

# PROSODIC INTERFERENCE AFFECTING ENGLISH COMMUNICATION AMONG CEBUANO-VISAYAN SPEAKERS IN SOUTHERN CEBU

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## Abstract

This study aims to heed the call of giving importance to the creative aspects of first language interference in oral English communication. It contends that languages have their own distinct features but this does not mean inferiority or superiority to another. The suprasegmental features of the Philippine English Variety as spoken in the southern towns of Cebu are identified to examine the aspects of first language interference in speaking English. An investigation on the distinct suprasegmental features of the southern Cebuano Variation is first identified and compared to the *standard*. Results indicate that the Southern Cebuano Variation is spoken with a sing-song twang. This is characterized with a strong emphasis on the last syllable of most words, especially when they are used in a sentence. Further, findings reveal that the distinct prosodic features of the L1 studied do not significantly affect the respondents' English prosody despite the obvious disparity of both languages. The phonological interference identified is phonemic, not prosodic. Therefore, the L1 interferences in stress, pitch and intonation do not have a significant influence on the suprasegmental features of the Filipino English variety spoken in the southern municipalities of Cebu. The prosodic interferences identified are not noteworthy enough to swerve speakers from the *standard*. In an attempt to explain such phenomenon, Flege's Merger hypothesis claims that the merging of phonetic properties of phones impact both the first language and the target language (Lord 11). As speakers become invariably influenced by L2, they may experience phonological modifications. Hence, while one think that acquiring new phoneme(s) will be more difficult than rearranging the two existing sounds from allophones of the same phoneme to separate phonemes, research has proven otherwise (Major and Kim qtd. in Yavas 205). This study concludes that inclination for prosodic interference is higher when the structures or sounds are similar in L1 and L2 than when they are dissimilar. This study recommends further investigation of the phonemic structure of the Cebuano-Visayan Southern Variety.

**KEYWORDS:** interference, prosodic, phonemic, suprasegmentals, L1

## 1. Introduction

A good command of the English language translates to success in academic and career accomplishments. Thus, English communication skills are of prime importance in the Philippines. It has been so since the drafting of the second Philippine constitution declaring English and Filipino as official languages in the Philippines.

The English used as a norm in Philippine education is General American (Llamzon , 1997). And although the advent of American Based Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industries has further strengthened the ubiquity of General American English, some Filipinos, as Llamzon notes, are willing to copy American English only to a point (1997). They retain something of their identity- in not conforming to nasal twangs, in their careful articulation of syllables, and in enunciating with a rolled /r/, instead of the retroflex /r/, are among many examples. The sociolinguistic underpinnings of this are what Braj Kachru explains that the spread of English considers certain aspects, acquisitional, sociolinguistic, pedagogical and theoretical (2001).

This widespread linguistic influence is also affecting Cebu, a progressing island in the southern part of the Philippines. Despite the three vowel sounds of the Cebuano language, as opposed to the 14 vowel sounds of the English language, many BPO industries and English as a Second/Foreign Language institutions opt to open businesses in Cebu for two important reasons, lower cost of living than Manila and good English communication skills of Cebuanos. However, English proficiency is not entirely true to the whole Cebuano populace. In contrast to the readily accessible facilities in big universities and educational advancements in the city, the nearby towns rely on whatever resources they have. This situation often leads students from faraway towns to pursue college education in the city. As these students mingle with peers from the city, their accented speech becomes a common interest, even to the point of being a subject of misunderstanding.

An accented first language speech is also often manifested in the way they speak English. This is what Braj Kachru calls interference. This interference is presumably a result of contrasts between the phonological features of the different Cebuano native languages and General American English. Interference as a subject in language learning is often ignored (Kachru, 2001). This study aims to heed the call of giving importance to the creative aspects of first language interference in oral English communication. It contends that languages have their own distinct features but this does not mean inferiority or superiority to another.

Previous studies of the Philippine English phonology such as that of Tayao and Llamzon have dealt much with segmental phonemes, describing vowels and consonants. There is however very little material on suprasegmentals. Tayao (2009) in her study recommends that further investigation of suprasegmental features of speech be conducted to include morphophonemic changes that appear as a result of speech. This study is of such endeavor. It describes the suprasegmental features of the English spoken by Cebuanos in the southern part of the province. This description is analyzed and categorized to identify the language interference that the different groups experience in speaking English.

