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# Prominence in Singapore and American English: Evidence from reading aloud

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# Prominence in Singapore and American English: Evidence from reading aloud

## **Abstract**

English has spread far beyond the boundaries of the traditional L1 varieties (eg British, American, Australian English). Not only is English a leading foreign language throughout the world, it is also a central language for many multilingual communities throughout the world. The speakers of these new Englishes are not yet fully seen as 'native speakers' by many speakers from the traditional L1 varieties but cannot be called 'non-native speakers' in any meaningful sense of the word. Kachru (1990) calls these new varieties 'outer circle' Englishes, a contrast to the 'inner circle' native speaker varieties and the 'expanding circle' foreign language speakers of English. The outer circle varieties of English (eg Singapore, Indian, Nigerian English) differ from the inner circle varieties in a number of ways, but few are more noticeable in speech than differences in prosody, that is, in the use of stress, rhythmic structure and intonation. To those familiar only with inner circle varieties, outer circle speakers of English can sound both fluent and choppy, comfortable with English yet incomprehensible, perfectly grammatical yet far too fast. These inner circle judgements grow out of unfamiliarity with the music of outer circle speech. One area of difference between inner and outer circle Englishes is intonation, or the systematic use of voice pitch to communicate phrase-level meaning.

## **Disciplines**

Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education | Modern Languages | Modern Literature | Vocational Education

## **Comments**

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## Prominence in Singapore and American English: evidence from reading aloud

*John M Levis*

### **Introduction**

English has spread far beyond the boundaries of the traditional L1 varieties (eg British, American, Australian English). Not only is English a leading foreign language throughout the world, it is also a central language for many multilingual communities throughout the world. The speakers of these new Englishes are not yet fully seen as 'native speakers' by many speakers from the traditional L1 varieties but cannot be called 'non-native speakers' in any meaningful sense of the word. Kachru (1990) calls these new varieties 'outer circle' Englishes, a contrast to the 'inner circle' native speaker varieties and the 'expanding circle' foreign language speakers of English.

The outer circle varieties of English (eg Singapore, Indian, Nigerian English) differ from the inner circle varieties in a number of ways, but few are more noticeable in speech than differences in prosody, that is, in the use of stress, rhythmic structure and intonation. To those familiar only with inner circle varieties, outer circle speakers of English can sound both fluent and choppy, comfortable with English yet incomprehensible, perfectly grammatical yet far too fast. These inner circle judgements grow out of unfamiliarity with the music of outer circle speech. One area of difference between inner and outer circle Englishes is intonation, or the systematic use of voice pitch to communicate phrase-level meaning.

### **Intonation in Singapore English**

The intonation of Singapore English (SgE), the outer circle variety examined in this study, has a number of differences from inner circle Englishes. Low (2000) compared relative pitch range in British English

(BrE) and SgE, and found that SgE speakers seem to have a larger pitch range, largely because of early boosted pitch used by SgE speakers. When this booster was not included in the computations, however, pitch range differences between the varieties were not significant.

Goh (2000) examined the ways in which final pitch movement (tones) and prominence were used in BrE and SgE. Her goal was to examine whether both varieties employed tones in a way consistent with Brazil's (1997) model of discourse intonation. She found that the two varieties employed different sets of tones and that meanings associated with tones were not equivalent in the two varieties. For example, speakers of SgE primarily use three tones: rising, falling and level. BrE speakers, in contrast, use a falling-rising tone that is almost absent from SgE, while using far fewer rising and level tones.

The difference in tone use is paralleled by a different tone-to-meaning connection in the two varieties. Goh (2000:43) says that 'tone choices in Singapore English are not always consistent with Brazil's model [developed for British English] and therefore do not always have the same discourse functions as they do in British English.' In other words, the form-to-meaning connections in the two varieties cannot be neatly matched.

