

The Phonology of Brunei English: L2 English or Emergent Variety

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1. Introduction

The status of different Englishes depends substantially on whether they constitute varieties of English as a first language, English as a Second Language (ESL), or English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This three-way distinction has alternatively been represented in terms of the three circles model proposed by Kachru (1985, 2005): first-language varieties are found in inner-circle countries like the UK, the USA and Australia; ESL varieties occur in outer-circle places that were once colonies and where the language now has an official status, such as India, Nigeria and Singapore; and EFL varieties exist in countries in the expanding circle where English has no official status, including Germany, Brazil and China.

One crucial difference between the status of varieties of English in the three circles, as noted by Kachru, is that inner-circle varieties have traditionally established the norms, outer-circle varieties increasingly develop their own standards independent of the patterns of usage found in the inner circle, and expanding-circle varieties generally continue to look to the inner circle for guidance on how English should be used. To a certain extent, this distinction between the circles resonates with attitudes in different places, as people in outer-circle countries such as Singapore are usually comfortable with their own style of English, particularly in terms of pronunciation, and most are quite proud to sound Singaporean (Deterding 2007), while people in places such as Poland more often tend to insist that they aspire to RP British English pronunciation (Scheuer 2005; Sobkowiak 2005) and may be upset or even insulted to be told that they speak with a Polish accent.

Despite its widespread adoption and continued usefulness, there are some problems with Kachru's three-circle representation of varieties of English. The status of different places is determined by history and geography, and some expanding-circle countries where English is quite widely used, such as Argentina and Belgium, might alternatively now be regarded as indeterminate between the outer and expanding circles (Jenkins 2009: 20). Furthermore the model fails to capture many of the dynamic ways in which English is being used in today's globalised world (Cogo & Dewey 2012: 9). In addition, Seidlhofer (2011) argues that there is no need for speakers in the expanding circle to continue to be classified as norm-dependent and so be excluded from contributing to the ways that English is evolving, especially as they nowadays constitute the majority of speakers of English in the world (Crystal 2003: 69).

An alternative way of conceptualizing the evolution of English in different places is by means of the five-phase model of postcolonial development proposed by Schneider (2007). The first phase deals with the introduction of English into a territory where it was not previously used, while the fifth phase involves the emergence of diversity in a completely mature variety. Only inner-circle varieties such as those of the United States and Australia are considered to have reached the fifth phase, though it is possible that English in some places such as Singapore is in the process of achieving this status.

Current research on Brunei English (e.g. Deterding & Salbrina 2013: 119) suggests that it may be in the third phase of Schneider's model, labelled 'nativization', in which the variety is still subject to substantial external influences, as indigenous norms are not yet established. Although Brunei English is certainly developing many distinct local characteristics and it may well one day evolve to establish its own norms of pronunciation, lexis and usage, it still seems to be subject to influence from inner-circle varieties. In fact, school exam papers are still set in the UK and then sent to the UK to be graded, and furthermore many British teachers are employed in local schools, so the historical link with Britain continues. In addition, there may be substantial influence from

American English, something that will be analysed in this paper.

The paper examines aspects of pronunciation, particularly the apparent increasing incidence of rhoticity among young people in Brunei, as this is something that seems currently to be undergoing a transition. The investigation of rhoticity may thus provide a window onto the status of Brunei English and help to establish if it is a second language variety or if it is emerging as a variety that may one day become independent of external norms of pronunciation and usage.

2. The Phonology of Brunei English

An early investigation into the pronunciation of Brunei English was carried out by Mossop (1996). Based on auditory judgments, he described a range of features, including the use of [t] and [d] for /θ/ and /ð/ (consonants that will here be termed ‘voiceless TH’ and ‘voiced TH’, following the convention established by Wells 1982), the omission of final plosives from words such as *first* and *hand*, the shortening of long vowels in words such as *shirt*, *moon* and *cream*, the merging of /e/ and /æ/ (vowels that will here be referred to as DRESS and TRAP, using the lexical keywords proposed by Wells 1982), and the avoidance of vowel reduction in the second syllable of words such as *frigate* and *mammal*. Mossop (1996) made no mention of rhoticity, apart from a brief comment about the lack of final [r] when the vowel in words such as *square*, *chair* and *hair* is shortened to [e] (p. 201). While it is possible that he failed to notice rhoticity among his speakers, or alternatively that he believed it did not merit discussion, it is perhaps more likely that the widespread incidence of rhoticity in Brunei English is a recent phenomenon.