This study assumes that first language interference is highly influential in the way Southern

Cebuano's speak English. This claim is supported by the language interference theory as defined by Dulay (qtd in Khansir, 2012) as the automatic transfer, due to habit, of the surface structure of the first language onto the surface of the target language, and Vygotsky's social interactionist theory which assumes that language development is determined by the interaction of physical, linguistic, and social factors- any and all of which may vary greatly for each individual learner.

Vygotsky's Social Interactionist theory is the notion that human mental function is from participating cultural mediation integrated into social activities. This has much relation to Ellis (1997) who refers to interference as transfer, which is the influence that the learner's first language exerts over the acquisition of the second language. He argues that depending on the learner's stage of development, this transfer is governed by learner's perceptions about what is transferable. Ellis raises the need to put a distinction between errors and mistakes. According to him, errors reflect gaps in the learner's knowledge and they occur because the learner does not know what is correct. Mistakes, on the other hand, reflect occasional lapses in performance; they occur because the learner is unable to perform what he or she knows.

Carroll argues that the circumstances of learning a second language are like those of a mother tongue (2008). Sometimes there are interferences, and occasionally responses from one language system intrude into speech. The other language learned is kept as distinct as possible. To successfully learn L2 requires the learner to often preclude the L1 structures from the L2 learning process, if structures of two languages are different.

On a similar note, Kachru writes about a context of diversification positing that they are not only acquisition deficiencies as generally presented. A deeper sociological, linguistic, attitudinal and cultural reasons suggests that diversification whether conscious or unconscious is often symbolic of subtle sociolinguistic messages which include, exponent of distance, marker of creativity potential, expression of the Caliban syndrome-that which negates all that is local, the names, language, heritage and so on, and diversification versus international English.

Beardsmore suggests that many of the difficulties a second language learner has with the phonology, vocabulary and grammar of L2 are due to the interference of habits form L1 (2003). The formal elements of L1 are used within the context of L2, resulting in errors in L2, as the structures of the languages are different.

Therefore, it may follow that languages with more similar structures are more susceptible to mutual interference than languages with fewer similar features like English and Cebuano. The learner is likely to resort to L1 structures for help if L2 is more distant from L1. The further apart the two languages are structurally, the higher the instances of errors made in L2 which bear traces of L1.

However, the amount of interference that speakers experience would tend to vary depending on several physiological and environmental factors such as exposure to the target language, formal language training and cultural influences. Therefore, it is justifiable that speakers be classified into categories. Llamzon(1997) in his study on Philippine phonology categorized speakers into three and analyzed each category's phonological feature based on David DeCamp's post-creole continuum. On this continuum, the *acrolect* is closest to the standard form of a language, the *basilect* is the most distant from the standard

form, and the *mesolect* is intermediate between the two. (Bhela,1999). Therefore, there is a great deal of variation in the speech community and the point at which a form of speech is located along the continuum depends on the context as well as the social characteristics of the speaker.

This study considers all the aspects mentioned in investigating the distinct suprasegmental features of Cebuano-Visayan languages in the southern towns of Cebu, in terms of stress, pitch, and intonation, characteristics of the Philippine English variety in the aforementioned variables, L1 interferences in suprasegmentals that affect English utterances among Southern Cebuanos on the lexical, syntactic, and discourse levels. It takes into account different social characteristics before analyzing the amount of influence L1 has on the target language.

## **2. Method**

This qualitative study uses the normative survey technique to collect demographic data of the respondents who are freshman English university students from Cebu's southern towns: Dalaguete, Alcoy, Bolhoon and Oslob. These students are assumed to have raw English abilities, thus making them the best representatives of their respective speech communities.

The respondents were identified through a purposive - random sampling technique on all the freshman English classes in Cebu Normal University. This guarantees that all the possible samples that were taken from the population have the same probability of being chosen.

