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Understanding Matters: Swedes' Attitudes Towards Malaysian English

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Introduction

Whether value-free or value-laden, the varieties of English spoken in different countries and territories are divided into two categories, namely Standard English and Non-Standard English (Jenkins, 2015). When it comes to pronunciation, only Received Pronunciation (RP), a British variety spoken by some middle class people, and General American English (GA) are regarded as Standard while all other English accents are somehow non-Standard (e.g., Rönnerdal & Johansson, 2005). For more and more people, however, this Standard and non-Standard distinction of English pronunciation is a more convenient classification as it has been used for a long time. They argue that both Standard and non-Standard English pronunciations are equally acceptable for communication and language education in local and international contexts (Jenkins, 2000, 2005). Malaysia, for example, together with other Southeast Asian countries, tries to embrace and promote their own English pronunciation, rather than taking RP or GA as the model pronunciation to attain and use (Deterding, 2005; Pillai, 2017; Sewell, 2016). Nevertheless, attitude towards non-Standard English pronunciation tends to still be negative, particularly among people from countries where English is not used locally and Standard English is set to be the norm to follow (e.g., McKenzie & Gilmore, 2017; Pilus, 2013; Rezaei, Khosravizadeh, & Mottaghi, 2018).

This study reports the attitude of Swedish people, a group of Westerners, towards the pronunciation of Malaysian English, a Southeast Asian variety. A number of previous studies investigated attitude towards non-standard English, but research on the influence of comprehensibility and intelligibility on the attitude is still emerging. Our central interest is, therefore, in whether

the degree of understanding the message heard affects the attitude, and if so, in what ways it does.

As we shall see later, English is one of official languages in Malaysia, and Malaysian English has pronunciation features that are also commonly found in the English spoken in other Southeast countries, which are distinctive from those of RP or GA (Low, 2010, 2016). On the other hand, Sweden, one of the countries where English is mostly used in international settings, has a language policy that promotes Standard English to be the model for English education, and research reports a preference for RP and GA among the Swedish (Björkman, 2014; Hult, 2005). Therefore, we assume that the underlying attitude of Swedish people towards Malaysian English accent, non-Standard pronunciation varieties may not be as positive as towards RP or GA, at least at the starting point when they encounter it. The matter is whether the contextually preconditioned attitude among Swedes can be changed when they understand the variety of English well. We thereby pose the research question: Does the degree of understanding the Malaysian English accent crucially affect Swedes' attitude towards Malaysian English accent? If then, in what ways?

The rest of the introduction section describes the pronunciation features of Malaysian English shared with English spoken in five other countries in Southeast Asia and discusses how they would be perceived by those who have not had much exposure to Asian English in their social, cultural environment. It also reviews previous studies on language attitudes, mainly those investigating the attitudes towards Asian English pronunciation in international contexts.

Pronunciation features of Malaysian English found in other Southeast Asian English

We found several studies devoted to the phonetic (pronunciational) characteristics of Malaysian English (e.g., Baskaran, 2008; Low, 2010; Phoon, Abdullah, & Maclagan, 2013). Interestingly, a majority of them are also identified in the English of Singapore, the Philippines, Indonesia and India (Low, 2010, 2016), perhaps because of the influences of their mother tongues which actually share common phonetic features.

Individual sounds of language can be classified into consonants and vowels. In English consonants are represented by letters b, c, d, f, g, h, j, k, l, m, n, p, q, r, s, v, w, x, y, z, and vowels with a, e, i, o, u and sometimes y. As for consonants in the English in Malaysia and the other four countries, first of all, *th* sounds in RP and GE as in the words 'three' and 'this' often do not

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exist (Jenkins, 2000). Therefore, the two words are, for example, pronounced as *sree* or *tree* and *dis* in these Asian varieties. In addition, final consonant sounds in words are often omitted in the five varieties (Low, 2010, 2016). For example, 'balance' is pronounced as *balan*, 'lift' as *lif*, or 'fast' as *fas*. Consonant omission in different positions is also found in RP and GA, for example, pronouncing 'factsheet' as *facsheet* or 'scripts' as *scrips*. Beside these types of omission in RP and GA, the speakers of Malaysian English and the other four skip the final consonants much more than RP and GA speakers do.

Regarding vowels, the number of vowels in Southeast Asian English is noticeably smaller than that of RP, due to the fact that some vowels which are distinctive in Standard English merge in the non-standard Asian varieties (Low, 2010, 2016). For example, the vowels in the pairs of words 'book' and 'boot', 'seat' and 'sit', 'cut' and 'cot', and 'common' and 'caught' differ in RP and GA in terms of their qualities and lengths, but not clearly in the Southeast Asian varieties. Particularly, long vowels as in 'boot', 'seat', 'cot' (in GA), 'caught' are usually shorter in the non-standard than in the standard.

