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CHAPTER • FIVE

**Two Issues in the Study of Singapore  
English Phonology**

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**5.0 Introduction**

At least two issues confront the student of the phonology of Singapore English. The first has to do with the nature of Singapore English, the object of study; the second concerns the methodology of studying the phonology of new varieties of English in general, and the phonology of Singapore English in particular. These issues will not go away easily, and will most likely continue to confront future students of Singapore English. Even though a solution of the issues is not easy to come by — it depends on one's theoretical orientation and methodological sophistication — an awareness of the issues is the first step towards a systematic and rigorous description of the phonology of Singapore English. For ease of exposition, the first issue is labelled the language issue; the second issue, the methodology issue. These issues are by no means new, and have been addressed in various ways by previous scholars. This chapter clarifies relevant concerns in the study of Singapore English phonology.

**5.1 What Do We Study When We Study Singapore  
English?**

The language issue has to do with the object of study: What is Singapore English? The situation of English in Singapore must be considered before an answer to this perennially controversial question is articulated. In present-day Singapore, English is the language of administration, enjoying the status of prestige among the four languages which are recognised as the official languages, viz., English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil. Historically,

English was the language of administration by virtue of the fact that the Straits Settlements, comprising Singapore, Malacca and Penang, was established and ruled by the British. The Settlements, paradoxically, were largely settled by immigrants from Hokkien-speaking areas of China, particularly in Singapore and Penang, and Tamil-speaking areas of India. Although English was the prestigious language in the Settlements, the local populations, except for a privileged few, continued to speak their mother tongues — Malay, Tamil and various Chinese dialects. English became the lingua franca for the whole community.

In education, English was the language of choice as the medium of teaching. For a time, Chinese-medium schools offered a viable alternative to English-medium schools. But, as English gained importance as the language of international commerce, and of science and technology, Chinese-medium schools lost their appeal among the Chinese population, and were eventually replaced by English-medium schools.

Singapore English as it is known today is the product of a successful educational system with English as the language of instruction (cf. Tay, 1979; Foley, 1988; Pakir, 1991; Foley et al., 1998). For this reason, Singapore English should not be considered a creole, since it lacks a pidgin as its predecessor. Nevertheless, Singapore English exhibits grammatical features which arise through language contact. Since the local languages continue to be spoken, and standard English<sup>2</sup> continues to be emphasised in the educational system and enjoys prestigious status, we would expect the grammar of Singapore English to be in constant state of flux. This is one source of the problem that faces the student of Singapore English. The continued influence of contact languages increases the internal variability of the language.

Platt and Weber (1980) are among the first scholars to investigate the internal variability in the structure of Singapore English (SE). One common morphological feature of standard English is inflectional tense marking (*work* vs. *worked*). Tense is not consistently marked in the speech of SE speakers. Table 5.1 shows the rate of regular tense marking

Table 5.1: Rate of tense marking in SE.

	C+ed	V+d	C+d/t
Group I	17/17 (100%)	6/10 (60.0%)	19/35 (54.3%)
Group II	33/54 (61.1%)	17/45 (37.8%)	15/93 (19.4%)

Adapted from Platt and Weber, 1980: 60

Group I consists of speakers with an education higher than GCE and Group II consists of speakers with a GCE education or lower. Verbs can be classified into three categories, depending on the way they influence the pronunciation of the past tense morpheme *-ed*. Verbs which end in *t* or *d*, such as *start* and *demand* belong to the C+*ed* category, where the past tense morpheme is realised as [-əd]: *started* [sta:təd], *demanded* [di'mændəd]. Verbs which end in vowels, such as *try*, *stay*, fall into the V+d category; here, the past tense morpheme is realised as [-d]. Finally, verbs which end in consonants fall into the C+d/t category. In this category, the past tense morpheme is realised as [-d] if the stem-final consonant is voiced, and as [-t] if it is voiceless. The figure to the right of the slash is the total number of verb tokens which ought to be marked for past tense, and the figure to the left of the slash is the number of tokens of actual tense marking. Thus, all the 17 verbs which should be marked for past tense are marked among Group I speakers; but in Group II, out of 54 such verb tokens, only 33 tokens, or 61.1%, are so marked. The figures show that the degree of tense marking is correlated with the phonemic make-up of stems and the level of education of the speakers. It is not surprising at all that education plays a role in a speaker's speech patterns. With the added vowel, the inflectional pattern C+*ed* is perceptually more prominent than the other two categories. It is therefore expected that verbs of this category would be more likely marked for past tense than verbs with less prominent inflection.