Ten years later, Salbrina (2006) investigated the vowels of Brunei English using acoustic measurements as well as auditory judgements, and she confirmed the tendency for long and short vowels (such as FLEECE and KIT) to be merged and showed that there was also little distinction between DRESS and TRAP.

After a further four years, Salbrina (2010) included the study of consonants in her research on the pronunciation of eighteen ethnically Malay female undergraduates in Brunei reading an early version of the Wolf passage (Deterding 2006), and she reported that about 52% of the tokens of *thought*, *threaten* and *third* in her data had [t] rather than [θ] at the start, and the final plosive in words such as *fist* and *feast* was omitted in about 62% of tokens. In addition, she reported that half of her speakers might be classified as rhotic.

Salbrina and Deterding (2010) focused just on the rhoticity of the eighteen speakers from Salbrina (2010), and they reported that about 47% of tokens with potential post-vocalic [r] in stressed syllables in the reading of the Wolf passage had r-colouring. While only three of the speakers had r-colouring in all the tokens investigated, nine speakers had r-colouring in most of them, and just six speakers exhibited no r-colouring in any of the tokens.

The current paper will investigate rhoticity among Brunei undergraduates in more detail, including data from men as well as women and also including some non-Malays. In addition, the incidence of rhoticity will be correlated with other features of speech, to try to determine if it might be considered a prestigious feature of pronunciation or not.

A more extensive analysis of Brunei English, including its grammar, lexis and discourse, is presented in Deterding and Salbrina (2013).

3. Data

53 undergraduates at the University of Brunei Darussalam (UBD) were recorded reading a short text, the Wolf passage (see Appendix), and they were also interviewed for five minutes by the author of this paper. 38 of them are female and the other 15 are male. 33 are ethnically Malay, 15 are Chinese, and the remaining five are from one of the minority ethnic groups in Brunei. They were aged between 20 and 24 at the time of the recording except for one female who was aged 35 and one male who was 28. The speech patterns of the two older speakers do not seem to be markedly different from the others. All the speakers have good English, though many stated that Malay is their first language while seven of the Chinese gave Mandarin Chinese as their best

language. Further details about the speakers can be found in Deterding and Salbrina (2013: 9).

In this paper, the rhoticity of these speakers will be analysed in some detail, particularly based on their reading of the Wolf passage, and the incidence of rhoticity will be correlated with three other features of pronunciation: the realisation of voiceless TH; omission of [t] from the end of word-final consonant clusters; and differentiation between long and short vowels. Each of these three features has a standard pronunciation, so the correlation may provide an insight into whether rhoticity is linked with a prestigious way of speaking or not in Brunei English, and we can therefore see what this tells us about the status of Brunei English, both as an emergent variety within Schneider's five-phase model and also as an ESL variety.

4. Incidence of rhoticity

Perceptual judgements were made about the presence or absence of [r] at the end of stressed syllables in five tokens from the Wolf passage for all 53 speakers: *heard*, *concern*, *short*, *more* and *before*. The context for these tokens is shown below (where three dots indicate that the extract is not at the beginning or end of a sentence):

As soon as they **heard** him, ...
 ... full of **concern** for his safety, ...
 ... stayed with him for a **short** while.
 ..., and once **more** he was successful.
 ... cried out even louder than **before**.

These five tokens provide a range of environments for the potential r-colouring in the coda of a syllable: in *more* and *before*, the potential [r] occurs at the end of the word, while in the other three tokens it occurs in a syllable coda where there is a following consonant. Moreover, *before* is the final word in a sentence, while the other four tokens involve non-final words.

Another phonetician listened to the data, and the rate of agreement between the two listeners was 87%. In cases of disagreement the item was generally counted as non-rhotic, so the results reported here represent a conservative estimate of rhoticity.

The results for the incidence of rhoticity for these five tokens are shown in Table 1. (The total for *more* is 52 rather than 53 because one speaker omitted the word.) These results show that nearly 31% of the tokens have r-colouring while about 69% do not. Furthermore r-colouring is more common in word-final position (*more* and *before*) and is less frequent in a non-final position of a coda consonant cluster.