When it comes to the patterns of word and sentence stress (giving more prominence to certain words or parts of words), they are important to carry and understand meanings in RP and GA, but not as much in the Southeast English. That is, English users from Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Indonesia and India do not realise the stress pattern found in Standard English clearly as speakers and, as listeners, do not rely on them greatly to understand others' utterances.

In fact, many of the pronunciation features of the five Southeast varieties described above are quite common among many non-Standard English speakers besides those from Western English native speaking territories, such as Australia, North America or UK, and those from the same origin as English, such as Swedish or German (Kirkpatrick, 2010). These features are therefore often not quite well recognised or understood by Western native English speakers, Westerners from the same language origin of English and second language speakers that have learned Standard English. In particular, Jeong, Thorén, and Othman (2017) report that Swedish listeners had great difficulty in understanding Malaysian English due to the aforementioned pronunciation features except not realising *th* as in 'three' and 'this'.

The generally low international status of non-standard English when compared to Standard English has been likely to invoke negative attitude towards the speakers of non-Standard English. In the era of globalisation non-Standard English speakers considerably outnumber Standard English speakers, and a number of scholars have strived to raise the status of non-

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standard English to be equal to Standard English (Bayley & Villarreal, 2018). Hopefully such 'top-down', ideological endeavours may change the attitude towards non-standard English including Malaysian and other Southeast varieties eventually. In addition to this, actual change in the attitude toward a type of English may begin to emerge when it is well understood in international contexts and thus function as an effective communication tool. This is the concern our study.

Attitudes towards non-standard English pronunciations

According to Eagly and Chaiken (1993), attitude is "a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favour or disfavour" (p. 1). An attitude toward English pronunciations in the literature is often negative, judging or disfavouring non-standard accents, while in favour of standard pronunciation. Few exceptions to this frequent tendency were found among some of those who use English in local contexts. For example, Tokumoto and Shibata (2011) report that, unlike Japanese and Korean university students who were not satisfied with their mother-tongue influenced English accents, Malaysian students highly evalued their own accents deviating from Standard English. Otherwise, studies on attitudes about English accents report a discourse that stigmatises the non-standard, considering them 'incorrect', 'improper', 'inadequate' or even 'wrong'.

For instance, Earlier, Dalton-Puffer, Kaltenboeck, and Smit (1997) surveyed Austrian university students' attitudes toward Austrian-German-accented English, GA and RP, and their result indicates evident preference for RP (most) and GA, in disfavour of Austrian-German-accented English. Recently, Rezaei et al. (2018) investigated Iranians' attitudes toward Australian English, GA, RP and African-American Vernacular English, and found that both GA and RP are most highly favoured, followed by Australian English, and that African-American accent was least favoured. Ahn's (2015) quantitative survey and qualitative interview data show that Korean and native English teachers residing in Korea have negative attitudes towards the English by Singaporean, Indian, Chinese and Japanese speakers, the attitudes include strong rejection. In a study by McKenzie and Gilmore (2017), Japanese university students were asked what they thought of English spoken by Chinese, Japanese, Indian, UK and US speakers, and majority of them answered only UK and US English is 'correct' based on their perception on fluency and pronunciation. Moreover, Crismore, Ngeow and Soo's study (1996) conducted in a Malaysian context describes that Malaysians consider their own English including pronunciation 'functional', but they want to learn

Standard English. Their findings in fact contradict Tokumoto and Shibata's abovementioned study (2011) where Malaysian university students expressed confidence and acceptance of their own English accent.

External influences, such as social cultural environment, education, as well as people we share beliefs and values with, largely contribute to shaping our attitudes (Bohner & Wänke, 2002). The whys for negative attitudes towards non-standard English accents that previous studies discuss are mostly related to external factors. Tokumoto and Shibata (2011) speculate that their educational contexts influence Korean and Japanese students' preferences for native speaker pronunciation while being critical of their own accents. They also point out, while Malaysian students are situated in a multilingual society that requires tolerance to different accents, Korean and Japanese students' experiences of communicating in English mostly take place in the language classroom where they hear English by either native speakers (teachers) or Korean/Japanese speakers (teachers or peers). In a similar vein, Rezaei et al. (2018) concluded that exposure to RP and GA in their school context appears to lead Iranian students to highly value the two varieties other than Australian English and African American English. Dewaele and McCloskey (2015) surveyed 2034 multilingual speakers from different countries to investigate factors influencing their attitudes towards non-native accents. Their result indicates that personality traits (extraversion or introversion) are most influential, but linguistic practices and exposure to different accents also emerged as important factors affecting the participants' language attitudes. Therefore, although it is not desirable, stigmatizing, disfavouring and stereotyping, non-standard English accents seem to be a prevalent and relatively stable part of attitude about English in the current global setting.