A data-gathering instrument was distributed to the respondents, who in turn accomplished the tasks in the instrument. Their reading and spontaneous speech styles were then elicited. Through observation and interview, distinct features of utterances spoken in Southern Cebu are identified and are presented in a table. The characteristics of these utterances were compared and contrasted to the phonology of General American. Features of both languages are then compared and contrasted.

The result of the contrast and comparison was used as basis in identifying the interferences that the respondents experience in speaking English. The phonemes in both sections were described in reference to the General American English to highlight the language interferences found. To do this, the respondents were asked to read the set of utterances in the data-gathering instrument. They were also asked to speak spontaneously regarding familiar topics. The responses were recorded on tape, and the audio recordings of the three groups were analyzed and interpreted according to the basis of the theories advanced.

To determine the prosodic features of the respondents' native language and contrast it to English, a comparative survey was done. The data gathered was analyzed, organized and interpreted. For validation purposes, the results of this study were juxtaposed with a survey result that was conducted through a field work in the southern towns of Cebu.

## **3. Instrument**

The research instrument is made up of two parts. The first part is designed to get the demographic profile of the respondents. Among the data obtained are educational attainment and language background of the respondents.

The second part of the instrument is of three sets. The first set consists of randomly selected words, sentences, and selections, written Cebuano-Visayan that the respondents read. The list of English words is composed of 15 randomly selected everyday words. It has five two-syllable words that are stressed on the first syllable, four two-syllable words stressed on the second syllable, and six multiple syllable words stressed on the second and third syllable.

The second set of the instrument consists of fifty (50) words that carry stress in Philippine English that are distinctive from General American. These words are identified by Barcelon (qtd. In Llamzon,1997) as commonly mispronounced words by Filipinos. Ninety percent of which are used by Tayao (2009) in her study about the phonological features of Philippine English. These words include fifteen (15) words stressed on the first syllable, fifteen (15) words that are stressed on the second syllable, four (4) words that are stressed on the first or second syllable, five (5) words that are stressed on the first or third syllable, seven (7) words that are stressed on the second and forth syllable, and four (4) words that are stressed on the last syllable. Sentences that are used on both items are based largely on newspapers and news articles from the internet so as not to deviate the respondent's familiarity from the topics.

The third set is a list of speaking tasks that made respondents interact spontaneously. Subjects range from personal to educational, political, environmental, and entertainment issues. These are matters that are deemed to be of interest to the respondents. The speaking tasks required respondents to talk about their personal profile- educational background, occupation, if any, and family life.

Data analysis of this study is in three phases. Firstly, distinct features of Cebuano-Visayan variety spoken in the southern towns of Cebu are extracted from certain utterances that respondents read from the research instrument. These utterances are compared to "standard" Cebuano-Visayan variety-one that enjoys the glottopolitical status of the language.

The result of the analysis of the first phase is employed in identifying the characteristics of the Philippine English Variety as spoken by the people in Southern Cebu. The results of the previous analysis are compared to the stress, pitch, and intonation of General American English.

On the third phase, the presence of language transference in stress, pitch and intonation on the utterances of the respondents are examined through lexical, syntactic and discourse levels.

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

Despite the variations, commonalities among the dialectal features of the towns under study are seen to typify their speeches. Discussed in this section are the common characteristics of suprasegmental features that are found in the dialectal variations in Alcoy, Dalaguete, Bolhoon and Oslob. These features are compared to the General American features to be able to examine the language transfer that occurs in the speakers' L2 learning.

The following results are revealed in the study:

##### **4.1 Distinct suprasegmental features of Cebuano-Visayan spoken in the southern towns of Cebu**

Southern Cebuano Variation is spoken with a sing-song twang. This is characterized with a strong

emphasis on the last syllable of most words, as shown in the following table of random Cebuano words. The table shows how word stress in “standard” Cebuano differs from the Cebuano variety as spoken in the Southern municipalities of Cebu. For the purpose of this study, standard Cebuano-Visayan pronunciation refers to the variety which enjoys a glotto-political status, that which is spoken in Cebu City which is the center of trade and commerce in the island.