Table 1. Incidence of rhoticity in the Wolf passage

	[r]	No [r]
<i>heard</i>	13	40
<i>concern</i>	10	43
<i>short</i>	9	44
<i>more</i>	26	26
<i>before</i>	23	30
Total	81 (30.7%)	183 (69.3%)

If we look into these results in more detail, we find that four speakers have r-colouring in all five tokens, 31 of them, over 58%, show some sign of rhoticity, and 22 have no r-colouring in any of the tokens (see Table 2).

Table 2. Number of speakers producing number of coda [r]s

number of coda [r] realised	number of speakers
0	22
1	5
2	13
3	6
4	3
5	4

If only a single token produced by an individual speaker is perceived as having r-colouring, this could represent an exceptional item, but if at least two tokens are judged to have r-colouring, then we can assume that the speaker may be perceived to be at least partially rhotic. On the basis of a 2-out-of-5 threshold, Deterding and Salbrina (2013: 33) conclude that 26 of these UBD undergraduates (49%) have a rhotic accent, which is almost identical to the 50% reported in the earlier study involving only female ethnically-Malay speakers (Salbrina & Deterding 2010), though it must be admitted that the 2-out-of-5 threshold is somewhat arbitrary. Indeed, eight of the speakers exhibit r-colouring in *more* and *before* (in which there is no following consonant) but not the other three tokens, so it is uncertain if they should be classified as rhotic or not.

We can further consider the incidence of rhoticity among female and male speakers and also between the two main ethnic groups, Malays and Chinese. The results for female and male speakers are shown in Table 3. Using the 2-out-of-5 classification of rhotic speakers, we find that 22 of the 38 females are rhotic (58%) while only 4 out of the 15 males are rhotic (27%).

Table 3. Incidence of rhoticity in the Wolf passage

	Rhotic	Non-rhotic
Females	22 (57.9%)	16 (42.1%)
Males	4 (26.7%)	11 (73.3%)

The difference between the two genders is significant at the 0.05 level ($\chi^2=4.2$, $df=1$, $p=0.041$). We should be cautious in drawing too great an inference from such small numbers, as one should not really do a chi-squared test when one of the cells has less than five tokens (Mackey & Gass 2005: 279). Nevertheless, these figures suggest that young women in Brunei are more likely to be rhotic than men.

The incidence of rhoticity for the two main ethnic groups is shown in Table 4. While it appears that more Chinese are rhotic than Malays (60% versus 45%), the difference is not significant ($\chi^2=0.87$, $df=1$, $p=0.35$).

Table 4. Incidence of rhoticity for the Malay and Chinese speakers

	Rhotic	Non-rhotic
Malay	15 (45.5%)	18 (54.5%)
Chinese	9 (60.0%)	6 (40.0%)

To summarise so far: about half of young Bruneians can be described as rhotic, though the incidence of r-colouring is variable for most of them and it is more likely to occur in open syllables than closed ones. Women seem to be more likely to be rhotic than men, but there is no difference between ethnically Malay and Chinese Bruneians.

6. Correlation of rhoticity with other features of pronunciation

In addition to analysing the background of the speakers, we can also consider how the incidence of rhoticity correlates with other features of pronunciation that are non-prestigious in Brunei English. In Brunei, as in most of South-East Asia, many speakers pronounce the voiceless TH in word-initial position such as in *thin* and *three* as [t] (Deterding & Kirkpatrick 2006). The Wolf passage has three

words with initial voiceless TH, *thought*, *threaten* and *third*, and overall about 47% of the tokens of these words are pronounced with an initial [θ], while nearly 53% of them have [t] at the start. Table 4 shows how the rhotic and non-rhotic speakers pronounce these three tokens.

Table 5. Pronunciation of initial voiceless TH by the rhotic and non-rhotic speakers

	[θ]	[t]
Rhotic speakers	41 (52.6%)	37 (47.4%)
Non-rhotic speakers	34 (42.0%)	47 (58.0%)
Total	75 (47.2%)	84 (52.8%)

Although the results in Table 5 seem to suggest that the rhotic speakers tend to use more [θ] than the non-rhotic speakers, the difference between the two groups is quite small and it is not significant ($\chi^2=1.79$, $df=1$, $p=0.18$).

