*Southeast Asia: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, Vol 16, 2016, pp. 8–15 © FASS, UBD

# The Status of Brunei English based on the Phonology of Local Teachers and Undergraduates

Nur Raihan Mohamad

*Universiti Brunei Darussalam*

**Abstract**

This paper investigates shifts in Brunei English. Ten local teachers and ten undergraduates were recorded reading the Wolf passage. The analysis of rhoticity, initial voiceless TH sounds, final [t] in consonant clusters, and the distinction between long and short vowels was mainly based on the auditory judgments of the researcher. It was found that the majority of both age groups are rhotic. This suggests that rhoticity is an emerging trend in Brunei English possibly because of the effects of Brunei Malay and the exposure of speakers to rhotic varieties of English, such as that of the USA. The study is unable to provide a conclusion as to whether rhoticity is a prestigious or non-prestigious form of pronunciation due to the small sample size. However, it is clear that there is an increase in the number of instances of non-prevocalic [r], suggesting the possibility of Brunei English shifting from Phase 3 to Phase 4 of Schneider's Dynamic Model (2007) as it has started to develop its own distinctive phonological characteristics.

## Introduction

The majority of English speakers in Brunei consider it their second language (L2), while Malay is their first language (L1). There are of course some speakers who grow up acquiring English earlier than Malay and eventually identifying more with English, and these speakers might consider themselves to be L1 speakers of English. In contrast, some older people who rarely speak English might consider it to be a foreign language. Clearly, it is not possible to determine a single status for Brunei English. Nevertheless, it is useful to consider it as a variety within the framework of the Dynamic Model suggested by Schneider (2007). The model has then been reapplied and modified (Schneider, 2014) to include developments in Indian English, Hong Kong English, South African English and Philippine English. Similarly, Deterding (2014) used the model to investigate the development of English in Brunei in terms of its pronunciation, grammar and lexicon.

Not only is there substantial variation in English in the country, but Brunei English is also undergoing change. The current research on Brunei English suggests that it may be in the third phase of the Dynamic Model, termed Nativization (Deterding & Salbrina, 2013; Deterding, 2014, 2015), which means that it is still subject to external influences as it has not yet not established its indigenous identity. While it is possible that Brunei English may evolve to establish its own norms in pronunciation, lexis and usage, currently there still seem to be substantial influences from Inner Circle varieties of English such as those of the UK and US (using the Three Circles Model proposed by Kachru, 2005).

Deterding (2015) has investigated the status of Brunei English based on the phonology of 53 undergraduates and he concludes that the local variety of English is an emergent variety (shifting from Phase 3 to Phase 4) because it is developing its own style of pronunciation. Similarly, this paper will investigate the changing status of Brunei English by analysing the differences in the phonological features of two age groups: local teachers and undergraduates.

## The phonology of Brunei English

There are a number of studies on the phonological features of Brunei English. One of the earlier investigations by Mossop (1996) observed the following tendencies among local speakers of English. (Here, following the conventions established by Wells, 1982, TH is used to refer to the initial sounds that are realised as dental fricatives in standard English, and keywords in small caps are used to refer to vowel phonemes, even though Mossop did not follow these conventions.)

- use of [t] for initial voiceless TH, for example in *theatre* and *third*
- use of [d] for initial voiced TH, for example in *the* and *that*
- omission final [t] and [d] in words such as *feast* and *banned*
- merging of DRESS and TRAP
- avoiding vowel reduction
- no distinction between long and short vowels such as FLEECE and KIT, for example in *feast* and *fist*

It seems that rhoticity was not prominent then as it was not mentioned by Mossop (1996). However, the data in recent studies (Salbrina, 2006, 2010; Deterding & Salbrina, 2013; Nur Raihan, 2014) have shown that rhoticity now is common, which suggests that it may be an emergent feature in Brunei English.

## Data and Methodology

This study involves comparing the phonological features of ten young local undergraduates from Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD) and ten local teachers who are pursuing an in-service degree in UBD. The participants are all female ethnically-Malay speakers. This selection was made to eliminate the variable of gender and ethnicity. Moreover, the speakers are all majoring in English Language and Linguistics.

The undergraduates are aged between 20 to 24 years old and are referred to as U1-U10. Prior to the recordings, they were given a questionnaire and were asked to list the languages they speak in order of proficiency. Most of the undergraduates listed Malay first and English second, and only U5 and U7 claimed to be more proficient in English than in Malay. Half the younger speakers are bilingual while U1, U5, U6, U7, and U10 are multilinguals.