Table 1

*Standard Cebuano vis-à-vis Southern Cebu Variety*

“Standard” Cebuano		Southern Cebu Variety	
	Stressed Syllable/s		Stressed Syllable/s
tambuk (fat)	tam-	Tambuk	tam- , -buk
babuy (pig)	ba-	Babuy	ba- , - buy
Buntag (morning)	bun-	Buntag	bun- , tag
udtu (noon)	ud-	Udto	ud- , -to
Hapun (afternoon)	ha-	Hapon	ha- , -pon
Humut (pleasant smell)	-mut	Humut	-mut
bahu (bad smell)	-hu	Bahu	-hu
da-ut (thin)	-ut	da-ut	-ut
Guba (broken /out of order)	-ba	Guba	-ba
mahadluk (to be scared)	-had-	Mahadluk	-had- , -luk
karaan (old /not new/of the past)	-ra-	Karaan	-ra- , -an
gutumun (to be hungry)	-tu-	Gutumun	-tu- , -mon
bagul-bagul (skull)	-ba-	bagul-bagul	-ba- , -gul
ipaka-un (to feed/to give as food)	-ka-	ipaka-un	-ka- , -un
bintana (window)	- ta	Bintana	-ta , -na

There is a noticeable rising intonation in a significant number of utterances. Instead of a low tone that signals the end of a word as spoken in the standard form, there is a significant rise of the voice when it comes to the finality of each word. In the South, there is a noticeable stretch of the vowel sounds of most

syllables. Thus, equal emphasis of syllables is placed along with the first syllable stress on standard Cebuano. The following paratones represent the certain stress levels for syllables. 1 is low, 2 is normal, 3 is high and 4 is very high.

The words *tambuk, buntag, babuy, bahu*, and *da-ut*, are generally given stronger emphasis on the syllables with the vowel sound /u/. Among the respondents, however, it can be observed that the emphasis previously mentioned is significantly lower due to a laxer enunciation of the vowel sound /u/. A significant finding is that contrary to the standard’s three phoneme utterance, the South has more. In the south, /u/ is relatively less tense and shorter than the standard. *Humut* and *guba* also share these characteristics. In the four words previously mentioned, the first syllables *tam-*, *ba-* and *da-* are also emphasized.

Stress on words with multiple syllables like *mahadluk, gutumun, bagul-bagul, kara-an, bintana, ipaka-un* are also evident on the southern dialect. Had- for mahadluk, -tum- for gutumun, -ba- for bagul-bagul, -ra- for kara-an, -ta- for bintana, and -ka- for ipaka-un. In addition, it is noticeable that the last syllable of each word is also given strong emphasis in the southern dialect. Instead of a low tone that signals the end of a word as spoken in the standard form, there is a significant rise of the voice as respondents came to a finality of each word. This is a similar case scenario with the words *udtu* and *hapun*, are pronounced in standard Cebuano with more emphasis on the first-syllable. In the South however, there is a noticeable drag in the vowel sounds of the last syllables. Thus, equal emphasis of these syllables is placed along with the first syllable stress on standard Cebuano. Therefore, one distinction of the Cebuano-Visayan variety in the south is its tendency to stress the last syllable in a multiple-syllable word.

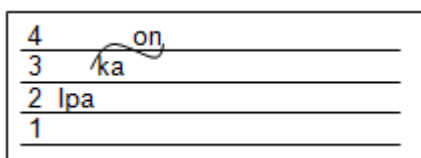


Figure 1. Paratone Showing Multiple-Syllable Word *ipaka-on* (to feed) Stressed on the Last Syllable

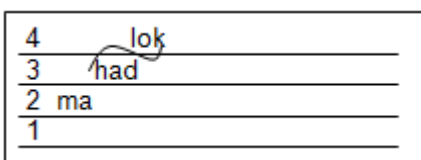


Figure 2. Paratone Showing Multiple-Syllable Word *mahadlok* (to fear) Stressed on the Last Syllable

Distinctions in pitch and intonation are also very evident in the dialect. Cebuano Visayan has four pitch levels that correspond to stressed and unstressed syllables in words that build the thought units that consequently, make-up the sentences (Pesirla,2013). Pitch level 1 is used with falling tone after declaratives and imperatives, pitch level 2 is a normal tone used to start all kinds of sentences, level 3 is a rising pitch tone for every stressed syllable and in ending all interrogatives and words in series and the extra-high pitch level 4 is used on the last stressed syllable of emphasized words in exclamatory sentences. But for the purpose of this study, pitch levels are observed in the way they are integrated with the other suprasegmental phonemes stress and juncture in sentential level. This integration is called intonation.

