



Phonological Features of Basilectal Philippine English: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract: This paper attempts to describe the result of a data-based investigation of the phonology of the basilectal Philippine English as a response to Tupaz' (2004) challenge to conduct Philippine English studies that would describe not only the "educated English" (the acrolect and mesolect speakers), but the "linguistic practices of genuinely marginalized voices (the basilect speakers) in Philippine society" (p.54), as described by Llamzon, 1997 in Tayao, 2004). The findings of this study provide a description of the phonological features of these "marginalized" voices that include minimally functionally literate Filipinos such as jeepney drivers, nannies, janitors, market vendors, and the like from a particular region and Visayan language variety – Cebuano speakers from Region 7 – to distinguish it from the previous studies that have usually sampled subjects of Luzon origin only. Finally, the paper echoes the call for future studies of Philippine English phonology describing the range of segmental and suprasegmental features of various basilectal PE speakers across the country.

Key Words: phonology; sociolinguistics; Philippine English; basilectal speakers



1. INTRODUCTION

As the additional and official language of Filipinos, Philippine English (henceforth, PE) has its distinct characteristics, functions, and forms different from other World Englishes like, for example, Singaporean English, Malaysian English, and Thai English (Kachru, 1992). Moreover, its acceptance and legitimacy lie in the fact that English has penetrated the historical, functional, sociocultural, as well as the creative processes or contexts of the Filipinos (Kachru, 2004). Historically, language policies of the country have been formulated and revised time and again to accommodate the use of English in the educational system and to establish its place in such contexts. As an official language, English is used in various domains of function, which may include schools, mass media and World Wide Web, business and commerce, or government offices. The use of English in these domains contribute to the acculturation of English and its “native” speakers’ ways of life, belief system, etc., into the Filipinos’ psyche and culture—changing, transforming, or altering their sociocultural face or identity. In the same vein, the various literary genres, professional genres, and news media have been influenced by the conscious adaptation of the English language by the Filipinos.

1.1 Review of literature

As a legitimate and institutionalized variety of World Englishes (Kachru, 2004), PE, particularly its sound system, has received considerable attention from scholars. Attempts at providing a description of the phonology of PE started with Llamzon’s (1969) groundbreaking publication on Philippine

English, which he then entitled *Standard Filipino English*. After claiming that “there is a standard variety of English which has arisen in the Philippines [and it] stands or falls short on the premise that there is a sizeable number of native and near-native speakers of English in the country” (p. 84), he then sketched the structure of Standard Philippine English (SPE) based on the utterances of the representative speakers identified, alongside his identification of representative speakers of SPE and their norms of acceptability as well as his recommendation to target SPE in the teaching of English rather than General American English (GAE). His sketch of the structure of SPE primarily dealt with the phonology of the then purported (standardized) variety, hoping that someone would later on come up with a dictionary of Filipinisms, or “English expressions which are neither American nor British, which are acceptable in Filipino educated circles, and are similar to expression patterns in Tagalog” (p. 46).

Amidst the criticisms that were thrown against the bold proposal of Llamzon (1969), it could be said that the study of and scholarship in the emerging variety of English in the Philippines came to be among the most pursued in linguistics in the Philippines.

Llamzon (1997) attempted to describe the phonology of the various groups of Filipino English speakers, which he categorized as *acrolect* (considered formal and high-style), *mesolect* (falls somewhere between the prestige of the *acrolect* and the informality of the *basilect*), often the most widely spoken form of a language, generally being used by the *middle class*, and *basilect* (typically differ from the standard language in pronunciation,



vocabulary, and grammar, and can often develop into different languages; a variety of a language used by people from a particular geographic area) following Strevens' (1982) and Platt and Weber's (1980) terms for the speakers' styles of talking (p. 44).

In his paper, he described the segmental features (production of vowels and consonant sounds) of the three groups of Filipino speakers vis-à-vis their American counterparts.

