

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/255058598>

The Features of Singapore English Pronunciation: Implications for Teachers

Article · January 1994

CITATIONS

12

READS

11,593

2 authors:



David Deterding

Universiti Brunei Darussalam

92 PUBLICATIONS 2,267 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE



Robert Denier Hvitfeldt

2 PUBLICATIONS 12 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



The use and status of language in Brunei [View project](#)



Rhoticity in Brunei English: A diachronic approach [View project](#)

The Features of Singapore English Pronunciation: Implications for Teachers

DAVID DETERDING and ROBERT HVITFELDT

In this short description of the features of Singapore English Pronunciation (SEP), Standard Southern British (SSB), roughly equivalent to the older term Received Pronunciation (RP), will be used as a convenient reference point. Other varieties of English, such as those used by well-educated Americans or Australians, could also be used as models, and most of the points made in this paper would still be valid. SSB has been chosen merely because it is probably the most familiar to Singaporean educators.

There is absolutely no intention to suggest that SEP is "incorrect" or SSB "correct" -- this paper is meant to be essentially descriptive. The debate about standards and a model for use in teaching can (and does) take place elsewhere.

There is, of course, a wide range in the English pronunciation of Singaporeans, and individuals vary considerably in the way they speak according to the situation they are in (Pakir, 1991) and the attitude they want to convey (Poedjosoedarmo, 1993). The range extends from the most prestigious variety, the *acrolect*, generally spoken by highly-educated people and closest to the SSB model, down to the least prestigious variety, the *basilect*, more often spoken by primary school leavers or those with relatively little English language education. Gupta (1994) says that most Singaporean speakers systematically alternate between a colloquial and a more formal variety according to the formality of the situation. This paper will describe some of the features of the *mesolect*, a variety halfway between the *acrolect* and the *basilect*. No single speaker will use all of these features all of the time, but the features are found quite extensively among a wide variety of speakers.

The system of sounds of SEP differs from that of SSB in a number of ways. Individual sounds of SEP, such as vowels and consonants, often have a pronunciation quite distinct from those of SSB; and stress placement, rhythm, and intonation also differ quite markedly. Each of these will be considered in turn.

Vowels

SSB has twelve *monophthongs*, that is, vowels pronounced with a constant quality: five long vowels /i:, ɑ:, ɔ:, u:, ɜ:/ and seven short vowels /ɪ, e, æ, ʌ, ɒ, ʊ, ɔ/ (Roach, 1991). "Long" in this sense refers primarily to the duration of the pronunciation: long vowels take somewhat longer to utter than short vowels. It will be noted, however, that in addition to this difference in duration, there is also an important difference in the quality of the vowels in pairs like 'seat' and 'sit'. The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) symbol for each is shown together with an example word in the following table.

<u>IPA</u>	<u>example</u>	<u>IPA</u>	<u>example</u>	<u>IPA</u>	<u>example</u>
i:	seat	ɑ:	cart	u:	fool
ɪ	sit	ʌ	cut	ʊ	full
e	bed	ɔ:	caught	ɜ:	hurt
æ	bad	ɒ	cot	ə	about*

*In 'about', it is the first syllable that is pronounced as /ə/.

In SEP, the distinctions in quality as well as length between the long and short vowels of SSB are often neutralized. Because of this, /i:/ and /ɪ/, /ɑ:/ and /ʌ/, /ɔ:/ and /ɒ/, and /u:/ and /ʊ/ are frequently pronounced the same. In addition, /e/ and /æ/ are often the same in SEP (Brown, 1991). As a result, pairs of words such as the following, which are quite distinct in SSB, often have the same pronunciation in Singapore:

seat/sit cart/cut caught/cot fool/full bed/bad

In contrast to monophthongs, *diphthongs* involve a change in quality during the vowel. SSB has eight diphthongs: /eɪ/, /aɪ/, /ɔɪ/, /əʊ/, /aʊ/, /ɪə/, /eə/ and /ʊə/. SEP has the same number of items, but two of these diphthongs tend to be pronounced as long monophthongs. The SSB /eɪ/ in 'face' and /əʊ/ in 'nose' might, in SEP, be transcribed as [e:] and [o:]. When Singaporeans say these words, there is often little change in quality during the course of the vowel.

The most common vowel in SSB is the schwa /ə/, the short vowel at the start of words like 'about' and 'around'. In unstressed SSB syllables, short vowels are most often pronounced as a schwa. This is called *vowel reduction*. SEP exhibits much less frequent vowel reduction than SSB and often retains a full vowel even in unstressed syllables. The differences in pronunciation can be seen in the first syllable of the following words:

	<u>SSB</u>	<u>SEP</u>
'contain'	/kənteɪn/	/kɒnteɪn/
'affect'	/əfekt/	/æfekt/

Note that in SEP this absence of systematic vowel reduction sometimes means that a distinction is made between a pair of words, such as 'affect' and 'effect', which no longer occurs in SSB.