The teachers, henceforth referred to as T1-T10, are between 29 to 35 years of age. In the questionnaires, only T10 gave English as her most proficient language and Malay second, and the other nine teachers listed Malay first and English second. The majority of the older participants speak Malay and English only, while four of them, namely T1, T5, T7, and T10, listed more than two languages, such as Arabic, Mandarin, Dusun and Kedayan.

All the participants were recorded reading the Wolf passage (Deterding, 2006) (see Appendix) in a quiet room in the university in the presence of the researcher. They were given ample time to read the passage before the recording. A microphone attached to a computer was placed near the participants, and Praat (Boersma & Weenink, 2010) was used to analyse their segmental features. The analyses were primarily based on the auditory judgments of the researcher, though acoustic measurements provided by the speech software were used to support the researcher's initial judgments. Table 1 below lists the segmental features and the tokens used from the passage.

| Segmental feature | Tokens |
|---|---|
| Rhoticity | *heard, concern, short, more, before* |
| Initial voiceless TH | *thought, threaten, third* |
| Final consonant cluster | *fist, forest, feast* |
| Vowel distinction | *fist, feast* |

**Table 1**. List of tokens from the Wolf passage (Deterding, 2006)

The methodology closely follows that of Deterding (2015). This comparative study will look into the realisations of rhoticity, initial voiceless TH sounds, final consonant clusters, and the vowel distinction between the KIT and FLEECE vowels, as found in *fist* and *feast*. All words from the passage are italicised.

## Results

In this section, the incidence of rhoticity and the number of rhotic speakers are presented. The findings on rhoticity are then correlated with the participants' realisations of initial voiceless TH, retention or omission of final consonant clusters and vowel distinction. All analyses are based on the researcher's perceptual judgments, though inspection of spectrograms was used in some areas to support the judgments.

### *Rhoticity*

Ladefoged (2006) explains that rhotic accents are the norm in most parts of North America and Scotland, and these accents permit some form of [r] after a vowel, so an [r] would be found in *heard* [hɜːrd] and *more* [mɔːr], while non-rhotic speakers would pronounce these words as [hɜːd] and [mɔː]. Non-rhotic accents are prevalent in most accents in England, Australia and New Zealand.

For the analysis of rhoticity, a falling third formant in the spectrogram (Hall, 1997, p. 107) was used to support the researcher's initial judgment on whether a speaker produces the consonant [r] in the five tokens mentioned above. Both closed (*heard*, *concern*, *short*) and open (*more*, *before*) syllables were examined, to ensure there is a range of different environments. Only *before* occurs at the end of a sentence while the other tokens are non-final words.

Following Deterding and Salbrina (2013, p. 33), a 2-out-of-5 threshold is used to determine if a speaker is rhotic or not. In other words, if a speaker produces [r] in at least two of the tokens then she is considered to have a rhotic accent. The first analysis investigates the incidence of rhoticity. The results are shown below in Table 2. There are a total of 20 instances (40%) of [r] heard in the teachers' data while the undergraduates produced 36 instances (72%). The difference between the two spoken data is highly significant ($\chi^2 = 10.4$, df = 1, $p = 0.0013$). Also, both groups show that there are variations in the number of [r]s occurring in the tokens regardless of the environment of the potential [r], and *short* has the fewest tokens of [r] in both groups.

| | Teachers | | Undergraduates | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | [r] | no [r] | [r] | no [r] |
| *heard* | 7 | 3 | 9 | 1 |
| *concern* | 3 | 7 | 7 | 3 |
| *short* | 1 | 9 | 4 | 6 |
| *more* | 4 | 6 | 8 | 2 |
| *before* | 5 | 5 | 8 | 2 |
| **Total** | 20 (40%) | 30 (60%) | 36 (72%) | 14 (28%) |

**Table 2**. Incidence of rhoticity

The investigation also looks into the number of rhotic speakers in both age groups. Table 3 below provides more information about the participants and the number of coda [r]s realised. Two teachers, T2 and T4, did not produce [r] in any of the tokens and only T10 produced five coda [r]s. In the undergraduates' data, there are more speakers who produced [r]s in all five tokens (U5, U7, U9, U10) than their counterparts. Also, only U1 did not produce any [r]s in the tokens.

| No. of coda [r] realised | No. of speakers (Teachers) | No. of speakers (Undergraduates) |
|---|---|---|
| 0 | 2 | 1 |
| 1 | 2 | 0 |
| 2 | 3 | 1 |
| 3 | 1 | 2 |
| 4 | 1 | 2 |
| 5 | 1 | 4 |

**Table 3**. Number of speakers producing number of coda [r]s

Using the 2-out-of-5 threshold, the majority of speakers in both the older group (60%) and the younger group (90%) are considered to be rhotic.