The internal variability is manifested in a subtle way in the phonology of SE as well. Here two such cases will be considered. The first case concerns the suffix *-ic*. In standard English, the suffix *-ic* induces the primary stress to shift to the stem-final vowel (*ecónomy* vs. *económ-ic*). If the stem-final vowel is long, it tends to be shortened at the same time. (Diphthongs will be considered as long vowels.) This is illustrated in the following words:

Vowel Shortening:

bible	[baɪbəl]	biblical	[bɪblɪkəl]
cycle	[saɪkl]	cyclical	[sɪklɪkəl]

Interestingly, in SE, *biblical* is pronounced in the same way as it is in standard English, where the diphthong is shortened. But *cyclical* is pronounced with the stem's diphthong intact: *cyclical* ['saɪklɪkəl]. Vowel shortening, which is a general phonological rule of standard English (cf. Chomsky and Halle, 1968),<sup>3</sup> applies to *biblical* without fail in SE, but not to *cyclical* at all.

The second case has to do with the so-called intervocalic voicing. Intervocalic ('between vowels') voicing is observed in the following pairs of words: *consign vs resign; conserve vs. preserve; and consume vs. resume*. In these words, the stem-initial /s/ is voiced when the prefix ends in a vowel. In SE, intervocalic voicing not only happens in these pairs, but also in words which do not show intervocalic voicing in standard English. Consider the following three words:

Standard English	SE
Asia        ['eɪʃə]	['eɪʒə]
pressure    ['preʃə]	['preʒə]
December    [dɪ'sembə]	[dɪ'zembə]

To be sure, there are SE speakers who do not voice the intervocalic fricative in these words. Even those who do, do not voice it consistently. In the jargon of phonological theory, [ʃ] and [ʒ] are in free variation. Moreover, the voicing rule does not apply to other words which have similar phonological environment. For example, *precious* is consistently pronounced as ['preʃəs], not as ['preʒəs].

Phonological rules are expressions of linguistic regularity and stability of a language. If a rule loses its generality, it is symptomatic of a language losing its linguistic stability. The two phonological rules discussed above are responsible for vowel shortening in some words, but not in other words of identical phonological environment. The loss of generality of phonological rules in SE increases the internal variability of the language.

Up to this point, the central question at hand has not been addressed directly: What is Singapore English? In all likelihood this is a question that cannot be answered to the satisfaction of all curious minds. After all, the concept of Standard British English, or Mandarin for that matter, is an elusive one as well. The great internal variability of SE does not make the task any easier. Whatever the answer one proposes, it needs to be examined carefully for its conceptual underpinnings and empirical adequacy.

Two proposals have been presented in the literature. Platt (1975) considers basilectal SE as a 'creoloid', perhaps in recognition of the fact that SE developed out of an English-based education system, rather than a community-wide pidgin. The term basilect refers to the lowest level of the speech continuum, which Platt and many others, take to be the defining characteristic of SE. It must be emphasised that the notion of a speech continuum is a fuzzy one, and it does not enhance our understanding of the language situation in Singapore any more than the plain observation that there are different varieties of SE. A moment's reflection will convince

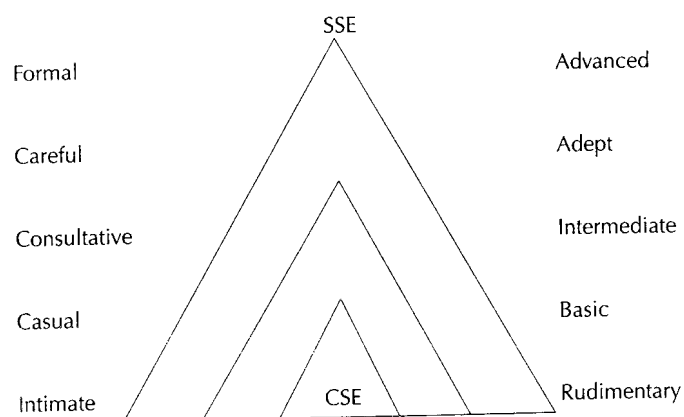
us that no language is a monolithic master of its speakers. The command of a repertoire of distinct varieties associated with a language allows the speaker to interact with other members of the linguistic community effectively. It is the hallmark of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972). The fact that there are different varieties of SE should surprise no one. It is a fact of all languages, regardless of origin.

The second proposal is argued along the line of diglossia (Ferguson, 1959). This notion, as described by Ferguson, is a broad one. It refers to the situation in which two languages or varieties of the same language co-exist in the same community, yet perform distinct communicative functions. Typical diglossic countries include China, where Mandarin is spoken for inter-regional communication, and local dialects are used among families, friends or people of the same dialect community — Mandarin vs. Cantonese in Guangdong, Mandarin vs. Shanghai dialect in Shanghai, and so on. In pre-modern China, literary Chinese (*wenyan*) is used for written communication, and the vernacular (*baihua*) is used for oral communication. Diglossia is a familiar fact of linguistic life.

