

FORUM

IDEOLOGY AND INTELLIGIBILITY

Intelligibility studies: a consideration of empirical and ideological issues

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ABSTRACT: This paper critically examines key issues underpinning past research on the intelligibility of L2 speech. While acknowledging the substantial contribution made by intelligibility studies to our understanding of L2 speech and how it is received and perceived, a close reading of the research in this area gives rise to grave misgivings. In particular, there has been a tendency to treat intelligibility with no serious consideration of the context of interaction and the real participants involved. Furthermore, this field of investigation appears to be largely grounded in unequal native/non-native hierarchies, manifested in misconceptions and myths about native and non-native speakers and their speech. With an emphasis on issues of pronunciation, and a focus on the varieties and speakers of the Outer Circle, this paper questions and challenges some of the dominant trends in this field, and concludes by suggesting new ways of defining and investigating intelligibility.

INTRODUCTION

The spread of English in the world today has meant that changes to the language are inevitable. This is the basic premise in Widdowson's (1997: 140) portrayal of English as a virtual language that is "variously actualized" as it spreads, resulting in "adaptation and nonconformity". Adaptation suggests appropriation and pluralism, whilst nonconformity implies discarding compliance with once-undisputed Inner Circle norms. Hence, research has documented the ways in which English is adapted and actualized in multilingual contexts through nativization and internationalization. While there appears to be some acceptance of the legitimacy of the Outer Circle varieties, more recently there have been calls for recognition to be also accorded to the Englishes of the Expanding Circle, insofar as they contribute towards and constitute a type of international variety of English (EIL) (Seidlhofer and Jenkins, 2003; Prodromou, 2003).

The spread of English, which has resulted in new users and owners of the language, has putatively removed L1 speakers as the sole custodians of the language with the right to dictate standards and prescribe norms. This is especially pertinent when it comes to pronunciation, where there has been evidence of increasing divergences, even among native varieties (Trudgill, 1998). These widening gaps in phonology are only compounded when non-native varieties are taken into account, and may be attributed to a number of factors like the general idea that standard English can be spoken in any accent (Trudgill, 1999), the predominance of cross-linguistic influence in matters of phonology (Odlin, 1989), and the inextricable link between identity and accent (Pennington and Richards, 1986). However,

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as pronunciation differences continue to develop in defiance of L1 pronunciation norms, concerns have been voiced about intelligibility: how do we ensure that speakers of various Englishes remain intelligible to one another?

Few would deny the need for people to understand each other's Englishes, if English is to continue as a global language. Hence, researchers have affirmed the centrality of intelligibility as a key component in communication, and pronunciation experts have stressed improved intelligibility as the most important goal of pronunciation teaching (Celcia-Murcia et al., 1996; Jenkins, 2000; Seidlhofer, 2001b). While pronunciation is admittedly only one of several factors contributing towards intelligible speech, intelligibility and "error gravity" studies attempting to isolate the role of particular linguistic features relative to others in the determination of intelligibility have consistently pointed to the importance of the pronunciation component (Fayer and Krasinski, 1987; Suenobu et al., 1992; Derwing and Rossiter, 2003). Even non-experimental studies like Hinofotis and Bailey's (1980) investigations of the speech of international teaching assistants at UCLA, and Jenkins's (2000) study of interlanguage talk in a classroom of international students, have pointed to pronunciation as the single most problematic communication area.

Clearly, pronunciation is a vital element in effective communication, and this has been endorsed not only by researchers but also by respondents like students, teachers and immigrants (Rajadurai, 2001; Breitzkreutz et al., 2001; Derwing, 2003). The evidence points to a threshold level where pronunciation is concerned, and speakers who fall below this level will have communication problems no matter how well they control other aspects of the language like grammar and vocabulary (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996; Lam and Halliday, 2002).

Given these findings, a detailed review of a range of intelligibility studies was undertaken. Adopting a sociolinguistic approach, with an emphasis on phonology, this paper examines key aspects of studies that form the basis on which claims of intelligible and unintelligible speech are predicated, evaluating them particularly in relation to the realities of the Outer Circle.