To summarise, there are more instances of rhoticity in the data from the undergraduates than the teachers. Even though there is a significant difference in this result, the majority of the teachers are still considered to be rhotic using the 2-out-of-5 threshold. Also using this method, almost all of the undergraduates are considered to have rhotic accents.

### *Initial voiceless TH*

The results above are now correlated with the results for the realisation of initial voiceless TH. The tokens *thought*, *threaten* and *third* were used to analyse this feature of pronunciation. Deterding and Kirkpatrick (2006) observe that there is a tendency for South-East Asian speakers of English, including Bruneians, to produce initial voiceless TH as [t].

It was found in the older group's data that 57% of the tokens were pronounced with an initial [θ] while the remaining 43% of them had [t]. Similarly, the younger group had more instances of [θ] (80%) than [t] (20%). These are similar findings to Deterding (2015). These results are shown below in Table 4.

| | Teachers | | Undergraduates | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | [θ] | [t] | [θ] | [t] |
| Rhotic speakers | 12 (67%) | 6 (33%) | 21 (78%) | 6 (22%) |
| Non-rhotic speakers | 5 (42%) | 7 (58%) | 3 (100%) | 0 (0%) |
| **Total** | 17 (57%) | 13 (43%) | 24 (80%) | 6 (20%) |

**Table 4**. Realisations of initial voiceless TH by the rhotic and non-rhotic speakers

The results from the older groups' data might suggest that the rhotic speakers tend to use more [θ] than the non-rhotic speakers. However, the difference is quite small and it is not significant ($\chi^2 = 1.8$, df = 1, $p = 0.18$). For the undergraduates, it seems that the majority of the rhotic speakers and the only non-rhotic speaker tend to use [θ] than [t]. A chi-square test cannot be used for this set of data because one of the expected frequencies is less than 5 (Preacher, 2001).

### *Final consonant clusters*

Another segmental feature to correlate with rhoticity is the absence or presence of the final consonant [t] in *fist*, *forest* and *feast*. The latter token is the final word in the passage whereas *fist* and *forest* are both in the middle of a sentence and are followed by a word which begins with a vowel. These tokens were used for the analysis because speakers from inner-circle countries would likely retain the final [t] in the tokens with these environments (Cruttenden, 2014, p. 314).

Table 5 below shows the collated results for the retention and omission of the final [t]. Again, similar to Deterding (2015), the data suggest that rhotic speakers in both age groups have a tendency to omit the final plosive. However, in contrast to Deterding (2015), the majority of the non-rhotic teachers and the only non-rhotic undergraduate tend to retain [t]. However, overall, there is no significant difference between the rhotic and non-rhotic speakers ($\chi^2 = 1.43$, df = 1, $p = 0.23$). So, it seems that there is little difference between the rhotic and non-rhotic speakers in terms of retaining or omitting the final [t] from word-final clusters.

| | **Teachers** | | **Undergraduates** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | [t] | Ø | [t] | Ø |
| Rhotic speakers | 7 (39%) | 11 (61%) | 12 (44%) | 15 (56%) |
| Non-rhotic speakers | 7 (58%) | 5 (42%) | 2 (67%) | 1 (33%) |
| **Total** | 14 (47%) | 16 (53%) | 14 (47%) | 16 (53%) |

**Table 5**. Realisations of final [t] by the rhotic and non-rhotic speakers

### *Vowel distinction*

Finally, this investigation will look into whether the rhotic and non-rhotic speakers of both age groups produce two different vowel lengths or the same vowel in *fist* and *feast*. The analysis of this minimal pair involved the researcher's auditory judgment and acoustic measurements of the formants from Praat. The results are shown below in Table 6.

| | **Teachers** | | **Undergraduates** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Different | Same | Different | Same |
| Rhotic speakers | 4 (67%) | 2 (33%) | 8 (89%) | 1 (11%) |
| Non-rhotic speakers | 3 (75%) | 1 (25%) | 1 (100%) | 0 (0%) |
| **Total** | 7 (70%) | 3 (30%) | 9 (90%) | 1 (10%) |

**Table 6**. Vowel distinction in 'fist' and 'feast' by the rhotic and non-rhotic speakers

The findings above concur with Deterding (2015) as there is a higher tendency for both rhotic and non-rhotic speakers in both age groups to differentiate between the short KIT vowel in *fist* and long FLEECE vowel in *feast*. However, whether the difference is significant or not cannot be answered with the small sample size of this preliminary research.