Prominence seems also to be a feature of SgE, yet with distinct patterns of use that are not common in BrE. Specifically, prominence in SgE shows a strong tendency towards placement on the final word of a tone unit regardless of its lexical category, as in example 1 below, spoken by the second female SgE reader examined in the present study, where a final pronoun is prominent. In other words, prominence is placed on phrase-final words regardless of information value. In contrast, inner circle varieties tend not to make final function words prominent in discourse. (Of course, inner circle varieties do sometimes place prominence on function words, yet such placement is consistently seen as marked.)

- 1 ...the more CLOSEly did the traveller FOLD his cloak aROUND  
HIM (SgE F2)

In addition, prominence in SgE is more likely to be placed on multiple words (ie three or more) in a tone unit. In contrast, inner circle varieties rarely use more than two prominent syllables in a tone unit. Finally, SgE speakers do not readily de-accent previously mentioned information, a clear difference from inner circle varieties (Goh 2000).

### The study

The goal of this chapter is to compare how American English (AmE) and SgE speakers make prominence choices in oral reading. The study draws on a small data set within the SgE corpus (Deterding & Low 2001), in which three SgE speakers (one male, two female), all ethnically Chinese, read a fable, *The North Wind and the Sun*, reproduced below.

#### The North Wind and the Sun

The north wind and the sun were disputing which was the stronger, when a traveller came along, wrapped in a warm cloak. They agreed that the one who first succeeded in making the traveller take his cloak off should be considered stronger than the other. Then the north wind blew as hard as he could, but the more he blew, the more closely did the traveller fold his cloak around him; and at last the north wind gave up the attempt. Then the sun shone out warmly and immediately the traveller took off his cloak. And so the north wind was obliged to confess that the sun was the stronger of the two.

In order to compare the prominence choices made by the SgE speakers, three AmE speakers (one male, two female), all speakers of General American, also read the same fable. These three readers ranged in age from 30 to 46 years, somewhat older than the SgE speakers. All three were teachers, and one was also a graduate student.

The advantage of equivalent texts is clear, in that it allows for direct comparison of prominence choices. The disadvantages are also evident. The text is a stylised, read fable, and the prominence patterns are not likely to be exactly equivalent to those found in spontaneous speech. Yet, as Brazil (1992) argues, it would be false to say that reading aloud and spontaneous speech are wholly distinct.

... in spite of the many differences between the circumstances in which spontaneous speech and reading aloud occur, both activities utilise the same repertoire of intonational options.

(Brazil 1992:210)

Prominence choices in inner circle varieties, for which the most complete analyses are available, include a number of elements. For this study, I examined both the number of prominent syllables used and the documented tendency of SgE to avoid non-final tonic syllables. (All statistics reported are descriptive, since the study looked only at a sample of six readers.)

## **Results**

The results show two key findings. First, the SgE speakers use a much larger number of prominent syllables as compared to the AmE speakers. Second, there is a rather striking difference between the readers from the two varieties in their use of tonic syllables followed by non-prominent words. The AmE speakers all regularly de-accented enclitics, while the SgE speakers almost never did so. In fact, the opposite tendency was evident in the data. Instead of de-accenting, all three SgE speakers marked as prominent the last two words of some phrases in the reading.

### *Tone units*

In order to discuss prominence choices, it is necessary to briefly describe the tone unit choices made by the speakers. All speakers read fluently and with ease, and most tone unit boundaries were at grammatically sensible places. Unusual breaks (eg *wrapped / in a warm cloak*) were slightly more common for the SgE readers (seven of 66 tone units) than in the AmE readers (one of 53 tone units), but this difference is probably a difference between more and less skilled readers, and the unusual breaks did not affect the overall fluency of any of the readings. There were no obvious differences in speech rate for the six readers. All recordings were between 33 and 40 seconds. The average length for the AmE readers was 36.67 seconds and that of the SgE readers, 37 seconds.

