Rhoticity in Brunei and Singapore English

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Abstract

Rhoticity refers to accents in which [r] is pronounced whenever there is an ‘r’ in the spelling. This paper investigates the difference in rhoticity between Brunei and Singapore English. 30 recordings from the Universiti Brunei Darussalam Corpus of Spoken Brunei English (UBDCSBE) and also 30 recordings from the National Institute of Education Corpus of Spoken Singapore English (NIECSSE) were used to analyse potential instances of rhoticity. The speakers are 15 female and 15 male from each variety of English. Over 500 tokens of potential r-colouring were analysed auditorily and acoustically. The study finds that 53% of the Brunei English speakers have rhotic accents, while only 7% of the Singapore English speakers have rhotic accents. However, recent studies suggest that rhoticity is increasing in both Brunei and Singapore.

Introduction

Rhoticity refers to accents in which the pronunciation of [r] occurs in all positions. Roach (2000, p. 63) states that rhoticity describes accents in which [r] is pronounced “in final position (before a pause) and before a consonant.” For non-rhotic accents, [r] is only pronounced before a vowel. An example for when [r] is pronounced in final position is the word car, which in rhotic accents is pronounced as [kaːr], while in non-rhotic accents it is pronounced as [kaː]. An example for when [r] is pronounced before a consonant is the word market, which in rhotic accents is pronounced as [maːrkɪt], while for non-rhotic accents it is pronounced as [maːkt]. Non-rhotic accents can have [r] in final position when it acts as a linking-r. Broadbent (1991, p. 282) explains linking-r as “the occurrence of r after certain vowels, namely [ɑː], [ɔː] and [ə], when the following morpheme begins with a vowel.” For example, with the phrase care about, even non-rhotic speakers tend to pronounce it as [keərəbaʊt] instead of [keəəbaʊt] because of the linking-r in between the two words. Accents that are rhotic include most accents in America and also the Scottish accent. Accents that are non-rhotic are British Received Pronunciation (RP), and Australian English (Wells, 1982).

This paper compares the accents of speakers of Brunei English and Singapore English for rhoticity. There have been several studies that focus on the pronunciation features of Brunei English such as those conducted by Mossop (1996) and Deterding and Salbrina (2013), as well as Singapore English such as those conducted by Deterding (2007) and Tan (2012). However, there seem to be few studies that compare the two varieties of English.

Brunei and Singapore

In this section, a brief background to Brunei and Singapore is provided before the pronunciation of the English in each country is considered in the subsequent sections.

Brunei Darussalam

Brunei Darussalam (henceforth Brunei) is a Southeast Asian country located on the island of Borneo. It is home to over 400,000 people (Brunei Demographics Profile 2016, 2016). There are a number of ethnic groups in Brunei including Malays (66%), Chinese (10%) and other
indigenous groups (3%), while the remainder (21%) consist of expatriates and foreign workers. There are also six indigenous tribes, Kedayan, Belait, Tutong, Bisaya, Murut, and Dusun that are officially categorised under the ethnic group ‘Malays’ though the languages they speak are quite distinct from Malay.

The official language of the country is Malay, and this is what most Bruneians claim to be their mother tongue. English, on the other hand, is widely used especially by the younger generation and both Malay and English are commonly used as the mediums of instruction in schools as well as by the government (Deterding & Salbrina, 2013, p. 5).

Until 2008, English was used as a medium of instruction beginning from the fourth year of primary school. A new education system called SPN21 (Sistem Pendidikan Negara - Abad 21) was implemented in 2008. As part of this system, both Malay and English are used from the beginning of primary school. The variety of Malay that is promoted as the medium of instruction in schools and within the government is Standard Malay. In the public sphere, another variety of Malay, called Brunei Malay, is commonly used instead.

**Singapore**

Singapore is an island located just south of the Malay peninsula. Its population is nearly 6 million people (Singapore Demographics Profile 2016, 2016). There are a number of different ethnic groups in Singapore: Chinese (74%), Malays (13%), Indians (9%) and others (4%), which includes expatriates.

There are four official languages in Singapore: Mandarin, Malay, Tamil and English. Due to the fact that the majority of the country’s population is Chinese, unsurprisingly, their mother tongue (as specified by the government) is Mandarin. However, in Singapore, English is still the most commonly used language by the government and in administration, and it is the medium of instruction in schools (Leimgruber, 2011, p. 1). In fact, according to Tan (2014, p. 333), English is the main household language for the majority of the younger generation of Singapore.

**Brunei English**

Mossop (1996) conducted one of the earliest studies on the pronunciation of Brunei English, describing common pronunciation features of Brunei English at that time. This includes the reduction of final consonant clusters, TH sounds as [t] and [d], and a lack of distinction between long and short vowels. However, rhoticity was not reported, maybe because rhoticity was not widespread at the time. It was only in 2010 that a study on rhoticity was conducted by Salbrina, reporting that half of her subjects, who were all undergraduates at that time, had rhotic accents and indeed Nur Raihan (2015) suggested that rhoticity has been increasing in Brunei.

