

The Intelligibility of English in Global Contexts: Concepts, Methods, Findings and Implications

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Intelligibility is considered key to successful and effective human communication. The intelligibility of the English used by its non-native speakers is the subject of much research enquiry, and as English continues to strengthen its foothold in international settings as *the* global lingua franca, the issue of mutual intelligibility has never been of greater importance. The paper begins by examining “intelligibility” as conceptualized by scholars in the fields of World Englishes (WE) and English as a lingua franca (ELF). While WE scholars approach the subject by investigating the international intelligibility of the new varieties of English, particularly to other non-native speakers of the language, ELF researchers seek to uncover how speakers negotiate and co-construct intelligibility in interaction, and the kinds of accommodation strategies employed in the process. Although the underlying assumptions and the methodologies associated with the 2 fields are not always congruent, the findings contribute towards developing a clearer picture of the subject of intelligibility in global communication. The paper ends by considering the pedagogical implications of the findings of intelligibility studies in WE and ELF.

Key Words: intelligibility, world Englishes, English as a lingua franca, negotiation of intelligibility, interactional practices

I . Introduction

Munro (2011) quite rightly states that “Intelligibility is the single most important aspect of all communication” (p. 13). Verbal communication cannot take place if speakers are unintelligible as their interlocutors will not be able to recognize speech and assign meaning to utterances. The issue of intelligibility is particularly significant in global contexts where speakers of diverse linguacultural backgrounds use different varieties of English, many of which display variation in its linguistic norms and practices, to communicate. As international encounters and global communication continue to increase at an unprecedented pace, the combinations of speakers coming into contact with one another are all the more varied and mixed. Also, as non-native speakers

of English now far outnumber its native speakers (Jenkins, 2015), it is no longer a case of whether the former are intelligible to the latter. Equally, if not more, important is the extent to which non-native speakers of English are intelligible to each other, as well as the extent to which native speakers are intelligible to non-native speakers.

The subject of mutual intelligibility when English is used as the global lingua franca has in recent years become the subject of much research enquiry, particularly amongst researchers working in the fields of World Englishes and English as a Lingua Franca. World Englishes is a research paradigm that “investigates new varieties of English as independent, named, regional varieties ... and it generally focuses on features of pronunciation, lexis, grammar and discourse that make each variety distinct from the others” (Deterding, 2013, p. 6). In seeking to determine the intelligibility of these new Englishes, researchers consider the subject from both the perspectives of native speakers as well as other non-native speakers, given that “native speakers are not [considered] the sole judges of what is intelligible (Smith, 1992, p. 76). Meanwhile researchers in English as a Lingua Franca are keen to uncover *how* English is used by speakers of varied first language backgrounds in actual interaction, and the kinds of practices and processes that are characteristic of such interactions. When intelligibility is the focus of study, researchers seek to determine what speakers do to make themselves more intelligible for communication to be effective and meaningful. Findings from both research paradigms shed light on what makes speech intelligible and how intelligibility may be enhanced in global contexts, which has wider implications particularly for language pedagogy.

Before reviewing research from the aforementioned two fields, specifically in relation to the methods adopted, the findings and the implications, the concept of “intelligibility” is first examined in the section below.

1. The Concept of “Intelligibility”

Intelligibility is a notion that is difficult to pin down. Bamgbose (1998) considers it a “complex matter” (p. 8) while Deterding and Kirkpatrick (2006) refer to it as being “somewhat elusive” (p. 392). This in part is due to the use of the term in both a general as well as a specific sense; while some researchers adopt a narrow use of the term, others prefer a broader one. The matter is further complicated when the term is used interchangeably with other terms such as “comprehensibility” to mean the same thing (Field, 2005).

