

SUPRASEGMENTAL FEATURES OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE SPOKEN BY IRAQIS

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ABSTRACT

The present study has been carried out against the general background of English as a language that continues to be the leading international language in the world and, in particular, the foreign language that is most often taught, learned and spoken in the Arab world in general and in Iraq, the country I focused on, in particular. In Iraq, there has been visible improvement in teaching English lately, but factors such as the fact that native teachers are rarely employed in Iraqi schools and that students seldom get the chance to be exposed to the language produced by natives, either in their own country or abroad, still have a negative impact on the process and on its outcome.

The present thesis is structured in seven chapters, followed by a list of references and appendices.

In the first chapter, *General Background of the Study. Study Methodology*, as its name indicates, the general background of the study and the study methodology are introduced. Part of the former has already been hinted at – the situation of English in Iraq. British English (and Received Pronunciation) as the standard against which the Iraqi English speakers' articulation was analyzed are spoken about here and the main ideas in some studies in suprasegmental phonetics, involving comparison between English and other European or non-European languages, are mentioned in an attempt to delineate the less explored areas that my study seeks to cover.

As for the latter, the study methodology, the following are mentioned:

- the aim of my research: to investigate the suprasegmental aspects of Iraqi English (IE) with reference to word accent patterns and the three intonation systems: tonality, tonicity and tone, by comparing the IE speakers' articulation to Standard British English (SBE);
- the research questions: a) Are word accent patterns in the English spoken by Iraqi Arabic/ Kurdish L1 speakers different from/ similar to Standard British English?; b) Are the intonation patterns and its features (tonality, tonicity, and tone) in the English spoken by Iraqi Arabic/ Kurdish L1 speakers different from/ similar to Standard British English?; c) Is there a difference between word

accent and intonation patterns of the English spoken by the Iraqi Arabic/ Kurdish L1 speakers at the level of the three geographical areas represented in the study and at the individual level of the speakers involved in the study?; d) Are there any factors that trigger differences/ similarities between word accent and intonation patterns in IE and Standard British English?;

- the type of analysis: the analysis is both qualitative – the data is described and analyzed, and quantitative – the percentage of divergence from the standard is indicated in the case of each of the fifteen speakers involved in the study and collectively, for the three regions of Iraq they represent;
- the selection of the speakers: fifteen speakers were chosen for the study; they come from the three dialectal regions of Iraq: northern, central, and southern, and took part in my research on a voluntary basis. They have various educational backgrounds and interests, but they were all selected from among people who use quite a lot of English in their everyday life;
- the test materials: three types of test materials were used: a list of words containing 22 items with various length and accentual patterns, a dialogue containing all major simple and compound tones, and a free speech delivered on one of three suggested topics (Social media networks have become a must in our lives; Early marriage is good for many reasons; A woman should work and help sustain the family), for each speaker. The free speech was used only to validate the articulatory peculiarities noticed for the list of words and was not taken into consideration when establishing to what extent the IE speakers' articulation conformed to the standard set;
- the recording of the material: all speech samples were recorded using the Praat software. The recordings were made in the phonetic laboratories at Siahddin University of Erbil, Al-Anbar University, and al-Dewaniya University, so as to minimize outside noise disturbance;
- the transcription of the recordings: the transcription and analysis of the data was done at two levels: first, auditorily, as I perceived the speeches and then, acoustically (instrumentally), with the help of the Praat software. Brief explanations on how Praat software works have also been offered.

Chapter Two, *Specific Background of the Study. Approaches to Suprasegmental Features*, focuses on general theoretical aspects concerning word accent, rhythm and intonation, both in English and in Iraqi Arabic.

Chapters Three to Five contain the actual analysis of the corpus and the main findings that resulted from it.