In Singapore, the language situation is more complicated. Most Singaporeans command at least two of the four official languages: English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil. English, as the language of administration, is shared by all ethnic communities. Therefore, for most people, diglossia could mean English for official and inter-ethnic communication, and Chinese, Malay or Tamil for intra-ethnic communication. In the literature on Singapore English, the notion of diglossia is applied more narrowly. It refers to different varieties of English: the H variety is the standard English, and the L variety is the localised variety of English, which is commonly referred to as Colloquial Singapore English or CSE. (The corresponding H variety is called Standard Singapore English, or SE.) Gupta (1989, 1991, 1992) is a strong advocate of this diglossic view of SE.

In some sense, the diglossic view of the English language situation in Singapore is conceptually more appealing than the competing continuum view. It circumvents the inherent difficulty of delimiting the boundaries of the various 'lects,' particularly those of the mesolects. The H form is the acrolect, which is the same as standard SE, and CSE is the L form, which includes the basilectal and mesolectal varieties. Due to different educational and language backgrounds, speakers necessarily differ in their linguistic performance. The diglossic view does not preclude the possibility of differing levels of proficiency among speakers of the language. While endorsing the diglossic view, Pakir's notion of the 'expanding triangles' implicitly encodes different proficiency levels which could be identified with the lectal varieties under the continuum view. The triangles are shown in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1: Continuum view of SE.



Pakir, 1991: 174

The left cline represents speech styles, ranging from formal to intimate. The right cline encodes proficiency levels, which are labelled as advanced, adept, and so on. All these levels are reminiscent of the lects, and the two forms of SE, namely standard SE and CSE, occupy the two ends of the triangles. On the triangles, Pakir writes,

Highly educated users of English are found at the top ends of both speech continua. However, their movement along the continua is fluid and far-ranging compared to others who are less proficient. They are capable of moving along the whole diglossic continuum, from top to bottom, and yet cross over to the proficiency continuum, often remaining at the top end and occasionally stretching down to the intermediate level or even lower.

Pakir, 1991: 174

Obviously, the two views of SE are a reflection of the internal variability of SE.

## 5.2 How Do We Describe Differences?

The internal variability of SE is not only responsible for the two competing views of SE discussed above, but it also tests the limit of the methodology

with which to investigate SE. The methodology problem can be attacked in different ways. Tay (1979, 1982) and Platt and Weber (1980), among many other works, are representative of the comparative approach to the study of SE. This approach compares SE with British English, and the comparison yields a list of differences between SE and British English. While there is a pedagogical purpose for it, such a comparative approach tends to treat SE as a language which 'deviates' from the proper usage of British English, thus reinforcing the view that SE, and other new forms of English for that matter, are simplified, imprecise copies of the 'original'. SE is an autonomous language, and should be analysed as such in its own right.

A different angle for the methodology problem will be taken. An examination will be conducted of how internal variability of SE puts a limit on the efficacy of the research tools, no matter which theoretical approach is taken.

For example, take the vowel systems of SE and RP. In current phonological theories, two levels of representation are recognised. The underlying representation encodes the basic phonological, or phonemic, contrasts of a language, whereas the phonetic representation encodes detailed phonetic information about the way the phonemic contrasts are pronounced, or in phonological jargon, realised. Therefore, in comparative studies, it is customary to compare the phonemic contrasts and their realisation patterns within each of the phonological systems under comparison. But the internal variation of SE makes such comparative analysis difficult. An examination of three analyses of SE vowels demonstrates this point. The three analyses are Tay (1982), Brown (1988a) and Hung (1996). Only pure vowels will be considered.

Hung (1996) suggests that SE has eight pure vowels, as follows:

i	bit, beat	u	fool, full	
e	day	o	toe	
ɛ	bet, bat	ɔ	cot, caught	
	ə	fur	a	luck, lark

In addition, the RP diphthong /ɛə/ hair is realised as [æ], but its status is left undecided<sup>4</sup>.

Brown (1988a) sees the same phonemic contrasts, but the phonetic symbols that are used to transcribe the vowels are different. They are shown below:

i	bit, beat	u	fool, full
e:	day	o:	toe
ɛ	bet, bat	ɔ	cot, caught
	ə	ɜ:	luck, lark

Brown uses /e:/ to transcribe the vowel in *hair*, for which Hung gives /æ/.

What does the difference in phonetic symbols mean? Obviously, for Brown (1988a) and Hung (1996), the vowel contrasts are the same — in the jargon of phonological theory, they have the same vowels at the underlying representation. But at the level of phonetic realisation, where details of phonetic information are important, it is not clear whether the different symbols describe the same realisational patterns. It is possible that the symbols describe different realisational patterns, due to the internal variability of SE. It is equally possible that the transcriptions reflect personal preferences, not linguistic substance. A cursory check of the transcriptions used in Webster's dictionaries and those published by Longman will convince the skeptic of this possibility. The lack of stable meanings of symbols used in transcription, compounded by the internal variability of SE, renders futile the precise comparison of phonetic realisations of phonemic contrasts.

