

## Article

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# Intelligibility of Different Varieties of English

Brian R. Duff

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### Key Words

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English Intelligibility  
Mutual Intelligibility  
Comprehensibility

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this paper is to examine and understand the causes of confusion and problems of Intelligibility created by different accents and dialects among the wide varieties of native speakers (NS), semi-native speakers (SNS), and non-native speakers (NNS) of English in and from different regions around the world. Different dialects often use different vowel sounds and/or may place emphasis on different syllables compared to other types of spoken English.

Section one of this paper begins by generally defining intelligibility, three varieties of English speakers and why they may experience problems of intelligibility. Section two discusses problems of intelligibility among native and semi-native speakers of English with their different accents. Section three then discusses problems of intelligibility for NNS of English. Problems addressed include misunderstanding the correct pronunciation of vowel sounds, division of syllables, and placement of stress on syllables.

### **1 Nature of the Problem**

This section describes the notion of Intelligibility (hereinafter intelligibility) in terms of understanding other speakers of English, introduces three basic varieties of English speakers, and generally describes some reasons why they may experience problems of intelligibility when speaking amongst themselves in English.

#### **1.1 Defining Intelligibility**

Intelligibility can be described as the understanding of spoken words and voices. It is mostly used in speech science and therapy to reference how one quantitatively and accurately articulates pronunciations. For instance, how one articulates whole words as well as speech sound intelligibility determines the ease with which people understand their pronunciation. According to Kaur (2018), Intelligibility refers explicitly to having clear recognition of words and utterances and is different from comprehensibility, which is the grasp of the meaning of words and utterances. Therefore, it does not mean that if a person lacks intelligence, they also lack comprehensibility. However, the two concepts contribute to the understanding of communication. Hence, the lack of the two concepts will affect the panelist's ability to understand and interpret any utterances by the speaker.

Speech intelligibility is most deeply discussed in universal languages such as English. Many studies have been conducted to assess the different levels of intelligibility amongst

the varieties of English dialects which informed the coining of the word *Englises*. The high level of proliferation and diversification of the English language necessitated the study of English intelligibility across the globe. The diversification of the language has created many dialects and lingua francas, prompting the need to use English as an international language, not a foreign one. Nevertheless, with all the different type of dialects, accents and pronunciations, the intelligibility of spoken English is assessed by how one can speak comprehensibly to the audience they are addressing. Problems such as misunderstanding, confusion, and frustrations arise when there is lower intelligibility of speech. The consequence of which often results in problems of miscommunication.

## 1.2 Different Varieties of English

With over two billion speakers by the 2000's, English is the most widely spoken language in the world native speakers (NS) of English and is widely studied as a foreign language and used by non-native speakers (NNS) of English. Speakers of English are known as *Anglophones*, and countries where English is spoken natively by a large majority of people in the country are referred to as the *Anglosphere*. As shown in **Chart 1** these include the U.S. (over 231 million NS of English), the U.K. (60 million), Canada (19 million), Australia (17 million) and New Zealand (4.8 million) (English-Speaking World, 2022).

|                |                     |             |
|----------------|---------------------|-------------|
| United States  | American English    | 231 million |
| United Kingdom | British English     | 60 million  |
| Canada         | Canadian English    | 19 million  |
| Australia      | Australian English  | 17 million  |
| New Zealand    | New Zealand English | 4 million   |

**Chart 1 – Anglosphere English-Speaking Countries (English-Speaking World, 2022)**

In addition to the top five Anglosphere countries, several countries (as show in **Chart 2**) including South Africa, India, Nigeria, the Philippines, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago also have millions of English speakers using sub-varieties of English with various dialects ranging from English-based creoles and Standard English. Other countries, such as Ghana and Uganda, also use English as their official languages (English-Speaking World, 2022; List of Countries by English-Speaking population, 2022).

|                             |                           |              |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|--------------|
| English – South Africa      | South African English     | 11.4 million |
| English – India             | Indian English            | 128 million  |
| English – Nigeria           | Nigerian English          | 141 million  |
| English – Philippines       | Philippine English        | 63 million   |
| English – Jamaica           | Jamaican English          | 2.6 million  |
| English – Trinidad & Tobago | Trinidad & Tobago English | 1.1 million  |