In Chapter Three, *Word Stress and Rhythm in the English Language Spoken by Iraqis*, the analysis focuses on conformity with and divergence from the BE standard in the use of word stress and rhythm by the Iraqi speakers of English. The investigation at these two levels revealed that Iraqi English accentual patterns were often different from the SBE ones in all types of words included in the corpus: disyllabic, trisyllabic and polysyllabic ones. The highest percentage of divergence was recorded in the case of the speakers in the southern part of Iraq – 36.33%. This was followed by the percentage representing divergent articulation of the speakers in the central part of the country – 31.66%, and that representing non-standard articulation of the speakers in its northern part – 29.33%. Overall, the percentages characteristic for all three regions fall below half, which prompts me to conclude that the rate of divergence from the standard in terms of word accent was not very significant.

At the individual level, the speakers for whom the lowest and highest percentage of dissimilarity were recorded paralleled the level of divergence displayed by the group they were members of: the smallest number of non-standard instances of articulation were produced by speaker 9, in the northern part of Iraq (17% divergence from the standard), while the highest number of non-standard instances of articulation were characteristic of speaker 12, in the southern part of the country (52% divergence from the standard).

As I suggested in Chapter Three, deviance from the standard may have been caused by negative interference from the speakers' mother-tongue, in the sense that some of them showed an obvious tendency to place stress in English words having a certain number of syllables in the same way they normally do it in Arabic words that are made up of the same number of syllables. On the other hand, a certain tendency towards speech "softening" in the case of the speakers coming from the southern part of the country may have led to non-standard articulation being produced by them. The clearest example of such articulation may be the tendency to place stress on the first syllable of words that do not normally carry initial accent in SBE. On the contrary, the fact that Kurdish, the mother-tongue of the speakers in the northern part of Iraq, is an Indo-European language and thus nearer to English than Arabic, which belongs to a different family of languages, seems to have been a facilitator in terms of word stress placement, in the sense that the five speakers from the north of Iraq placed word

stress in a way that resembled the articulation of the BE native speaker more closely. Finally, divergence from the standard may have been the consequence of reproducing a wrong model that the Iraqi speakers may have been offered, most probably, their English teacher's (in the introductory chapter of the thesis, I pointed out that, despite some progress having been visible and with some exceptions, English teachers in Iraq are still in need of improving their own foreign language (and teaching) skills).

Besides stress placement variation as compared to SBE, another non-standard feature has been noticed in the Iraqi speakers' articulation of some trisyllabic words that may find an explanation in stress-related matters. Thus, the shift from the central vowel /ə/ to the back vowel /ɒ/ in the first unaccented syllable of words like "commercial", by speakers 10 and 15, and "productive", by speakers 1, 9, 12, and 15, may have a double justification: on the one hand, the fact that, being used to one to one correspondence between letters and sounds in their mother-tongue, the Iraqi speakers correlated the letter "o" with the vowel /ɒ/; on the other hand, they may have disregarded the fact that it is only in unaccented syllables that vowel sounds of any kind are usually reduced to /ə/ and thus produced the vowel /ɒ/ as if it had occurred in an accented syllable.

Syllable reduction has also been noticed in my analysis. Three speakers – 5, 8, and 15 – suppressed the last syllable of the word "employee", which they articulated as /ɪm'plɔɪ/, thus reducing the word to a disyllabic one, the verb corresponding to the noun under discussion. This led me to suppose that some Iraqi speakers of English may face difficulties in pronouncing two adjacent vowels in whose case the most obvious (though not the only) characteristic that helps to differentiate between them is length (/ɪ/ and /i:/ in this case), when this vowel cluster occurs in word final position (this may probably be because, in the Iraqi Arabic dialect, though not in Modern Standard Arabic, groups of short + long vowel of the kind encountered in the English word "employee" occur in word-mid position (e.g. "bi.iit" 'house', "bi.iiʃ" 'how much'), but never in final position). Another example of syllable reduction in word final position is offered by speaker 14, who articulated the word "artistic" as /ɑ:'tɪst/, without the derivational affix *-ic*, so the noun instead of its corresponding verb (which may have been a slip of the tongue rather than misarticulation triggered by mother tongue negative transfer).

