

YOUTUBE SUBSCRIPTION, GEOGRAPHICAL RESIDENCE AND ACCENT ALTERATION

(A Case Study of an English-Indonesian Bilingual Child)

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the changes in English vowel production in a 10-year-old bilingual child residing in Aceh Indonesia. The subject speaks English (the subject acquired British English since toddler) predominantly at home and Indonesian at school. She has been watching videos of American-English Youtubers on daily basis for approximately four years. The absence of British English exposure due to the subject's geographical change from Bristol to Indonesia, combined with the increasing virtual contact with American English from the internet has altered the subject's English oral production phonologically. This study aimed to explore the areas of phonology affected, how and why it happened; whether the change occurred naturally, or intentionally and if the identity played an important role in the alteration. This is a descriptive-quantitative study using two sources of data; primary and secondary. The primary data was retracted from an in-depth interview with the subject, whilst the secondary data was the subject's English production taken from the subject's parents' video collection. Taken together, the findings show that phoneme is the only phonological level affected by the new language situation and exposure, while the prosodic area is maintained. In addition, the reason for this accent change is natural instead of intentional. The subject confesses that she was unaware of the change and thinks she needs not to alter her English accent because she rarely uses the language for social purposes. The findings suggest that language daily virtual exposure like YouTube channels can change one's

language, phonologically even without the subject's residential area being put into consideration.

Keywords: accent-change, phonology, pronunciation, YouTube, bilingualism, multilingualism,

Introduction

Studies of language change nowadays do not only cover those that happen through geographical contact between two speakers who speak different languages, but also those happening through media (Dydia et al., 2021; Irnanda et al., 2021), or in the pre-digital era, through the internet. In the EFL world, English language learning materials around the world were still presumably dominated by two major dialects; The American and the British. At that time, contact between non-English language speakers and other types of English accents or dialects, such as Australian, Canadian, South African, or Indian was rare. Then, films, songs, and international TV News were the 'only' available authentic resources to be relied on by students and teachers residing in EFL countries to learn English, and those materials were highly dominated by British and/or American-original. Nowadays, due to the advancement of technology and relatively easier and cheaper access to the internet and digital gadgets, English native speakers as the source of learning are no longer difficult to access to have an actual natural conversation with. To illustrate, several language learning apps such as Hello Talk and Tandem offer one-to-one or synchronous online classroom meetings with native speakers of the target language, especially to those who are at the advanced level of their learning. Besides, the internet offers a free abundance of resources in the form of English-language audio and video. The most popular ones are YouTube, Netflix, and Podcast. According to Wise (2022b), there are 37 million channels on YouTube in 2022, and an excess of 2 billion total users of the platform. Netflix users by 2022 are reported to be as many as 233 million (Ruby, 2022b), and it is predicted that podcast listeners will reach the statistic of 424 million people by the end of 2022 (Ruby, 2022a).

As a consequence of more English available to non-native speakers of English on the internet, geographical residency seems to lose its importance in foreign language learning or exposure. Over 2.5 billion monthly active users watch 2 videos per day on YouTube (Wise, 2022a). Furthermore, YouTube channels normally have at least one host who speaks a certain language with a certain style or dialect. When the channel is subscribed by those who do not

use the language, style, or dialect, it can potentially lead to a situation similar to language natural exposure. Schneider (2016) argued that many people now experience what is called passive exposure to *World Englishes*. Schneider (2016, p. 254) also noted that typically speakers are confronted with a ‘strange variety’, noting other speakers from different origins, using unfamiliar accent features, words, or structures. Thus, it can be assumed that regular ‘consumption’ of YouTube videos for a relatively long period might influence or alter one’s language without the person even having to have direct actual contact with the speaker of that certain language style or accent.

From the researcher’s preliminary research observing family-related toddlers and children who have a routine of watching YouTube videos that specifically expose the use of certain language or dialect, it was noted that those children have occasionally spoken a phrase or expression unfamiliarly spoken in their community. For example, an Indonesian-speaking child used the word *ingin* instead of *mau* (both means ‘want’), although their family never used the first word for their daily communication because it sounds too ‘standard’ or formal. Similarly, from the researcher’s preliminary observation, it was found that in this YouTube era, more Indonesian-speaking toddlers of the researcher’s relatives now use the English word ‘no’ to respond to a question. This short expression of foreign language was reported by their parents to be gained from YouTube channels with nursery content they have been regularly watching on their parent’s gadgets. This is reasonable as children pick up language easier especially when they are interested in the talk (Ackermann et al., 2020).