**Chart 2 – Sub-Varieties of English-Speaking Countries (English-Speaking World, 2022)**

Because English is widely used around the world for business and has spread to many communities and metamorphosized into different *lingua francas* (Choomthong and Manowong's, 2020). As a *lingua Franca*, English has gained popularity in its usage as a preferred contact language. Different speakers from diverse settings and backgrounds possessing completely different first languages use it. Therefore, English has become a needed mode of communication amongst speakers of other languages for several centuries. The importance of English became well established as an increased number of NNS of English found it necessary to communicate with each other in English. Because they could not readily use each other's first language, English became their main medium of communication. The demand for English continued to increase over many years creating the birth of multiple dialects and integrations of English into other first languages leading to the existence of many varieties of Englishes.

According to (Galloway and Rose, 2014, as cited in Choomthong and Manowong, 2020), the exceptional spread and internationalization of English as a *lingua Franca* (**ELF**) brought about a sociolinguistic landscape change. The sociolinguistic change involves a transfer of certain features of a community's first language to how they pronounce English words. Such transfers enabled the denationalization of English; therefore, it should not belong to the native speakers anymore. According to Kruger and Van Rooy's (2018) study, English varieties are categorized into three spheres: native Englishes, non-native Englishes and translated Englishes. Studies of these three varieties were made through a multidimensional method considering extensive language features intertwined with factor enquiry. Other researchers have generally categorized English varieties into native speakers (NS), semi-native speakers (SNS) and non-native speakers (NNS) of English, which coincide with Kruger's model.

Some interesting explanations for some of the English varieties include having the languages sprouting from contact, such as those types of English that were formed after encountering NS and NNS of English in the postcolonial period. There are also the English varieties that arose because of merging with foreign languages, as well as other types that have evolved from the translation of foreign languages into English. One researcher has even taken the categorization of English varieties even further in history before the three sociolinguistic Circle models, where he profiles the varieties as represented by how they spread, acquisition of patterns as well functional allocation (Kachru, 1992, as cited in McLellan, 2020). Kachru emphasizes that the difference in the varieties derives from the historical movement context. His earlier categorization includes photo-Germanic English, Old -English, Middle English, early modern English, and Modern English (Kachru, 1992; World English, 2022).

It, therefore, prepares a good ground for the differentiation of these varieties of English based on how they came to fruition. Their origin makes a big impression as a point of difference analysis because these varieties came to be at different times. In terms of actualizing the understanding of such a wide variety of Englishes, it would be essential to state that there are other ways of categorizing them. For instance, using accents and pronunciation as well as the origin as mentioned before. The categorization using the basis of accents and pronunciation involves varieties such as American English (**AmE**), British English (**BrE**), African English (**AfKE**), and Asian English (**AsnE**). However, the latter categorization seems to be lesser contemporary and preferred than the former categorization which already includes both NS and NNS models. Consequently, more focus is placed on the former categorization. In Kruger's categorization, for instance, native Englishes include most English varieties with the lowest contact level, such as BrE. He also describes native English as those higher contact native Englishes such as AmE, Australian English (**AusE**), Canadian (**CanE**) and New Zealand English (**NZE**) (Kruger and Van Rooy, 2018).

Other native varieties of English include those with very high contact with native Englishes, such as Irish and South AfKE. In describing non-native English varieties using the international corpus English (**ICE**), Kruger says that they are varieties which have advanced along phases of the dynamic model and are represented by Afrikaans English (**AfKE**) and Singaporean English (**SngE**) (Kruger and Van Rooy, 2018). They also include

Asian and African varieties that are less advanced regarding Schneider's developmental continuum. As stated by Kruger, the translated corpus mainly contains Afrikaans translations to English. It is, therefore, significant to highlight that using the translation corpus allows researchers to measure the control of influence by other languages using the contact medium, as all three have the characteristics of contact. In analysis, it is crucial to state that Kruger's corpus multidimensional analysis is more focused on the differences and similarities of registered written language. The highlighted lines of characteristics are said to have been informed by written registered dimensional comparisons providing certain differences as highlighted. It has informed more about the differences in the contact varieties and how they created the gaps between each other.