The brief analysis of rhythm also showed both conformity and non-conformity with the BE standard as far as the division of clauses into feet and feet duration were concerned. The conclusion that may be drawn here is that the difference between IE as produced by the

speakers involved in this study and SBE lies rather in the manner in which feet were divided than in how long each foot took to be articulated (in the latter case, dissimilarities were not as significant as they were in the former). I consider this a consequence of the fact that the Iraqi speakers tested had difficulties in speaking the foreign language, which brought about hesitation; this, in its turn, led to the increase in the number of feet in TGs when articulated by the IE speakers as compared to the number of feet the native speaker uttered in the same TGs. As such, feet division divergence from the standard is related to the speakers' level of proficiency in the foreign language. It thus may be anticipated that the higher their level of proficiency in English will be the closer the way they divide TGs into feet will most probably get to SBE.

The average foot duration in the BE native's speech increased as follows: 1: 1.02: 1.22: 1.64: 1.82 in one, two, three, four and five syllable feet, respectively (i.e. a disyllabic foot took 0.02 longer than a monosyllabic one; a trisyllabic foot took 0.22 longer than a monosyllabic one, and so on), while in IE, the same kind of ratio is 1: 1.07: 1.19: 1.35: 1.84.

The comparison of the ratios of average foot duration in SBE and IE showed that, in general, there were (minor) differences between them, in the sense that, in both languages, the longer the foot, the more time it took to be articulated. However, exceptions to this general rule were identified in IE: sometimes, shorter feet took longer time to articulate than longer feet and vice-versa. In the absence of speech samples offered by other BE native speakers, I cannot illustrate such exceptions from the rule for SBE, but I may suspect that they do exist in this variety of English as well.

What may be concluded based on the ratios above is that, given the monosyllabic foot as a starting point, feet made up of two syllables took longer time to articulate in IE than in SBE; feet made up of three syllables took approximately the same intervals of time to utter in the two languages; feet made up of four syllables took longer time to utter in SBE than in IE; finally, feet made up of five syllables mirror the situation of disyllabic feet – they were quite close in terms of duration when they were articulated by the native British English speaker and by the Iraqi speakers of English.

Following the argument of Kurdish belonging to the same large family of languages like English, what I did not expect was the two speakers from the north not to be the ones who divided tone groups into feet in a way that was the closest to SBE. They were overtaken by two speakers from the south in this respect, which may demonstrate that, if for some suprasegmental features (word accent in this case) mother tongue plays a positive role, this role is not necessarily extended to other suprasegmental elements as well.

In Chapter Four, *Tonality in the English Language Spoken by Iraqis*, focus falls on how the Iraqi English speakers divided their speech into tone groups and seeks to find out whether the way they did this corresponds to tone group division in SBE. The criteria based on which the boundaries of tone groups were established are also mentioned. In addition, marked and unmarked tonality is brought into discussion in the same comparative manner, after some hints at the elements that indicate one or the other are provided.

As far as tonality is concerned, most of the Iraqi speakers whose speech I have analyzed did not conform to SBE in terms of marking the boundaries of tone groups.

The groups of speakers representing the three regions of Iraq demonstrated different levels of conformity with the way in which the native speaker divided the dialogue into TGs. Thus, the speakers in the central part of the country produced the most numerous instances of divergent articulation (24%). They were followed very closely by the speakers in the northern part (23.11%) and by those in the southern region (23%). Overall, this closeness in performance may indicate that the fact that the speakers in the three regions use different regional varieties of Arabic and that the mother tongue of those in the north is Kurdish did not play a major role in differentiating between them as far as division of speech into TGs is concerned. On the other hand, it may be seen that the percentage of divergence in all three cases considered is not considerably high.

Qualitatively, divergent division of the dialogue utterances into TGs took two main forms: the combination of several clauses in one TG (this being the result of merging several TGs in one tone unit) and the division of one TG into segments that grammatically and semantically represent less than a full clause.