The staccato rhythmic intonation of Cebuano Visayan depends on the type of sentence. Pesirla (2013) notes two kinds of intonation, rising and falling. Rising intonation is used in interrogatives. On the other hand, the falling intonation is used in a statement, in imperatives and exclamations. The multiple syllable stress is especially apparent when words are used in a sentence.

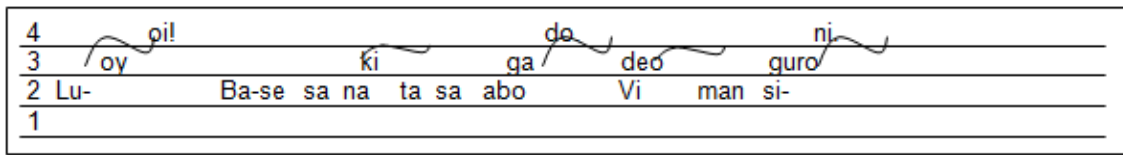


Figure 3. Sample sentences showing words with multiple-syllable stress

It is also noteworthy that the southern variety has more vowel sounds than the standard Cebuano. Some of which are the less tense vowel sounds. These add to the tonality in the dialectal variation.

#### 4.2 Characteristics of the Philippine English Variety as spoken by the people in Southern Cebu

Findings reveal that the distinct accent that respondents have in spontaneous natural speech in L1 does not have a significant effect in the way they speak English. Speakers tend to be very careful with the way they share ideas using L2. The trace of the southern accent of the respondents is especially apparent in word stress only, wherein some emphases are placed on the wrong syllables.

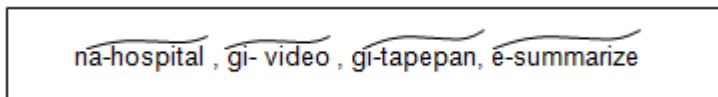


Figure 4. Codemixed Words Stressed on the Last Syllable

However, the usual sway of the voice which is typical of the southern dialect is not noticeable on spontaneous talk. The suprasegmental features of their first language only affect their English intonation when codeswitching is done.

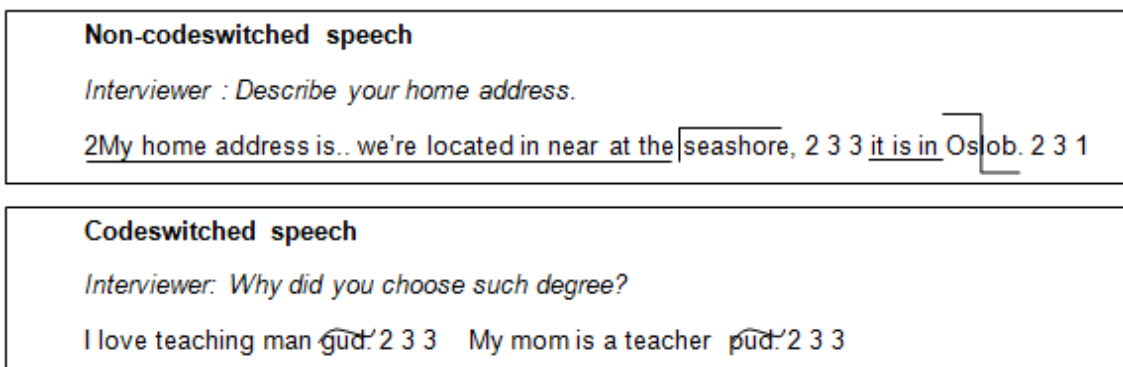


Figure 5. Stresses on Codeswitched and Non-codeswitched speeches

The respondents were made to read fifty (50) words that, according to Tayao (2009), are found to be commonly mispronounced by Filipinos. Among the fifty words, fifteen words are stressed on the first



syllable in General American. These are *carton, menu, baptism, hazardous, pedestal, and formidable, spiritual, subsequent, government, rescue, ancestors, sabotage, talented*. Among the fifteen, most of the respondents' stress miscues are on the words *talented, pedestal* and *ancestors*. These words were stressed on the second syllable. Some of the speakers stressed the second syllable of *government*. It may be noted however, that *government* was written along with *govern*, a verb that stressed on the second syllable. This placement is seen to be a distraction to the respondents.