A study of the evolution of English cannot be complete without understating its effects on specific areas of pedagogy as well as scholarship because of the need for standardization (McLellan, 2020). That postulates the suggestion that it is improper to constrain the type of language used in giving instructions or teaching in classes. The better model to undertake is to give freedom to the teacher to choose the norm they feel suits them (McLellan, 2020). Nevertheless, the concern is more on the spoken language differences and the confusion that comes with such differences. It is, however, essential to recognize that registered written varieties of English have an influence on the spoken language. Dissecting aspects of various characteristics is the most critical focus of this paper.

As we have seen, some of the native English varieties include BrE and AmE, and it is relevant to look at the different characteristics of both types of English to elaborate on their uniqueness. After that, a consideration of the semi-native and non-native will also be examined. According to Han (2019), different varieties of English contain different accents, discourse structures, vocabularies, grammar, sociolinguistics, as well as characteristics in their pronunciation, spelling, tones, and intonation. Such characters are therefore important to English learners for more convenient or intelligible communication. As cited previously in this paper, the spread of English to the world orchestrated several changes to the language bearing other regional characteristics. Some notable English varieties that will feature more in this discussion include South AfkE, CanE, and AusE together with BrE and AmE.

Taking a closer look at both AmE and BrE, it is noteworthy to state that even these original Englishes have notable differences, as there are no two people within a speech community who speak alike (Han, 2019). That creates minor speech groups and differences called dialects. The good news about dialects does not make communication difficult or impossible. Building on the specifics of the dialects, BrE and AmE have many subdivisions that differentiate the speech communities, such as Scottish English, Midwest AmE, Northern BrE, New England English, New England AmE, South BrE and many more (Han, 2019). It, therefore, reveals why a majority of the educated around areas such as South England speak BrE. On the other hand, AmE is the common dialect spoken by most Americans (Han, 2019). Nevertheless, according to Kretzschmar (2020), AmE portrays certain differences and demarcations as one move from one place to another. The existence of different social groups represents more differences in AmE. One can conclude that AmE and BrE are the two main varieties of English used by regions and nations that refer to this as their first, second or one of the preferred foreign languages.

As highlighted earlier in this discussion, the characteristics of English varieties are one aspect of difference that should be discussed. As such, the BrE and AmE have interesting characteristics that set them apart and make them unique. Understanding these characteristics and their difference in use can help people learn English more easily. Some of these characteristics include:

### 1) Difference in Phonetics

Phonetics is associated with human speech and sounds, significantly differentiating speakers from different regions. For instance, native speakers of BrE and AmE differentiate their phonetics into two categories, the General American (**GA**) and the Received Pronunciation (**RP**) (Han, 2019). The important difference that separates the two is the vowel pronunciation for words such as *dance*, *glass* and *fast*. According to Han (2019), the pronunciation of these words by Americans includes a short vowel ă (/æ/) sound, such as that found in the words *bat*, *cat*, and *hat*. On the other hand, people of British origin pronounce the words with more of a schwa (/ə/) vowel sound such as *dance* (/da: ns/), *glass* (/gla: s/), and *fast* (/fa: st/).

Another difference can also be identified in the pronunciation of words such as *car* and *door*. In AmE, the words have an (**r**) sound making a fricative effect, while in

BrE; the (r) sound is primarily silent except for some words such as *far* because the linking (r) comes naturally. Americans also have a distinct pronunciation of words such as *fog* and *dock*, where a low back /ɑ:/ short ɒ vowel sound like vowel sound pronounced in AmE with words such as *olive*, *car*, or *father*. BrE pronounces these words with the mid, back vowel sound /ɔ/ like the AmE vowel sound pronounced in words like *on*, *walk*, and *saw*. Similarly, certain words such as *dew*, *new* and *duke* which contain the long ū (/u:/) vowel sound in AmE are mostly pronounced with a /ju:/ sound in BrE.

Kretzschmar (2020) backs the difference in vowels in his explanation of the emergence of Standard American English (SAE). He explains that certain pronunciation features express the unstable nature of low back vowels in AmE. For instance, one of the standout Pennsylvania English characteristics is the merging of the words *dawn* and *don*. The merge represents a combination of both the pronunciation from eastern England with the Pennsylvanian one. A final observation of AmE is that they tend to articulate every syllable in their pronunciation. However, in BrE, the pronunciation tends to omit certain syllables. The distinctive characteristics are but a small fraction of the phonetics aspects identified between AmE and BrE.