Attitudes stereotyping and stigmatizing certain races, ethnic groups or gender can affect one's comprehensibility (e.g., Vasandani, Babel, & Munson, 2018). Having this understanding as a baseline, some recent studies investigated how actual understanding or the intelligibility of speech affects attitude towards different English accents, that is, the influence of an immediate, direct variable on it. For example, drawing on the concept of processing fluency, Dragojevic and Giles (2016) suggest that the ease with which GA and Punjabi English can be understood significantly affects listeners' attitude towards them. In order to confirm the causal effect of processing fluency on the attitude of participants (university students in the US), the researchers let the participants listen to the recording of both GA and Punjabi English with and without background noise. Their finding shows that the effect on extant preconception of different accents certainly has effects on the participants' comprehension and in turn on their attitude about the speech

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they heard. However, it also demonstrates that whether they understand a speech with ease is more strongly linked to positive or negative attitude toward it than stereotyping bias. In the same vein, Dragojevic, Giles, Beck, and Tatum (2017), after analysing participants' responses to Mandarin- and Punjabi-accented English, affirmed that whether they were able to process a speech with ease, moderated or reinforced pre-existing negative attitudes towards non-standard English. In addition, Khojastehrad, Rafik-Galea, and Abdullah (2015) found out that the extent to which international students are attracted to the English spoken by Malay, Chinese-Malaysian, and Indian Malaysian (the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia) largely depend on the intelligibility for their perceptions.

As mentioned previously, it is a Swedish language education policy to promote Standard English (earlier only British English and more recently both British and American English) as the model for school English education (Björkman, 2014; Hult, 2005). This national policy has been challenged, but preferring Standard English to non-Standard English particularly for grammar and pronunciation seems to be common among Swedes (e.g., Armandi, 2016; Hult, 2005). We, therefore, presume that the Swedish may favour non-standard English less in their attitudes towards Malaysian English when they encounter its speakers. The matter we are interested in is whether and to what extent understanding Malaysian English plays a role in Swedes' attitude towards it, which can be presumably pre-coloured by their preconceptions of Southeast Asian English.

Context

The study was part of a larger study that investigated the mutual intelligibility of Malaysian English and Swedish English (see Jeong, Thorén and Othman, 2017, 2018). In the study, 38 Malaysians and 51 Swedes participated voluntarily. The Malaysians were tested for their perceptions and understanding of Swedish English accent, and the Swedes were tested for their perceptions and understanding of Malaysian English. The main data for this current study, however, were the Swedish participants' comments about Malaysian English accent that we collected after the perception tests.

Participants

The 51 Swedish participants were either staff or students at two Swedish universities. Their ages ranged from 25 to 67 years old, and they used English on a regular basis for their studies, work, personal communication

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and entertainment (e.g., watching TV or reading books for pleasure). Among the participants, 30 were assigned to a group that we named 'Swedes 1, and 21 to another group that we called 'Swedes 2'. The first group, Swedes 1, listened to a Malaysian English speaker reading fifteen true/false sentences at the perception test. The other group, Swedes 2, also listened to the same speaker reading the same sentences, but for this group, the speaker altered her pronunciation for the three phonetic features – word stress, consonant cluster and long vowel – while maintaining her own overall accent. These three phonetic features in her unaltered pronunciation were the main factors for the difficulty with understanding her reading, which most of Swedes 1 had. Table 4.1 shows that Swedes 2 understand the Malaysian Speaker much better than Swedes 2. The difference between the two groups was significant: t (42) = -8.95, p = 0, when equal variances are not assumed. For a more detailed report on the effect of the intelligibility of the speaker's pronunciation, refer to Jeong, et al. (2018).

Table 8.1

Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) of the percentages of the answers given with understanding by Swedes 1 and Swedes 2

Participants	Number	M (%)	SD
Swedes 1	30	53.78	17.15
Swedes 2	21	85.40	7.49

Written comments and interviews

After the perception test, individual participants were asked to provide a written comment about the speaker. After that we also had a short interview session individually. One request we made to the participants was to tell us whether it was difficult for them to understand the Malaysian speaker, and if it was, what made them feel that way. They freely talked about what they thought of Malaysian English accent that they had just experienced during the perception test.

