Singaporeans' reactions to Estuary English

CHIA BOH PENG and ADAM BROWN

A consideration of whether EE could conceivably be an alternative to RP as a teaching model

Introduction

Since David Rosewarne first coined the term in 1984, much has been written about *Estuary English (EE)*. The definition usually given of Estuary English is that if we can imagine a continuum with Received Pronunciation (RP) at one end and Cockney (an urban accent of London) at the other, then Estuary English is in the middle. This definition is restated by Wells (1998-9) as 'Standard English spoken with the accent of the southeast of England. This highlights two chief points: that it is standard (unlike Cockney) and that it is localized in the southeast (unlike RP)'. The book *English Language for Beginners* (Lowe & Graham 1998) contains on p. 156 a diagram giving the actress Joanna Lumley as an example of RP, the boxer Frank Bruno for Cockney, and the comedian and writer Ben Elton for EE. This is ironic, in that Ben Elton himself denies that he is a speaker of EE (John Wells, personal communication).

Variations on this continuum model of RP – EE – Cockney have been proposed. Coggle (1998-9) proposes that a distinction should be made between conservative RP and modern RP, the latter being closer to EE on the continuum. Maidment (1994) adds further refinements by pointing out that one can distinguish formal and informal forms of RP, EE and Cockney, and that informal RP may overlap with formal EE, and likewise informal EE with formal Cockney.

There is thus some debate as whether EE exists as an entity, partly because it often seems to be defined negatively (as being neither RP nor Cockney). Others have objected that it is a ragbag category for anything in between RP and Cockney. However, it should be remembered that concepts like RP are not monolithic. Wells (1982:279), for instance, distinguishes *mainstream RP*, *U-RP* (upper-crust RP), *adoptive RP* and *near-RP*, while Gimson (1980) distinguished *conservative RP*, *general RP* and *advanced RP*.

There is also debate as to whether EE is an accent (i.e., solely a matter of pronunciation) or a dialect (involving grammar, vocabulary, etc). Non-phonological phenomena claimed to belong to EE (Rosewarne 1994a) include *cheers* (for *thank you*, *goodbye*), *there you go* (for *here you are*), *there's* (*there is*) preceding plural expressions, and frequent use of *basically*. However, as Wells (1998–9) points out, these are expressions to be found in colloquial standard English and many other dialects of English. Indeed, Rosewarne (1994a) notes that EE uses Americanisms such as *excuse me* (for *sorry*), *busy* (for *engaged* on the phone) and *who's this?* (for *who's speaking?*). Certain constructions such as *I never did* (for *I didn't*) and invariant tags such as *isn't it?* are claimed to be

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characteristic of EE, and are also found in Singapore English.

EE as a possible standard in the UK

As the title of Rosewarne's (1994a) article 'Estuary English: tomorrow's RP?' shows, claims have been made that EE may replace RP as a standard accent in the UK. This claim may be investigated by examining two aspects of standard accents: their geographical extent, and their sociolinguistic status.

Geographically, the term Estuary English was originally coined to refer to the estuary of the River Thames, specifically suburban areas of Greater London and the counties of Essex and Kent, where the accent was first noted. It has been argued (Maidment 1994) that this was a misnomer originally, as there is no evidence that the accent originated in this area, and more so now that it has spread. Rosewarne (1994a:4) claims that EE 'has spread northwards to Norwich and westwards to Cornwall, with the result that it is now spoken south of a line from the Wash to the Avon'. Crystal (1995:327) includes cities such as Hull, Chester and Bristol, even further north than this line. However, Trudgill (2001) disputes that EE 'will ever become anything more than a regional accent, albeit the accent of a rather large region ... [T]here is no way in which the influence of London is going to be able to counteract the influence of large centres such as Liverpool and Newcastle which are at some distance from London'.

Sociolinguistically, since EE is located between RP and Cockney, it serves 'as a bridge between the various classes in SE England. So, for instance, upper class speakers can move "down market" from RP towards Cockney ... and Cockney speakers can move "up market" towards RP' (Coggle 1994). It is claimed (Foulkes & Docherty 1999:11) that EE is the source of many changes in features of accents of England, which are thus being leveled by converging.