## Discussion

Previous studies have shown that about half of the UBD undergraduates are rhotic (Salbrina, 2006, 2010; Deterding & Salbrina, 2013). In addition, an analysis on the speech of secondary school students has found that 23 out of 24 students have rhotic accents (Nur Raihan, 2014). This suggests that rhoticity is an emerging trend in Brunei English. Further evidence for this claim is that this segmental feature of pronunciation was not mentioned in the earlier studies of the pronunciation of Brunei English (Mossop, 1996), which suggests that rhoticity was not as prominent then as it is now.

The current research has shown that the majority of both age groups are rhotic even though there are more instances of non-prevocalic [r] in the undergraduates' data. This provides more evidence for the claim that rhoticity is an emergent trend. In terms of gender and patterns of speech, women tend to adopt more prestige forms than men (Trudgill, 1995, p. 70) and they are claimed to 'lead men' in terms of changes in pronunciation (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013, p. 255). Even though we have to use such claims with caution (Cameron, 2007), the findings in this study could suggest that rhoticity may be an emergent trend in Brunei. Future work will compare these results with comparable analysis of male data.

Deterding (2015, p. 18) lists some of the prestige and non-prestige features of Brunei English (see Table 7).

| | **Prestigious form** | **Non-prestigious form** |
|---|---|---|
| Initial voiceless TH | [θ] | [t] |
| Final consonant cluster | Retention of [t] | Omission of [t] |
| Long and short vowels | Different vowels | Same vowel |

**Table 7**. Prestigious and non-prestigious pronunciation features of Brunei English

In both age groups, there is a tendency for the majority of the rhotic speakers to use the prestige forms in two out of three of the segmental features analysed here: use of [θ] for initial voiceless TH sounds and to differentiate between *fist* and *feast*. However, none of these differences was shown to be significant, so we cannot draw any solid conclusions. Also, the non-rhotic speakers have provided some evidence to show that they too tend to use prestige forms. However, as there is only one non-rhotic speaker among the undergraduates, this may not be a good representation of this subgroup.

What is more conclusive is the increasing incidence of rhoticity in the speech of local speakers of English, especially the younger speakers. Deterding and Salbrina (2013) suggest that the increasing exposure to American English through media such as television programmes, movies, and songs may be one of the causes of this trend. In addition, they suggest Philippine English is a factor, as there many Filipino teachers in schools and domestic helpers in homes (Deterding, 2015, p. 18). A final suggestion for why rhoticity is an emergent trend is Brunei Malay, as this strongly rhotic variety of Malay (Clynes & Deterding, 2011) may influence the local speakers' pronunciation of Brunei English. It is not known which of these factors is more important. Deterding (2015, p. 18) suggests that these probable influences could altogether affect the pronunciation of Brunei English and the possible change is occurring due to the combination of all three influences.

In regards to the status of Brunei English, this paper proposes that Brunei English is an emergent variety. If the speakers are subject to external influence (from American and Philippine English), this could provide evidence that Brunei English is in Phase 3 (Nativization) of Schneider's Dynamic Model (2007). However, the influence of Brunei Malay suggests a degree of indigenisation, and furthermore, as younger speakers are becoming more rhotic, this indicates that Brunei English is moving away from its roots with

British English. Deterding (2015, p. 18) further states that 'Brunei English is developing its own distinctive style of pronunciation' due to the influences mentioned above, so it could be regarded as moving towards Phase 4 of the model (Endonormative Stabilization).

In addition, Deterding (2015, p. 19) suggests that young speakers of English in Brunei could be 'participating in a dynamic global style of English' which has many shared features of pronunciation such as the realisation of [t] in initial voiceless TH and the omission of the final consonant in *forest* and *fist*. He notes that these worldwide trends occur regardless of the pronunciation of the speakers in Kachru's Inner Circle. As the trend for the use of English as a lingua franca continues to grow (Seidlhofer, 2011; Kirkpatrick, 2010; Jenkins, 2000) due to the increasing number of speakers worldwide, perhaps attaching a label or a status to a variety of English is no longer appropriate.

## Conclusion

Language is not static and its status constantly changes. This investigation suggests that rhoticity provides an insight into how Brunei English has changed over the years. The emergence of rhoticity is possibly due to a combination of the influences of American English, Philippine English and Brunei Malay. The status of this local variety of English was determined by analysing the prestigious and non-prestigious forms of pronunciation used by ten teachers and ten undergraduates. This proved to be inconclusive as more data is needed to better represent the English speakers of Brunei. Other limitations to the study include the quality of the recordings, having a limited number of tokens to analyse, and the arbitrary conditions for characterising a speaker as rhotic or not. In conclusion, the evidence gathered suggests that Brunei English is an emergent variety though the relevance of its status is now questionable in a modern world where ELF is becoming the globalised trend.

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## Appendix: 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.