In the field of World Englishes, the preference among researchers is for the definition provided by Smith and Nelson (1985). “Intelligibility” is used to refer specifically to the recognition of words/utterances and is distinguished from “comprehensibility”, which refers to the meaning of words/utterances, and “interpretability”, which relates to the

intent behind the use of words/utterances. Smith (1992) explains that each concept contributes to understanding as a whole and is in fact part of a continuum ranging from intelligibility, at the lower end, moving through comprehensibility to interpretability, at the higher end. Thus lack of intelligibility will impact the interlocutor's ability to comprehend as well as interpret the speaker's utterances.

The complexity surrounding the notion of intelligibility is apparent when one considers how the term is conceptualized in different, but related, fields. For instance, researchers working in the field of second language pronunciation adopt Munro and Derwing's (1995, see also Derwing and Munro, 2005) definition where intelligibility is "the extent to which a speaker's message is actually understood by a listener" (p. 76). This contrasts with "comprehensibility" which is "a listener's perception of how difficult it is to understand an utterance" (Derwing and Munro, 2005, p. 385). Thus while the terminology used is the same, the scope of the definition differs. Further, researchers associated with the field of World Englishes themselves may adopt a broader conceptualization of 'intelligibility' than the more narrow one proposed by Smith and Nelson (1985). Bamgbose (1998), for instance, defines intelligibility as "a complex of factors comprising recognizing an expression, knowing its meaning, and knowing what that meaning signifies in the sociocultural context" (p. 8).

While some researchers in the field of English as a Lingua Franca, like Jenkins (2000), are inclined to adopt Smith and Nelson's definition, the focus is on the interactive nature of intelligibility, specifically on the "negotiation of intelligibility" (Jenkins, 2000, p. 79). Speakers in interaction employ various accommodation strategies to co-construct intelligibility in an ongoing manner. Intelligibility thus is conceived as being dynamic, interactional and context-bound, residing neither in the speaker nor recipient, but instead dependent on the participants' strategic use of strategies to arrive at mutual understanding (Kaur, 2018). Researchers like Mauranen (2006), Pitzl (2005) and Kaur (2010), who investigate intelligibility in pragmatics, deploy the term "intelligibility" to mean understanding.

How "intelligibility" is conceptualized in World Englishes and English as a Lingua Franca has an impact on the methods adopted in research and the findings obtained, as the next section illustrates.

II. Methods and Findings

1. Research of World Englishes

Much of the research on intelligibility in World Englishes relates to pronunciation as non-native speaker pronunciation can be quite distinct from that of the native speaker

(Bamgbose, 1998). Recognition of words and utterances, i.e. intelligibility, is also contingent on the pronunciation of these words and utterances. Given the interest in the new Englishes, researchers set out to explore the extent to which these varieties are intelligible in relation to one another as well as in relation to the more established native speaker varieties of English. One of the earliest studies to adopt this approach is that by Smith and Rafiqzad (1979).

In order to compare the intelligibility of nine varieties of English, Smith and Rafiqzad (1979), obtained samples of 10-minute readings done by educated speakers of English representative of Hong Kong, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Nepal, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and the United States. These recordings were then played to groups comprising a minimum of 30 educated people from 11 countries, i.e., Bangladesh, Republic of China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Nepal, the Philippines and Thailand (n=1,386 listeners). The listeners completed a cloze procedure test as they listened to the recording, a listening comprehension questionnaire and a personal data sheet. The main findings of the study are that native speaker English, in this case American English, is far from being the most intelligible, and listeners are more alike than they are different in how intelligible they find the different varieties of English.

A later study by Kirkpatrick et al. (2008) examined the intelligibility of one specific variety of English, i.e., educated Hong Kong English, to listeners from two different countries, one where English is the native language, i.e., Australia, and the other where it is a second language, i.e., Singapore. Instead of readings, as in the aforementioned study, the recording used was of six English major students with typical Hong Kong English pronunciation conversing with their native speaker (British) lecturer. Groups of Singaporean (n=37) and Australian (n=35) students completed a worksheet comprising listening comprehension questions as they listened to the recording. Kirkpatrick et al. (2008) observed that both groups of listeners found Hong Kong English to be highly intelligible in spite of the presence of local features in the pronunciation of its speakers.