Function words include prepositions such as 'to', 'of', and 'for', conjunctions such as 'and', 'or', and 'but', object pronouns like 'him', 'her', and 'them' and auxiliary forms of 'have', 'be', and 'will'. In SSB, these function words have two forms: the *weak form*, which in most cases has a schwa, is used when the word is unstressed; and the *strong form*, with a full vowel, is used on the rare occasions when the word is stressed. In SEP, weak forms are used less often, and a full vowel is found in most circumstances. In the following

examples, the function words 'to', 'of', and 'and' are shown together with a content word, to suggest the sort of context they might occur in.

	<u>SSB</u>	<u>SEP</u>
'to town'	/tətaʊn/	/tu:taʊn/
'lots of '	/lɒtsəv/	/lɒtsɒv/
'and cheese'	/əndtʃi:z/	/ændtʃi:z/

Consonants

In SSB, most words that are spelt with a 'th' are pronounced with a *dental fricative* -- the tongue is pressed lightly against the back of the teeth allowing some air to escape with a hissing sound. In SEP, these words are often produced with the tongue a little further back and without the accompanying hiss, using an *alveolar plosive* /t/ or /d/. As a result, 'three' and 'tree' are often pronounced the same, and 'then' has the same sound as 'den'.

A *consonant cluster* is a combination of consonants within a word. For example, the word 'fact' has a consonant cluster with two consonants /k/ and /t/ in final position. In SEP, consonant clusters in final position tend to be simplified, so that many speakers may omit the final /t/ in 'fact', thereby pronouncing the word as /f###k/. Final consonant cluster simplification means that some grammatical distinctions, such as that between singular and plural, can be neutralized: 'cat' and 'cats' may both be pronounced /kæt/. Note that SSB speakers also simplify final consonant clusters in rapid or informal speech if that simplification does not result in any loss of information, but loss of final '-s' rarely, if ever, occurs.

When there is a single consonant in final position, it is often replaced in SEP with a *glottal stop* [ʔ]. This is a kind of 'catch' in the throat, caused by a momentary closure of the vocal cords, and it is similar to the sound (or, more accurately, absence of sound) that many speakers have in the middle of the negative 'uh-uh'. This is found particularly when a word, such as 'cat', 'hot', 'back', or 'luck' ends with a /t/ or /k/, but it also sometimes occurs with words ending in /p/, /d/, /g/, or /b/. For some speakers of SEP, then, 'cop', 'cot', 'cock', 'cob', 'cod', and 'cog' are all pronounced alike: /kɒ###/.

Stress

Lexical stress is concerned with the most prominent syllable within a polysyllabic word or two-word noun phrase. In SSB stressed syllables are slightly longer, slightly louder, and/or slightly higher-pitched than unstressed syllables. The placement of lexical stress differs considerably between SSB and SEP (Tongue, 1979:33). In the following tables, the syllables with primary stress are shown in upper case.

<u>SSB</u>	<u>SEP</u>
COLLeague	colleAGUE
CHARacter	chaRACter
RUSH hour	rush HOUR
MOUSE trap	mouse TRAP

Differences in lexical stress are particularly evident for words with suffixes. In SSB, some suffixes have the effect of shifting the primary stress to be later in the word, but in SEP they often have no such effect. For example, notice how the stress is shifted to the right by the addition of '-ic' in SSB but not in SEP:

	<u>SSB</u>		<u>SEP</u>
eCONomy	ecoNOMic	eCONomy	eCONonomic
aCADemy	acaDEMic	aCADemy	aCADemic

In addition to lexical stress, there are differences in *sentence stress*, or the way in which the most important words are made more prominent within a whole sentence or utterance. In SEP, pronouns such as 'you' and 'me', primary auxiliaries 'have' and 'be', and modals, such as 'will', regularly receive considerable prominence, but they are only stressed in specific circumstances in SSB. In a sentence such as "We have done our homework", 'have' in SEP would regularly receive stress even though the sentence is a simple statement of fact. In SSB, on the other hand, the placement of stress on 'have' in this sentence would only occur in a statement meant to refute the listener's expectation that the homework has not yet been done.

Rhythm

SSB is often said to be *stress-timed*. This means that there is a tendency for the time between any two stressed syllables to be roughly equal regardless of the number of unstressed syllables which might come between them. For example, in

PLEASE GIVE a BOOK to the LAdy in the HAT

the five stressed syllables (indicated by upper case) occur at roughly regular intervals even though zero, one, two, or three unstressed syllables may come between them.

In contrast, some languages, such as French, are said to be *syllable-timed*, with each syllable having roughly equal duration regardless of the location of stress.

It has been suggested that SEP may be syllable-timed (Platt and Weber, 1980:57), and recent computer-based measurements (Deterding, 1994) indicate that there is some justification for describing SEP as more syllable-timed than SSB. It is almost certainly true that it is the rhythm of SEP that is the most salient feature in marking it as distinct from SSB.

There are many factors that may contribute to this perceptual difference (Brown, 1988). One is that SSB has considerable liaison between words. For example, in SSB the words 'get up' would usually be said with no break between them; but SEP speakers tend not to join them together in this way. In SSB, the following two sentences sound almost exactly the same; but that would certainly not be true for SEP.

I need to get up at eight o'clock.
I need to get a potato clock.