INTELLIGIBILITY: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

A survey of the field reveals that researchers have employed various definitions of intelligibility, accompanied by a whole array of methods devised to measure it. In very general terms, intelligibility may be defined as the extent to which a speaker's message is understood by a listener (Munro and Derwing, 1995a, b). However, this simple definition veils the intricacies and complexities of intelligible speech and successful interaction.

Intelligibility has commonly been investigated in conjunction with two other variables: comprehensibility – listeners' *perceptions* of a speaker's intelligibility – and accentedness – the degree of foreign accent. Most of these studies have focused on aspects of phonology, with analyses aimed at determining the relative contribution of various segmental and suprasegmental features to intelligibility, comprehensibility and accentedness. Although consensus has been hard to achieve, based on "native speaker" judgements of "non-native"¹ speech, a series of investigations by Munro and Derwing (Munro and Derwing, 1995a,b; Derwing and Munro, 1997) have suggested a hierarchy of importance: intelligibility, comprehensibility, with accentedness the least important consideration.

Research has also studied the effects of variables such as familiarity, rate of speaking, and shared L1s on ratings assigned to intelligibility. Some studies have attempted to identify

the “cost” of having a foreign accent in terms of processing time, the degree of irritation expressed by listeners, listeners’ subjective evaluation of the personality of the speakers, and their suitability as norm-providing models, as well as their acceptability and employability in the workplace.

Reviewing the research in this area, Smith and Nelson (1985) declare that intelligibility studies are marked by confusion, and suggest that in order to clarify the situation, understanding of three terms is necessary. The first is intelligibility, which they define in terms of word and utterance recognition; the second, comprehensibility, refers to word and utterance meaning, or the propositional content of messages; and the third, interpretability, refers to perception of the speaker’s intentions. Smith (1992) goes on to state that these three categories should be viewed in terms of degrees of understanding on a continuum, with intelligibility being the lowest and interpretability the highest. Jenkins (2000) accepts Smith and Nelson’s definition and categorization in general, but she rejects the suggestion that intelligibility is not as important as comprehensibility and interpretability. As far as interaction among learners of English is concerned, she regards intelligibility as a prerequisite (though not a guarantee) of successful communication at the locutionary and illocutionary levels. Hence disagreements still remain on the exact definition and purview of the term “intelligibility”.

The lack of consistency in intelligibility studies and their findings may be attributed to differences in definitions, methodologies, and samples used as well as variables investigated. Nevertheless, that intelligibility is a crucial concept in communication – perhaps especially critical in cross-cultural interaction – is not disputed. What is open to question, though, is the manner in which intelligibility is routinely investigated in most (though not all) studies. It is clear that many of the studies share a number of shortcomings, both methodological and conceptual, and the following discussion offers a selective critique of the research on intelligibility of L2² speech. In particular, two areas are dealt with here: first, fundamental methodological limitations and second, a clear ideological bias which colours and governs much of the research in this field.

QUESTIONING METHODOLOGICAL PRACTICES

Issues of validity and reliability are, of course, central in any research design, and a review of a range of studies on intelligibility points to severe constraints in terms of the assumptions adopted, the adequacy of procedures and, consequently, the strength and generalizability of the findings. These may be illustrated by focusing on the techniques used to elicit speech samples, the influence of the setting, and the role of participants.

Elicitation techniques

In intelligibility studies, one area that raises concern is the manner in which speech is elicited from speakers for subsequent evaluation. While nearly all studies on intelligibility use some form of recording, the recordings tend to differ in length, complexity, rate of speech, and degree of authenticity, spontaneity, and contextualization. Speech samples in many studies consist of read data, ranging from monosyllables through sentences to passages and broadcast material. Some researchers discard reading altogether, choosing instead to record subjects performing rehearsed monologues, self-introductions, speaking freely on any topic or narrating stories extemporaneously. However, the problem with

such practices is their reliance on artificial, unnatural data to provide the sole source of evidence on which claims of intelligibility are based, which are then often generalized to entire speech groups and communities. Even in studies that attempt to elicit “natural” speech as the stimulus material, the laboratory-like conditions under which the experiments are conducted negate such attempts. These techniques produce artificial and inauthentic data, and consequently place severe limitations on the findings of the research.