The second set is composed of fifteen words stressed on the second syllable. These are *direct, centennial, ingredient, certificate, participate, thereby, utensil, dioxide, percentage, committee, bamboo, precinct, throughout, lieutenant, semester, govern, colleague*. Most of the respondents stressed *utensil, semester* and *dioxide* on the first syllable. *Committee* was given stress on the third syllable.

There was no mistake on words that may be stressed on the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> syllable, *robust, centenary, despicable and kilometer*. Primary and secondary stresses on the 1<sup>st</sup> and secondary stress on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> syllables for *economics, economical, adolescence, antecedent, rehabilitate, cemetery and commentary, complimentary and documentary* are commonly mistaken by the respondents, especially in for words such as *adolescence and antecedent*. Respondents' 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> syllable stress on *paraphernalia, itinerary, preparatory, hereditary, interpretative, pronunciation* are generally correct. The most noticeable finding on this section is that respondents from the south of Cebu are weak on segmental phonemes. A great deal of pronunciation miscues is attributed to absent vowel sound varieties in the dialectal variation and some consonant sounds like the /d/ in *ingredient* is sounded as /dʒ/. Such a subject is beyond the scope of this study. This may well be included in recommendations.

To test the respondents' intonation, they were made to read a news article and were asked to participate in a spontaneous speech. Illustrated in the following is how the respondents read the article.