The situation is quite similar in the case of conformity to the standard of the IE speakers' marking tonality in the dialogue TGs. Not only is the hierarchy the same – the most numerous instances of divergent tonality were produced by the speakers in the center of Iraq – 24.43%, followed by those in the north – 23.10%, and those in the south – 18.34%, but, as can be seen, the percentages representing non-standard articulation in this context were also quite close to those representing divergence in TG division, at least in two of the three cases: the articulation of the speakers in the central and northern parts of Iraq.

At the individual level, the most numerous instances of divergent articulation were identified in the case of speaker 13 in both contexts analyzed in Chapter IV. Speaker 14 divided the dialogue utterances into TGs in a way which was the closest to the BE native speaker's articulation, while speaker 11 produced marked and unmarked tonality units in a similarly close-to-the-standard manner.

The focus of Chapter Five is tonicity. In particular, I compare the IE speakers' articulation of TG tonic parts with that of the native speaker (to this end, I introduce the elements which help in the identification of tonic syllables). In addition to this, neutral and marked tonicity are also discussed comparatively in some detail.

The analysis of tonicity in Chapter V revealed that, from the point of view of the tonic element in a TG, the IE speakers often produced articulations which were not similar to the BE native's. Thus, the articulation of the speakers in the central part of Iraq was the closest to the standard, though the percentage of divergent pronunciation was far from being small: 59%. The speakers in the other two parts of Iraq articulated the tonics in the dialogue TGs dissimilarly as compared to the standard even more often: those in the northern part, in 63% of the instances considered, and those in the southern part, in 62% of them.

When the IE speakers were taken into consideration individually, I could conclude that the speakers for whom the lowest and highest percentage of divergence were recorded followed the trend displayed by the group they represented: the smallest number of divergent articulations belonged to speaker 5, in the central part of Iraq (46% divergence from the standard), while the highest number belonged to speaker 9, in the northern part of the country (73% divergence from the standard).

In terms of type of tonic selection divergence, the following were the most frequent: accentuation of a different syllable from that which was accented in the same word by the BE native speaker, accentuation of the whole word instead of one or two syllables only, accentuation of a different word, and accentuation of either more or fewer words in a tonic unit, as compared to the standard (often, this unit was born by merging TGs which were separated in the BE native's articulation).

As for potential reasons why tonic selection resulted into articulations that were not similar to the BE native speaker's, I suggested that, at least for the speakers whose mother tongue was Arabic, this exerted negative influence on the foreign language spoken: in Arabic, the focus of information tends to occur at the beginning of a sentence, unlike in English, where it is rather left for the end of it; moreover, word accent is flexible and rather predictable in Arabic, which allows speakers of this language to often move stress from the end of the word towards its beginning, especially in polysyllabic words. Apart from this, Iraqi Arabs' way of speaking being naturally emotionally-loaded, often, loudness and prominence given to certain words in a sentence are discernable characteristics of their articulation.

Divergence from the standard was not as high in terms of marking tonicity as it was in terms of selecting the tonic element in a TG. The speakers in the central part of Iraq

articulated marked and unmarked tonicity TGs 27.55%. differently as compared to how the BE speaker did it. For the speakers in the northern part of the country, the divergence percentage was higher – 35.55%, while the articulation of the speakers in the southern part differed from the standard by 38.22%.

At an individual level, speaker 5, a representative of the central part of Iraq group, diverged from the standard on the least numerous occasions – 17.77% of his articulation instances were non-standard. On the other hand, the highest number of divergent articulations were produced by speakers 8 and 13, the former from the central part of Iraq, and the latter from the south – divergence amounted to 44.44% in both cases.

IE speakers diverged from the standard in two main ways in terms of marking tonicity: they produced marked instead of unmarked tonicity and vice-versa; they diverged from SBE unmarked tonicity by articulating a non-final lexical word as the tonic element of a TG, and by articulating more than one tonic element belonging to the same category: “grammatical+grammatical”, or to different categories: “lexical+grammatical” or “grammatical+lexical”. When they followed the standard, they mainly did it when marked tonicity was used by the BE native speaker, more exactly, when the tonic was represented by one word only: a non-final lexical word or a final or non-final grammatical word; and when there were two tonic elements: a final or non-final lexical word and a final or non-final grammatical word, or non-final lexical items.