The experimental setting

Another characteristic of many intelligibility studies is that they tend to be conducted without an adequate consideration or acknowledgement of the influence of the context of interaction. Often, they present bits of decontextualized language in artificial settings for listeners who are unspecified. Alternatively, in some cases, attempts are made to contextualize the rendering by specifying an imaginary audience. With a few notable exceptions, the vast majority of studies seem to ignore the fact that speech is context-specific and highly dependent on the topic, participants, and situation. Kachru (1986: 106) asserts that “the whole concept of intelligibility is open to question if we do not include the appropriate parameters of the context of situation as relevant to intelligibility at various levels”. The fact is that people speak differently in different situations (intra-speaker variation), and people react to speech differently in different settings. Given that attitudes are a social phenomenon, it seems strange that so many studies have sought to obtain evaluations of speech in a situational vacuum (Giles, 1992).

The role of the participants

Intelligibility presupposes participants. In fact, it may well have as much to do with the listener as with the speaker. In everyday communication, interlocutors rely heavily on shared background knowledge to engage in meaningful interaction. However, the emphasis on the role of top-down processing of contextual information (as opposed to bottom-up processing in the reception and production of linguistic form) seems to be downplayed when it comes to conversations involving L2 speakers. Many researchers in this area are still preoccupied with ideas of intelligibility grounded in notions of accuracy of the linguistic form, and the literature abounds with isolated examples of “errors”, “variances”, and “deviances” in non-native speech form. There is thus a need to refocus, and to shift some of the responsibility for effective communication to the listener and his or her ability to use top-down processing to interpret utterances. Reviewing past studies on attitudes towards accents, Lindemann (2002) argues that often claims that non-native speech is unintelligible rest on the mistaken assumption that it is solely the speaker’s responsibility to ensure that communication is successfully achieved. This kind of asymmetry, Jenkins (2000: 69) declares, is no longer tenable, as it “fails to acknowledge any active role for the receiver”.

It is also fairly obvious that intelligibility is strongly influenced by the listener’s biases and preconceived ideas about speakers and accents. Any bias or judgemental attitude on the part of the listener could act as a formidable barrier to intelligibility. This has been borne out in investigations into African American Vernacular English (Eisenstein and Verdi, 1985), research into workplace interaction in the US (Lippi-Green, 1997), studies on the English of non-native teaching assistants (Rubin, 1992), and others, showing the prevalence of bias, prejudice, and xenophobia preventing people from understanding

non-native speech. Indeed, “intelligibility may be as much in the mind of the listener as in the mouth of the speaker” (Morley, 1991: 499).

Past attempts to define and measure intelligibility have not only failed to attach sufficient importance to the role of the listener, but have also neglected the role of the speaker to accommodate receptively and productively to interlocutors. Most speakers in intelligibility studies have no inkling who their listeners are/will be, and so have no opportunity to adjust their speech accordingly. Even among native British speakers, Carter and McCarthy (2004) observe how speakers constantly work hard to adjust their speech and orientate towards the listener. The need for such accommodation is only heightened in intercultural encounters where speakers do not share the same L1 or cultural schema.

In short, as Smith and Nelson (1985: 333) aptly declared nearly two decades ago, “intelligibility is not speaker- or listener-centred, but is interactional between speaker and listener”. The fact is that conversation is always collaboratively achieved: both speaker and listener must work towards the construction, transmission, and interpretation of meaning, and thus share the onus for effective communication. Bamgboṣe (1998: 11) acknowledges this too: “in a communicative act which involves a speaker and an addressee, both participants contribute to the speech act and its interpretation, and part of this contribution is making an allowance for the accent and peculiarities of the other person’s speech.”

