

## Spelling Pronunciation: A New Norm in Brunei English?

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### Abstract

This paper investigates the extent of spelling pronunciation in Brunei English. Twenty undergraduates from Universiti Brunei Darussalam and twenty school students Yayasan Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah Secondary School were recorded reading a passage and a list of sentences that included possible instances of spelling pronunciation such as *buffet*, *salmon*, and *honest*. Based on auditory judgment, the study finds that the younger speakers had more instances of spelling pronunciation than the older ones. Also, the male undergraduates produced more spelling pronunciation than the females, though the difference was not significant for younger speakers. There is some evidence that spelling pronunciation might be one factor encouraging a rhotic accent among female speakers, though curiously this is not the same for males.

### Introduction

Spelling pronunciation occurs when the pronunciation of a word changes to reflect its spelling. For example, in the seventeenth century *often* came to be pronounced with no medial [t], but now the [t] is being restored, influenced by the spelling of the word (Algeo, 2010, p. 46). Similarly, *forehead* was once pronounced as [ˈfɔːrɪd], but most people nowadays say it as [ˈfɔːhed] (Wells, 2008, p. 317).

For both *often* and *forehead*, the modern pronunciation is reverting to how the words were originally pronounced. Hickey (2014: 297) suggests a more restricted definition of spelling pronunciation, involving the pronunciation of a word to reflect spelling that deviates from its etymology. For example, *fault* is now usually pronounced with an [l] even though historically there was no [l] in this word. Similarly, *again* always used to be [əˈgen], but sometimes it now has [eɪ] in its second syllable, though Wells (2008, p. 15) reports that only 20% of people in Britain and 3% of those in America prefer this new pronunciation. However, the broader definition of spelling pronunciation favoured by Algeo (2010) will be adopted here, including any word where the spelling affects the way that a word is pronounced, regardless of whether this reflects the etymology of the word or not.

In Brunei, and indeed throughout South-East Asia, it has been noted that pronunciation of *salmon* with [l] is widespread (Deterding & Salbrina, 2013, p. 42), and it may even be considered the standard pronunciation in the region. However, Wells (2008, p. 708) indicates that pronunciation of the word in both RP British English and General American is [ˈsæmən], with no medial [l]. So we can say that the local pronunciation of *salmon* is an instance of spelling pronunciation that deviates from the standard as shown in dictionaries.

Due to the implementation of the British education system in 1984, British English is usually regarded as the pronunciation model of English taught in classrooms in Brunei. One aim of the current study is to investigate the extent to which speakers of English in Brunei are moving away from this pronunciation model, specifically focusing on their use of spelling pronunciation.

Another aim is to correlate spelling pronunciation with rhoticity. A speaker with a rhotic accent produces [r] wherever ‘r’ occurs in the spelling, including after a vowel (Ladefoged, 2006, p. 92) in words such as *heard*, *more*, and *there*. Here we refer to the occurrence of [r] in words such as these as ‘r-colouring’, while rhoticity describes an accent. Rhoticity seems to be

an emergent trend in Brunei English (Salbrina, 2006, 2010; Salbrina & Deterding, 2010; Nur Raihan, 2014; Deterding, 2015), and it might be regarded as an example of spelling pronunciation.

## Pronunciation in Brunei

There have been a number of studies on the phonology of Brunei English. An early investigation by Mossop (1996) observes that there was a tendency among local English speakers for:

- use of [t] for initial voiceless TH, for example in *thought* and *threaten*
- use of [d] for initial voiced TH, for example in *the* and *they*
- omission final [t] and [d] in words such as *feast* and *planned*
- merging of [e] and [æ]
- avoiding vowel reduction
- no distinction between long and short vowels, such as in *fist* and *feast*

Rhoticity was not mentioned by Mossop (1996), so it seems that it was not as widespread at that time as it is now, confirming that it may be an emergent trend in Brunei English. Deterding and Salbrina (2013) have suggested that increasing rhoticity in Brunei English may be caused by three different factors: influence from the first language of most people in Brunei, Brunei Malay, which is strongly rhotic (Clynes & Deterding, 2011); exposure to American media; and exposure to Filipino English, which is also rhotic. Spelling pronunciation was not mentioned, but it may represent a further factor in the rhoticity of Brunei English.

