

Reimagining Southeast Asian Englishes in formal and informal ELF interactions: strategies of ‘attuning’ and negotiation for meaning

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Abstract

This paper explores two main issues: whether English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) communication can include mixing, meshing or alternation with languages other than English in Southeast Asian or ASEAN contexts; and whether in these ELF interactions there is any substantial difference between ELF users from the “outer circle” and the “expanding circle” in terms of their interactional strategies. These issues are connected to the subtheme “Southeast Asian varieties of English” for the 19th English in Southeast Asia conference.

Two related theoretical frameworks are employed: the notion of ‘attuning’ (House 2008, p. 355), or “listening accommodation” (Deterding, 2013, p. 17), and negotiation for meaning, as distinct from overt and covert misunderstanding. Following some essential background information, these frameworks are explained and applied to data from two sources:

- a question-and-answer panel discussion held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and broadcast by the BBC World Service satellite television channel to mark the 50th anniversary of the formation of ASEAN
- examples of negotiation, including but not exclusively misunderstandings, from the Asian Corpus of English.

1. Introduction; Background; Definitions

The case for world Englishes being by definition codemixed varieties is made in McLellan (2010). In that study examples were analysed from four southeast Asian countries in which English functions as a second language, termed ‘outer circle’ Englishes by Kachru (1985) in his ‘three circles’ model of world Englishes. In these countries, Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore, English is used intranationally, especially in education, mass media, business and commerce domains, and distinct varieties of English have developed, influenced by the other languages in the repertoire of their citizens. In the six other southeast Asian countries which are members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), English is considered to be a foreign language, with few if any intranational functions. These countries, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam, are designated as belonging to the ‘expanding circle’, in Kachru’s model.

Recent research studies in the field of World Englishes have noted some limitations in Kachru’s model: following the declaration of English as the official working language of ASEAN in 2009 (Kirkpatrick, 2014) the distinction between the outer and expanding circle Englishes in ASEAN countries has become less clear-cut. It remains true that Vietnamese people are unlikely to use English to communicate with other Vietnamese, since they have the more viable alternative of using Vietnamese, and likewise for other expanding circle countries, as they all have their national languages as their default choice for intranational communication. But the need to use English at ASEAN meetings, increasing labour mobility and moves towards wider use of English

as a medium of instruction (EMI) in tertiary education, are all contributing to a redirection of the focus of research towards English as a lingua franca (ELF) in ASEAN interactions.

ELF is not a distinct variety of English, but it can be exemplified as the language used when Indonesians interact in English with Thais (Kirkpatrick, 2007, pp. 7-8), assuming that the Thais do not speak Bahasa Indonesia and the Indonesians do not speak Thai. As with the varieties of English used by those from the outer circle countries, their speech, writing and online interactions will be influenced by the other languages known to them, but they will make adjustments, for example avoiding switching into Thai and Bahasa Indonesia, in order to maintain intelligibility. Hence all ELF interactions are characterized by aspects of negotiation and accommodation, and by the desire to avoid potential miscommunication or breakdown.

The same principles, including the need for negotiation and awareness of the capabilities of interlocutors, thus apply to all ASEAN English users. This can be investigated through the use of the Asian Corpus of English (ACE), as described by Kirkpatrick (2014, pp. 10-11), “a corpus of naturally occurring spoken English used as a lingua franca (ELF)”. Deterding (2013) analyses misunderstandings found within the ACE corpus through a sub-corpus comprising 147 instances of misunderstanding, using post-event interviews with participants to identify misunderstandings which were not directly signalled during the conversations, and therefore not evident from the audio recordings or the printed transcripts. This ‘Corpus of Misunderstandings from the ACE’ (CMACE) is fully accessible online (<http://fass.ubd.edu.bn/research/CMACE/home/index.html>). Ishamina Athirah’s (2015) study focuses on the role of listener’s pronunciation as one cause of misunderstanding, using a similar sub-corpus.

