

Globalization and the Changing Perspectives on Intelligibility of English

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Abstract: The global diffusion of English and the resultant birth of its varieties have had various sociolinguistic impacts. The present socio-economic-linguistic situation is such that communities need to communicate as never before. In the matter of communication in English the native speaker had an upper hand as the other variety speakers were expected to understand him. However, the elevated status of the non-native varieties of English and the financial emergence of many onetime third world countries, such as China and India have, if not subverted, balanced the situation. This paper attempts to throw some light on how intelligibility is perceived differently today.

Keywords: intelligibility, native speaker, non-native speaker, globalization, global diffusion, perspective.

Introduction: Prior to the extensive globalization of English, English was viewed as the sole property of native speakers. It was their right and privilege to adapt, to change, to accept or to reject anything related to English. It was their language. They were the sole proprietors, and theirs was the final verdict. They decided the right and wrong of English. In such a scenario, 'intelligibility' meant intelligibility to the native speaker. It was a time of hegemony. The non-native speakers were merely the users of the language with a consumer status. Production and distribution were always on the other side. Non-native speakers depended on norms provided by natives. Notions of democracy and heterogeneity were not much encouraged. The native speaker was the lord to be pleased. On the altar of intelligibility, the non-native speaker had to sacrifice all the non-native features in his speech. It was his job to make himself understood by the native speaker. It was again his fault, if he could not understand the native speaker. The native masqueraded among the applauding crowd of non-natives who were supposed to bear all the brunt of intelligibility.

One-sided Perspective on Intelligibility: Thus, any earlier discussion on intelligibility was with reference to the native speaker because he was considered the sole owner of English. The native was the model, and it was the responsibility of the non-native speaker to emulate him. English had to sound like English both in articulation and in culture. It was the one-time tenable view, which ignored both the non-native speaker's perspective and the role of the listener. As far as the international intelligibility of English is considered, the view, which once prevailed among applied linguists and ELT professionals, was a one-

sided one. According to Bamgbose (1998), it was “a one-way process in which non-native speakers are striving to make themselves understood by the native speakers whose prerogative it was to decide what is intelligible and what is not” (as cited in Jenkins, 2000, p. 69). In the words of Nihalini (2000), “The typical approach in this tradition is to use the native accent selected for comparison as a template, juxtapose it against a non-native accent, and identify the features that do not fit the template” (p. 108). This approach to intelligibility places the native speaker in a highly privileged position as he is exempted from all responsibilities with regard to intelligibility. The non-native becomes the underprivileged. Because he speaks a deviant variety, intelligibility becomes his obligation. Scholars such as Bansal (1969) had this one-sided perceptive on intelligibility. For them, *standard* English meant either British English or American English. The non-native varieties enjoyed no prestige. They were viewed as deficient and unintelligible and hence to be modified as per the requirements of the native speakers. As Bansal (1969) says, “most speakers of L2 are quite satisfied if they can manage to make themselves intelligible to the native speakers” (1969, p. 4). The satisfaction was dependent on the native speaker. The intelligibility of the native speaker to the non-native was not a matter of consideration. Another strong voice that vehemently stood in favour of this one sided perceptive was Quirk (1984). He took a very rigid stand, which would not allow deviation from native speaker standard. He argued that a single standard, based on either British or American English, should be consistently applied in all non-native contexts (as cited in Pickering, p. 1).

Gimson (1978) believed that unrestricted development in pronunciation would lead to mutual unintelligibility (as cited in Bansal, 1969, p.18). He argued for a harnessing of the non-native varieties. However, there is no guarantee that this kind of restriction will assure international intelligibility. This will only be a conniving at the sociolinguistic and cultural realities of the day. English, like the prodigal son, has gone out of the fold to which it may not return. It cannot be a monolith, and it never was. The earlier tests in intelligibility focused on testing intelligibility in speaking a foreign language. That is to say, the tested was always the non-native speaker. According to Lado (1961), language tests contrasted the phonemic sound and units of the foreign language including intonation, stress and rhythm and the sound segments with those of the foreign speaker. He disapproves of vague scoring scales, which measured intelligibility based on approximation to the native speaker. Lado (1961) suggested identifying specific problems by making the speaker read aloud the material prepared for the test. However, his tests also revolved around only the non-native speaker. The psycholinguistic study of Carrol (1963) tested the intelligibility of foreigners speaking in English to native listeners. Harlan Lane (1963) attempted to find out how a foreign accent could distort the speech. Black, Tosi, Taketuta and Jancosek (1965) experimented on the speech