We might also note that Malay words are typically pronounced as they are spelled, and this might represent one further factor encouraging spelling pronunciation in Brunei English. There are a few limitations to the one-to-one link between Malay spelling and pronunciation, including:

- the letter ‘e’ can be pronounced as [e] or as [ə], so *perang* can be [peran] (‘yellow’) or [pəran] (‘war’)
- final ‘ai’ can be a diphthong [aj] or a sequence of two vowels [a.i] (with [.] indicating a syllable break), so *cukai* (‘tax’) is two syllables pronounced as [tʃukaj] while *mulai* (‘begin’) is three syllables pronounced as [mula.i], because the final ‘i’ in *mulai* is a suffix
- in words borrowed from English, the letter ‘g’ can be pronounced as [g] or [dʒ], so there is instability about the pronunciation of words such as *generasi* (‘generation’) and *teknologi* (‘technology’), with some people using [g] and others using [dʒ]

Nevertheless, these uncertainties about the pronunciation of a word from looking at its spelling are minor compared to the complex issues involving English spelling, and it seems probable that the relatively predictable spelling of Malay may encourage the use of spelling pronunciation in Brunei English.

## Data and Methodology

The speech data for this study are from the recordings of a total of 40 speakers from Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD) and Yayasan Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkuah Secondary School.

The UBD students consist of ten female and ten male ethnically-Malay undergraduates aged between 21 and 25 years old who are all majoring in English Language and Linguistics. They are referred to as FU1-10 and MU1-10. On a questionnaire given to them prior to the recordings, they were asked to list the languages they speak in order of proficiency. 16 of them wrote Malay first and English second, while just four, FU5, FU7, MU4 and MU8, listed English before Malay. 11 of them claimed to be multilingual while the rest are bilinguals.

The school students consist of 10 female and 10 male Malay secondary students aged between 11 and 15. They were randomly selected from different classes of Year 7, Year 9, and Year 10. From their questionnaires, 13 listed Malay as their most proficient language, while two females, FS2 and FS3, and five males, MS1, MS5, MS7, MS8 and MS10, wrote English first. Similar to their older counterpart, the majority of them described themselves as bilinguals while eight of them can speak more than two languages.

Each participant was recorded in an empty room and in the presence of the researcher. Before the recording, each participant was asked to read through the Wolf passage (Deterding, 2006; see Appendix A), which was chosen as it contains clear tokens of all the vowels and consonants of English. The tokens selected here to test for r-colouring in the Wolf passage are: *heard*, *concern*, *short*, *more* and *before*. In addition, the participants were asked to read ten sentences designed to investigate spelling pronunciation (see Appendix B). Only the first eight will be considered here. They contain the following words that might reflect spelling pronunciation: *buffet*, *salmon*, *vegetables*, *honest*, *often*, *comfortable*, *doubt* and *company*.

Table 1 below shows the standard pronunciation of these words (Wells, 2008) and their typical spelling pronunciations. *Buffet*, *honest*, and *often* are shown with two standard pronunciations as there are distinctions in how they are pronounced by the majority of RP British English and General American English speakers. Only the pronunciation that is most commonly used is shown in Table 1, although Wells (2008) suggests alternatives for the pronunciation of some of the words. Indeed, as was discussed above, the spelling pronunciation [ˈɒftən] is one of the standard variants.

	Standard Pronunciation		Typical Spelling Pronunciation
	Br	Am	
<i>buffet</i>	[ˈbʊfeɪ]	[bəˈfeɪ]	[ˈbʌfet]
<i>salmon</i>		[ˈsæməŋ]	[ˈsælmən]
<i>vegetables</i>		[ˈvedʒtəbʰlz]	[vedʒɪˈteɪbəls]
<i>honest</i>	[ˈɒnɪst]	[ˈɑːnəst]	[ˈhɒnəst]
<i>often</i>	[ˈɒfən]	[ˈɔːfən]	[ˈɒftən]
<i>comfortable</i>		[ˈkʌmpfətəbəl]	[kɒmˈfɔrtəbəl]
<i>doubt</i>		[daʊt]	[daʊbt]
<i>company</i>		[ˈkʌmpəni]	[ˈkɒmpəni]

**Table 1.** Standard pronunciations and typical spelling pronunciations

A microphone was placed a few inches from the mouths of the participants, and the recordings were directly to a computer using Praat software (Boersma & Weenink, 2010).

The analysis involves transcription on the basis of auditory judgments by the researcher. In the case of self-correction made by a speaker, the corrected pronunciation is used for the analysis and the original mispronunciation is ignored.