## 2) Difference in Individual Sounds

When a word has more than one syllable, one of the syllables in English is always stressed a little louder than the others. Additionally, certain key words in a sentence are often stressed even if they only have one syllable. Many non-native speakers of English not only have no sense of where syllables begin or end or what the proper vowel sound should be for each syllable, they often tend to place stress in the wrong place when pronouncing words in English, or even say the words with no stress at all. This can be true for slow, medium, and fast speech forms.

English speakers can often have different ways of stressing the same word in different types of English. One notable difference between the AmE and BrE is a weaker overall word stress in AmE. This character often makes AmE sound monotonous and boring but more distinct than BrE. AmE tends to put stress on the first syllables of words but also adds secondary stress on the consequent syllables to

pronounce them distinctively. In either language, emphasis may be placed on single syllable words in different manners depending on what is customary under various cultural and other settings.

### 3) Difference in Vocabulary

A distinction is evident between the AmE and BrE vocabulary. Vocabulary in this context involves spelling and the meaning of words. Vocabulary is structured through certain rules. The rules provide the basis for the difference between AmE and BrE. For instance, words that end up with **(-er)** in AmE end with **(-re)** in BrE. Such words include *theatre*, *litre*, *centre*, and *fibre* appear more in BrE but change to *theater*, *liter*, *center*, and *fiber* in AmE. The second example of vocabulary difference is shown in words that have **(-or)** ending in AmE, while in BrE, these words end up with **(-our)**. Examples include *favour*, *colour*, *humour* and *labour* in BrE, while the same words appear as *favor*, *color*, *humor*, and *labor* in AmE.

A broader scope is also shown through words that project certain consonants. In AmE, the vocabulary is full of words that have one consonant; while on the other hand, the stand-out characteristic is the involvement of two consonants. A good example involves words such as *traveller*, *jeweller*, and *waggon* in BrE vocabulary, whereas the same words are spelt as *traveler*, *jeweler*, and *wagon* in AmE. More Evaluation finds that in AmE words that end with **(-se)** change to **(-ce)** in BrE vocabulary. Examples of such words include *offence* and *defence* in BrE, which change to *offense* and *defense* in AmE. In AmE, words that end with **(-ize)** and **(-yze)** are generally spelt with **(-ise)** and **(-yse)** in BrE. All these and other special characteristics in vocabulary highlight subtle but distinct differences between the two main Englishes referred to as native English.

### 4) Difference in Grammar

Looking into the grammatical structure, one can also find apparent differences between BrE and AmE. Compared with the vocabulary and the phonological differences, there are fewer grammatical differences between AmE and BrE. Having stated that, one can conclude that the grammatical element of both languages is the most stable. It is evident that the part underwent significant development over the years. The main difference that stands out between BrE and AmE is that AmE has

added a creative character to its grammar. In this context, non-native speakers are invited to study the small difference to ensure they use the grammar correctly. The grammatical difference can be highlighted as one of the significant points of diversion between NS of English and NNS of English, as the latter struggle to perfect their comprehension such deep but minute characteristics.

One such area is the verb usage in the two Englishes. An example to clarify the difference can be shown by a phrase such as “*Do you have ...?*”, which has two different meanings in BrE and AmE (Han, 2019). Expounding on the explanation in AmE, the phrase means, “*Is this item your possession right now?*” On the other hand, the same phrase in BrE would mean, “*Do you customarily have?*” (Han, 2019). For more understanding, an observation of the patterns of both Englishes would be more helpful. For example, in AmE, one may use the phrase “*Do you have a book?*” while in BrE, the same question will be asked in a different pattern, such as “*Have you a book?*” (Han, 2019). Of considerable attention in the buildup of the difference in this stage is that BrE also adopts the use of “*do*” with a negative sentence. The difference only comes in for more formal English. For instance, the past participle of the verb *get* is *got* in BrE, while in AmE, the past tense is *gotten*. An American would say, “*I wish they could have gotten there earlier*”, while a British speaker would say, “*I wish they got there earlier.*”

After looking at the verb differences, grammatical characteristics extend to prepositions where clear differences can be highlighted between AmE and BrE. An American speaker, for instance, avoids the use of a preposition before mentioning a day or certain dates. On the other hand, British speakers must use a preposition in the same case. An example can be shown with the following sentence:

