

The Intonation of Questions in Brunei

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Abstract

The study investigates the patterns of conversational intonation among speakers of English in Brunei Darussalam, comparing the intonation patterns on questions with those of Malay, following similar research conducted in Kuala Lumpur by Gut and Pillai (2014). Data was collected from 20 undergraduates at UBD using the map task, half in English and half in Malay. The results show that yes-no questions in the Malay recordings in Brunei often have a falling tone, but this does not seem to affect the English spoken in Brunei, as English yes-no questions usually have the expected rising intonation. Furthermore, it is found that declarative questions in English usually have a rising tone, but in Malay they are more often likely to have a falling tone. Finally, it was found that code-switching in the Brunei data was very common, involving English words in the Malay recordings as well as Malay words in the English recordings.

Introduction

Intonation is the pattern of pitch in a sentence, describing the rises and falls of the pitch of our voice (Roach, 2009, p. 119). Variations in pitch convey linguistic and pragmatic meaning, so the same words can express different meanings based on how you say them and the same sequence of words may be a statement or a question.

For example, consider the statement, ‘They are married happily.’ This can express the fact that they are happy or else, if there is a pause after *married*, that the speaker is happy about their marriage. Similarly, ‘He is not here, I’m afraid.’ This could mean that the speaker is expressing regret that he is not around or else showing his fear (if the second clause is a separate sentence) (Meng et.al., 2009).

In Brunei English, a rising tone often occurs at the end of utterance. It may indicate a question, as expected, but Deterding & Salbrina (2013, p. 45) report that it may also indicate a speaker’s uncertainty. In one extract in their study, the speaker talks about the places she visited during her vacation and she uses a rising pitch that makes her appear uncertain. In addition, it seems that a rising tone is more common with women than men. In contrast, a falling tone usually indicates certainty, and in Brunei English, *yeah* with a falling pitch may indicate a speaker’s end of turn (Deterding & Salbrina, 2013, p. 73).

This paper investigates the intonation of speakers of English in Brunei when asking questions, and in particular it investigates whether they are influenced by the intonation of Malay. Comparison will be made with the results reported by Gut and Pillai (2014), who conducted similar research in Kuala Lumpur, so we can find out if the question intonation of speakers in Brunei is similar to that of speakers in Peninsular Malaysia.

Data

Twenty female undergraduates students at Universiti Brunei Darussalam were recorded for this study, nineteen Malays and one Chinese. Most were aged between 20 and 23, but one was 35. The Malays all stated that they usually speak Malay at home and with friends, though inevitably some code-switching into English occurs, as is widespread in Brunei (McLellan,

2010). The Chinese student stated that she speaks Malay and Hokkien interchangeably at home. All participants speak English competently, as they had undergone English-medium education since primary school. They all use English when talking to their lecturers as they are majoring in English-medium subjects, and they sometimes use English when talking to their friends. In addition, some of them stated that they use English when talking to government officials, even though Malay is the official language in Brunei.

The participants were paired up and each one was given a map. In each pair, there were two different maps, one showing a trail and one without. The participants were seated opposite each other and they could not see each other's map. The participant whose map included the trail acted as the Leader, and her job was to guide the other person, the Follower, along the trail. In addition to the presence or absence of a route, some of the landmarks on the two maps differed. The exercise therefore encourages the participants to ask questions, checking on the landmarks and also the route.

There are two sets of maps, one in English (Figure 1) and the other in Malay (Figure 2). In both figures, the Leader's map is on the left while the Follower's version is on the right. The labels in the Malay map are direct translations from the English, which is somewhat problematic because the existence of words such as *Golf*, *Nuklear* and *Karavan* may have encouraged code-switching into English. Furthermore, some of the participants did not know the word *Triangulasi*, so they stumbled when saying *Titik Triangulasi* ('trig point'). In retrospect, it would have been better to use more neutral terms like *bridge*, *village*, *wooden bench* and *large tree*.

Five of the recordings involved the English map and five involved the Malay map. The English recordings lasted between 91 seconds and 254 seconds, with an average of 157 seconds. The Malay recordings lasted between 137 seconds and 225 seconds, with an average of 168 seconds. Although, on average, the Malay recordings are a little longer, the difference is not significant ($t=0.33$, $df=8$, $p=0.75$, ns).