and oral comprehension of foreign students (as cited in Bansal, 1969, pp. 19-20). The subjects in all the above-mentioned experiments were speakers for whom English was either a second language or a foreign language. As Jenkins (2000) observes the earlier intelligibility tests involved interactions between L1 speakers or those between L1 speakers and L2 speakers (p. 73). There were not many studies from the perspective of the L2 listener. Interactions between L2 speakers of English could not find a place in debates on intelligibility. In this regard, Kachru (1986) rightly questions the self- assumed legitimacy of the native speaker in determining the intelligibility of non-native speech acts that have international functions. The issue of intelligibility targeted on the non-native speaker for long. However, the emergence of non-native varieties and the increasing use of English as an international language has brought in a paradigm shift in this one-sided perceptive on intelligibility. As Nelson (1996) reiterates, native speaker is becoming a rare sight in international interactions in English. Moreover, the non-native speaker who, according to him, might have never had the dubious good fortune of even meeting a native speaker is reigning on the stage (as cited in Pickering, p. 1). This asserting presence of the non-native speaker has compelled even the strongest supporters of the native standard to rethink of this one-sidedness in intelligibility.

Two-sided Perspective on Intelligibility: The recent approaches to intelligibility are far from being a one-sided one. The extensive use of English as a foreign or a second language has made indelible marks on the overall socio- linguistic scenario. The non-native speaker has risen in his/her status and is not a factor to be pushed aside. The dependence of the one-time technologically advanced native speaker countries on the non-native countries has made successful communication imperative on both the sides. There can be losses of deals and business in case of a communication failure. This loss affects both sides equally. Thus, recent researches on intelligibility also take into account the intelligibility of the native speaker's speech. It has now become a two-sided approach. As Potter (1996) observes of languages in general, "effective language is always two-way. It is, first of all, an instrument of communication. It consists of an arbitrary system of pattern of speech sounds by means of which man imparts to others, and shares with others, his thoughts, emotions and desires" (p. 10). Therefore, it is hearing and imparting and is always a two-way process. Everyone needs to be aware of world Englishes or non-native varieties considering the sociolinguistic realities. The inner, the outer and the expanding circles share the responsibility equally (Kilickaya, 2000, p. 35). From mere 'intelligibility', the discussion has now moved on to 'mutual intelligibility'. In any act of speech communication, both the speaker and the listener are equally important. It is a process that demands the involvement of both. It is a give and take affair not a one-sided one. As Tiffen (1974) says the listener and the speaker must be "tuned in" to each other if real communication is to take place (as cited in Atechi (n.d) p.46). There has to be

accommodation, acceptance and compromises in real communication. These demands on successful communication are more imperative if the interlocutors speak different varieties of English—both native and non-native. This is because they differ in not only accent but also in their socio-cultural experiences. As Gretchen, an American teacher working in Oman testifies she had difficulty in understanding many of her colleagues, especially some individuals from India and England. Some Indian and British lecturers were relatively easy to understand while she found it difficult to understand those with strong regional accents and intonation. As a native speaker of English, she feels that they should adapt their speech to suit the circumstances in which they find themselves and to enable their message to be easily understood by those to whom they are speaking. According to her, the goal of speech is to convey message. Clear enunciation, medium speed and use of Standard English help those from different countries understand each other. She also speaks of how she could overcome these difficulties over time. She thinks it must be a matter of becoming accustomed to these differences, with exposure to them, which accounts for her better understanding of other varieties (personal communication, July 5, 2011). Gretchen's views are a clear indication of the paradigm shift. It is also another approval of Kachru's observation that the intelligibility of Indian English by native speakers forms a cline (1983. p. 84). Native speakers also have come to realize the need to adapt and accommodate as communication is, necessarily, a two-way process. Shared socio-cultural background and a proper understanding of the context may make up for the many lapses in communication. It facilitates top down processing and enables them to track down lapses in pronunciations. Jenkins (2000) gives the example of how she could properly interpret her daughter's wrong pronunciation of the word 'drama'. What she said sounded like 'drummer' to Jenkins. However, she could easily locate the word 'drama' from her mental lexicon, as she knew that British schools, especially girls' schools, do not have drummer complexes. Moreover, she also knew her daughter's interest in acting (p. 76). What aided successful communication here was, their shared British socio-cultural background and Jenkins' awareness of the context—her daughter's interest in acting. However, this can happen only when the interlocutors speak the same variety and belong to the same socio-cultural background. Others need to negotiate and accommodate.