EE is thus best viewed not as a new accent (Wells (1998-9) claims that it has been around for 500 years), but as a range of pronunciations between RP and Cockney. It is a means of avoiding the posh associations of RP, and the working-class implications of Cockney. It has street credibility. Coggle (1998-9) refers to its shock factor: 'a bit like having a tattoo or wearing a stud in your tongue.' Rosewarne (2000) describes it as 'the T-shirt among accents'.

EE internationally

All the preceding discussion has necessarily focused on the UK. There are few RP speakers, and fewer Cockney speakers, outside the UK. The geographical and sociolinguistic implications discussed above have no real validity outside the UK. It is therefore interesting to examine the status EE might have in English teaching circles outside the UK. Very little has been written about this aspect. Rosewarne (1994a, 1996) makes reference to a matched-guise study he carried out on non-native learners and teachers from 33 countries. The methodology and results are unpublished, apart from the following figures (Rosewarne 1994a):

RP	83.88
General American	70.05
Australian English	59.09
Estuary English	57.45

The results show that EE 'was rated lowest of the four native-speaker varieties in the study'. RP was probably rated the highest because it is seen as the most effective means of international communication and because it is familiar from ELT coursebooks (which do not exist for EE).

Rosewarne (1996) argues that there are several features of EE pronunciation that correspond to typical pronunciation features by non-native speakers of English, and that therefore make EE an attractive alternative to RP for teaching purposes. The focus of this article is the acceptability of EE to Singaporeans. What follows therefore is a list of EE pronunciation features that correspond to typical features of Singapore English (SgE) pronunciation.

Consonants

- *L-vocalization:* What in RP would be dark [l]s, occurring syllable-finally, become high back vowels in both EE and SgE, symbolized variously as [w, ʊ, o], e.g. *still* [stɪʊ]. However, in syllabic position, SgE has [ə], e.g. *little* EE [lɪtʊ], SgE [lɪtə] (identical to *litter*). Where the [l] follows a back vowel like [ɔː], it may be absorbed in both EE and SgE, e.g. *faulty*, *forty* both [fɔːtiː].
- *T-glottaling:* The /t/ phoneme is realized as a glottal stop when it is preceded by a vowel or /l, n/ and followed by the end of a word or a consonant other than /r/, e.g. *Scotland*, *network, bent*, *Bentley* [skɒʔlənd, neʔwəːk,

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benʔ, benʔliː]. Use of glottal stops elsewhere is a feature of Cockney rather than EE, and is not found in SgE.

- *T-affrication*: Rosewarne (1994b:4) states that /t/ followed by /w/ can be pronounced as [tʃ] in EE, e.g. *twenty* [tʃwentiː]. This is common in SgE in certain words like *twelve* [tʃwelv].
- *Yod loss and coalescence:* The /j/ approximant (yod) is lost in EE in syllable-initial clusters after the alveolars /l, n, s, z/, e.g. *absolute*, *news*, *consume*, *presume* [æbsəˈluːt, nuːz, kənˈsuːm, prɪˈzuːm]. While this can be found in SgE in certain words such as student [ˈstuːdənt], the EE feature of yod coalescence, whereby /t, d/ followed by /j/ become [tʃ, dʒ], is not, e.g. *Tuesday*, *reduce* EE [ˈstuːdənt, rəˈdʒuːs].
- *TH-fronting:* Coggle (1998–9) claims that the substitution of [f, v] for [θ, ð] in word-medial and word-final position, once considered a purely Cockney feature, is becoming widespread in EE. Thus, *bath* and *father* are increasingly [bɑːf, fɑːvə], as they are for many SgE speakers.

Vowels

- The high vowels [iː, ɪ] and [uː, ʊ] may be neutralized before a vocalic [l], e.g. *feel*, *fill* both [fiʊ], *fool*, *full* both [fuʊ].
- *HappY-tensing*: The final vowels in words like *happy* are [iː] rather than [ɪ] in both EE and SgE.
- Initial *re-* in words like *resist* is pronounced with /riː/ rather than /rɪ/ in both EE (Rosewarne 1994b:5) and SgE.
- *Centring diphthongs*: Rosewarne (1994b:4) states that /eə/ is pronounced as a monophthongal [ɛː] in rapid EE, e.g. *square* [skwɛː]. It is similarly monophthongal in SgE. Likewise, /uə/ in words like *jury* is monophthongal ([dʒuːriː]) in both EE and SgE.