Deterding and Salbrina (2013, p. 32–33) conducted another study involving the pronunciation of English by Brunei undergraduates, including rhoticity, and they also found that around 50% of their subjects had rhotic accents. These two studies by Salbrina (2010) and Deterding and Salbrina (2013) show a consistent pattern among English speakers of Brunei, that around half of them have rhotic accents.

However, a recent study by Nur Raihan (2016, p. 11) indicates that rhoticity is increasing in Brunei. Part of her study includes analysing the speech of teachers and undergraduates, and it was found that 60% of the teachers and 90% of the undergraduates now have rhotic accents. Furthermore, Nur Raihan (2017, forthcoming) shows that current undergraduates are much more likely to be rhotic than undergraduates who were recorded about seven years previously.
Singapore English

There have been a number of studies regarding the pronunciation of speakers of Singapore English. Poedjosoedarmo (2000, p. 119) investigated the effects of media as a potential influence on Singapore Standard English and she claimed that rhoticity was increasing in Singapore as a result of the influence of the rhotic American accent found in the media. Lim (2014) investigated the pronunciation features of 13 undergraduates from the University of Singapore and found that rhoticity was a variable feature. She also suggested that rhoticity was increasing possibly due to the increasing influence of American English through the media.

Deterding (2007, p. 11) showed that most Singapore English speakers have non-rhotic accents. The subjects of his study were 41 female undergraduate students from the National Institute of Education (NIE) in Singapore. Nine of them were found to have rhotic accents, and he suggested that the number of speakers who have rhotic accents in Singapore was increasing.

Tan (2012) conducted a study on the occurrences of postvocalic-ı̇, intrusive-ı̇ and linking-ı̇ in Singapore English, and she also investigated links between the speakers’ use of [ı̇] and their education level and socioeconomic status (Tan, 2012, p. 19). She found that there was in fact a direct correlation, and suggested that this could be due to exposure to American media. The main language for most speakers from the higher education levels and socioeconomic status is English, while for those in the lower education levels and socioeconomic status, it is Mandarin or another Chinese dialect. Tan then claimed that because of this, the speakers whose main language is English are “most likely to be entertained by English TV programs and English pop music, and therefore have much higher exposure to the English-language media, which is highly Americanized in Singapore” (Tan, 2012, p. 20).

Brunei versus Singapore

One study that focused on the difference in rhoticity between Brunei English and Singapore English speakers was done by Salbrina and Deterding (2010). Their subjects were 18 Bruneian and 12 Singaporean undergraduates, all of them being Malay. The results showed that around 50% of the Brunei English speakers were rhotic while only one out of the 12 Singapore English speakers was rhotic. This showed how Brunei English speakers were clearly more rhotic than Singapore English speakers.

Data

The data for the current study consist of recordings of 30 undergraduates from Universiti Brunei Darussalam and 30 undergraduates from the National Institute of Education, Singapore. Among the 30 undergraduates from each institute, 15 are female and 15 are male. The recordings for the undergraduates in Brunei are from the Universiti Brunei Darussalam Corpus of Spoken Brunei English (UBDCSBE) (Deterding & Salbrina, 2013), while the recordings for the undergraduates in Singapore are from the National Institute of Education Corpus of Spoken Singapore English (NIECSSSE) (Deterding & Low, 2005). The majority (18 out of 30) of the speakers from Universiti Brunei Darussalam are Malay, while the rest are Chinese and a few are from other indigenous groups. The majority of the speakers from Singapore are Chinese while the rest are made up of Malays and Indians. Table 1 and Table 2 show the breakdown of the ethnicity of the speakers from Brunei and Singapore respectively.
Methodology

The data for both the Brunei and Singapore speakers consist of five-minute long interviews conducted by the same British academic. The interviews for the Brunei English speakers were recorded between 2007 and 2010, while those for Singapore were recorded between 2001 and 2005.

All 60 recordings were analysed auditorily with acoustic help from spectrograms generated by the software Praat (Boersma & Weenink, 2015). The best indications of rhoticity are either a dipping 3rd formant or a low 3\textsuperscript{rd} formant (Tan, 2012, p. 10). Figures 1, 2 and 3 are some examples of spectrograms in which there is clear r-colouring, while Figure 4 illustrates the absence of r-colouring.

![Figure 1. Spectrogram of the pronunciation of *Borneo* by a Brunei speaker](image-url)
As can be seen from the circled area in Figures 1 and 2, the third formant in each spectrogram is dipping. This is a clear indication of r-colouring.

In Figure 3, the third formant is quite low (1895 Hz) which is an indication of r-colouring, though it is quite flat so there is little evidence of dipping. The dipping at the end right after the circled area is likely to be the formant transition for the following [d]. As the whole vowel has r-colouring, it is labeled as [ɜː] rather than [ɜːr]. This is how Wells (2008) shows the vowel for American English.
In Figure 4, the third formant is not dipping, and it is quite high (3257 Hz). This indicates that the speaker pronounces the token with no r-colouring.