INTERROGATING THE NATIVE/NON-NATIVE PARADIGM

Aside from methodological limitations, another factor responsible for much of the uneasiness and dissatisfaction that emerge from a review of L2 intelligibility studies is their uncritical adherence to a paradigm that exalts the native speaker and affirms his superiority. In a scathing article, Kachru (1997) talks about “the agencies of control” which intentionally use “the power of mythology” as a foundation for models and paradigms. This “albatross of mythology” is now critically evaluated via a discussion of some of the common misconceptions and myths that have underpinned research on issues of intelligibility. The underlying emphasis is on evaluating this all-pervasive paradigm in relation to non-native varieties in countries of the Outer Circle.

Some misconceptions about non-native varieties

Misconception 1: Only non-native speech is accented. The general definition of “accent” as “aspects of pronunciation” means that everyone speaks a language with a particular accent. To label only non-native speakers of English as having an accent is thus misleading and disparaging. The problem is that anyone who does not speak with a native accent (whatever that might be) is stigmatized as speaking with a “foreign accent”.

However, it is interesting to note that the tables are turned in some countries of the Outer Circle. Research has shown that in these countries, it is locals speaking English with a native-like accent who are mocked as sounding foreign and affected, and derided for putting on a false accent. In contrast, it is the local accent which is seen as “accentless”. This makes one question studies that required non-native speakers to rate the speech of fellow non-native speakers on scales ranging from “no foreign accent” to “very strong foreign accent”. It is certainly rather odd and unreasonable to expect non-native speakers, and particularly speakers of nativized varieties, to label their own speech forms as exhibiting a

“foreign accent” when the daily reality suggests that it is the non-local accent that is foreign to them.

Misconception 2: Non-native speech lacks intelligibility. That the L2 speaker usually speaks English with a non-native or local accent is generally accepted, but does this necessarily make him or her less intelligible? A series of largely undisputed studies by Munro and Derwing (1995a,b; Derwing and Munro, 1997) consistently found that intelligibility scores (how well a speech sample is actually understood) were higher than comprehensibility scores (a listener’s subjective perception of the comprehensibility of a speech sample), which in turn were higher than accentedness scores (the degree of foreign accent). The researchers concluded that non-native speech may be highly intelligible even if the speaker has a strong foreign accent. This does not imply that L2 speech is always perfectly intelligible; but equating accentedness with lack of intelligibility is a false comparison, and unfortunately this is the basis of many speech evaluation instruments, including standard tests of spoken English.

The lower intelligibility ratings assigned to L2 speech in some studies may sometimes be accounted for by other non-linguistic variables. First, they could be due to prejudice on the part of the listener. The numerous studies on intelligibility that conclude by conceding that listeners’ attitudes may be a confounding factor in the ratings only go to show that this possibility cannot be discounted. For instance, researchers have reported on the tendency for L1 speakers to assign labels like “foreign”, “non-native”, “non-standard”, “accented” and “lower status” to speech samples heard, causing them to evaluate the speech negatively for intelligibility. This suggests that pronouncements of poor intelligibility may be the result rather than the cause of negative social-psychological attitudes. In short, speech ratings are probably more indicative of subjective attitudes and prejudices than they are objective measures of intelligibility and comprehensibility.