Suprasegmentals

- Words like *subject*, which have variable stress in RP depending on whether they are nouns or verbs ([ˈsʌbdʒɪkt] noun, [səbˈdʒekt] verb) have invariant stress on the first syllable in both EE and SgE.
- Rosewarne (1994a) claims that EE often places stress and even the intonational nucleus on prepositions, e.g. *Let us get TO the point*, although Maidment (1994) disputes this. In SgE, such prepositions are rarely pronounced with weak forms (using [ə]).
- Rosewarne (1994a:6) claims that 'the pitch of intonation patterns in Estuary English appears to be in a narrower frequency band than RP. In particular, rises often do not reach as high a pitch as they would in RP'. Maidment (1994) rightly disputes this, in the absence of instrumental evidence. It is interesting to note that a narrower pitch range was also claimed for many years for SgE, apparently on the basis of a casual unsubstantiated remark in 1969. Instrumental evidence (Low 2000) has shown that SgE speakers in fact use a wider pitch range than RP speakers.
- Rosewarne (1994a:6) claims that 'there is a rise/fall intonation which is characteristic of Estuary English', without further elaboration. Maidment (1994) again rightly argues that this claim cannot be verified since it is so vaguely stated. A greater frequency of rise/fall tones has also been claimed for SgE, but again without evidence to corroborate this.

Many people around the world seem concerned about whether EE will replace RP as a pronunciation model for English teaching. However, it is worth keeping the scale of the differences between the two accents in perspective. As Wells (1998-9) points out, in reply to a query from Japan, 'it is perhaps worth emphasizing that the differences [between RP and EE] we are talking about pale into insignificance when set alongside the gross pronunciation errors made by most Japanese learners of English'.

The experiment

It has been argued that many features of EE are being adopted by speakers of RP in order to sound less posh, i.e., these features are increasingly becoming features of RP too. Since the differences between RP and EE are not great, and since many features of EE correspond to features of SgE pronunciation, an experiment was carried out in order to investigate SgE speakers' reactions to EE.

Methodology

Six male speakers' voices were used: two RP, two EE and two SgE. Seventeen SgE speakers (15 female and two male), all undergraduates

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on a phonetics course at the National Institute of Education Singapore, listened to the recordings, which were 1 min 30 sec long (± 10 sec). The listeners did not know the SgE speakers.

Listeners then rated the recordings on various characteristics. These characteristics were scales reflecting the three broad categories of *competence*, *personal integrity* and *social attractiveness* (Edwards 1982). Listeners were required to give their ratings by marking a ten-centimeter line for each trait (e.g., *refined* vs *not refined*), which was then measured in tenths of a centimeter, thus producing a 100-point scale. Scales were randomized so that the positive quality was sometimes at the left and sometimes at the right, although measurements were always taken from the negative end. Thus, the higher the measurement, the more positive the rating.

Previous work on the attitudes of SgE speakers to accents has concentrated on SgE, RP and American English, and occasionally Australian English, Scottish English and Hong Kong English (Loh 1982, Koh 1983, Ooi 1986, Seah 1987, Lim 1988, Chen 1990, Ong 1990, Godhia 1991). It is difficult to compare these studies with the present one because of differences in methodology and accents used. However, they were nonetheless helpful in deciding on the traits to be used. Also, a pilot study showed that the three traits *capable*, *successful* and *influential* were not distinct, i.e., respondents gave the same responses to all three, and therefore only one trait, *capable*, was used in the final experiment.

Results

The average ratings for the six speakers across the 17 respondents are give in Table 1. Full details of methodology and statistical analysis are given in Chia (2001).

An ANOVA between accents was carried out, which showed that there was a significant difference (at $p < 0.05$) between all three accents on 11 of the traits, between RP and EE on 11, between RP and SgE on 10, and between EE and SgE on only four. An ANOVA was also carried out between speakers of the same accent. RP and EE speakers had significant differences in only three categories, while SgE speakers had no significant differences.

A factor analysis was performed to determine if these represented 12 different traits, or whether responses to several traits were so similar that they could be grouped into a smaller number of factors. The results show that two independent factors can be identified:

Factor 1: *Sincere*, *Interesting*, *Friendly*.