The text consisted of 113 words, and each reader used between 15 and 23 tone units in reading the text. The three AmE readers used 15, 15 and 23 tone units (an overall average of 6.40 words/tone unit – 339/53), while the SgE readers used 20, 23 and 23 tone units (an average of 5.14 words/tone unit – 339/66). Although there appears to be a difference between the two groups of readers, the difference is unlikely to be important, since readers have a large number of choices available in segmenting texts.

### *Frequency of prominent syllables*

The two groups of readers showed large differences in the number of prominent syllables in their readings, as shown in Table 10.1. I rated all prominent syllables both impressionistically and instrumentally using a Kay Elemetrics CSL 4500. The instrumental analysis included measures of pitch prominence, pitch movement and energy level. The three SgE readers averaged 44.33 prominent syllables per reading, ranging between 42 and 47 prominent syllables per reading. This averages to approximately 3.9 prominent syllables for every 10 words of text. The

AmE readers averaged 30.33 prominent syllables per reading, an average of about 2.7 prominent syllables per 10 words of text. As a relative frequency, the SgE readers used a prominent syllable for every 2.55 words of text, while the AmE readers used a prominent syllable for every 3.72 words, about a 46% difference. Over the course of this text, this leads to a very large difference in the number of prominent syllables in the two varieties. This indicates that while both SgE and AmE mark prominent syllables, the two varieties allow very different levels of prominence to be marked in normal speaking style.

Table 10.1: Number of prominent syllables for SgE and AmE readers

	Reader	No. of prominent syllables
SgE	Female 1	44
	Female 2	47
	Male	42
	Total	133
AmE	Female 1	33
	Female 2	29
	Male	29
	Total	91

### *De-accenting*

If the two varieties differ in the number of syllables that are normally prominent, they differ even more in the way de-accented enclitics are used. Goh (2000:38) says that ‘the general absence of long enclitic segments is another notable feature of intonation’ in SgE because of ‘a tendency for SgE speakers not to de-accent information’. That characteristic was evident in the readings used for this study. The AmE speakers used non-final tonics 17 times in reading the fable, while the SgE data showed only two examples. (Non-final is defined as placement of a tonic on a word that is not phrase final. Tonics on final words such as *STRONGer* are not considered non-final, even though the tonic syllable is not the last syllable in the word.) Two of the AmE readers used this non-final pattern four times, and one (Female 2) used nine non-final tonics out of 15 tone units, shown in example 2. Only tonics are shown, with non-final tonic choices in bold. Tone unit boundaries are marked with /.

- 2 The north wind and the sun were disPUTing / which was the STRONGer, / when a TRAVeller came along, / wrapped in a warm CLOAK. / They agreed that the one who first succeeded in making the traveller take his CLOAK off / should be considered STRONGer than the other. / Then the north wind blew as HARD as he could, / but the MORE he blew, / the more closely did the traveller fold his cloak aROUND him; / and at LAST / the north wind gave UP the attempt. / Then the sun shone out WARMly / and immediately the traveller took OFF his cloak. / And so the north wind was obliged to conFESS / that the sun was the STRONGer of the two. /

(AmE F2)

This reader de-accented between one and three words after the tonic in a majority of the tone units. This frequency surprised me. Crystal (1969) indicates that final tonics in spoken text are the overwhelmingly dominant pattern in BrE speech, occurring approximately 90% of the time. Reading aloud is not speech, and in a stylised text like this de-accenting is likely to be more frequent, but her reading seemed completely ordinary when I recorded her. Only upon analysis did I notice the strong tendency towards de-accenting. In other words, it appears that final de-accenting is a critical part of the prominence system of AmE (and probably that of other inner circle Englishes).

The SgE readings, on the other hand, had only two instances of final de-accenting (as HARD as he could; fold his cloak aROUND him), both for the male reader. In all other cases, the final word of the tone unit was prominent. The almost complete absence of final de-accenting suggests that the prominence system of SgE is structured differently from AmE. Specifically, the use of de-accenting is well known to correlate with information structure in inner circle Englishes (Halliday 1967), with de-accented information likely to be previously mentioned in the discourse (Bardovi-Harlig 1986). This cue does not appear to be used heavily in SgE, whereas it is common in AmE.