One might think that spectrographic analyses of the vowels may offer some helpful guidance in the effort to compare realisational patterns. Unfortunately, spectrographic analysis has its limit. An examination of the fundamental frequencies of the SE vowels in Hung (1996) does not reveal any meaningful and reliable information for the task at hand. The speech of an individual is highly variable, and the acoustic profiles of any two tokens of the same vowel, uttered by the same speaker, are different. Spectrographic analysis has its limitations in illuminating the realisational patterns of phonemic contrasts of SE.

There is no guarantee, of course, that scholars of SE will agree on the exact phonemic contrasts. Note that both Brown and Hung are of the opinion that there is no length contrast among vowels at the level of underlying representation. Brown's long vowels do not contrast with corresponding short vowels. Tay (1982) agrees that SE shows no length contrast among its vowels, but this is the result of phonetic realisation. At the underlying level, SE vowels, like their RP counterparts, show short-long contrast. Tay (1982) writes:

At the phonemic level, length is one of the features used to distinguish the following pairs of vowels: /i:/ and /ɪ/, /ɔ:/ and /ɒ/ and /ɑ:/, /ɒ/ and /ɔ:/, /u/ and /ʊ/. In [SE], length distinctions are consistently maintained at the phonemic level. At the allophonic level, however, length distinctions are not maintained in [SE].

Tay, 1982: 141

The so-called allophonic level is functionally equivalent to the level of phonetic realisation. Unfortunately, Tay (1982) does not give arguments supporting her view.

However, Tay's cautious remark is well-taken. There is evidence which suggests that SE has more underlying vowel contrasts than suggested by the vowel inventories of Brown (1988a) and Hung (1996). Consider the RP vowels /ɛ/ *bet* and /æ/ *bat*. In the vowel inventories shown above, the two vowels are merged in SE. This claim needs close scrutiny. The examples of Hung, *bet* and *bat*, and those given by Brown, *dress* and *trap*, all contain voiceless consonants following the vowels. Tay (1982: 141) observes that for some speakers at least, the RP vowel /ɛ/ has variable realisation in SE. When it is followed by voiceless consonants, it is close to RP [ɛ]. But when it is followed by voiced consonants, as in *head*, *dead*, *said*, and *bed*, it is close to [e'], which is the SE realisation of the diphthong [eɪ] (Tay, 1982, p. 141). Interestingly, the vowel /æ/ in *bat* and *dad* is always realised as [ɛ]. The way the two vowels are realised is shown below:

	RP	SE		RP	SE
bat	[bæt]	[bet]	bet	[bet]	[bet]
bad	[bæd]	[bed]	bed	[bed]	[be'd]
back	[bæk]	[bek]	Beck	[bek]	[bek]
bag	[bæg]	[beg]	beg	[beg]	[be'g]

This pattern throws doubt on the claim that the RP vowels /æ/ and /ɛ/ are merged in SE. For those speakers with the above realisational pattern, the two vowels must be contrastive at the underlying level.

Internal variability of SE phonology makes it difficult to produce meaningful comparisons of vowels even at the level of underlying representation.

### 5.3 Conclusion

In the preceding sections the discussion focused on some of the conceptual and empirical issues which form the core of the language

and methodology issues facing students of SE, and, by extension, other new varieties of English. These issues give rise to the controversy which punctuates the research literature on SE. Given the short history of English in Singapore, and the tension between the prestige of Standard English and the emergence of a local variety, internal variation is bound to be a fact of SE for the foreseeable future. A clear articulation of the issues highlights the pitfalls in the systematic analysis of the grammar of SE.

- 1 The English situation in Singapore is a controversial matter, as can be seen later in the chapter. Here, following Pakir (1991), the term 'Singapore English' refers to the English language as spoken in Singapore. It is a cover term for the numerous English varieties one encounters in Singapore.
- 2 The term 'Standard English' refers to the pronunciation norms of British or American English as recorded in popular dictionaries such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the *Longman English Dictionary* and various Webster's dictionaries. Such norms need not be applicable to other varieties of English as spoken in Britain or other English-speaking countries.
- 3 There are a few exceptions to Vowel Shortening in standard English, among them *scene* vs. *scenic*, *phoneme* vs. *phonemic*. But these are exceptions that prove the rule. Words like *conic* (cf. *cone*), *athletic* (cf. *athlete*), *volcanic* (cf. *volcano*) all conform to the rule.
- 4 Following common notational convention, the slashes /.../ mark underlying representation; the square brackets [...], phonetic representation.