Global and local identity in the maintenance of vowel contrasts in Indian English

This paper reports on the second stage of a project which aims to describe and understand variation in the English of elite English medium educated speakers from India. The first stage was to compare the TRAP-BATH contrast in these speakers, with speakers of SSBE, under experimental conditions. In reading tasks and in elicited tasks it emerged that the IndE speakers maintained the distinction to some extent in F2, but that there was limited contrast in F1 and no contrast in duration. Consequently the means for some BATH lexemes were in the TRAP space, particularly low frequency lexemes. Nevertheless the lexical sets were surprisingly robust, given suggestions that some indigenized Asian Englishes were leaning towards the AmE norm of merging TRAP and BATH (Tan 2016, Hansen Edwards 2016, Deterding Wong and Kirkpatrick 2008). Our in-depth production study of the variable is consistent with Starr (2019)’s perception study in which Singaporeans report themselves as maintaining the distinction.

However, we found considerable variation in the degree of contrast among the IndE group, with contrast increasing if speakers were female, used English in the home, and consumed both UK and US media frequently (the latter is similar again to Starr 2019). This steered us away from simple British-American exonormative orientation (Meyerhoff and Niedzielski 2003). In the present paper we explore the vowel contrast in peer to peer conversations, finding that the earlier effects are retained in the informal register. We use ideological positionings in the discourse to further understand variation among speakers. Greater contrast is associated with a tier 1 city identity (vs. tier 2 city or more rural identity), a pan-regional or mobile Indian identity, and global rather than local experiences and outlook (cf. Alsagoff on Singapore 2010).

References