Intonation

Intonation is the rise and fall of pitch of the voice in connected speech. For example, we often use rising intonation when asking questions that can be answered with a 'yes' or a 'no'; but falling intonation is more common for statements.

Are you ↗ going?
You are ↘ going.

The underlying structure of SEP intonation is probably different from SSB. For example, in SSB, the intonation pattern, or *tone*, of each part of an utterance is primarily focused on the most prominent syllable, or *tonic syllable*. Thus, in the previous example, the rising and falling tones (transcribed as ↗ and ↘) occur on the most prominent syllable -- the first syllable of 'going'. But often in SEP, although there certainly are stressed and unstressed syllables, it is hard to identify one stressed syllable that is more prominent than the others (Deterding, 1993). The result is that many SEP speakers place more than one tonic syllable in a short utterance which in SSB would have only one, causing marked differences in the intonation of the two varieties of English.

SEP also has some quite distinctive intonational patterns. In particular, there is the frequent use of a rise-fall tone (transcribed below as ^) for special emphasis.

I'm so ^ tired. (I really am extremely tired.)

The rise-fall tone does exist in SSB, but it is rather rare and often entails a kind of innuendo that is not suggested by its use in SEP.

Implications for Teachers

As we have seen, the differences between SEP and SSB extend to many areas, including individual segments (vowels and consonants), stress, rhythm and intonation. Speakers whose speech exhibits many of the characteristics outlined here may, as a result, find that foreigners cannot understand them easily. This is obviously a problem for Singapore, where the economy depends so heavily on foreign trade.

Since there is great variety in the pronunciation of vowels by speakers of standard Englishes such as American, Australian, and SSB, the special characteristics of vowel pronunciation in SEP may not, in fact, affect comprehension too greatly, even if some

vowel distinctions may be lost. Rather more important is the SEP pronunciation of consonant clusters, particularly in word-final position where syntactic and/or semantic information often lies. The tendency for speakers of SEP to drop final '-s' and '-ed', and to replace many contrastive consonants with glottal stops, seems to interfere with efficient communication with foreigners rather more seriously. Teachers need to be aware of the fact that although they can easily understand their own pupils, the goals of English teaching might include ensuring that foreigners can also understand those pupils after they leave school.

SEP stress placement, when different from any of the other standard Englishes, probably causes more severe problems in communication between Singaporeans and foreigners than any other area of pronunciation. Once again, teachers' awareness of the differences in stress patterns between SEP and SSB and their ability to provide a model which uses standard stress placement may reduce comprehension difficulties later on.

Similarly, rhythm and intonation differences can seriously interfere with communication between some Singaporean and non-Singaporean English speakers. Intonation, for example, carries a great deal of social and cultural information regarding concepts such as politeness, confidence, and familiarity. It is likely that some classroom emphasis on intonational differences may help to eliminate unintended impressions of rudeness, impropriety, or brashness that speakers may have of one another. (Admittedly, more research needs to be done on the way in which cultural and sociological impressions are conveyed.)

This paper has reviewed some of the areas in which Singaporean pronunciation differs from an external standard. The aim has been to use non-technical language as far as possible, in the hope that teachers can understand it and learn something about the pronunciation used by many of their students. In order to present this information to as wide an audience as possible, some of the more complex issues have not been covered in detail. Readers who want to pursue these details further will find the references below helpful.

It is important to re-emphasize that Singapore pronunciation is not "wrong", and in some situations it may constitute the most appropriate way of speaking. However, in other circumstances, it may result in a failure to be understood or the creation of false impressions or intentions. Greater knowledge about the features of SEP may lead to a reduction in the frequency in this kind of breakdown in communication.

References

- Brown, A. (1988). The staccato effect in the pronunciation of English in Malaysia and Singapore. In Foley, J. (ed.) *New Englishes - The Case of Singapore*. Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1988. pp.115-128.
- Brown, A. (1991). *Pronunciation Models*. Singapore: Singapore University Press

- Deterding, D. (1993). Intonation and stress placement in Singapore English. Paper presented at SAAL/STU seminar, The English Language in Singapore: Implications for Teaching, November 11-12, 1993, Singapore.
- Deterding, D. (1994). The rhythm of Singapore English. Paper presented at SST-94: Fifth Australian International Conference on Speech Science and Technology, University of Western Australia, 6-8 December, 1994.
- Gupta, A. F. (1994). *The Step-Tongue: Children's English in Singapore*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Pakir, A. (1991). The status of English and the question of 'standard' in Singapore: A sociolinguistic perspective. In Tickoo, M.L. (ed.) *Language and Standards: Issues, Attitudes, Case Studies*. Singapore: RELC. pp.109-130.
- Platt, J. & Weber, H. (1980). *English in Singapore and Malaysia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Poedjosoedarmo, G. R. (1993). Lectal variation in the media and the classroom: A preliminary analysis of attitudes. Paper presented at SAAL/STU seminar, The English Language in Singapore: Implications for Teaching, November 11-12, 1993, Singapore.
- Roach, P. (1991). *English Phonetics and Phonology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2nd edition).
- Tongue, R. K. (1979). *The English of Singapore and Malaysia* (second edition). Singapore: Eastern Universities Press.