

**CAUGHT between three COURTS:
shifting norms in the low-back vowel system of Singapore English**

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In recent years, scholars have observed shifts in Singapore English (SgE) towards greater endonormativity and more US-oriented rather than UK-oriented norms for lexicon and pronunciation (Schneider 2003, Deterding 2007a, Starr & Park 2015, Starr et al. 2016). In particular, rhoticity has been found to be on the rise among younger speakers; this shift has been claimed to result from US media exposure (Poedjosoedarmo 2000, Deterding 2007a, Tan 2012). Conflict between US, UK, and Singapore norms is particularly salient in the COT, CAUGHT, and COURT lexical sets. SgE is traditionally described as featuring a total merger of the COT-CAUGHT-COURT nuclei, resulting from non-rhoticity and a lack of vowel length distinction (Deterding 2007b). Acrolectal SgE speakers in local media, however, often raise and lengthen CAUGHT and COURT to [ɔ:] as in the UK; this approach is potentially disrupted by the rise in US-style rhoticity. Our study investigates how Singaporeans of different ages and social backgrounds navigate variation in the low-back vowel system, and how production of these vowels interacts with rhoticity.

34 female Chinese Singaporean participants ages 21 to 81 were recorded reading a minimal pair list and a short story passage, and in conversation with an interviewer. Vowels were normalized using the Bark Difference Metric in NORM (Thomas & Kendall 2007).

Production of the low back vowels varied considerably among individuals, with some exhibiting a total merger, others maintaining a distinction between COT and CAUGHT/COURT, others only raising CAUGHT, etc. The youngest group, speakers ages 21-29, were found to produce lower and fronter COT, CAUGHT, and COURT than older speakers, with COURT in near-merger with COT. Extending a finding from Deterding (2007a), both CAW and CORE were raised and backed further than their pre-consonantal counterparts (CAUGHT/COURT).

Speakers ages 21-29 showed a dramatic increase in postvocalic rhoticity relative to older groups. This increase was restricted to the minimal pair reading condition; in the reading passage and in spontaneous speech, all age groups used a low level of variable rhoticity, with older groups showing no stylistic stratification. Surprisingly, however, no difference in vowel quality accompanied the use of rhoticity in COURT or CORE words, as would be expected if Singaporeans were adopting US English-like pronunciation. Use of rhoticity also did not correlate with frequency of US media consumption.

Our analysis of the SgE low back vowel system suggests that the UK-oriented, acrolectal form of SgE used by some educated, older speakers is giving way to local norms among younger speakers, as SgE continues its progress toward endonormative

stabilization. At the same time, these findings support the notion that younger SgE speakers are shifting to rhotic variants for formal speech. As rhoticity did not correlate with the use of US-like vowels or US media consumption, however, this work challenges the narrative that the increase in postvocalic rhoticity in SgE is part of a general shift toward US English due to media influence; rather than trying to sound American, young SgE speakers are constructing a variety of English that sounds distinctly Singaporean.

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