Prosodic variation in Indian Englishes

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Abstract

There is disagreement over the nature and status of "Indian English" (Schneider 2007; Mukherjee 2007; Sailaja 2012), including the degree to which a single, pan-Indian variety can be identified. On the one hand, vast linguistic diversity and extensive multilingualism make homogeneity unlikely; on the other, convergent, 'areal' features in phonology are identifiable (Masica 2005). While the prosody of "Indian English(es)" has received less attention, there is evidence of L1 influence (Gargesh 2004; Sirsa & Redford, 2013; Wiltshire & Harnsberger, 2006; Puri, 2013; Maxwell, 2014; Fuchs, 2015). Nevertheless, studies have typically not distinguished *between* L1s, or have not examined these properties in the L1 speech for the same speakers. The findings of Sirsa and Redford (2013) and Maxwell (2014) in particular indicate a more complex picture where possible L1 influence is varied, and one that depends on which aspects are being considered.

We examine the influence of L1 Bengali (Indo-Aryan) and L1 Tamil (Dravidian) on Indian English (IndE) (as compared with British English). There is little research on Bengali prosody besides intonation, and little research on Dravidian prosody more generally. Nevertheless, certain features (e.g. stress, quantity and phrasing) are known to differ a) between Bengali and Tamil, and/or b) between these and (Br)E. In both Indo-Aryan and Dravidian languages, prominences play a post-lexical, not lexical, role, and their phonetic cues differ from those of (Br)E. The languages also differ from (Br)E in prosodic phrasing and accent typology, with smaller prosodic constituents and fewer pitch accent types (with a characteristic repetition of rises), and with the 'strongest' syllable falling left-most. Accordingly, both Bengali and Tamil may be described as having stronger 'macro-rhythm' (cf Jun 2014) than (Br)E. While stress assignment in (Br)E is variable and cued by multiple cues (including duration), in Bengali, it is predictable, giving word-initial prominence (Khan 2014). In Tamil, there is disagreement on the existence and location of lexical stress (Arden 1934; Andronov 1973; Marthandan 1983; Trubetzkoy 1939; Keane 2006). However, while durational cues to 'stress' are absent, there are consistent differences in F0 giving prominence to initial syllables, and non-initial syllables show spectral reduction. Both Bengali and Tamil have quantity distinction (vowels and consonants in Tamil, only consonants in Bengali); (Br)E has no such quantity distinction, but duration is a phonetic exponent of some vowel quality contrasts.

We investigate the extent to which these properties influence the English spoken by speakers of these languages. L1 speakers of Bengali (BG) and Tamil (TM), with fluent L2, and bilingual in, English, were recorded reading "The North Wind and the Sun" in English, and several prosodic parameters were analysed. For English short vs long monophthongs, only TM speakers showed a distinction in duration, bearing out our prediction of L1 influence. However, contrary to expectation, both BG and TM speakers showed stress-conditioned durational variation (absent from both L1s). Neither group differentiated durationally between stressed and nuclear-accented syllables, raising questions about the location and nature of nuclear accents in Indian-English (and L1s). BG speakers showed more extensive phrase-final lengthening than TM, and (as predicted) a greater use of rising pitch accents than BrE. TM speakers displayed a high frequency of H-tones. In all, the results suggest a complex picture, with evidence for L1 influence AND evidence for Pan-Indian features (both in the adoption of prototypical English features and in the sharing of common "Indian" features). This raises questions about classifying Indian English prosodically, and its status as a homogeneous variety of English. We are currently analyzing the same set of features in the English of Hindi and Telugu speakers, and will also compare with an analysis of an L1 rendition of the same passage for the same speakers.