While much can be learnt about intelligibility and interactional strategies of participants through the study of misunderstandings, it is also useful to adopt a broader approach and investigate aspects of negotiation for meaning found within ELF interactions (Matsumoto, 2011), not only those in the ACE corpus, but those found in other corpora worldwide, notably the Vienna Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE, n. d.; Klimpfinger, 2009), which consists of ELF interactions mainly between speakers of European languages. Negotiation for meaning is a key feature of all interactions, not only those which take place through a lingua franca.

One component of negotiation, and a requirement for establishing and maintaining intelligibility in conversations is “attuning” (House, 2008, p. 355), which occurs when interlocutors gradually become accustomed to the intonation, speed of speech, pronunciation and other features in a conversation. Deterding (2013, pp. 16-17) uses the term “listening accommodation, ... getting used to the patterns of speech of one’s conversational partners”, which covers grammar and word usage and also pragmatic features. The panel members in the BBC question-and-answer discussion (data set 1) need to attune to the features of the Englishes used by those in the audience who ask the questions; likewise the audience needs to attune to the features of the panelists who are from five different ASEAN countries.

2. Methodology; Data

In order to investigate aspects of negotiation for meaning and attuning in ELF interactions in Southeast Asia, two datasets are used.

2.1 Data set 1: BBC World Service television Q&A panel

The panel discussion series “Global Questions: The ASEAN way” was broadcast on 21st May 2017 (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p052sq4n>). It was chaired by the well-known BBC

News presenter and reporter Zeinab Badawi, with a panel of five invited guests from Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand. The majority of the audience were Cambodians, since the event took place in Phnom Penh. The format was pre-selected questions from audience members, posed to the panel when invited by the chairperson, who then designated one of the panel members to address the question.

Figure 1 is a screenshot from the panel discussion, showing the chairperson and five panel members seated onstage.



Figure 1. “Global Questions: The ASEAN way”

Source: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p052sq4n>

The format of this broadcast, with participants from across ASEAN, is a prime example of a formal ELF communicative event, as distinct from informal conversational interaction. Extracts from this broadcast are discussed in section 3.2 below.

2.2 Data set 2: ACE Corpus examples

The ACE Corpus, as noted above, includes multiple examples of interactions in which speakers are negotiating in order to maintain intelligibility and to reduce the risk of conversation breakdown. One of these is exemplified in section 3.3, followed by one from the CMACE corpus, which includes a misunderstanding partly caused by codemixing.

2.3 Data analysis

Two extracts from data set 1 are analysed in terms of their international (ASEAN ELF) intelligibility. Inevitably this involves noting deviations from ‘standard’ norms of pronunciation

and grammar, but the notions of attuning and negotiation for meaning, outlined above, provide the main analytical framework. Two further extracts are analysed in data set 2. The first of these is from the ACE Corpus, whilst the second is from Ishamina and Deterding (2017). These are informal unscripted conversational interactions, hence they contrast with the more formal and longer turns at speaking in data set 1. The same analytical framework of attunement and negotiation for meaning is applied to data set 2. In extract, [3] below features of collaborative negotiation are salient, whilst extract [4] shows an example of a misunderstanding. Ethnometodological conversation analysis features such as turn-taking, adjacency pairs, self- and other-repair are more applicable to the extracts in data set 2, as these contribute to attunement and to collaborative negotiation for meaning.

3. Analysis of examples from data sets 1 and 2

3.1 Data set 1: BBC World Service television Q&A panel

Following introductions by the Chairperson of the five panel members, members of the audience were then nominated to ask their questions, which had been preselected. The Chairperson then nominated one or more panel members to address the questions. The first questioner asked about “the ASEAN way”, the consensual non-combative *modus operandi* at ASEAN gatherings, and whether this was still an effective method of achieving consensus. A subsequent question was posed by a Cambodian participant as follows:

Extract [1]

I believe that crime stemming from landgrabbing [længrebɪn] could be qualify a crime against humanity because.. its involve the possible transfer of population illegally er imprison(?) many other inhuman act and prosecution. From your perspective, what mechanism of policy against [əgeɪn] crimes stemming [stəm'eŋ] from landgrabbing should there be?