## Results

### *Spelling Pronunciation*

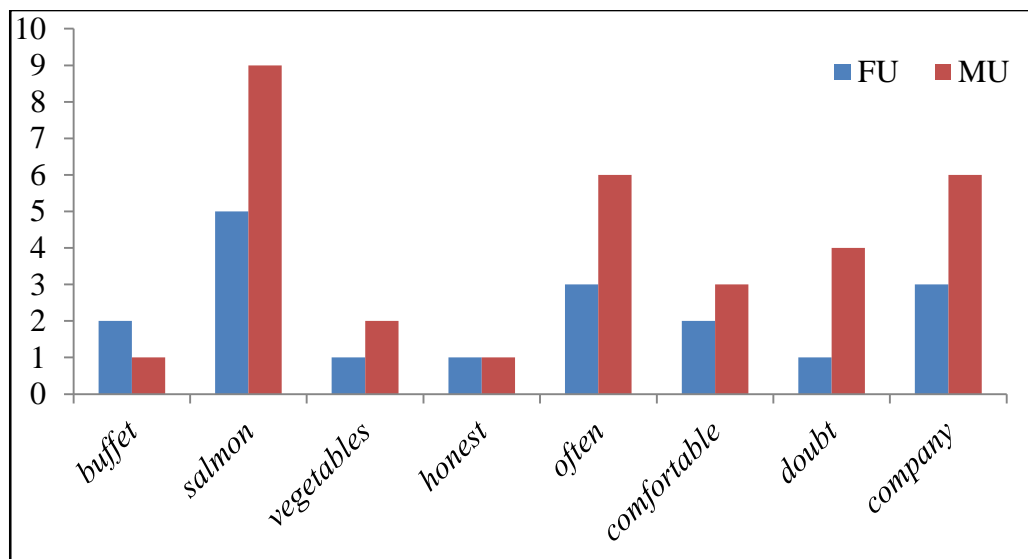
Table 2 shows the result for the total number of spelling pronunciations for the two age groups and for the female and male data. It was found that the undergraduates produced fewer instances of spelling pronunciation (31.2%) than the secondary students (53.8%), and this difference is highly significant ( $\chi^2 = 16.6$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ).

	Undergraduates		Secondary students	
	Spelling	Non-spelling	Spelling	Non-Spelling
<b>Female</b>	18	62	39	41
<b>Male</b>	32	48	47	33
<b>Total</b>	50 (31.2%)	110 (68.8%)	86 (53.8%)	74 (46.2%)

**Table 2.** Total number of instances of spelling pronunciation

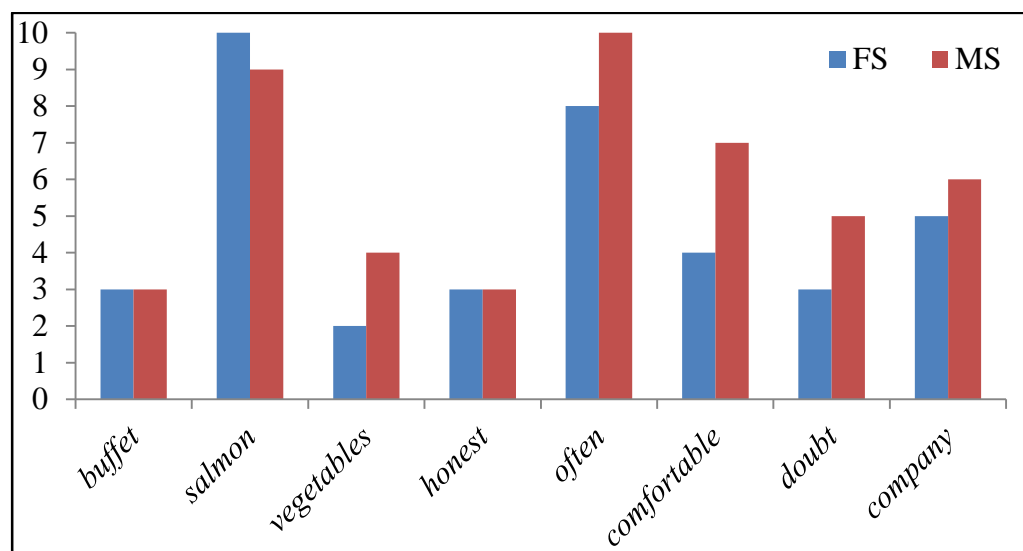
While it is tempting to suggest that spelling pronunciation is an emergent trend, as younger speakers exhibit it more than older speakers, it is essential to remember that there is a confounding factor: the undergraduates are better educated than the secondary students, and it is entirely likely that some of the younger speakers will adopt more standard pronunciation with less evidence of spelling pronunciation as they grow older and study more.

The results for the individual words for the undergraduates are shown in Figure 1. It can be seen that *salmon* was most often pronounced using spelling pronunciation in the data of both the female and male undergraduates. In contrast, the female undergraduates produced the least spelling pronunciation in *vegetables*, *honest* and *doubt* whereas the fewest number of occurrences for the males was in two tokens: *buffet* and *honest*. The males had more spelling pronunciations than the females in all words except *buffet* and *honest*, and a paired t-test confirms that this difference between the two genders is significant at the 0.05 level ( $t = 2.84$ ,  $df = 7$ , paired-test,  $p = 0.026$ ).