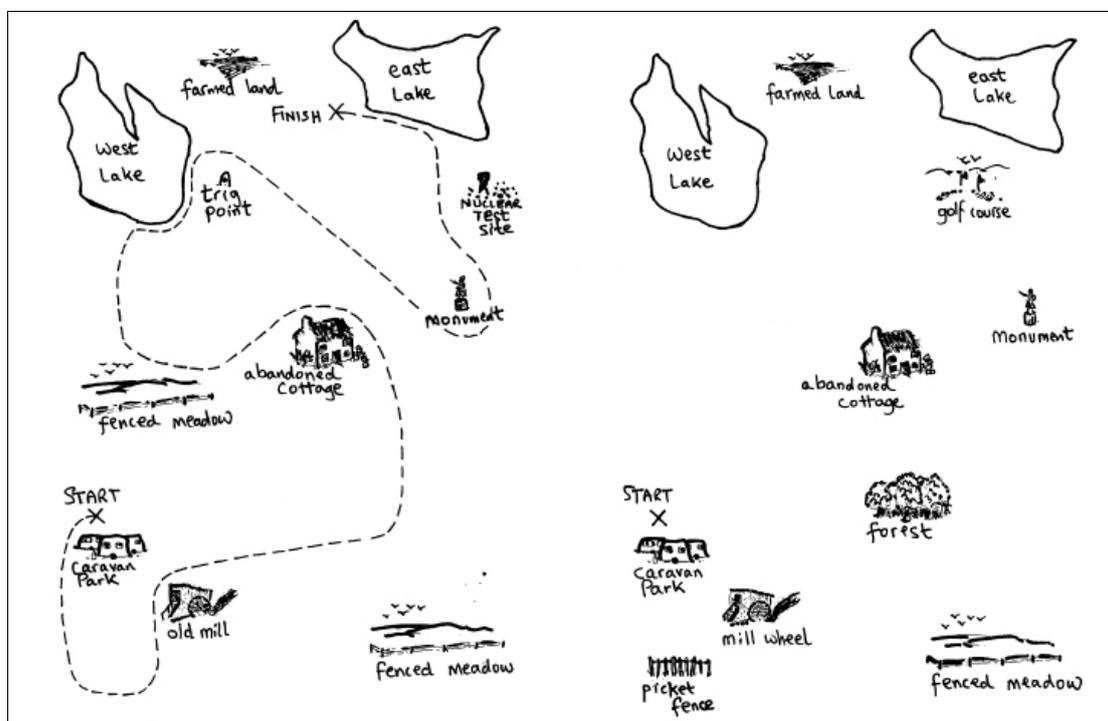


Figure 1 English Map Task (Slovak 2007)

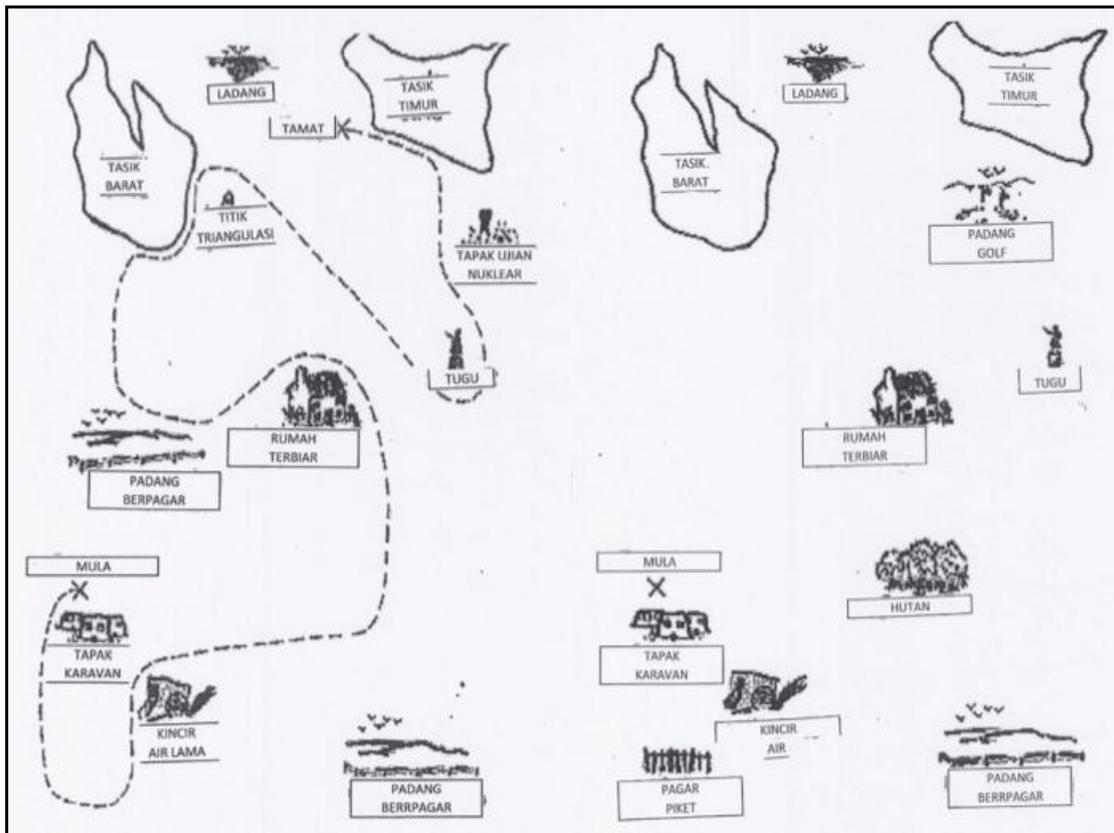


Figure 2 Malay Map Task (Gut & Pillai, 2014)