A second reason for poorly rated L2 speech can be attributed to flawed or potentially biased research designs. This may be illustrated by looking at the often-cited study by Anderson-Hsieh et al. (1992). The stimulus tape in this study consisted of 60 L2 speech samples with an L1 speaker sample dubbed in between each. The native speaker samples were not evaluated, and served as “a native speaker reference” (p. 537). While the authors claim that the purpose of this was “to reduce the influence that one non-native speech might have on the next one being rated” (pp. 537–8), it is obvious that this would cause the listeners to evaluate the L2 speech samples not for their inherent intelligibility, but in terms of how different they were from the L1 speech. After all, other studies on intelligibility have reported that ratings of intelligibility tend to be made relative to the previous speaker. Besides the stimulus tape, the scale used by the researchers in the SPEAK test also hints of a bias, as the lowest point on the scale represented “heavily accented speech that is unintelligible”, whilst the highest point represented “near-native speech” (p. 538). This instrument erroneously links accentedness with unintelligible speech, resulting in a measurement of “deviance from native norms” being equated with a lack of intelligibility. By the same token, L1 speech is deemed to be always perfectly intelligible. As in many other studies, unrelated dimensions are combined, and used to make unfounded claims about the lack of intelligibility of L2 speech.

Misconception 3: The non-native speaker is responsible for communication problems. When communication breakdowns occur, it is almost axiomatic to point to the L2 speaker as the cause of the problem. While it is true that a lack of proficiency generally hampers

communication, often at least two other factors are responsible for this unjust apportioning of the blame. First, L2 speech is assumed to be defective, and therefore hard to understand. Non-native varieties have been variously described in studies on intelligibility in terms of “errors”, “deviance”, “distortions” and “strange pronunciation”. For instance, Anderson-Hsieh et al. (1992: 539–41) analyse “pronunciation deviance” in terms of “error rates”, whilst Lanham (1990: 251–6) examines South African Black English (SABE) in terms of “the consequences of error” and concludes by recommending further research into SABE’s “contribution to unintelligibility”. Clearly, prevailing views in SLA continue to equate non-native speech with a linguistic deficit.

The second factor derives from a subtle underlying hierarchy that assigns a higher rank to a L1 interlocutor and a subordinate one to the L2 speaker. To illustrate, intelligibility has been defined as being “hearer-based; it is a judgement made by the listener. Intelligibility is one aspect of the total communicative effect of a non-native message” (Fayer and Krasinski, 1987: 313). The implicit assumption here is that the “native speaker” is the listener-judge, and that it is only in L2 speech that intelligibility and communicative effect are suspect.

Aside from prejudging L2 speech as being error-ridden, many other studies implicitly describe L2 speech as annoying and burdensome to the native speaker, thus assuming that it is only the L1 speaker who has to work at understanding the L2 speaker. What is absent in this view is any consideration of the difficulty faced by the L2 speaker in understanding the L1 speaker – a difficulty compounded by the non-standard accents of many L1 speakers, and the lack of linguistic competence on the part of some L2 speakers. Although some studies have described L1 speakers’ use of foreigner talk, there is also research indicating that monolingual L1 speakers are rarely aware of the skills necessary for intercultural communication, resulting in a one-way communicative burden imposed on the L2 speaker (Kubota, 2001). Moreover, negative attitudes towards L2 speakers may cause L1 speakers to reject their share of the communicative burden altogether and claim that even clear, proficient L2 speakers are unintelligible. Derwing (2003), for example, showed how native speakers tend to “shut down” and “close up” when L2 learners start talking. Lindemann’s (2002) study revealed how negative attitudes of some American speakers towards their Korean interlocutors caused them to treat the latter as incompetent, and employ avoidance strategies that eventually led to unsuccessful communication. Her research appears to suggest that underlying such communication breakdowns is the problem of social inequality: “ideologies that locate the non-native speakers as a subordinate group” (p. 439).

Some myths about native varieties

Myth 1: The native variety should constitute the norm. A review of the research in the area of intelligibility of non-native varieties reveals that such studies have been carried out within a paradigm that evaluates non-native Englishes using the L1 model as the prescriptive frame of reference. In particular, phonological descriptions of nativized varieties tend to consist of ways in which they deviate or fall short of Inner Circle, mother tongue norms and, by implication, of intelligibility requirements. Thus, Bamgboṣe (1998: 9) remonstrates against studies which assign RP a status akin to Daniel Jones’s cardinal vowels “against which the quality of other accents is to be measured”, and cautions against such “deficit” approaches.