Not only did the SgE readers not de-accent, they also made final words prominent in ways that were unexpected to my AmE ears, as in examples 3 to 5. Sometimes this involved accenting a pronoun, as in example 3, but more commonly, the unexpected accent pattern involved multiple prominent syllables at the end of a tone unit. Rather than de-accenting one of the syllables, the SgE readers increased prominence at the end of the tone unit. Bolinger (1986) remarks that this kind of end-weighted prominence is often found in television or radio broadcasts (in

inner circle Englishes) to give the message extra punch. Interestingly, he associates it in many cases with reading aloud.

- 3 FOLD his cloak aROUND HIM (SgE F1, SgE F2)
- 4 take his CLOAK OFF (all three SgE readers)
- 5 SHONE OUT WARMly (SgE F1)

### **Conclusion**

Tonic usage, or focus, is considered one of the key carriers of meaning in spoken English. In the teaching of English, rare is the pronunciation teaching text that does not include practice with this feature. Researchers and teacher training books argue strongly for its importance. Dalton and Seidlhofer (1994) call it the most important topic, one that is both teachable and learnable, a conclusion echoed by Pennington and Ellis (2000), in their study of Cantonese learners of English. Jenkins (2000) includes it as an essential element of her *Lingua Franca Core*, those features of pronunciation that are put forth as crucial for non-native speaker/non-native speaker communication. Hahn (2004) finds that misplaced focus can seriously affect comprehensibility of speech for inner circle listeners. Clearly, for international communication, it is important for speakers of different varieties to be able to understand each other and communicate effectively, and prominence is a critical part of such communication.

Yet the assumption that all varieties of English use similar prominence systems may not be valid. In this study, the prominence system of an inner circle and an outer circle variety were shown to have conspicuous differences. In AmE, prominence is associated with information focus and non-focus, and the prominence system includes both prominent words and those which are de-accented, especially those de-accented in enclitics. Prominence in SgE does not appear to follow the same system of prominence and de-accenting. It is quite possible that the semantic functions of information focus are also achieved in SgE through different means. While prominence may be part of marking focus, it seems clear that the acoustic cues in the two varieties are not associated with meaning in the same ways.

It also became evident that judgements of prominence are made with a particular perspective. As an inner circle speaker, I listened for prominence and measured it in accord with inner circle models. However, the intonational system of SgE, to the extent that it is structured differently, may use both acoustic cues that are not part of

AmE and also other cues which are also used by AmE but which have different functions in the two varieties. Bolinger (1986) points out that judgements of prominence (or accent, as he calls it) are made not only with reference to pitch protrusion, syllable duration and intensity, but also by the use of full vowels where reduced vowels are expected and in the non-deletion of certain segments where deletion is the norm (as in [h] deletion in pronouns like *him*). The perceived prominence of the final pronoun *him* in all the SgE readings was due partly to pitch prominence, but also to the use of a full vowel [i] and the non-deletion of [h].

While this study has examined the use of prominence in AmE and SgE, it is likely that the division shown here is also true of inner circle and outer circle varieties in general. There is no reason to believe that newer Englishes (which exist in multilingual environments) necessarily use the same means as the traditional native speaker varieties to achieve focus. Because we know that different languages mark focus in different ways (eg syntactic, lexical and prosodic means), there is no reason to assume that different varieties of English must all use prominence to achieve the same semantic ends. Rather than assuming the inner circle varieties to be the standard against which outer circle Englishes are measured, it is important to describe the intonation of outer circle Englishes in reference to their own linguistic systems and according to the intuitions of their own speakers. This will help determine whether the differences found in this study are indeed common to other inner circle/outer circle comparisons.

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