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'Sheep' and 'Ship': An investigation into English vowel merger in multilingual Singapore

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Abstract

English is often discussed with models that have a 'Centre/Standard' variety e.g., in US, and UK where English is spoken as a first language, and varieties of spoken elsewhere are regarded as 'Outer' or 'Non-standard'. 'Standard' varieties are often regarded as prestigious and worthy of documentation, and to be taught in schools. This is problematic when the speech sounds in the local varieties of English differ from 'Standard' varieties. In Singapore, English is the working language among the multilingual population. Despite its importance, speech sounds in Singapore English are not well documented and not used in teaching. 60 Singaporean speakers of English completed a same/different judgement task of 206 words to investigate possible vowel mergers e.g., are 'sheep/ship' pronounced the 'same'? They also read aloud the same words. We analyzed the acoustics (F1, F2) of their articulations and analyzed whether participants' same/different judgements predicted the way they pronounced the words.