The Need for Mutual Intelligibility; Negotiation and accommodation had existed before the varieties claimed prestige and identity. For example, the British colonizers spoke to their Indian servants not in their glorified accent. They also avoided obfuscation and the use of bombastic words. Yuel and Burnell (1968) point out that this was one of the oddest characteristics of Butler English. Both the masters and the servants spoke to each other in Butler English (as cited in Hosali, 1997, p. 1). The master had no hesitation in using the broken English of his native servants. He had to get his things done and as always, successful communication was a must for that. It did not matter what

accent he spoke. The present scenario of the spread and diversification of English has intensified this need for mutual acceptance. Intelligibility is neither speaker-centered nor listener-centered. Communication is basically a matter of interaction where native speaker advantages hold no water. There should be mutual intelligibility, lest it should lead to disasters. In this context, Patil (2008) cites the example of the mid-air collision between a Saudi Arabian airliner jet and a Kuzhakstan cargo plane, caused by a pilot's poor understanding of English (p. 32). To avoid such disasters in future, the civil aviation authorities of India have made it mandatory for all expatriate pilots to pass a test in spoken English to ensure that the Indian air traffic controllers can understand them (Times of India, February 10, 2006). What is evident here is that mutual intelligibility is far more important than retaining identity.

The development of hybrid varieties and local norms can be encouraged but in international communication, intelligibility should not be at stake. If English breaks up into mutually unintelligible varieties, it will naturally lose its role and status as an international language. The communicative responsibility is on both the sides. Rigid demarcations between native-speakers and non-native speakers do not exist anymore. As Patil (2008) says, "With the diversification of English, we are talking about training the native speaker to develop sensitivity towards intercultural communication" (p. 33). Kenworthy (1950) also points out that the goal for majority of the learners of English today is comfortable intelligibility (as cited in Maruthikumari, 2007 p.9). The concept of comfortable intelligibility has shifted the focus from native speaker emulation to retaining one's identity without damaging intelligibility. The term was coined by Abercrombie in 1956. His answer to the question, whether learners of English need to acquire native speaker- like accent, was the following:

Intending secret agents and intending teachers have to, of course, but most other language learners do not need more than a comfortably intelligible pronunciation (and by comfortably intelligible, I mean a pronunciation which can be understood with little or no conscious effort on the part of the listener). I believe that pronunciation teaching should have, not a goal which must of necessity be normally an unrealized ideal, but a *limited* purpose which will be completely fulfilled: the attainment of intelligibility. (as cited in Brown, 1989, p. 4)

This kind of intelligibility has now become the goal for most learners in most parts of the world. Blind imitation of native speaker accent is considered unrealistic and inappropriate. However, as is implied in Abercrombie's answer, retaining national identity should not lead to intelligibility failure on international platforms.

Conclusion: To conclude, the deviation from the one-sided perspective on intelligibility is clear. It is a process of give-and-take, and both the interlocutors need to feel comfortable in the process. In the past, the onus of intelligibility was on the shoulders of the non-native speaker. As a

result, it was the responsibility of the non-native speaker to approximate the native speaker English in terms of vocabulary, grammar and accent. However, this one-sided view of intelligibility is gradually being replaced by a reciprocal perspective on intelligibility. Hence, the onus of understanding non-native varieties is equally with the native speaker. In other words, intelligibility is a common pursuit cherished by the native as well as the non-native speaker. As Jenkins (2000) puts it, “speakers need to compensate for the listeners' linguistic and extra- linguistic inadequacies” (p. 77) and listeners, as Bamgbose (1988) suggests, “are as responsible as speakers and part of a listener's contribution to intelligibility is in the making of allowances for an interlocutor's accent” (as cited in Jenkins, 2000; p. 79).

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