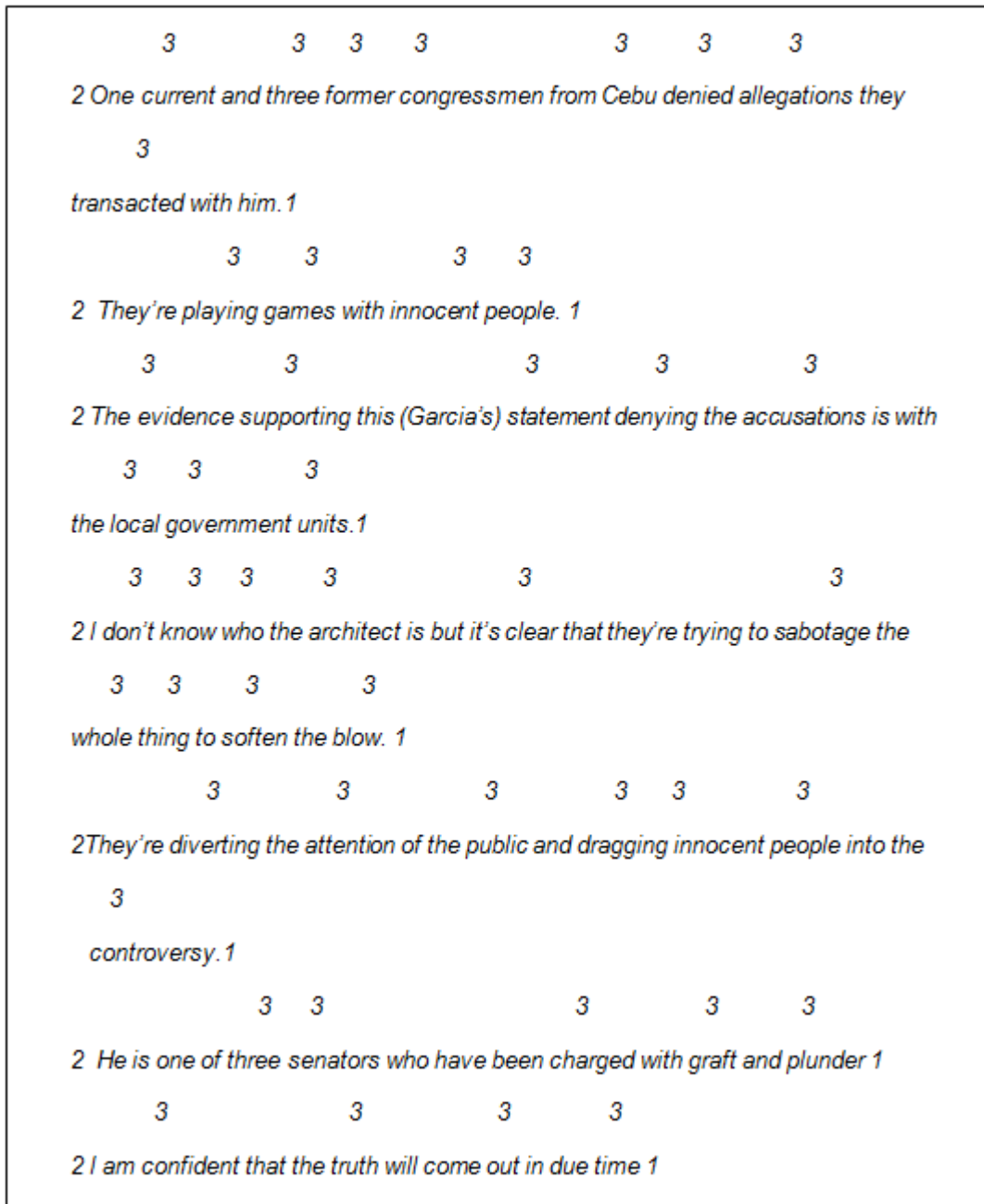


Figure 6. Stress Levels of Respondents' Read Speech

(source: <http://www.sunstar.com.ph/superbalita-cebu/balita/2014/05/20/maternity-ikiha-na-maternity-nanghimakak-343921>)

The results of this section draw many similarities with that of that of the read article in set A. As previously mentioned, the distinct accent that respondents have in spontaneous speech does not affect the way they read. Findings in this section show that in reading the English news article, there is no trace of the southern accent of the respondents. The usual sway of the voice which is typical of the southern dialect is not apparent in interviews. Upon examination of the multiple accent in a single word as characterized by their first language, what may be observed are only segmental miscues due to the absent varieties of the General American vowel sounds in the Cebuano language.

The typical rising intonation on almost all utterances cannot be spotted either. This implies that second language interference of the respondents does not include read speech. The next discussion will center on this subject.

To test if L1 affects L2 learning, the respondents were made to answer questions that required them to talk spontaneously. The questions require them to speak about personal, familiar and academic matters. The speeches reveal that the transfer that occurs as the respondents speak in English is largely on the vowel and consonant production. The suprasegmental features of their first language do not affect their intonation in English. On the contrary, they do have an effect on stress, to a certain degree. Some words are stressed on the wrong syllables, like talented, adolescent, overflow, committee, hazardous, baptism, utensils and ancestors. However, the possibility that the respondents' less exposure and poor education to the words in question are not ruled out in this study. Therefore, evidences gathered are not enough to attribute solely the respondents' stress miscues on first language interference

Upon examination of data gathered from interviews, the most striking characteristic on the Southern Variety is on segmental miscues and not on suprasegmentals.

#### 4.3. L1 interferences in stress, pitch and intonation that affect Southern Cebuano's English utterances

Findings show that a noteworthy prosodic interference occurs when an English word is code-mixed with a Cebuano word.

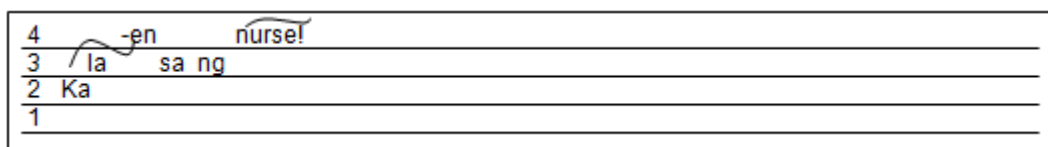


Figure 7. Paratone Showing Prosodic Interference When English Words are Code-mixed with Cebuano