Following Llamzon's (1997) group representative speakers of Philippine English, Tayao (2004) conducted a data-based study in an attempt to describe the distinctive phonological features shared in and between speakers of the three groups. Her study also showed that among the *basilectal* speakers, the vowel inventories among Cebuano and Visayan speakers showed only three vowels as utilized by the speakers coming from this group representative. She added, however, that among basilectal Tagalog speakers, a five-vowel system would be realized and utilized.

1.2 Research aims

Tupas (2004), however, posits that while these descriptive studies provide some insights into the phonological features of Philippine English, their overemphasis on *mesolectal* and *acrolectal* (or the so-called educated) speakers fails to give an adequate picture of the sound system of this variety of English. He laments this incomplete description in arguing that "by focusing simply on 'educated' English, studies on Philippine English have lent themselves towards elitist (socio) linguistics by almost completely ignoring the linguistic practices of genuinely marginalized voices in Philippine society" (p.

54). These marginalized voices (i.e., the basilectal speakers in this study) include minimally functionally literate Filipinos such as jeep and tricycle drivers, nannies, janitors, and the like, whose speech patterns in English need to be described.

This study was set to provide an initial description of the phonology of *basilectal* PE, particularly the Cebuano speakers from Region 7 (Cebu, Bohol, Siquijor, and Negros Oriental) residing in Metro Manila. The researcher hopes that the findings of this study may enrich the literature on the phonology of Philippine English as a legitimate variety of World Englishes.

Answers to the following questions would be given, after an analysis of the English of some 48 Cebuano individuals:

1. How may basilectal Philippine English be described in terms of its segmental features such as vowels and consonants?
2. How may basilectal Philippine English be described in terms of its suprasegmental properties such as stress and intonation patterns?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 The respondents

Given the exploratory nature and purpose of this study, which is to provide an initial description of the basilectal Philippine English, this study only revolved around the description of the English as spoken by 48 subjects – 20 male and 28 female. Most of them are ages 23 to 32, but their ages range from 18 to 52. All of them grew up in Cebu, Bohol, Negros Oriental, and Siquijor and only moved to Manila later in their life (i.e., after seven years old of age). Thus, all of them have Cebuano as their native language with Tagalog and English as additional languages acquired later in their lives. It should be highlighted here that the choice of Cebuano as the



substrate language in the current study was deliberate: to distinguish it from the previous studies that have usually sampled subjects of Luzon origin only. This should allow for testing the possibility of language-specific influences – if any – to the phonology of (basilectal) PE.

The subjects use English only at work or in school and they claim fair English proficiency across the four language macro-skills. Details of their self-ratings of their English language proficiency are reported in Table 1:

Figures and tables should be referred to in the text. They should be centered as shown below and must be of good resolution. Where equations are used, adequate definition of variables and parameters must be given, as shown in the example below.

Table 1

Self-ratings of the English Proficiency of the Respondents

Macro-skill	Very good		Good		Fair		Poor	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Reading	1	2.6	11	21.	27	52.	9	23.
		0.0	05	31.	63	52.	68	15.
Writing	0	0	13	58	28	63	7	79
		0.0	21.	63.	15.			
Speaking	0	0	8	05	32	16	8	79
		0.0	36.	57.	5.2			
Listening	0	0	18	84	28	89	2	6

The subjects work as drivers, vendors, security guards, and household helps, among others, and the majority of them earn Php2, 100 - Php6, 000 per month. More than half of them completed the prescribed secondary education but a lot still did not, with only one being able to see but not finish college. These have qualified them to be basilectal speakers of PE.

After selection, the subjects were asked to read aloud a list which contains words and expressions that makes use of

the critical segmental and supra-segmental features. A sampling of those words and expressions are found in the Appendix of this paper. The subjects were tape recorded while reading those words aloud. The resulting tape recordings were then transcribed following the IPA Phonetic Alphabet.

2.2 Data Collection

The researcher replicated the data collection procedure used by Tayao (2004) and Llamzon (1997).