(Source: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p052sq4n>; author's transcription)

Whilst this question is clearly intelligible to the panelists and to the audience, attunement is necessary to the pronunciation features of Cambodian English, especially on the part of the panel member who is asked to respond to this question, Mr John Riady from Indonesia. One example in extract [1] above is the pronunciation of “stemming” as [stəm'eŋ], with a reduced centralized [ə] vowel in the first syllable, and a lowered [e] vowel in place of the expected [ɪ] in the stressed second syllable. The key word ‘landgrabbing’ is pronounced [længrebɪn], with consonant cluster reduction at the boundary of the first and second syllable. ‘Against’ is pronounced [əgeɪn], with final consonant cluster deletion of [-st]. The absence of the word-final [-d] in ‘qualify / qualified’ is somewhat unexpected, since the following sound [ə] representing the indefinite article ‘a’ is a vowel, and there should be no difficulty in articulating the word-final [-d] in this environment. However, Cambodian speakers of English have a tendency to drop final consonants owing to the influence of Khmer, their first language (Morgan, 2013).

In terms of syntax there is transposition of the -s in “its involve”, a very common feature across many Southeast Asian Englishes (“that’s mean” for ‘that means’, Oh my grammar, 2013). The non-standard but nonetheless intelligible verb phrase “could be qualify” may be classified as

either syntactic or phonological, or both, in line with the analysis of misunderstandings in Ishamina (2015).

Extract [2] below is part of the response to another question, about the issue of deforestation in Southeast Asia, by Malaysian panel member Nurul Izzah Anwar:

Extract [2]

Yes, er I think the the bigger issue that's linked to deforestation is also the practice of slash and burn, which is basically being practised not just with small time farmers but also big corporations and er most ASEAN countries have corporations who are partly responsible to the forest fires in Indonesia and that caused Indonesian economy what sixteen billion US dollars of losses just for 2015 alone. So for me when you talk about er such a huge problem link to er deforestation the haze I mean it er it affects every school-going children in ASEAN and I can't I mean that's not even taking into account... the death toll.

(Source: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p052sq4n>; author's transcription)

From this quotation we can assume that the answers given by the panel members are unscripted, as indicated by the slight hesitations (“er”), rephrasing (...I can't I mean that's not...) and fillers (“what”, “I mean”). Syntactic deviations are seen in “responsible to” instead of ‘responsible for’, article deletion in “...caused Indonesian economy...”, and singular/plural concordance in the phrase “every school-going children”. The same processes of attunement are necessary for the audience, both live at the event and the worldwide audience for the broadcast programme, to comprehend what is said here by the Malaysian panel member.

Audioclips of extracts [1] and [2] were played, once only, to those attending the presentation at the ESEA19 conference from across all of ASEAN. They rated both the speakers highly in terms of intelligibility. Thus it appears that the minor deviations from expected norms in the speech of the Cambodian questioner and the Malaysian panelist do not cause any reduction in intelligibility.

3.2 Data set 2: ACE Corpus and similar examples

Whilst the examples from the BBC ASEAN Q&A panel are of more formal ELF with longer turns at speaking, the ACE corpus data consist mainly of informal conversational interaction. As noted above, the ACE corpus can serve as a source for examples of negotiation for meaning, and of actual and potential misunderstandings in ELF contexts. Attuning to the accent of interlocutors and negotiation for meaning both play important roles in achieving and maintaining intelligibility. Two examples can illustrate this.