Matsuura (2007) compared the intelligibility of two varieties of English – American English and Hong Kong English – representing native speaker and non-native speaker English, respectively, to a group of Japanese EFL students. In addition, he explored how individual learner differences, e.g., familiarity with different varieties of English, might predict how intelligible the two varieties were. Recordings were made of readings done by an American female and a Hong Kong female which were then played to a group of 106 Japanese tertiary students with intermediate level proficiency in English. The intelligibility of the two varieties was assessed through a cloze dictation. The dictation scores indicated that the Japanese students were better able to understand the speaker of Hong Kong English than the speaker of American English. Further, in the case of the

former (but not the latter), greater exposure to other varieties of English meant greater ability to understand this non-native variety of English.

The aforementioned studies reflect the kinds of intelligibility studies conducted within the World Englishes paradigm. As shown above, researchers not only examine the intelligibility of non-native speaker varieties of English but they also put to test the intelligibility of native speaker varieties of English. In spite of the presence of localized features, the former is found in most cases to be more intelligible than the latter, a finding that calls into question the need for teachers and learners to adhere to native speaker norms in language teaching-learning contexts. The methods adopted, i.e., use of recorded readings/conversations based on which subjects complete cloze dictation and listening tests, however, fail to take into account how actual communication takes place in global settings. In this regard, researchers in the area of ELF are seeking to investigate the subject of intelligibility in naturally occurring communication in real-world settings.

2. Research of English as a Lingua Franca

The earliest intelligibility study to adopt an ELF perspective is that of Jenkins (2000). The study set out to identify the phonological features that were essential for speech to be intelligible in ELF communication. Further, Jenkins was keen to examine the kinds of accommodation practices that speakers employed in such interactions to increase the intelligibility of their speech when faced with misunderstanding. The data of the study included “recordings of different L1 pairs and groups of students engaged in communications tasks” (p. 132), observations of miscommunication and communication breakdown taking place in various multilingual contexts, and follow-up interviews. The transcriptions of recordings were analysed qualitatively for phonological deviations and convergence. On the basis of “genuine interactional speech data” (p. 131), Jenkins proposed the Lingua Franca Core (LFC) which comprises phonological features found to be crucial for international intelligibility, i.e., most consonant sounds, appropriate consonant cluster simplifications, vowel length distinctions and nuclear stress.

In a more recent study, Matsumoto (2011) examined “sequences of repair of pronunciation” (p. 98) in ELF interaction to determine the kinds of phonological adjustments speakers made to increase the intelligibility of their speech. The data consisted of video recordings of paired interactions between graduate students (n=6) taking place at the dinner table at a dorm at an American university. Semi-structured, informal interviews were also conducted with the individual participants to gather supplementary data. Analyses of repair sequences show how speakers adjusted their pronunciations by switching to what they considered more target-like pronunciation, and repeating unintelligible segments of speech, as they negotiated intelligibility. Like

Jenkins' study, this study provides evidence of how "intelligibility is dynamically negotiable between speaker and listener, rather than statically inherent in a speaker's linguistic forms" (Jenkins, 2000, p. 79).

As mere recognition of the form of words and utterances is insufficient to allow speakers to achieve their goals in actual communication, many ELF researchers do not confine their investigations to pronunciation or "intelligibility" in the narrow sense, as adopted by researchers from World Englishes. The separate components of understanding proposed by Smith and Nelson (1985) are conflated as researchers (Pitzl, 2005; Mauranen, 2006; Kaur, 2010) examine naturally occurring spoken data to uncover the strategies and practices speakers employ to achieve shared understanding in ELF interaction. Speakers of varied linguacultural backgrounds have been found to make strategic use of interactional practices such as repetition, paraphrase, confirmation and clarification requests and comprehension checks to negotiate intelligibility/comprehensibility. The four extracts below from Kaur (2010, 2011, 2012) illustrate how intelligibility is negotiated in interaction through the use of various strategies.