In Chapter Six, IE tones were analyzed in comparison with the tones identified in the BE native speaker’s speech. To that end, the chapter opens with theoretical reference to the two tone types – primary and secondary, with their variants – that characterized the IE speakers’ articulation of the dialogue.

In terms of TG tone, there were both cases of similarity and cases of dissimilarity between the articulations of the fifteen IE speakers and that of the BE native speaker. Thus, the highest percentage of divergence in tone articulation was recorded for the speakers in the southern part of Iraq – it amounted to 72%. Divergent articulation produced by the speakers in the central part of the country was close to that produced by the speakers in the northern part: it rose to 65% and 66%, respectively. Thus, the articulation of the speakers in these two parts was closer to the standard, though the percentages of divergence remained quite high.

Two speakers – 3 and 7 – committed the highest percentage of instances of divergent articulation (80%), while, at the opposite end, speaker 1 produced divergent articulation that amounted to 49%. Interestingly, some speakers from different regions produced articulations that were similar in terms of amount of divergence in tone choice: e.g. speakers 3 (center) and

7 (north) – 80%, speakers 2 (center) and 6 (north) – 60%, speakers 10 (north) and 14 – 62%, speakers 9 (north) and 15 (south) – 77%.

I suggested that IE speakers' divergent articulation of the dialogue TGs tone-wise may be the consequence of the fact that they simply had not reached a sufficiently advanced level of English when their speech samples were recorded, despite some of them having been using this foreign language for quite a long time (some, in professional contexts as well). This, in its turn, may be triggered, at least partly, by their inability to suppress the influence of their mother tongue on English (i.e. they articulated the dialogue TGs as they would have done it in their mother tongue, which sometimes resulted into differences between the type of speech acts some utterances were equivalent to in the SBE native speaker's and the IE speakers' articulations).

All in all, the articulation of the speakers in the northern part of Iraq was closer to the SBE speaker's, most probably due to their mother tongue being Kurdish, an Indo-European language, like SBE (though belonging to a different language family). Arabic as the mother tongue of the speakers in southern Iraq and a certain tendency to "soften" their speech may have set their articulation the farthest apart from the standard. It must be said, however, that only in the case of one speaker – speaker 8 – did I find it difficult to understand what the IE speakers were saying. The others' speech in English was perfectly intelligible to me as a researcher.

The results of my research will hopefully be significant in that it explores the nuances of Iraqi English, mainly word accent and intonation patterns, which have been scarcely explored over the years so far. To my knowledge, this would be the first lengthier study to be carried out on supra-segmental features of English as spoken by Iraqis. Its usefulness lies in that it may help to determine the similarities and differences between native and non-native speakers' use of word accent and intonation patterns in English, while addressing the question of intelligibility when non-natives use English.

This research may have pedagogical implications that may give teachers and learners alike a better insight into the nature of intonation features that distinguish Iraqi English from Standard British English. Once this aspect is clarified, the curriculum taught and the ways of teaching it may be adjusted in such a way as to bring about improvements in the outcome of the EFL class, i.e. better response to the learners' needs and better trained speakers of the foreign language.

This study admittedly has limitations that may be turned into future research starting points. It may be further developed in a number of ways. On the one hand, it may be extended

by involving a greater number of speakers (especially females, who were poorly represented in my study), representatives of various languages as their mother tongue. On the other, a larger corpus would help to bring new light on and to extend the results already obtained. Also, variables such as age, gender, education which I marked down in the speakers' profiles, could be taken into consideration to see whether differences between suprasegmental features of the articulation in native BE and of the articulation in IE vary with them. To validate the results in terms of how IE intonation is perceived by an interlocutor, native or non-native speakers of English other than Iraqis may be asked to provide feedback on this.