.

Taking these markedness conditions into account, Eckman is able to explain why certain reductions are more likely than others.

In contrast to Eckman's approach, described by A.James (1988:23) as "ad hoc", Tropf (1987) proposes an alternative explanation for universal difficulty based on sonority within the context of the syllable. Each syllable has a peak or sonority, usually located on a vowel, and the degree of sonority declines as the peripheral segments of the syllable are approached. Thus there is a hierarchical order of sonority spreading down from the vowel peak at the centre to glides, then sonorants (first liquids and then nasals) and finally obstruents (first fricatives and then plosives). The hypothesis is that the most sonorous segments are the most easily acquired while those that are the least sonorous are the most resistant to acquisition. It is claimed that sonority is a phonological-phonetic parameter which can account for forms that cannot be explained by either the constraints of the NL or the TL. Tropf found that in the German IL of Spanish speakers, the more sonorant a final target consonant was, the more likely it was to be realized in the IL.

With respect to onset clusters in a second language, Broselow (1987) proposes a vowel epenthesis rule as a way of dealing with syllable structures which would not be permissible in the NL. In the English of Egyptian speakers, words like *slide* and *floor* are realized as [silaɪd] and [filoor]. However, not all onset clusters conform to the structure of the sonority hierarchy. While the clusters in *slide* and *floor* do, the cluster in *stick* does not (fricative followed by stop). In fact the s-stop cluster is the only onset cluster, according to Broselow, to violate the sonority hierarchy and she follows Selkirk (1984) to argue in favour of the s-stop functioning at the level of a single segment. In this way she explains how her Egyptian speakers, rather than epenthesizing, prefix a vowel in words such as *study* or *ski* (realized as [istʌdi] and [iski]). Although Broselow does not discuss final