Next, we can analyse how the rhotic and non-rhotic speakers deal with final consonant clusters, particularly the final [t] in words such as *fist*, *forest* and *feast*, each of which occurs in the Wolf passage. Of course, it would be quite normal for most speakers of English, including speakers of standard British English, to omit the final [t] in these words when the next word begins with a consonant (Cruttenden 2014: 314). Consequently, only contexts in which the next word begins with a vowel (*fist in*, *forest and*) or where the word is at the end of a sentence (*feast*) are considered, as these are environments in which speakers in inner-circle countries such as Britain and America are more likely to retain the final [t] (Cruttenden 2014: 314; Neu 1980, p. 47). The incidence of [t] retention and omission for these three tokens is shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Rate of [t] omission by the rhotic and non-rhotic speakers

	[t] retained	[t] omitted
Rhotic speakers	36 (46.2%)	42 (53.8%)
Non-rhotic speakers	36 (44.4%)	45 (55.6%)
Total	72 (45.3%)	87 (54.7%)

Although these figures suggest a slightly higher tendency for the rhotic speakers to retain final [t], the differences fall far below the level of significance ($\chi^2=0.05$, $df=1$, $p=0.83$), so we should conclude that there is no difference between the two groups in terms of retaining or omitting final [t] from word-final consonant clusters.

Finally, we can consider whether the rhotic and non-rhotic speakers make a difference between the long and short vowels in a minimal pair such as *feast* and *fist*. Both these words occur in the Wolf passage, and auditory judgment combined with acoustic measurement of the formants suggests that 14 of the 53 speakers make no difference between these two vowels, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Separation of *feast* and *fist* by the rhotic and non-rhotic speakers

	Different vowel	Same vowel
Rhotic speakers	21 (80.8%)	5 (19.2%)
Non-rhotic speakers	18 (66.7%)	9 (33.3%)
Total	39 (73.6%)	14 (26.4%)

There appears to be a greater tendency for rhotic speakers to differentiate between these vowels (81% versus 67%), but once more the difference falls short of significance ($\chi^2=1.36$, $df=1$, $p=0.24$).

In summary: there is no evidence for a significant correlation of rhoticity with any of the three features of pronunciation investigated. In reality, 53 speakers is a small number when looking for statistical tendencies in pronunciation, and a much larger corpus of data would be needed to enable us to identify trends with any degree of confidence. However, we can certainly conclude that there is no evidence from these results that rhoticity is correlated with non-prestigious features of

pronunciation.

7. Discussion

It has been shown that about half of Bruneian undergraduates at UBD might be classified as having a rhotic accent, though the incidence of r-colouring is variable, as only four out of the 53 speakers studied here have a post-vocalic [r] in all the tokens analysed.

Based on the apparent absence of rhoticity in the data analysed by Mossop (1996), it may be a recent trend. Indeed, Nur Raihan (2014) has investigated the pronunciation of 24 school children in Brunei and reports that all but one of them could be described as having a rhotic accent, which lends support to the suggestion that rhoticity is an emergent trend in Brunei. In fact, phonics has recently been introduced for all primary school children in the country (Smith 2011), and with this promotion of the teaching of reading by means of explicit linking between the spelling of words and their pronunciation, one might expect the incidence of rhoticity in Brunei to be reinforced in the future, given that post-vocalic [r] reflects the written form of words.

Comparison of the different groups in the current study indicates that women in Brunei are more likely to have a rhotic accent than men. Trudgill (1995: 70) observes that, in many societies around the world, women tend to adopt more prestige forms of speech than men. Cameron (2007) urges caution in accepting all the claimed differences between the speech of men and women; but if women have a greater tendency to exhibit r-colouring in Brunei, this suggests that rhoticity may be perceived as a prestige feature of pronunciation, particularly among young people. Furthermore, young women are often believed to be the trend-setters in terms of pronunciation (Johnson 2008: 166), so this further supports the suggestion that rhoticity is currently emerging as the norm in Brunei.