I would argue that rigidly upholding L1/monolingual norms is unreasonable, inappropriate, and unrealistic, and that this is especially true in countries where English is widely used intranationally. First, even if the native model were deemed appropriate, it is seldom available in non-native contexts. The majority of L2 speakers of English have never been taught by an Inner Circle speaker, and the very small minority who have were not necessarily taught by speakers of a dialect received as standard. Perhaps more damaging is the fact that imposing L1 norms circumscribes teacher autonomy and robs multilingual teachers of any sense of confidence, forcing them to perform on an unequal playing field. It is thus unrealistic and unreasonable to expect pronunciation norms to remain tied to a native speaker model.

Secondly, not only is it unrealistic to impose Inner Circle norms, it is also often undesirable. As one's accent is intertwined with one's social and individual identity, the desire to maintain and safeguard the local identity precludes adopting RP, GA (General American), or any other Inner Circle model as the norm. As mentioned before, researchers in the Outer Circle have documented how speaking English with Inner Circle patterns is likely to be met with suspicion, derision, and even disgust at the inferred lack of national pride and identity. People simply cannot be expected to conform to the norms of a group to which they do not belong.

Finally, acceding to native norms is unrealistic because it fails to reflect the lingua franca status of English. English is widely used intranationally in many countries, resulting in it being reshaped to express local cultures and identities. This also means that today, no single exonormative model of English can adequately fulfil the many functions served by English in many of these communities. Internationally, the lingua franca use of English has meant that diversity is to be expected, and it is unfair and naive to expect all speakers of English to adhere to a monolithic model. As an international language belonging to its users, McKay (2003: 18–19) argues, “there is no reason why some speakers of English should be more privileged and thus provide standards for other users of English”.

Myth 2: The native speaker is always the best judge of what is intelligible. The vast majority of studies have used L1, often monolingual, speakers to evaluate L2 speech, in total disregard of the fact that most interactions in English today take place in the absence of Inner Circle speakers. With English used both intranationally as a nativized variety and globally as a lingua franca, there is little reason to assume that the intelligibility of any speech in English can only be determined by Inner Circle speakers. Kachru (1986: 94) pertinently asks, “What role does a native speaker's judgement play in determining the intelligibility of non-native speech acts that have intranational functions in, for example, Asia or Africa?” Bamgboṣe (1998: 10) voices his criticism of research on international intelligibility that viewed intelligibility as “a one-way process in which non-native speakers are striving to make themselves understood by native speakers whose prerogative it was to decide what is intelligible and what is not”. This state of affairs, where Inner Circle speakers are the final arbiters of the acceptability of a speech sample, or of the extent of deviation that will be tolerated, has been described as “the native speaker fallacy” (Phillipson, 1992: 194), and as a kind of “covertly articulated racial prejudice” (Milroy, 1999: 178). Hence, Widdowson (1994: 85) declares that native speakers have “no say in the matter, no right to intervene or pass judgement. They are irrelevant.”

Myth 3: The native speaker is always the best representative of what is intelligible. A little-known fact is that some research has shown that the Inner Circle speaker is not always

the most intelligible speaker. In the first place, not all such speakers speak RP, GA, or other non-regional forms of English, as they (like all speakers) are influenced by geographical factors, occupation, social status etc. Trudgill (1999) records that only about 9–12 per cent of the population in Britain speak standard English, and even then with some form of regional accent, whilst Crystal (2003) notes that RP in its pure form is spoken by less than 3 per cent of the British population.