How we analysed

As our focus was on whether, and to what extent the degrees of understanding result in more or less positive or negative attitudes, we firstly classified participants' attitudes into the dichotomy of 'positive' and negative', irrespective of their manifestation types – cognitive, affective or behavioural

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(see Eagly & Chaiken, 1993 for the definitions of the three types). We assessed semantic (meaning) properties of words and expressions that the participants used for this classification. For example, we considered words like, 'too difficult to understand', 'disturbing', 'tiresome' or 'weird' negative, and words like 'easy (including easy to follow or 'easier than I thought)' or 'charming' positive. To the positive category, we added cases where the listeners attributed being unable to understand to their own listening ability, not commenting on the speaker negatively. For example, when the word 'difficult (including 'difficult to follow', or 'too difficult') was used, we checked to which, between the speaker and listener herself or himself, was the difficulty attributed. That is, we counted mentions that the speaker's pronunciation caused difficulty as negative. We then checked the correlation between the groups (Swedes 1 or 2) and attitudes (positive or negative) as well as between the scores of the answers given with understanding and attitudes by performing two sets of non-parametric Spearman's Correlation.

What we found

Results show that Swedes 1 (N=30) that struggled to understand the speaker exhibited more negative (and less positive) attitude than Swedes 2 (N=21) that understood the same speaker much better than Swedes 1. That is, among Swedes 1, 33.3% had positive attitude and the rest were negative. On the other hand, among Swedes 2, 76.2% had positive attitude and the rest were negative. A Spearman's correlation shows that the groups (Swedes 1 and Swedes 2) and attitudes (positive and negative) were correlated, r_s = .325, p = 0.02. In addition, there was even a stronger correlation between the individual level of understanding (the scores given with understanding) and attitudes (positive or negative), r_s = .470, p = 0.001.

Some participants' mentions that we coded as positive are: "[*her pronunciation of] 'nest' made me not understand. I'm not sure if I have the correct pronunciation, but it is clear, but it is me who don't know the word… [her pronunciation of] of 'warm', I was uncertain. I don't think there was anything wrong but the 'r' was a bit undistinct.*" (P32); "*I had no problems to understand but the first 'e' in 'elephant' was the same as in 'nest'. It almost sounded like 'a'…but no problems to understand.*" (P34); "*Yeah, it was much easier than I thought.*" (P48)

Interestingly, P32 and P34 perceived the phenomenon that, in Malaysian English (and many other Asian Englishes), the vowel in 'nest' and the first vowel in 'elephant' tend to merge with another vowel as in 'apple' into one sound. The two Swedish participants seem to intuitively have Standard

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English phonetic features as reference for English pronunciation, and implied that the Malaysian speaker's pronunciation was somewhat different from the reference they had. Meanwhile, P48's comment indicates that he had some preconceptions of Malaysian English, which he thought he would not easily understand. Although not explicitly shown, it appears that he also had Standard English as reference. However, although perceiving that Malaysian English pronunciation is different from that of Standard English, the three participants who understood her quite well had a positive attitude towards her pronunciation.

On the other hand, some comments classified as negative are: "*It was too fast.*" (P1, and similar mentions by P2, P4, P6, P11, P19, P20, P23, P24, P26, P27, P39); "*The rhythm of language, it's like....* (untranscribable, mimicking the speaker)," (P8) "*Too blurry*" (P 19); "*A lot of sounds are missing*" (P1, also similar mentions by P3, P12, P15, P16); "*They are pronounced differently than I usually…*" (P27, also similar mentions by P8, P11, P13, P41); "*It was a row of sounds that I couldn't make any sense of... The vowel pronunciation is the problematic thing all the way through*" (P 26).

Observe that most of the negative comments above were made by Swedes 1 (up to Participants number 30). Besides these comments, from the interview data with Swedes 1, we could easily find words connoting negative impression, such as 'tiresome', 'confusing', 'wrong', 'incorrect', or 'disturbing', which were used to describe the speaker's pronunciation. Negative words indicating negative attitudes were also used by some of Swedes 2 but the percentage was much lower. Except for altering three phonetic features detrimental to the intelligibility of her reading, the speaker maintained her Malaysian accent in the reading for Swedes 2. That is, both Swedes 1 and Swedes 2 listened to the same non-Standard accent; the difference between the former and latter was to what extent they were able/unable to understand the speaker. As revealed by the correlation test, understanding appeared to be a crucial factor for the Swedish listeners' attitude towards the Malaysian English pronunciation.