There appears to be no difference in rhoticity between the two main ethnic groups, Malays and Chinese. This is a little surprising, as the Malay spoken in Brunei is strongly rhotic (Clynes & Deterding 2011), while the Chinese spoken in Brunei is non-rhotic. Although it is true that Standard Chinese can have rhoticised vowels, and for example 兒 (*ér*, 'son') is pronounced with r-colouring as [ɛ̃] (Lee & Zee 2003: 11), this is much more common in Beijing Dialect than other varieties of the language. Indeed, rhoticity is almost entirely absent in the Mandarin spoken in places such as Singapore and Taiwan (Lin 2007: 7), where 兒 is pronounced with a central vowel with no r-colouring, and this is also true for the Mandarin spoken in Brunei. One might predict, therefore, that on the basis of influence from their dominant home language, Malay Bruneians would exhibit more rhoticity than Chinese Bruneians, and it is not clear why this does not occur. One might note that Brunei Malay is the most widespread lingua franca in the country, and it is commonly spoken even by ethnically Chinese people, so maybe the pronunciation of Brunei Malay influences all speakers whether they are ethnically Malay or not.

Many of the pronunciation features of Brunei English might be characterised as prestigious or non-prestigious: use of [θ] for initial voiceless TH in words such as *thought* is closer to the inner-circle norm than use of [t]; retention of word-final [t] in phrases such as *fist in the air* is more standard than omission of this consonant; and a clear separation of the long and short vowels in words such as *feast* and *fist* is more prestigious than the merging of these two vowels. In each case, the rhotic speakers seem to have a slightly greater use of the more prestigious pattern, though none of the differences is significant, so we should be careful before we draw any firm conclusions about the correlation between rhoticity and these three features of pronunciation. However, these results certainly provide no evidence that non-rhoticity is perceived as the more prestigious way of speaking, even though British pronunciation is largely non-rhotic and pronunciation based on RP British English has traditionally usually been promoted as the norm in Brunei. In fact, there are currently about 260 teachers from the CfBT trust employed as English language teachers in Brunei schools (Deterding & Salbrina 2013: 18), most of them from England, Australia and New Zealand and almost all having non-rhotic accents, but it seems that they have little influence on the pronunciation of their pupils.

Given that the incidence of rhoticity seems to be increasing in Brunei, apparently led by young women, we might ask what the source of this influence is. Three potential influences can be suggested: the first is American English, as young Bruneians watch many American movies and listen to American music, though some linguists have questioned how much influence popular media have on sound changes that take place in society (Chambers 1998: 126); the second is Brunei Malay, which, as mentioned above, is strongly rhotic; and the third is the English of the Philippines, as there are about 200 teachers from the Philippines in Brunei schools, all of whom have a rhotic accent, and furthermore there are many thousands of Filipina domestic helpers (*amahs*) in Brunei homes. It is hard to determine which of these three influences is greater. Probably, they combine to influence the pronunciation of Brunei English, and the change is taking place because of the existence of all three influences.

Finally, we can consider what this tells us about the status of Brunei English. The suggestion that it still seems to be subject to substantial external influences, particularly from American English and maybe also Philippine English, confirms that it belongs in Phase 3 of Schneider's model. However, the fact that it is breaking away from its historical roots with British English, partly influenced by the pronunciation of the local variety of Malay, suggests that Brunei English is developing its own distinctive style of pronunciation so it might be regarded as moving towards Phase 4.

This progression from Phase 3 to Phase 4 of Schneider's model might alternatively be seen as a shift from being an L2 variety towards becoming an emergent independent variety. The observation that Brunei English seems currently to be influenced by an external style of pronunciation, in this case American English, suggests that it might be regarded as an L2 variety; yet at the same time, it is shedding its historical links with British English and thereby developing its own distinctive phonology, partly influenced by Brunei Malay, so this suggests that it is becoming an emergent variety.

However, there is an alternative perspective: in the modern globalised world, it is possible that young Bruneians are participating in a dynamic global style of English, so maybe the dichotomy between an independent national variety of English and L2 pronunciation is less relevant in the modern world where there is a burgeoning trend towards the use of English as a Lingua Franca (Seidlhofer 2011). This global ELF is characterised by many shared features of pronunciation, including avoidance of vowel reduction in function words such as *of* and *as*, widespread adoption of [t] for voiceless initial TH, and omission of the final /t/ in words such as *fist* (Deterding 2010), and these worldwide trends seem to occur regardless of how people in the UK or USA speak. We might then conclude that the phonological basis for classifying a variety of English as an emergent independent postcolonial variety or alternatively as an L2 variety may nowadays be gradually becoming less relevant in the modern world.

Appendix: The Wolf Passage

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 to 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.

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