The data were collected between January and April 2008 in the researcher's university and other major cities within Metro Manila (e.g., Manila, Parañaque, Quezon City, Pasig, Las Piñas, Mandaluyong). The data were gathered using a two-part instrument (see Appendix C for the Profile Sheet used in this study). The first part aimed to profile the respondents' personal information solicited their names, age, sex, province, age transferred to Manila, occupation, highest educational attainment, monthly income, and frequency of use of English in indicated domains (home, workplace, church, market, etc). It also revealed their own assessment of their English proficiency in terms of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Anybody who did not meet the requirements: 1) Cebuano-speaker from Cebu, Bohol, Siquijor, and Negros Oriental; and 2) transferred to Manila at least after their seventh year,



were not considered as legitimate/qualified respondents.

The second part of the data-collection instrument elicited from the respondents examples of their spoken English, which were recorded on audio tapes. They were requested to read aloud a list which contains words and expressions that makes use of the critical segmental and supra-segmental features. Speech samples of the select seven groups of exemplars of this variety of Philippine English were elicited using the following techniques: (1) oral reading of a list of words containing critical vowel and consonant sounds, (2) oral reading of a list of words with “distinctive” stress placements, and (3) oral reading of a structured dialogue for intonation pattern. A sampling of those words and expressions are found in the Appendix of this paper. The resulting tape recordings were then transcribed following the IPA Phonetic Alphabet (2005). Following the transcriptions of the recordings, analysis and description of the distinctive phonological features of the *basilect* PE ensued based on the frequency of occurrences of a given phonological feature. The researcher looked for trends across seven groups of respondents.

Although an attempt was made to include a novel way to elicit spoken English from the respondents, an impromptu speech where respondents were to answer a speaking prompt

provided by the researcher, this was dropped because the researcher observed that during the pilot testing of the data-collection instrument, respondents demonstrated discomfort, uneasiness, and embarrassment that resulted in prolonged silence and the expressed request/ decision not to participate in the research anymore. In view of this development, the researcher settled to adapt the procedures used by Tayao (2004) and Llamzon (1999) in their respective studies.

3 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 The segmental analysis of basilectal PE

3.1.1 The Consonants

Noted in the results are the deviation from some GAE consonant inventories particularly in the production of fricatives at the labiodental, interdental, and alveolar points of articulation. It may be worth mentioning here that the basilect Cebuano respondents in this study do not differ from their mesolect and basilect counterparts in Llamzon’s study (1997, p. 46) and Tayao’s (2004, p. 82) in terms of consonant inventories. This could be attributed to the fact that Filipinos in general do not tend to aspirate these STOP consonants (i.e., /p/, /t/, /k/), substitute /t/ for /θ/ (voiceless) and /d/ for the (/ð/ (voiced), among other substitutions. Llamzon (1997) stated that although “Filipinos are willing to copy GAE, they retain something of their identity—in their



lack of nasal twang, in the careful articulation of individual syllables, and in their refusal to use the ‘reduced signals’ of the informal conversational style of GAE” (p. 43). In the same vein, one can argue that Filipino speakers, be they *acrolect* or *basilect*, at some point, decide not to follow or speak like a ‘native’ American so long as they can be understood or are able to communicate their ideas, feelings, or desires. This is also true for other Asian speakers of English. The phonological system of the General American English or even the British English serves as a guide and is not meant to be strictly mimicked or aimed at. However, a closer look at the consonant inventories of the respondents in this study confirms a general notion that lack of training/exposure to the language may have greatly contributed to their inability to produce the sounds under study. It may be worth reiterating here that most of the respondents are high school graduates. Nevertheless, given the number of years they have been exposed to the English language (ten years, if we go by the Department of Education’s Bilingual Policy in effect now), it is still sad (to say the least) that these phonological features have not been mastered or at least learned by them. Of course one can always argue that their ethnic tongue forms the substratum which is responsible for the substitutions or mis-production of these sounds.