A 10-year-old girl of the researcher’s relative speaks two languages; English and Indonesian. The child was born to Indonesian-speaking parents who move to Bristol when she was 2. When the child was 6, her family moved back to their hometown in Banda Aceh, Sumatra, Indonesia. She was administered into a monolingual Indonesian public school until today. Thus, she speaks English with her parents and 13-year-old older sister, but Indonesian to her extended families, neighbours, teachers and friends. As the child still maintained communication in English with her family, she hears more than one dialect of English every day. Her parents speak Indonesian-accent of English, while her sister, maintains a Bristolian accent. As the child spends a relatively lot of time watching American gamers’ YouTube videos, she hears an American accent regularly as well. This peculiar language circumstance can trigger the child’s English accent altered. Thus, the present study aimed to look if there is evidence of language change due to this circumstance. And if so, in which areas of phonology are the change occurs?

Are there any phonological alterations or accent changes occurring? The reasons behind the change will also be discovered.

Literature Review

According to historical records, the British first introduced the English language to Americans between the 16-17th century or when the language spelling had not yet been standardised. As the consequence, the phonological differences between American and British English are found on many levels (Abderrahim, 2015; Khan et al., 2019). Despite the two countries having numerous English variations or dialects, the American and British phonological differences are generally described in certain features; vowel (monophthong & diphthong), consonantal, stress and intonation. The following is the elaboration on how the languages are different for the aforementioned phonological aspects (Blevins, 2015; Kiparsky, 2016).

A. Vowels

According to Khan (2019), in terms of vowels, American and British English are different in the following characteristics.

- a) Broad “a” while American flat “α”
British prefer broad “a” like in the word ‘dark’, while American prefer flat “α”, not only in words like ‘bath’ or ‘gasp’ but also in words like ‘quality’ (Khan et al., 2019).
- b) Vowel variation in ‘o’
American pronounce ‘o’ in words like ‘hot’, ‘god’ or ‘top’ with the /ah/ sound. Yet, in England, ‘palm’ is a contrast to ‘lot’, ‘top’ or ‘god’ (Boberg, 2015)
- c) Vowel variation ‘y’ preceding ‘u’
In pronouncing words such as ‘duty’, ‘tube’, or ‘due’, the British realise the sound ‘j’ before the ‘u’ sound. While Americans simply lengthen the sound ‘u’.

B. Consonants

Concerning British and American consonants, there are some varieties between them including British non-rhotic /r/ vs. American rhotic /r/, British /t/ vs. American flap /ɾ/ between two vowels, British /ʃ/ vs. American /z/, British /z/ vs. American /s/, British /s/ vs. American /ʃ/, British /ð/ vs. American /θ/ (Hosseinzadeh et al., 2015).

C. Prosody

In Phonology, prosodic elements include stress, rhythm and tone or intonation. In the present study, the aspect that will be focused on is only intonation. There are three kinds of intonations; rising, falling and

Methods

Participant

The subject is a ten-year-old female born in a bilingual Acehnese-Indonesian family who moved temporarily to Bristol when the subject was 2 years and 4 months old. The family stayed in England for four years before returning home to Banda Aceh, Indonesia where the majority of people speak two languages; Indonesian national language, Bahasa Indonesia or Indonesian, and Acehnese, the local language. The subject continued speaking English with her parents and elder sister as she always did when she was still in England. Yet, the parents had always mixed their language at home, using a compromising amount of Indonesian when speaking to their kids, thus the subject and her sister, to some extent, understood Indonesian, yet never used it themselves. In Indonesia, the girls went to a public monolingual school that used only Indonesian. Consequently, they had to adapt and started to activate their passive knowledge of the language. The data was collected when the participant was 10 years and 4 months old, or 4 years after the subject arrived in Banda Aceh. Over the four years, she had continued speaking only English with her sister and parents. Her communication with other people, such as extended family members, friends and teachers employed in Indonesian.

Over the four years, the subject had also been watching many YouTube videos. She spent more than 3 hours approximately every day watching recorded gamers playing online games while audio-narrated in Canadian English. Canadian English is one of the North American, or American English varieties (Boberg, 2015). The name of the YouTube channel she watched during the period of the present study's observation was *Itsfunneh* (n.d.) founded by Katherine 'Kat' La, a gamer YouTuber based in Canada (Wiki, n.d.). The channel had a total view of 11 billion by 2022.

Materials

The researcher collected the data from two materials. The first one is a video of the 5-year-old subject speaking English naturally for 1 minute 48 seconds describing a procedure of making a craft (T1). The other material is a freshly recorded video by the subject's parent showing the subject explaining a technique of drawing (T2). The subject's language production from T1

and T2 were compared for phonological discrepancies. The information gained from the interview (T3) –a reflection of the subject’s language-- was used to support the analysis.