*She began teaching Monday.* (AmE)

*She began teaching on Monday.* (BrE)

In summary, one can ostensibly say that the highlighted differences form the larger part of the native Englishes. However, the brief explanations of the characteristics defining both varieties represent only a tiny part of the larger pool of different Englishes. Nonetheless, any English speaker needs to take keen note of the highlighted aspects for better use of the two varieties. The biggest difference between BrE and AmE lies within

their vocabulary. It is therefore prudent to shift gears to the rest of the varieties of English to understand the evolution of English. Learning evolution calls for studying the history of something, as it is impossible to discuss something without looking back at its history.

As learned from the beginning, NS of English are those who use English as their first language and have an excellent grasp of all the aspects of the language. On the contrary, because NNS of English have borrowed and adopted English, they typically have only had a strong grasp of the overall learning process. The language becomes a second means of communication with people from other languages or areas. This development of English is evident by how it has had a long history from the early seventeen century during Shakespeare. It extended in both areas of the Atlantic, where Americans adopted certain words as other countries did. That is why we have different varieties of English across the world, including the Englishes of Africa, New Zealand, Canada, Australia, India, Singapore, and Asian countries. These semi-native and non-native Englishes have their characteristics too, which are important in this discussion. In defining semi-native Englishes, many scholars have termed it as the one adopted by countries who wanted it to play an official role. Most countries with such categorization are those postcolonial ones, such as Singapore, Nigeria, Kenya, and the Philippines. The NNS of English perceived English as foreign language and did not use it in their offices or any institutional role, such as has been the case in China and Japan.

Regarding the different varieties of English by SNS of English, most of the clearly recognizable differences are similar in nature to those between different types of native English. According to (Deterding, 2010, as cited in Kretzschmar, 2020) study which analyzed different semi-native Englishes using monophthongs measurements concluded that most of these varieties have a shared trend of using full vowels. They not only use them in unstressed syllables but also within certain function words. Nevertheless, distinctions arose from the study, which analyzes Nigerian, Indian and Singaporean English (SngE).

SngE is distinct from the other listed Englishes because it has pronunciation features such as (t) occurring at the beginning of words such as *third* and *thought*. It has (d)

occurring at the beginning of *there* and *this*. The example highlights the use of (d) and (t) in voiceless and voiced words with (TH), which is widely known to be used in SngE.

Therefore, it is established that the SngE standard features include using full vowels for their operative words as well as unstressed syllables in polysyllabic words. Syllable rhythm is also another standard feature in the area. The pronoun stressing differentiates SngE from non-native English, such as Asian English (**AsnE**). The same aspects are noticed in South AfkE and Nigerian English making unique difference observation in all these Englishes. The influence of SngE is said to originate from the time of Straits Settlements when Penang, Singapore and Malacca were under the British rule. However, after independence Singapore developed policies that addressed parities in the language. They adopted pragmatic multilingualism which created four co-owned varieties namely Tamil, Mandarin, English and Malay. However, at present the nation developed a standard SngE which is in use presenting the various feature stated earlier.

Another variety of English is East Asian English which is spoken in countries such as Japan, China, and Korea. Some countries, such as Japan, adopted the English language to counter threats from the outside world. English in these areas has been made part of their curricula. Nevertheless, despite the effort to teach native English in both Japan and Korea both have two varying Englishes influenced grammatically, culturally and phonetically by their native languages. Korean and Japanese phonetics, for instance, further complicate the communication of speakers from both countries because of the Anglo-native pronunciation element in their speech. In many cases, sounds not found in Japanese or Korean phonology make it hard for pronunciation to be clear and hence difficult to discern their spoken type of English. These fundamental elements go back to the main features of the difference between BrE and AmE, thus providing further evidence that every variety of English is unique because it borrows heavily from its own native language.

### 1.3 Internal Problems of Intelligibility (for NS, SNS, and NNS of English)

There are several problems English speakers face in terms of being able to intelligibly understand the words spoken by one another. This second focuses of some of the difficulties encounters in the case of two NS of English, two SNS of English, or two NNS of English trying to speak with one another.

