A Study of Focus and Accent in Singapore Malay

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In Malay, it has been observed that certain syntactic constructions, such as clefting, are used to mark relationships between neighbouring utterances in a discourse (i.e. focus, or more generally, information structure). Such facts raise the possibility that Malay adopts other strategies to mark such relationships. Intonation, for example, is used to mark focus in many languages, including Indonesian (e.g. Manado Malay in Stoel, 2005). A speaker makes a portion of an utterance the 'intended focus' by producing it with specific tonal markers or other forms of prosodic prominence (Ladd, 2008). In certain well-studied intonation languages like English, new information tends to be intonationally marked (i.e. accented), while given information tends to lack such marking. However, this relationship is generally not one-to-one. For instance, when the focused element is a phrase (i.e. larger than a single word), typically only its rightmost constituent receives an accent (Selkirk, 1995). Also, given information may sometimes be accented due to independent requirements on phonological structure (e.g. German, Pierrehumbert & Kaufmann, 2006). In brief, not all focused words are accented, and not all accented words are focused. This study aims to test whether intonation is used to mark focus in Malay, and moreover, the extent to which that relationship is one-to-one, or possibly influenced by focus projection, constraints on utterance-level phonology, or other factors.

To test these issues, 12 Singaporean native Malay speakers were recorded producing target sentences in contexts intended to evoke four different patterns of focus: all-focus, subject focus, verb-focus and VP-focus. All target sentences were SVO, and were produced as direct answers to wh-questions. The intended focus of the targets was thus manipulated by changing which syntactic constituent was targeted by the wh-word in the question. Singapore Malay intonation can broadly be characterised by prominent F0 rises that are associated with individual words. Visual and auditory inspection of the F0 contours was hence used to identify the word-by-word locations of such F0 rises, or *accents*, in each utterance. Overall, the specific focus contexts did appear to influence the presence of accents, except for the case of the verb-focus contexts. Across all contexts, the subject was generally accented, while the object was accented in 3 conditions, but largely unaccented in the subject-focus condition. The verb is optionally accented in the all-focus context, and unlike in English, it is generally accented in the VP focus context. Interestingly, the verb was not the most frequently accented constituent in the verb-focus context.

Together these findings suggest that focus-marking in Malay involves suppressing accents outside of focus rather than assigning new accents to a focused constituent. Strong inter-speaker differences suggest that there may be two coexisting grammars in Singapore Malay: one that obligatorily accents the final word in early focus contexts, and another that prefers deaccenting of the post-focus region. We show that these differences can be accounted for by a simple re-ranking of just two constraints. General patterns were also found for the within-word locations of the F0 peaks across constituents: the subject was generally accented on its final syllable while the object was generally accented on its penultimate syllable. In the subject-focus context, however, a number of speakers produced the F0 peak on the penultimate syllable of the subject. In summary, this study clearly shows that intonation is relatable to focus in Singapore Malay, but that the relationship is influenced by linguistic structure, and that the specific pattern varies for at least two groups of speakers.

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