Analysis

The phonological analysis used the binary technique, a property which is used to classify a linguistic form in terms of two opposite values (Estebas et al., n.d.). The token will be labelled as [A] or [B], which stands for American and British, respectively. The vowel discrepancy standard is based on that proposed by Boberg (2015). Regarding the T3, the data were analysed using the thematic analysis method with steps including; familiarisation, coding, generating themes, and reviewing themes.

Results

The findings of the present study are presented and discussed in the following order; the vowel comparison, the consonantal comparison, and the prosodic comparison.

The Vowel Comparison

In the first transcription (T1), the subject words containing contrastive vowels of American and British English were listed. They are:

box /boks/ [B]

and /ænd/ [B]

sister /'sɪs.tə/ [B]

costume /'kɒs.tʃu:m/ [B]

after /'ɑ:f.tə/ [B]

clothes /kləʊðz/ [B]

hanging /hæŋ/ [B]

got /gɒt/ [B]

her /hɜ:/ [B]

Whilst, in the second transcription which is recorded five years after the first one, the subject produced the following list of words:

draw /dra:/ [A]	lashes /læʃɪs/ [A]
almond /'ɑ:mənd/ [B]	longer /lɒŋgə/ [B]
a /eɪ/ [B]	at /æt/ [B]
hand /hænd/ [B]	short /ʃɔ:t/ [B]
paper /'peɪ.pə/ [A]	there /ðeə/ [B]
similar /'sɪm.ə.lə/ [B]	add /æd/ [B]
circle /'sɜ:kəl/ [B]	lower /ləʊə/ [B]
square /skweə/ [B]	art /ɑ:rt/ [A]

When the subject was 5, the subject spoke British accent. All vowel productions and r-vocalization during this time are realised following the Standard British. However, in the current video, made when the subject was 10, the subject's language displays a mixed variety of English in her vowel quality despite her retains using the British vowel varieties in the other majority of words. The words *draw*, *paper*, *lashes* and *art* are all realised with vowels highly resembling the American accent. The word *paper* and *art*, for instance, although not strong, is realised with a retroflex -r sound. The /æ/ sound quality in word *lashes* is a bit raised than how normally the /æ/ should be in Standard British.

The Consonantal Comparison

In the T1, there is no single word containing American-British consonantal variety was found. Whilst in the T2, the subject produced only one word with that criterion; writing. This word is pronounced in British variety by the subject, /'raɪ.tɪŋ/.

The Prosodic Comparison

The subject intonation is indeed undergoing a slight change. In T1, the subject uses a different melody than the one used in the first video. Yet, a deeper analysis is needed to confirm this finding.

Discussion

Generally, according to the diachronic phonological analysis findings, the subject's English production indeed undergoes some changes on the phonological level. The most significant

changes occur on the level of prosodic, particularly in intonation. The second prominent change occurs on the phonemic level, in which the evidence of vowel change is quantitatively higher than the consonantal one. This finding is consistent with the theory of language change that vowel is more prone to change than consonant sounds (Blevins, 2015; Kiparsky, 2016).

The phonological changes occurring in the present study seems to have been acknowledged by the subject as from the interview, she expressed that she thought that she now spoke a mix of British and American accent.

Excerpt 1

Interviewer : What English accent do you speak?

The Subject : British! No, I think it is a mix of British and American accents.

The subject expressed that she identifies herself at the time as more like an American

Excerpt 2

Interviewer : Do you mix accents subconsciously?

The Subject : Yes. I think I am more American in my personality.

It indicates that the language change undergone was perhaps motivated by identity; the subject admired the YouTuber and wanted to be identified as her idol. This assumption is supported by Gee et al. (2001) that teenagers fashion themselves through language. Furthermore, this accent alteration was made easy as the subject no longer lives in British-accent speaking community, in fact, she no longer lives in an English-speaking community at all who would watch her English use. Yet, this geographic factor indeed is not a barrier for many individuals in adopting their role model's language style or accent, as reported by Muir et al., (2021) in a study that involved more than 8 thousand participants in which 68 per cent of respondents reported having an English language role model, and four key role model dimensions emerged: overall command of English, paralinguistic features, personal attributes and accent/variety of English (p. 1).

Conclusion

Every bilingual or multilingual is unique because every brain, life story and language is unique. As this study has established, the advancement of technology has transformed the field of multilingualism study into more complexities as digital exposure has come into play along with individual, social and geographical factors. It is pivotal to look at multilingualism without

neglecting this digital-exposure factor in future studies. As the study only used a simple binary technique, a more precise analysis using speech-analytical tools is encouraged to employ in future relevant studies.

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