Factor 2: *Refined*, *Intelligible*, *Standard*, *I am impressed by the way he speaks*, *I would like to speak like him*, *This accent is appropriate for Singapore schools*, *Educated*, *Capable*, *Confident*.

The three traits in Factor 1 show strong correlations between them (between 0.967 and 1.000). These traits have been used by studies (Chen 1990, Lim 1988) to depict *solidarity* and *social attractiveness*. They show a negative correlation with the remaining traits that can be classed under Factor 2.

In Factor 2, for the traits *educated*, *capable* and *confident*, EE and SE were rated significantly less positively than RP. These results are consistent with another similar study (Chen 1990), where RP ranked higher on competence scales which included these traits. The favourable ratings of RP in these traits support the claim that RP is 'associated with power, education and wealth' (Andersson & Trudgill 1990:9).

A surprising finding was that RP was rated significantly more intelligible than SgE, despite SgE being the native accent of the respondents. These results agree with those of Ooi (1986). EE was rated significantly less intelligible than SgE.

RP was rated significantly more refined and more standard than SgE and EE. This shows that RP still holds considerable prestige for Singaporeans as a standard accent. It also shows that SgE speakers can distinguish RP from EE, and appreciate that EE is less standard than RP.

RP was rated highly for the remaining three traits: *This accent is appropriate for Singapore schools*, *I would like to speak like him* and *I am impressed by the way he speaks*. For the purposes of the present article, it is to be noted that both EE voices averaged lower than 50 for the first two, showing that EE cannot be considered a pronunciation model for educational purposes in Singapore.

In relation to the trait *I would like to speak like him*, both speakers of RP and EE were rated with a maximum of only 68 (as compared to 85 for *I am impressed by the way he speaks*). SgE is also rated slightly more favourably in this scale than for *I am impressed by the way he speaks*, suggesting that there is some degree of reluc-

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Table 1 Average rating (on a 100-point scale, across 17 respondents) towards the various accents

Trait	Average RP1	RP2	EE1	EE2	SE1	SE2
Sincere	59	74	72	70	70	75
Interesting	37	57	76	66	69	69
Friendly	36	54	74	66	76	77
Refined	85	88	43	71	59	62
Intelligible	91	92	58	58	74	74
Standard	93	91	53	67	53	63
I am impressed by the way he speaks	85	79	50	64	50	52
I would like to speak like him	53	68	35	46	58	51
This accent is appropriate for Singapore schools	70	72	39	49	53	65
Educated	92	91	66	79	74	74
Capable	85	88	73	78	70	71
Confident	87	82	77	72	71	66

(RP1 = first RP speaker, etc)

tance in acquiring RP as well as demonstrating some loyalty to SgE. The correlation between these two scales is only 0.562, indicating that a high degree of being impressed does not equate to a high degree of wanting to speak the accent.

The relatively low ratings of the respondents wanting to speak RP and SgE bring to mind the question of who Singaporeans do want to speak like. Chen's (1990) study noted that Singaporeans preferred to speak Broad Australian which was ranked top, followed by RP and General American (GA). This suggests that Singaporeans would like to speak Australian or GA (not included in the present study) as much as RP.

Conclusion

Many writers have noted that some features of EE are spreading rapidly in the UK from its base in the southeast. The results of the present study suggest that EE does not have any great appeal for Singaporeans, who have little intention of adopting the accent and do not feel it is appropriate for educational purposes in Singapore. RP is still considered to convey power and education, and to be the accent to be used as a model for pronunciation teaching. To respond to the title of Rosewarne's 1994a article, it therefore seems unlikely that EE will become tomorrow's RP, at least for educational purposes outside the UK. ■

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What's in a job title?

I took a job the other day, and though the pay was bad
It had the grandest sounding name of any job I've had
'Beverage Director' – that was how I'd be addressed
And when I told my girlfriend – well, she wasn't half impressed

But soon I found, to my chagrin, I wasn't quite the boss
And such a revelation rather took away the gloss
Above me was the Senior Vice-President (Canteen)
And then the Chief Executive and others never seen

I asked how many minions were at my beck and call
They looked at me in some surprise and said "Why, none at all"
And when I asked what wondrous feats would be required of me
They pointed to the kitchenette and said "You make the tea"

— Roger Berry,
Lingnan University, Hong Kong

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