BURMESE ENGLISH ACCENT

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I. INTRODUCTION

As knowledge of the English language has become increasingly important in non-English speaking countries, many non-native varieties of English have developed due to the contact of English under various circumstances. In the case of Burma, during the British rule of the country from 1885 to 1947 English was used in the areas of government, law, and education (Han-Tin, 1990). Since Burma's independence, however, the Burmese language has been reintroduced in these areas and the use of English has diminished. The contact between the two languages has left Burma with Burmese English, which includes an accent as one of its characteristics. Little or no study has yet been done on English spoken by the Burmese. In response to the lack of research on Burmese English, this study will explore the characteristics of the Burmese English accent. The segmental and suprasegmental traits of Burmese spoken English will be described using the method suggested by Mohanan (1992) where a non-native variety of English is viewed as having a system of its own. This paper sets out to identify the phonological characteristics of Burmese English with the aim that this knowledge will assist in the comprehension of the English spoken by Burmese speakers.

Studies on non-native varieties of English such as the English spoken by the speakers of Japanese (Suenobu et al., 1992; Basson, 1988; Beckman and Pierrehumbert, 1986; Sheldon and Strange, 1982; Dickerson, 1975), Hebrew (Basson, 1988), Arabic (Munro, 1993; Eltrug, 1984; Flege and Port, 1981; Zughdul, 1979), Brazilian (Major, 1986), Dutch (Koster and Koet, 1993), Chinese (Juffs, 1990), Russian (Thompson, 1991), French (Flege and Davidian, 1984), and Hungarian (Nemser, 1971) among others enable speakers in the community of "World Englishes" to communicate with minimum misunderstanding. With the intention to familiarize other English speakers with the Burmese English accent, this paper will describe the characteristics of a strong Burmese English accent.

II. METHOD

1) Subjects

Fifteen English major students and three English instructors from Rangoon University volunteered to be the subjects for this study. All of them were Burman males who grew up speaking only Burmese and no other languages at home. A questionnaire was given to the subjects regarding

their age, level of education, total years of study of English, age at which English language learning began, and career goals.

The age of the students ranges from twenty three to thirty one. Except for one student who started at age four, the rest of the subjects started to learn English at ten years of age. In general, the instructors had studied the language three to five years longer than the students. All of the instructors had a bachelor of arts degree in English while three students were studying in the third year English major and the rest were in the fourth year. Most of the students' career goals were related to fields where the use of English language is required except for two who intended to work in fields which do not require the use of English.

2) Material

For the present study, word lists, isolated sentences, and a paragraph are selected for the data. 445 words[1] and a passage of 199 words[2] are chosen to elicit consonants, vowels, diphthongs and consonant clusters from the English phonemic system. These are presented to the subjects first for silent reading in order to familiarize them with the materials, and then for reading aloud for recording.

3) Transcription

The transcription is repeatedly checked by the author as well as by two graduate students who have taken linguistics courses including phonetics and phonology to ensure the maximum detail and accuracy.

4) Accentedness rating and grouping

Excerpts with the length of 40 to 55 seconds are taken from the reading passage. They are broken at natural pauses and are approximately 3 to 4 sentences long. Four isolated words read by each speaker precede each excerpt from the reading passage in order to familiarize the listeners with the speaker's voice. A group of eight students from Northern Illinois University (NIU) listen to the excerpts and rate the accent on the scale of one to five. The mean for each speaker is calculated and three groups are established from the ratings.

In the first group, the ratings range from a mean of 1.375 to 1.875, establishing the least accented group. In the second group, the means range from 2.75 to 3.625. The means of the most highly accented group range from 4.125 to 4.375. The present study focuses only on the speakers in the most accented group consisting of four students.

III. DESCRIPTION OF A STRONG BURMESE ENGLISH ACCENT

1) Phonemic inventory of segmentals

Consonants. The following twenty-six phonemes are found in the strong Burmese accent:

	bilabial	labio-dental	dental	alveolar	palato-alveolar	palatal	velar	glo
nasal	m			n			ŋ	
stop	p b			t d			k g	
fricative		f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ			h
affricate					tɕ, ʧ, ʤ			
liquid				l, r				
glide	w̥ w					j		

Vowels. All of the speakers use the following ten vowels:

	Close	Half-close	Half-open	Open
Front	i, ɪ		ε	
Central		ə	ʌ	
Back	u, ʊ	o	ɔ	ɑ

Diphthongs. The diphthongs are as follows:

/uə/ (or /uɑ/) as in "poor,"
/iə/ (or /iɑ/) as in "peer,"
/aɪ/ as in "my,"
/aʊ/ as in "now,"
/εə/ as in "there,"
/eɪ/ as in "name," and
/oʊ/ as in "boat."

2) Distribution of the phonemes

Consonants. (a) The following consonants occur in the syllable-initial as well as final position:

stops: /p/, /t/, /k/, /b/, /d/, /g/
fricatives: /f/,/v/,/θ/, /s/, /ʃ/
affricates: /tʃ/, /dʒ/
nasals: /m/, /n/
liquid: /l/

(b) The speakers use the following consonants in syllable-initial position:

fricatives: /ð/, /z/, /ʒ/, /h/, /w̥/
glides: /w/, /j/
affricate: /tɕ/
liquid: /r/

(c) The nasal cosonant /ŋ/ occurs only in the syllable-final position.

Vowels. All the vowels can occur as an onset as well as a nucleus.

Diphthongs. The diphthongs /aɪ/, /aʊ/, /ei/, and /oʊ/ occur as onsets as well as nuclei, or as a rime, as in "eye," "out," ate," "own," and "mine," "now," "make," and "poke." The diphthongs /uə/ or /uɑ/ (as in "poor"), /ɛə/ or /ɛɑ/ (as in "there"), and /iə/ or /iɑ/ (as in "mere"), on the other hand, occur only in a rime.

3) Consonant clusters

Syllable Initial Clusters.
     • *Two Consonants.* The following double consonants occur in the syllable-initial position:

		Examples
voiceless fricative + nasal	/sn/, /sm/	snow, smoke
voiceless fricative + liquid	/sl/, /fl/, /fr/	slow, flower, afraid
voiceless fricative + glide	/sw/	swim, sweet
voiceless fricative + stop	/sp/, /st/, /sk/	speak, steel, school
voiceless stop + liquid	/pr/, /tʰr/, /kʰr/, /pl/, /kl/	prefer, trace, crocodile, pleasure, clasp
voiceless stop + glide	/tw/, /kw/	twelfth, quartz
voiced stop + liquid	/br/, /dr/, /gr/	bread, draft, grasp
voiced stop + glide	/gj/	argue

     • *Three Consonants.* In the syllable-initial position, there is only a series of a fricative, a voiceless stop, and a liquid, the three of which occur as a cluster: /spl/ (as in "splendid"), /spr/ (as in "sprout"), /str/ (as in "stream"), and /skr/ (as in "screw"). Every subject inserts a schwa between /s/ and the voiceless stop at least twice out of eight possible occurrences. In addition, speaker number one (S1) simplifies the cluster by deleting /s/ in "screw" and "scream." Both S1 and speaker number 4 (S4) delete /r/ in "street."