Analysis

The researcher transcribed the recordings and then identified all instances of questions. In many cases, these questions are marked syntactically, for example involving question tags, question words ('wh words') such as *where* in English or *di mana* in Malay, subject-auxiliary inversion in English or the *kah* question particle in Malay. However, some utterances identified as questions are declaratives, and they are classified as questions because they seem to involve the participant seeking to check something. Identifying declaratives as questions is rather subjective, as it is hard to differentiate between a declarative utterance that is asking for confirmation and one that is confirming some information. Nevertheless, some declarative clearly are questions.

Altogether 60 questions were identified in English, 20 by the Leader and 40 by the Follower, and 91 in Malay, 32 by the Leader and 59 by the Follower. The greater number of questions by the Follower in both languages is to be expected, as the Leader is mostly giving directions.

The researcher then classified the tone that occurred on all questions. Initially, it was intended to use all the tones suggested by Wells (2006), including rise, fall, fall-rise and rise-fall, but the complex tones almost never occurred, and on the few occasions where they may have occurred, it was hard to make a consistent distinction between rise and fall-rise, and also between fall and rise-fall. In consequence, the classification just involves rise or fall, depending on the direction of pitch at the end of each utterance.

Results

Table 1 shows the percentage of the types of question that were produced in the Malay and the English map tasks. The different categories of question are similar to those in Gut and Pillai (2014), but there is an additional type of question called a choice question, which generally involves the word *or* in English or *atau* in Malay (Chun, 2012).

	Wh	Yes/no	Tag	Declarative	Single word	Choice
English	13 (22%)	23 (38%)	5 (8%)	9 (15%)	6 (10%)	4 (6%)
Malay	29 (32%)	10 (11%)	6 (7%)	19 (21%)	24 (26%)	3 (3%)

Table 1 Question types that occurred

The results in Table 1 show that declarative and single word questions are more common in Malay, while more yes/no questions are produced in the English map task. Table 2 breaks down the question types for the English map task, showing that the Follower is more likely to produce wh questions while the Leader has more yes/no questions.

	Wh	Yes/no	Tag	Declarative	Single word	Choice
Leader	3 (15%)	9 (45%)	3 (15%)	3 (15%)	2 (10%)	0
Follower	10 (25%)	14 (35%)	2 (5%)	6 (15%)	4 (10%)	4 (10%)

Table 2 Question types by the Leader and Follower in the English map task

Table 3 breaks down the question types for the Malay map task, confirming declarative questions and single word questions are more common in the Malay map task especially by the Leader. Furthermore, the Follower produced more wh questions compared to the English map task, and she also asked fewer yes-no questions.

	Wh	Yes/no	Tag	Declarative	Single word	Choice
Leader	8 (25%)	5 (16%)	2 (6%)	8 (25%)	9 (28%)	0
Follower	21 (36%)	5 (9%)	4 (7%)	11 (19%)	15 (25%)	3 (5%)

Table 3 Question types by the Leader and Follower in the Malay map task

Table 4 shows the distribution of falling and rising tones produced by the speakers on different types of question in English. The wh questions are mostly associated with a falling intonation while the yes-no questions generally occur with a rising intonation. This is similar to the pattern associated with British English (Wells, 2006). These results are similar to those reported by Gut and Pillai, who find that for the English map task 53% of wh questions have a fall while 85% have a rise or fall-rise. Other types of question usually occur with a rising tone.

	Wh	Yes/no	Tag	Declarative	Single word	Choice
Fall	7 (64%)	5 (23%)	1 (20%)	2 (22%)	1 (17%)	4 (100%)
Rise	4 (36%)	17 (77%)	4 (80%)	7 (78%)	5 (83%)	0

Table 4 Tones produced for different question types in the English map task

Table 5 shows the pitch preference of different types of question in the Malay map task. In Malay, it seems that wh questions usually have a falling tone, and yes/no questions also often have a falling tone, while declarative questions are about evenly split between a rise and a fall. Gut and Pillai (2014) report that a rising tone is also strongly associated to single word question and this is also seen in Table 5. However, they report that 80% of wh questions in their Malay data have a rise, which contrasts with just 41% having a rise in the current study.

associated with rising intonation. This is similar to the studies that have been done with the Malay speakers of English in Kuala Lumpur where there was also a preference for a rising intonation in single word and yes-no questions. Wh questions in the current Malay data are more likely to have a rising intonation than in the Kuala Lumpur data, but this does not seem to affect the English that is spoken.

There are thirteen questions that involve code-switching in the Malay map task and three in the English map task, and there are many other instances of code-switching not involving questions. It is not clear if the same occur in the Kuala Lumpur data.

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