

## On a contact Malay inhibitory effect on L3 phonological sensitivity

Linguistic interest in the contact Malay varieties of Sri Lanka has been largely driven by their greater divergence from the grammars of other Malay varieties, particularly in syntax and morphology. In the domain of phonetics/phonology, this interest has focused to some extent on quantity, given the fact that Sri Lankan Malay features a range of intervocalic geminates that alternate with singletons (Bichsel-Stettler 1989, Tapovanaye 1995), not a feature ordinarily associated with Malay/Indonesian varieties, including other contact varieties. Given the ubiquity of multilingual language contact in the Sri Lankan linguistic area, this observation lends itself to the investigation of cross-linguistic effects, not just in historical language contact, but in present-day second and third language acquisition. All the non-English languages spoken natively in the Sri Lankan linguistic area feature the singleton/geminate alternation phonetically, however the associated phonology differs in each of the languages.

In second language phonetic research in progress, the comparative sensitivity of L1 speakers of Sri Lankan languages to phonemic quantity contrasts in Finnish is being investigated, using automated lexical discrimination testing and acoustic analysis with Praat. The most significant finding has been that L1 Sinhala speakers are strikingly sensitive, attributable in part to the fact that both Finnish and Sinhala permit non-complementary length contrasts, so that long vowels and geminates can co-occur in sequence. In Sri Lankan Malay varieties, they do not ordinarily co-occur and the length alternation between consonants and vowels is compensatory, causing the language to differ in that respect from both Sinhala and Tamil.

In tests of both perception and production, L1 Sinhala speakers with minimal to no exposure to Finnish perform similarly (though never identically) to L1 Finnish speakers in their sensitivity to quantity contrasts, on exposure to lexical items featuring those contrasts, and in their production of those items. The items are members of minimal pairs presented non-sequentially as stimuli (i.e. with intervening distractors).

In this paper, we present the results from the same experiment performed in the village of Kirinda, the majority of whose inhabitants are L1 (Sri Lankan) Malay speakers or highly proficient L2 speakers, and the majority of whom are also highly proficient L2 (and in many cases, L1) speakers of Sinhala, essentially the sole vernacular of the immediate environment beyond the core area of the village.

The third language acquisition dimension of the Kirinda Malay project involves identifying any effect that fluency in the variety might exert on the Sinhala advantage in sensitivity to Finnish-type quantity systems. In other words, for speakers of Kirinda Malay, (1) is native-like fluency in Sinhala sufficient to guarantee similar results to our non-Malay-exposed Sinhala-speaking research participants? (2) does the existence of gemination and alternating vowel length in Kirinda Malay strengthen the facilitating effect on sensitivity to quantity contrasts in Finnish, or (3) does the specific phonology of Kirinda Malay with respect to such contrasts set up an inhibitory L3 effect? Preliminary results suggest that (3) is the correct generalization.

The experimental procedure we used tests perceptual sensitivity and productive ability for quantity contrasts that were predicted to be salient for speakers of Kirinda Malay, but to be non-salient for the (non-Sri Lankan) L1 English speakers who we also tested. The results nevertheless show that the Malay speakers performed no better than the English speakers. We attribute this in part to the fact that the Kirinda Malay singleton-geminate contrast is phonologically-conditioned and complementary with respect to vowel length, whereas the length variation is phonemic in Sinhala, as it is in Finnish. The difference is consistent with an established effect in the second language acquisition literature (for example Curtin et al 1998) in which contrasts that may be phonetically present in the L1, but not phonemic, are difficult for learners to perceive and acquire in an L2 in which they are phonemically contrastive. The more significant L3-related result is the finding that fluency in Kirinda Malay actually inhibits quantity sensitivity in Finnish, not just in L1 Malay/L2 Sinhala speakers, but in L1 Sinhala/L2 Malay speakers as well, including speakers who acquired Kirinda Malay to fluency in early adulthood.

## REFERENCES

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