

Topics in Malaysian Mandarin Phonetics and Phonology

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This dissertation investigates the phonetic characterization of speech sounds in Malaysian Mandarin (MM), revealing that some regionally colored accent is attributed to L1 transfer effect and extensive language contact with Malay (and English). The articulatory and/or the acoustic analyses were carried out to document the place of articulation for the coronal consonants of MM, along with the vowel and tonal system. There are three principal findings. First, the three-way contrast of sibilants in MM are incompletely neutralized: (i) the “palatal” x derives another anterior variant [ç], whose contact location is similar to that of [s]; (ii) the “retroflex” and “non-retroflex” contrasts are less distinct in their articulatory features, but not in their acoustic properties. The sibilant variants are found to be contextually conditioned.

Second, vowel qualities of MM are very different. The post-alveolar syllabic approximant [ɹ] and the rhotacized [ə̃] are absent in MM; [a] and [u] are vowels without lingual contacts. The phonetic reduction (or centralization) is not significant in closed syllables, but it is obvious in the final element of diphthongs and triphthongs, because the non-final segment are in in-phase relation with the preceding onset and are more resistant to phonetic reduction (or, target undershoot).

Finally, MM has a compressed tone space due to influences from Malay that only contrasts H and L. The compressed tone space leads to the absence of the high level tone and the contour leveling in MM. More importantly, a new tone is introduced in MM, bearing a structural resemblance to checked tones of Hokkien. Neutral tones mostly occur in functional morphemes, which have various tonal realizations depending on different prosodic structures.

Keywords : Malaysian Mandarin, language contact, palatography, incomplete neutralization, vowel reduction, Tone 5