Besides this, empirical research has raised doubts about the intelligibility of Inner Circle speech worldwide. Smith and Rafiqzad's (1979) extensive study involving Inner, Outer and Expanding Circle speakers from 9 countries and listeners from 11 countries revealed that the Inner Circle speaker was always found to be among the least intelligible, showing that L1 phonology is not always inherently most intelligible. On the contrary, some studies have shown that for L2 listeners, the intelligibility of L2 speakers can surpass the intelligibility of native speakers (Bent and Bradlow, 2001). This of course does not imply that L2 speech is generally more easily received and understood. Nevertheless, the traditional belief in the universal superiority and infallibility of Inner Circle speakers that has led to authoritative promotion of their speech patterns and models of interaction must surely be challenged in today's world, where much successful communication in English regularly takes place among its non-native speakers.

RETHINKING INTELLIGIBILITY

Having critically evaluated aspects of research into the intelligibility of L2 speech, a few points seem evident. First, any investigation of intelligibility should be firmly embedded in the sociocultural and interactional context. Intelligibility, I would argue, is a dynamic notion – a negotiated process, rather than a purely fixed product. Second, it would appear that intelligibility is affected by listener factors like familiarity and attitudinal variables. There is substantial evidence that familiarity with a particular speaker and with varieties of English has a facilitating effect on intelligibility, as does a positive, supportive attitude, whereas a negative attitude works as a barrier and impedes intelligibility. Third, interacting with different people, and particularly with people of different language and cultural backgrounds, requires mutual responsibility and active accommodation. Fourth, given the poorly defined construct of the “native speaker” (Rampton, 1990; Davies, 1991; McKay, 2002), the validity of employing native speaker norms as the basis for research into L2 uses of English must be questioned. I would argue that adhering to traditional native/non-native paradigms in intelligibility studies is more an artefact of the research methodologies used than a reflection of an informed and erudite code of best practice. Besides, with empirical research disputing the inherent intelligibility of Inner Circle speech, there is little reason to teach English adhering rigidly to an Inner Circle model, on the false assumption that it would be the panacea for all problems of intelligibility. Finally, the reality of English as a local and global lingua franca must be accepted, for without such a recognition, “virtually all SLA research is reduced to operating within a native-speaker model, which constructs non-native speakers as defective communicators” (Seidlhofer, 2001a: 204).

CONCLUSION

This paper has highlighted certain inadequacies in the conceptual and empirical treatment of intelligibility in much past research, and offers in its place a reconceptualized,

context-sensitive view. Among the major principles that should inform a comprehensive theory of intelligibility are a recognition of the dynamics of context, the interactive nature of talk, the realities of multilingualism and the legitimacy of varieties of English. Such a position, however, does not suggest that “anything goes”. Instead, the discussion has served to advance the idea that the phonology of intelligible speech cannot be fixed to a narrow set of rigid features based on a monomodel or associated with a particular variety, but should be more pluricentric to include areas of tolerances constituting intelligible pronunciation (see Jenkins, 2000, on the phonology of EIL). This points to the importance of an adequate repertoire, accompanied by adaptive communication skills that would enable speakers to tailor their speech and pronunciation patterns for specific audiences and circumstances.

If this is the case, research into issues of intelligibility should focus on what competent and effective speakers do to maintain and enhance intelligibility in their daily interactions in a range of situations with a variety of interlocutors, rather than focus on the features of an idealized native speaker variety. Although such an approach, involving authentic contexts and naturalistic data, may appear to be time-consuming and unwieldy, it would lend the field of intelligibility studies a more qualitative, interpretive dimension, and thus offer a much-needed complementary or alternative methodology. To investigate intelligibility in this way would require adapting a model of research that has been shaped by positivism and firmly entrenched in a paradigm founded on monolingualism, the superiority of the native speaker, and a static view of standard English, of intelligibility, to one that is in keeping with current sociolinguistic realities. To ignore these facts in favour of dubious and flawed traditional methodologies and assumptions is to do grave injustice both to the concept of intelligibility and to the millions of users of English throughout the world.

NOTES

1. The terms “native” and “non-native” are used throughout this paper to reflect their use in the literature and practice of some scholarly communities. They are not intended here as value judgements on speakers.
2. “L2” is used as a shorthand in this paper to indicate language(s) acquired in addition to the mother tongue.

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