Interaction between standard language ideology and sociophonetic variation in Malaysian English

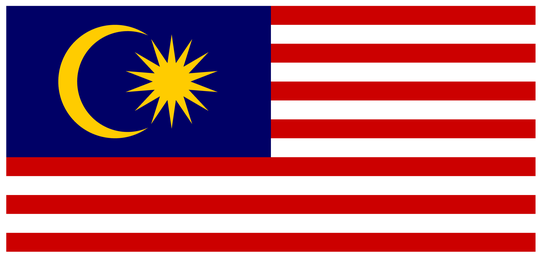
Ping Hei Yeung py101@georgetown.edu
Georgetown University

GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

Background

Ideologies that shape global attitudes towards English:

- **Standard Language Ideology (SLI)**: there is a single 'correct' way to speak English (Milroy 2001)
- **Native-speakerism**: native speakers are legitimate, non-native speakers are not (Holliday 2006)
- **American** (AmE) and **British** English (BrE) are hence perceived as the global standard



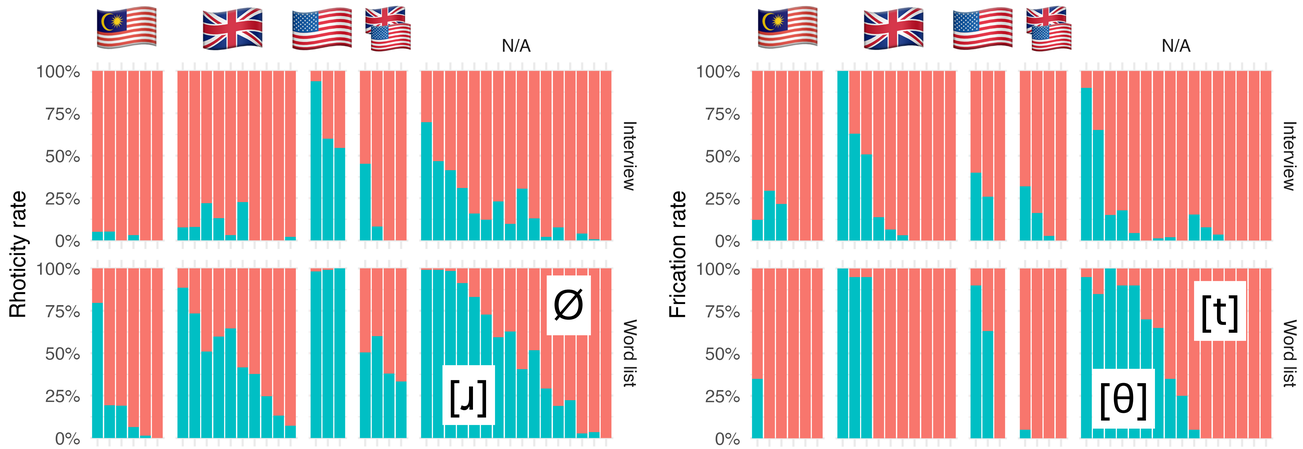
- **Malaysia**: Former British colony in Southeast Asia
- **Malaysian English** (ME): lingua franca in major cities, e.g., Kuala Lumpur
- Sociolinguistic variables:
  - Postvocalic rhoticity: rhotic [kɑɹ] or non-rhotic [kɑː] 'car'
  - TH-stopping: fricative [θɪŋk] or stop [tɪŋk] 'think'
- BrE and AmE are seen as more prestigious than ME (Pillai 2008)

Research questions

- What does **Standard English** mean to Malaysians?
- Does variation in **rhoticity** and **TH-stopping** reflect speaker beliefs about standardness?

Results

- No consensus on what constitutes the "standard"
- Some considered BrE/AmE as standard, others did not
  - *"Standard English is whatever I use in formal settings"* → locally-defined standard
- Some aspired to speak BrE or AmE, but many were not motivated to adopt specific standards



- Postvocalic /r/ production seems to align with speaker orientation, but not so much for /θ/
- Those who prefer AmE are more rhotic than those who prefer BrE or ME
- But those who prefer AmE/BrE do not use more fricative [θ] than those who prefer ME
- Task effect: rhotic [ɹ] and fricative [θ] more frequent in read speech than casual speech

Discussion

- Malaysians have diverse stances towards SLI, research should not flatten their perspectives
- Sociophonetic variation indexes standardness, but it is not a direct adoption of AmE/BrE norms
- Instead, the "standard" is often defined locally
  - *"My teacher said the fully enunciated /r/ is the correct pronunciation"* (no mention of AmE)

Methodology



- Fieldwork in Kuala Lumpur in Spring 2025
- (1) **Sociolinguistic interview**, (2) **word list reading**, (3) matched-guise perception test
- Interview questions:
  - *"What does Standard English mean to you?"*
  - *"If I could magically change the way you speak English, how would you change it?"*
- 58 speakers (32 F, 26 M, aged 19-35), 39 speakers analyzed so far
- Interview response → analysis of language ideology
- /r/ and /θ/ tokens from interview and word list → auditory coding
- Interview: 1921 /r/, 1684 /θ/
- Word list: 3938 /r/, 775 /θ/