3.1.2 The Vowels

It is interesting to note that this group of respondents for *basilect* PE speakers yielded different results compared to previous studies conducted where the representation of the basilectal vowel system of many Cebuano and Visayan speakers of English are described as utilizing “only three vowels” (Cf. Tayao, 2004, p. 84; Llamzon, 1997, p. 47), there is a noted production or realizations of other vowel sounds as in the case of /ɛ/ and /ɔ/ in words like *lend* and *Pau!*; /e/ and /o/ in instances like *gate* and *to*. Although not fully or distinctly realized, the results of this study indicate that there are occurrences where speakers were able to produce the ten vowel sounds. Realizations of these variants of vowel sounds could have been made possible by the exposure to American music, movies, and other forms of media to which all respondents confirmed listening to or watching. Likewise, news reports over local channels could have been responsible for these productions, for although majority of the news reports are now in Filipino, presence of English words, phrases, and idiomatic expressions are interspersed in the news. The advent of text messaging could also be an intervening factor for respondents admit passing on or forwarding English quotations they regularly receive.



3.2 The suprasegmental analysis of basilectal PE

3.2.1 Stress

The investigation of the word stress among the basilectal PE speakers for this study was made possible through the oral reading of a list of words with “distinctive” stress placements compared to GAE. The second part of the data-collection instrument facilitated elicitation of these data via audio recordings which in turn were transcribed and analyzed.

Generally, the basilectal PE stress pattern differs greatly from its GAE counterpart, as seen especially in the cases where three- and four-syllable words like *percentage*, *honorable*, *cemetery*, *ceremony*, and *elementary*. However, this study revealed a slight change in the placement of primary stress on the second syllable of the word *utensil* where the basilectal group in other studies placed it on the first (cf. Tayao, 2004, p. 85). This only suggests that until further comprehensive studies are conducted with regard to stress patterns of basilectal speakers, no conclusive claims can be made in relation to this suprasegmental feature of PE phonology.

3.2.2 Intonation

On the discrete-point or micro level, the intonation pattern of the basilectal group investigated in this study does not vary from the GAE intonation pattern, especially in the realizations of the general

rules discussed above (e.g., rising-falling intonation where simple statement of facts, commands or requests, or request for an information involving the *wh-questions* and the rising-rising pattern involved in *yes-no questions* are concerned). However, analyzed from a global or macro level perspective, the transcribed data would reveal that the respondents in this study do not fully reflect nor realize the GAE intonation pattern because of the staccato or disjointed reading of the structured dialogue. The natural flow of tones and the constancy of the rise and fall of the voice among the basilectal group may not fully reflect the GAE intonation pattern as a whole. What makes the findings of this study interesting is the fact that they were able to raise and lower their voices in the instances cited above. Again, this only suggests that further studies be done before a set of intonation patterns characteristic of the basilectal PE phonology be established.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has attempted to provide an initial description of the phonology of the basilectal Philippine English focused on the Cebuano speakers living within Manila and its surrounding cities in response to the challenge posed by Tupas (2004) with regard to the incomplete description, if not a dearth of studies, involving “the linguistic practices of genuinely marginalized voices in



Philippine society” (p. 54), such as jeepney and tricycle drivers, nannies, janitors, and the like.

Findings from this study seem to suggest that at the segmental and suprasegmental level, the Cebuano speakers from Region 7 do not diverge much from the GAE pattern. These results seem to reveal (if not challenge) certain phenomena not observed in previous findings of other studies (Cf Bautista & Gonzalez, 2006; Tayao, 2004) such as non-realizations of the interdental fricatives /f/ and /v/ and divergence from GAE stress placement of some words among their respondents. These *developments* in the “evolving phonology” (to borrow Tayao’s term) of the basilectal PE make this field more exciting and inviting for future research not so much towards the standardization of the Philippine phonology but towards a more empirical-based analyses and description of the various phonological features of the various geographical and linguistic backgrounds of PE speakers. May this paper be a contribution to more detailed analyses/studies of the phonology of basilectal Philippine English.

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² The following review is primarily based on Bautista (2000) and Tayao (2004).

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