In total there are over 500 tokens of potential r-colouring in the recordings. On average, each speaker has around 8 tokens of potential r-colouring. The tokens for potential r-colouring are mostly found in stressed syllables. However, in some cases, those in unstressed syllables are also considered when there is a shortage of tokens for potential r-colouring in stressed syllables. For a speaker to be judged and categorized as having a rhotic accent, at least two of the speaker’s tokens must have r-colouring.

Results

Of the 30 Brunei English speakers, 16 have rhotic accents, 9 female and 7 male. Of the 30 Singapore English speakers, only two have rhotic accents, both of them female. The breakdown can be seen in Table 3 and Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Rhotic</th>
<th>Non-rhotic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>16</strong></td>
<td><strong>14</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Rhotic and non-rhotic Brunei speakers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Rhotic</th>
<th>Non-rhotic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td><strong>28</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Rhotic and non-rhotic Singapore speakers
When the total number of speakers of Brunei and Singapore English who have rhotic accents are compared, the difference between the two is significant. ($\chi^2 = 15.56$, df = 1, $p < 0.0001$, though this might not be strictly valid as all the cells should have values of 5 or more (McDonald, 2014)).

Table 5 shows the number of r-coloured tokens that each speaker has. The number of speakers with no r-coloured tokens is 26 for Singapore and only seven for Brunei.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speakers</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>&gt; 2</th>
<th>&lt; all</th>
<th>all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Singapore Female</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore Male</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>26</strong></td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
<td><strong>0</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brunei Female</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brunei Male</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>7</strong></td>
<td><strong>7</strong></td>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Number of r-coloured tokens for each speaker

Neither of the Singapore English speakers that have rhotic accents has r-colouring on all their tokens and only one of them has more than two. In contrast, 11 of the Brunei English speakers have more than two tokens of r-colouring, though only one of them has r-colouring on all tokens.

**Discussion and conclusion**

The results show that the Brunei English speakers are much more rhotic than the Singapore English speakers. There are a number of possible reasons why this may be. One of them is the influence of American media. People are exposed to the popular American media particularly in movies and music due to the accessibility of the Internet. This could explain why, in recent studies, it has been found that rhoticity is increasing in both Brunei and Singapore (Nur Raihan, 2017, forthcoming, Tan, 2012).

However, this does not explain why there is a difference in rhoticity between the two varieties of English, as there seems to be no reason why Bruneians are more influenced by American media compared to Singaporeans (Deterding and Salbrina, 2013, p. 34) A second influence could be the difference in the mother tongue of the majority of the speakers in this study. The majority of the Brunei English speakers are Malays, and their mother tongue is Brunei Malay which is heavily rhotic (Clynes, 2014). On the other hand, the majority of the Singapore English speakers are Chinese and their mother tongue is either Singapore Mandarin or Singapore Hokkien. Although Beijing Mandarin is rhotic (Duanmu, 2007), Singapore Mandarin is not (Zhou, 2006, cited in Lin & Wang, 2007, p. 137) and Hokkien is also non-rhotic (Chung, 1996). This is one factor that could explain why most Singapore English speakers are non-rhotic.

One might note that one of the two rhotic Singapore speakers in Table 3 is ethnically Malay. However, the Malay spoken in Singapore is largely non-rhotic, so Singapore Malay omits the final [r] in words such as besar (big) or bandar (city), pronouncing these two words as [bəsər:] and [bandaːr:] respectively. As a result, the pronunciation of Malay is unlikely to be a factor. In comparison, Brunei Malay speakers with rhotic accents would pronounce these words as [bəsar] and [bandar] respectively.

Additionally, there are about 200 teachers from the Philippines in Brunei schools as well as hundreds more Filipino domestic workers in Brunei homes, so it is likely that their accents
would have some influence on the accents of the young people in Brunei (Deterding & Salbrina, 2013, p. 34). Since the English spoken in the Philippines is rhotic (Demirezen, 2012, p. 2662), this could be another explanation as to why the Brunei English accent is rhotic as well, especially the accent of the young people in Brunei.

Finally, another possible influence is the use of spelling pronunciation by Brunei English speakers (Deterding & Salbrina, 2013, p. 41). Rhoticity is an example of spelling pronunciation (Nur Raihan, 2015) as, by definition, it refers to accents in which [r] is produced whenever ‘r’ is found in the spelling (Ladefoged, 2006, p. 92). Nur Raihan (2015, p. 41), as part of her study on spelling pronunciation in Brunei, found that there is a correlation between spelling pronunciation and rhoticity in Brunei to some extent. Furthermore, there is a tendency to pronounce words of Brunei Malay according to the spellings (Nur Raihan, 2017, forthcoming). Therefore, it is expected that Bruneians would apply the same strategy when pronouncing English words as well.

Further research is needed in order to consider a wider range of data. For example, we should consider more Malay Singaporeans and more Chinese Bruneians, to investigate the impact of ethnicity between the speakers of the two varieties of English. Another limitation in this study is the unavailability of more recent recordings for Singapore. It is possible that Singapore English has shifted substantially since the NIECSSE recordings were made.

References


Deterding, A. Brown & E. L. Low (Eds.), *English in Singapore: Phonetic research on a corpus* (pp. 1–6). Singapore: McGraw-Hill.