**Figure 1.** Occurrences of spelling pronunciation in the individual tokens by the undergraduates

The results for the secondary students are shown in Figure 2. The word most frequently pronounced with spelling pronunciation was *salmon* for the female secondary students and *often* for the males. The fewest instances of spelling pronunciation was *vegetables* for the females and *buffet* and *honest* for the males. The males had more instances of spelling pronunciation for all words except *buffet*, *salmon* and *honest*. However, the difference between the two genders just fails to reach significance at the 0.05 level ( $t = 2.35$ ,  $df = 7$ , paired-test,  $p = 0.051$ ).



**Figure 2.** Occurrence of spelling pronunciation in the individual tokens by the secondary students

### Rhoticity

Table 3 shows the tokens of the five words *heard*, *concern*, *short*, *more* and *before* produced with r-colouring by the female and male undergraduates and secondary students.

	Undergraduates		Secondary students	
	[r]	no [r]	[r]	no [r]
<b>Female</b>	36	14	38	12
<b>Male</b>	15	35	39	11
<b>Total</b>	51 (51%)	49 (49%)	77 (77%)	23 (23%)

**Table 3.** Total number of instances of r-colouring

These figures show that rhoticity is more common among secondary students (77%) than undergraduates (51%), and this difference is highly significant ( $\chi^2 = 14.7$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.0001$ ), though, as with spelling pronunciation, we cannot be certain if some of the younger speakers will lose their rhoticity as they get older.

We might also note that rhoticity is more prevalent among the female than male undergraduates ( $\chi^2 = 17.6$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ), confirming a trend reported among undergraduates by Deterding and Salbrina (2013, p. 33). However, the figures are almost identical for the female and male secondary students.

### Correlation

Finally, we consider the correlation between spelling pronunciation and rhoticity. The correlation results for the four groups of speakers are shown in Table 4.

	Undergraduates	Secondary students
<b>Female</b>	0.47	0.24
<b>Male</b>	-0.21	-0.49

**Table 4.** Correlation between spelling pronunciation and r-colouring

The data in Table 4 shows that there is a positive correlation between rhoticity and spelling pronunciation for both groups of female participants, and this is particularly true for the undergraduates, but there is a negative correlation for both groups of males, especially for the secondary students.

## Discussion

Spelling pronunciation for some words, such as *salmon*, *often* and *company* seems to be becoming the norm in Brunei, though spelling pronunciation for other words, such as *buffet*, *vegetables* and *honest* is less widespread.

It has been claimed that women use more prestigious forms than prestige forms of speech than men (Trudgill, 1995, p. 70), and also that women are the trendsetters in society (Johnson, 2008, p. 166). The finding that female undergraduates are more rhotic than males confirms that this is an emergent trend in Brunei, and the finding that male secondary students also tend to have a rhotic accent shows that rhoticity is becoming the norm for all young people.

The finding that there is a positive correlation between rhoticity and spelling pronunciation for female undergraduates suggests that spelling might be one factor in encouraging rhoticity in this group. However, if we remember that the female speakers actually have the fewest instances of spelling pronunciation among all four groups, the link between spelling pronunciation and rhoticity seems rather tenuous. Furthermore, the finding that there is a negative correlation between spelling pronunciation and rhoticity for the male secondary students suggests that spelling is not a major factor in encouraging rhoticity, in this group at least.

Further work is needed to establish why there are different correlations for female and male speakers, in order to tease out what is influencing the emergent rhoticity of Brunei English. Further work is also needed to see whether spelling pronunciation is another emergent trend, or alternatively if increasing access to international English might slow down the further development of an indigenous style of pronunciation as Bruneians adhere more to external norms.

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## Appendix A: The Boy who Cried Wolf

(from Deterding 2006)

There was once a poor shepherd boy who used to watch his flocks in the fields next to a dark forest near the foot of a mountain. One hot afternoon, he thought up a good plan to get some company for himself and also have a little fun. Raising his fist in the air, he ran down the village shouting “Wolf, Wolf.” As soon as they heard him, the villagers all rushed from their homes, full of concern for his safety, and two of his cousins even stayed with him for a short while. This gave the boy so much pleasure that a few days later he tried exactly the same trick again, and once more he was successful. However, not long after, a wolf that had just escaped from the zoo was looking for a change from its usual diet of chicken and duck. So, overcoming its fear of being shot, it actually did come out from the forest and began to threaten the sheep. Racing down to the village, the boy of course cried out even louder than before. Unfortunately, as all the villagers were convinced that he was trying to fool them a third time, they told him, “Go away and don’t bother us again.” And so the wolf had a feast.

## Appendix B: Spelling Pronunciation Sentences

- 1) I would love to try their buffet.
- 2) The salmon is very good here.
- 3) Children do not like to eat vegetables.
- 4) The knight is brave and honest.
- 5) I do not go out often.
- 6) This chair looks comfortable.
- 7) I doubt it will rain.
- 8) He plans to expand his company.
- 9) I think it was a theatre, not a café.
- 10) Asia is the largest continent in the world.