Extract [3] is part of a conversation between a Bruneian (S1) and a Lao student (S2), discussing what can happen when they travel to rural areas where as guests they are culturally obliged to accept and taste whatever food or drink is offered to them. The Lao participant refers to eating snake meat, and the Bruneian asks what this tastes like:

Extract [3]

S1: so how does it [snake] taste like

S2: er:: the taste (1) is (1) not bad (1) the meat er: the colour look like
er: the chicken meat

S1: mm
S2: but er: the taste of the meat look like erm: k- crocodile meat
S1: oh it's is it um:
S2: <2> xxx </2>
S1: <2> elastic </2>
S2: yeah elastic
S1: chewy (.) oh @@ <spel> o k </spel>
S2: it very good
S1: good?
....

Source: <http://corpus.ied.edu.hk/ace/index.php?m=music&a=info&id=96>

Key: S1: Bruneian student
S2: Lao student
(1): pause, timed in seconds
<2>: overlapping turns
xxx: inaudible
@ : laughter
<spel>: individual letters pronounced

The Lao student S2 has difficulty describing the texture and taste of the snake meat and comes up with an inaudible word which the Brunei S1 hears as “elastic”. S2 repeats this approvingly, then S1 offers the description “chewy”, which is more appropriate for describing the texture of meat. There is evidence here of co-construction and collaborative negotiation, but no overt misunderstanding or conversation breakdown. Many similar examples can be found throughout the ACE corpus.

Extract [4], discussed in Ishamina and Deterding (2017, p. 295), is an example of a misunderstanding caused by codeswitching: the use of a Malay word which is misunderstood by the Maldivian interlocutor.

Extract [4]

Context: FBr1 is talking about religious schools in Brunei.

FBr1: for a religious school yeah
FMd: so what are what are the subjects ah they study <1> in the
yeah yeah </1>
FBr1: <1> in *ugama* school? </1> erm ah they
FMd: you mean government?
FBr1: in the government will be like how you say ah?

Key: FBr1: female Bruneian
FMd: female Maldivian
<1>: overlapping turns

After initially referring to (Islamic) religious schools in English, the Bruneian speaker makes a clarification request prior to addressing the Maldivian's question about subjects studied. But she uses the codemixed Malay-English phrase “*ugama* school”, not realizing that this is unfamiliar to her non-Malay speaking interlocutor. Because of similarities in pronunciation between “*ugama*” and “government” [ga:men] in fast speech, the Maldivian then makes a clarification request “you mean government?” This is taken up by the Bruneian who, unaware of the misunderstanding, then talks about subjects studied in government schools rather than religious schools. So this short extract from Ishamina's ELF data corpus contains examples of collaborative negotiation for meaning, misunderstanding caused in part by codeswitching, and a shift in topic which is a form of repair of the misunderstanding.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Southeast Asian ELF interactions may at times include instances of code-mixing, but this is just one of a number of meaning negotiation strategies that may be employed by multilingual interlocutors (and writers). Code-mixing can be a cause of misunderstanding, but it can also represent an attempt to achieve clarity and maintain intelligibility. The frameworks of attunement to different varieties of English used by Southeast Asians in ELF contexts, and of negotiation for meaning, can help in the analysis of ELF interactions in Southeast Asia and beyond. Misunderstandings may occur at different levels (phoneme, word, phrase, clause) and may not always be overtly signaled and repaired. They may be caused by a range of linguistic and pragmatic transfer features from the first languages of speakers, including codemixed expressions, as identified and exemplified by Deterding (2013) and by Ishamina (2015, 2017).

The short data examples analysed here suggest that meaning negotiation strategies and attuning occur in all ELF interactions, regardless of whether the speakers come from outer or expanding circle countries.

Future research in ELF in Southeast Asia could include comparison between speakers and writers from outer circle countries and those from the expanding circle to identify what types of attunement are required, which negotiation of meaning strategies are preferred, and which are less frequent or avoided. There is also scope for further investigation into whether the distinction between ELF users from the outer and expanding circles remains valid or can be challenged.

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