(1) Repetition + Paraphrase (Kaur, 2010)

V: so can someone ...(0.6) hold that **dual citizenship** in: Burma? ...(1.0)
dual? ...(1.4) **double citizenship?** can someone hold it in Burma?

(2) Inserting a qualifying lexical item (Kaur, 2011)

V: so it is a kind of interaction ...(1.4) a kind of **trading** interaction

(3) Replacing a pronoun with its referent (Kaur, 2011)

V: yeah and Japan too these three countries are very good in e-commerce
 and they're making a lot of money from **it** ...(1.4) a lot of money from
e-trade

(4) Repaired repetition (Kaur, 2012)

D: why you: not come tomorrow ah **yester[day**
 S: [yesterday
 D: why you not come **yesterday?**=

In (1), the 1.0 second silence after the initial question suggests to V that his interlocutor may not have understood the meaning of "dual". This causes him to repeat the word. The repetition, however, fails to elicit a response as indicated by the 1.4 second silence. This prompts V to paraphrase "dual" as "double", and to repeat the

question. Lack of uptake by the interlocutor is often interpreted as suggesting some difficulty in understanding and may prompt the speaker to employ various strategies to increase the clarity of his or her utterance. In (2) and (3), the absence of a comment by the interlocutor following a remark made by the speaker, V, causes him to add a qualifying lexical item, i.e., “trading”, and to replace a pronoun with its referent, i.e., “e-trade”, in a repeat of the preceding segment of talk, respectively. Both practices contribute towards making meaning explicit and appear designed to enhance the recipient’s understanding. In (4), a slip of the tongue and overlapping talk seem to be the trigger for D to repeat his question. Again, the speaker, who anticipates an understanding problem, adopts a pre-emptive strategy to facilitate recipient understanding.

By examining actual interaction between speakers, researchers are able to access the kinds of practices and strategies speakers employ to increase the intelligibility of their speech. In addition, analyses of such interactions reveal the recipient’s role in the negotiation of intelligibility. Thus, words that are seemingly unintelligible in isolation may have their intelligibility increased through negotiation as speakers modify their speech on the basis of feedback obtained from the interlocutor in an ongoing manner.

III. Implications for English Language Pedagogy

Findings from the kinds of intelligibility studies discussed above have pedagogical implications. In the context of international communication in English, expecting learners to adopt native speaker norms and patterns appears unnecessary in view of the finding that native speaker varieties of English are not always the most intelligible. While native speaker models may be appropriate in cases where learners are likely to find themselves studying, working or residing in English mother tongue-speaking countries, it is just as likely that learners will need English to communicate solely with other non-native speakers of English. In the case of the latter, it would certainly be more beneficial to expose learners to a range of non-native varieties of English. Familiarity with a variety of English has been shown to have a positive impact on one’s understanding (Smith and Bisazza, 1982; Tauroza and Luk, 1997; Derwing and Munro, 1997; Matsuura, 2007).

In addition to the above, learners are also likely to benefit from opportunities to develop their use of a range of strategies to negotiate intelligibility in interaction. As it is impossible to predict the varieties of English learners are likely to encounter in future communication, developing the ability to adjust and modify their speech in response to recipient feedback will stand them in good stead. Matsumoto (2011) proposes that successful interactions in ELF should “be included as legitimate and alternative teaching materials in ELT” (p. 110). As intelligibility is interactional, a point agreed upon by

researchers from both World Englishes and ELF, then it is in and through interaction that intelligible speech must be developed.

Note

(1) This paper consists of a slightly shorter and revised version of ‘Intelligibility in global contexts’, first published in *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary English Pronunciation* (2018), O. Kang, R. I. Thomson & J. M. Murphy (Eds.), (pp. 542-555). London: Routledge.

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