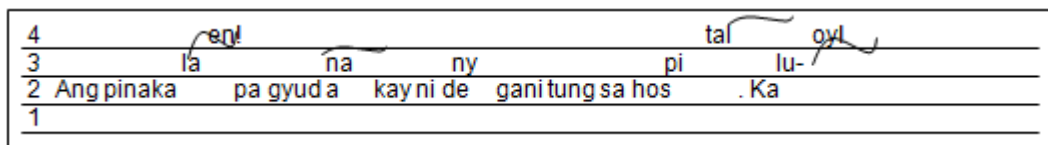


Figure 8. Paratone Showing Prosodic Interference When English Words are Code-mixed with Cebuano

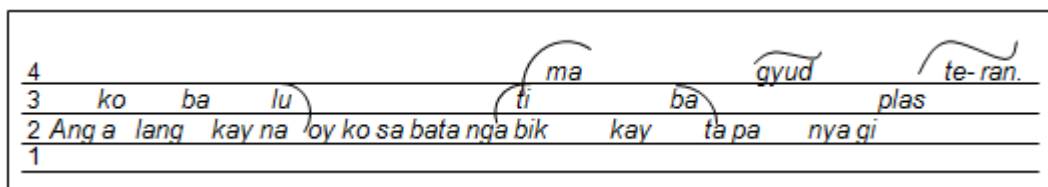


Figure 9. Paratone Showing Prosodic Interference When English Words are Code-mixed with Cebuano

Words like “nurse”, “hospital”, and “plaster” were pronounced entirely different from English, and exactly that of L1. Prosodic interference was also apparent only on multiple syllable words that perhaps were not familiar to the respondents. Due to their unfamiliarity, respondents decoded the words the way

they did their L1.

In an attempt to explain such phenomenon, Flege's Merger hypothesis claims that the merging of phonetic properties of phones impact both the first language and the target language (Lott, 2012). As speakers become invariably influenced by L2, they may experience phonological modifications. Hence, while one think that acquiring new phoneme(s) will be more difficult than rearranging the two existing sounds from allophones of the same phoneme to separate phonemes, research has proven otherwise (Major and Kim qtd. in Yavas,2011).

On a syntactic level, results revealed that the prosodic interference occurred when speakers codeswitched. There was an observably automatic change in the intonation, from English to southern Cebuano variation, upon switching codes. The southern sing-song twang came about whenever there is a Cebuano word in the sentence.

In discourse, traces of the prosodic transfer were very minimal and almost insignificant. They were discernible in content words stressed in the final part of the sentence. Some of the sentences in a discourse were spoken with much lower finality than the English pitch level. Remarkably, this did not occur on an entire discourse. The speakers were generally adamant to the General American accent when they explained something in English. The most observable transfer in discourse is phonemic interference, not prosodic.

## **5. Conclusion**

Based on the analysis and findings of this study, it is concluded that the inclination for phonological interference is higher when the structures or sounds are similar in L1 and L2 than when they are dissimilar. Results of the study reveal that the prosodic interferences identified are not noteworthy enough to swerve speakers from the standard.

Further, the L1 interference of southern Cebuano variation is mostly phonemic, not prosodic. Therefore, the L1 interferences in stress, pitch and intonation do not have a significant influence on the suprasegmental features of the Filipino English variety spoken in the southern municipalities of Cebu.

## **6. Recommendation**

In view of the foregoing findings and conclusion of this study, the following are recommended:

1. A study on the segmental phonemes of the southern Cebuano variety may be conducted. This will broaden the subject matter on prosody. Although ample researches have been done on the subject of segmentals but they will prove significant unless localized. Conducting a segmental study of the southern variety will not only help the dialect be recognized, but it will be a useful basis in teaching a second language.
2. A focus on the Philippine English variety as spoken by the people in Southern Cebu may be done in terms of vowel and consonant production. As observed in this study, the phonemic interference is the very subject that should be given importance since it greatly influences the way the respondents talk.
3. For a better English speaking ability, students are encouraged to avoid code-mixing and codeswitching,

especially because they are found to encourage prosodic interference. Further, an enhancement on vocabulary instruction may be promoted since decoding an unfamiliar vocabulary is found to result to irregular and almost intelligible speech that, although does not promote prosodic interference, is still worthy of attention.

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