What do these mean?

The findings show that understanding matters in Swedes' attitudes towards the pronunciation of Malaysian English. Swedes 2, who understood the Malaysian speaker better in general, were much more positive about her pronunciation than Swedes 1, who struggled considerably to figure out what she said. Although the speaker modified three features of her pronunciation, her second reading of 15 sentences for Swedes 2 was featured with her

Malaysian English accent as clearly as her first reading for Swedes 1. In addition, on the individual level, those who understood the speaker better tended to have a more positive attitude than those who did not understand her well. Therefore, we suggest that the degree of intelligibility of the speaker (understanding from the listeners' side) appeared to be a vital ingredient in the attitudes of the two Swedish groups towards the non-Standard English variety.

Before they listened to the speaker, we did not explicitly discuss with the Swedish participants their preconceptions or ideas about Malaysian English or other Asian English varieties. Our study is thus not capable of explicating the interaction between preconceived general attitude about a non-standard pronunciation and an impression created momentarily by encountering an actual speaker of it. Nevertheless, through reviewing the Swedish language education policy, we speculated that Swedish listeners might have a preference for Standard English, as a baseline attitude. Confirming our speculation, participants' comments evaluating the speaker's pronunciation were mostly related to her pronunciation features that they thought deviated or were different from Standard English. Adverse comments were often made when the speaker was not easily understood or not understood at all. On the other hand, when understood well, her pronunciation did not usually invoke negative evaluations although it was noticeably different from Standard English accents. In addition, interestingly, Swedes 1 in the midst of their struggle to figure out what the speaker said tended to attribute their misunderstanding to her 'not-good' pronunciation, while Swedes 2 more often, to their own 'poor' listening comprehension. This overall observation has led us to conclude that understanding can be an influential factor for attitude towards different English accents, aligning with the research that receptive processing fluency is important for creating positive attitude (Dragojevic & Giles, 2016).

Kachru (1992) notes, English, as any other language, is eventually localised in "an English-using, sufficiently large and sufficiently stable community" (p. 34). English has been an 'intranational, local lingua franca' in Malaysia, a multi-ethnic, multilingual society. The country is not the only community that uses a localised form of English but one of many in the era of globalisation, thereby there are many 'Englishes'. While maintaining the distinction between Standard and non-Standard English for convenience, a number of researchers and English educators have argued for equal legitimacy and acceptance of different world varieties of English. Getting used to and

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being able to understand a wide variety of English have been encouraged and promoted to be an important competence in using English in international contexts (Jenkins, 2015). However, stigmatising non-Standard English is also still prevalent at both national and individual levels in many countries (Liurda, 2009). If a non-Standard variety is perceived to be difficult to understand, this can be fuelling the stigma to the accent of the particular English, as exemplified in our study.

Do we then suggest that Malaysian and other Southeast Asian English users strive to attain Standard English pronunciations, to induce positive attitudes from their international interlocutors? Not at all. Standard English pronunciations can be more known internationally through media or educational systems, but research has evidenced that sounding like a native English speaker is not a necessary condition for being well understood (Grant, 2014; Jenkins, 2000). What we wish to propose is Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries can find a way to promote intelligible pronunciation in global contexts while not losing their own local English accents that are integral to their cultural and national identities. In this regard, for example, Jenkins (2000, 2015) has introduced the Lingua Franca Phonetic Core syllabus that can be utilised to promote locally-coloured but still very easy to understand English accents. Similarly, particularly in Malaysian contexts, Pillai (2017) argues that local features of Malaysian English should be embraced in teaching English pronunciation in Malaysia rather than having a "fixation with using a native model of pronunciation" (p. 7). We agree that this approach of embracing both locality and intelligibility promotes a positive attitude towards Southeast Asian varieties including Malaysian English, based on our findings.

Attitudes change and fluctuate (Bohner & Wänke, 2002). This general statement can be easily applied to attitude towards different varieties of English, and this study examined how it would vary in relation to understanding Malaysian English, a Southeast Asian variety. That is, we forged a link between the degree of understanding and the degree of positivity in the listener's attitude. In doing so, we were grounded on the intelligibility principle for pronunciation: seeking to be well understood without removing one's own local accent. This topic of our study appears to have been underexplored in the field of language education while much more research has investigated the influences of external factors (e.g., language ideology, policy or international power relation) on language attitude. We, therefore, recommend future research on the topic in different contexts and with diverse international interlocutor combinations.

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