For a society to articulate its central issues, human communication is essential. It becomes undeniable that developing mutual relationships and understanding reigns high. All these facets are linked with strong knots of language. Speakers communicating through either spoken or written means should have tangible intelligibility, which enables them to convey messages that are not distractive. According to Bayyurt (2018), the speaker's positioning toward the addressee signaling how close or distant their relationship is as they formulate the speech affects the result of the communication. On a larger scale of a global language such as English, it is critical that users of the language have the intelligence needed to communicate with any other user from the different varieties. Lack of intelligibility causes much confusion among the different speakers. However, the contributing factors are wide and long in their list. This section will highlight the issues superficially and in-depth in consecutive sections.

One of the contributing aspects of confusion and problem of intelligibility is the presence of different accents from different languages who have borrowed English as their second language or as an official language. However, even the native speakers experience confusion and intelligibility issues because of the various models of speech adopted. The fundamental issues of the confusion have been highlighted in the previous section, where features of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and phonetics provide a clear line of existing differences. When for instance, one native speaker of BrE is speaking to an American, they will find it hard to communicate if their verb placements do not agree. The listener will interpret the message in their language, understanding how sentence construction should be vis-a-vis how the speaker understands it, and that difference will create confusion already. Nevertheless, whereas for the native speakers, the issues may be technical aspects that go deeper into the evolution of the language, for semi and non-native speakers, the issues are more focused on the ability to understand the second language, the way it is translated, pronunciation, language characteristics and tonal variations which leads to loss of meaning of what is being communicated.

According to Serrani (2020), through the development of the world Englishes, smaller movements occurred, which include dialects informed and attributed to the users of the various languages. Dialects form a more significant part of the semi-native and non-native Englishes because they apply to small ethnic and social groups. Such growth of different dialects makes it challenging to standardize English, creating more geographical confusion

and homogeneity of the language. It decolonizes the thought of standardization and enables people to own the English language in their way.

As the real meaning of intelligibility manifest through the flow of the many features and characteristics analyzed here, it is essential to ascertain what unintelligibility is. According to Gyamerah (2018), unintelligibility occurs when sounds from a specific language are negatively reassigned to another. According to (Nelson, 2011, as cited in Gyamerah 2018) confusion studies, it is unavoidable to eradicate the negative influence of foreign sounds on intelligibility. Such features in semi-native and non-native English are mostly attributed to psychological noise in communication. When the communication path is broken, the message also gets broken and mostly, these features of unintelligibility cause much confusion, especially when the semi and non-native speakers from countries such as Nigeria, India and Singapore speak to native speakers.

## **2 Problems of Intelligibility Among NS and SNS**

Various factors may be considered in researching the intelligibility of speech among NS and SNS of English using different accents. Three specific areas of interest include: (1) The listener's prior exposure to different accents and how strong is the accent is, (2) The willingness of the listener to understand the accent, and (3) The speed of the words being spoken.

### **2.1 Listener's Prior Exposure to Different Accents**

According to Bayyurt (2018), intelligibility is affected by, among other things cross-cultural issues and familiarity with various English varieties. In the cross-cultural aspect, different accents emerge as the transfer of English is done to other social and cultural groups. Exposure to different accents affects speech intelligibility between native and semi-native speakers. In many instances, native English speakers find it hard to understand semi-native speakers because they lack familiarity with their accents. The integration of the world and translation of The English language has meant that semi-native speakers have had to adopt this language as the official communication language with natives or within themselves. Chan (2021) highlights the importance of most influencing factors, including familiarity with different varieties of English, proficiency, speed, involvement, and expectation in the listener's judgment of the speaker's

intelligibility. Familiarity with accents is, in this aspect, essential for the intelligibility assessment of the listener.

According to Levis and Zhou (2018), some accents are given a higher hierarchy, but no accent should be superior to another. It is also true that accents apply not only to the non-native language but also to native English. For instance, there are many American and British accents, but they are only categorized as the inner circle countries.

It, therefore, raises the aspect of the natives interacting with so many different accents from all over the world. The ability of any native speaker to understand the different languages is more aided by them having encountered it before or for several instances. Having familiarity with a topic or language helps the listener to transcribe the message quickly and accurately, facilitating intelligibility. Additionally, as the non-native and semi-native speakers now outnumber the native speakers, it does not matter if the former is less intelligible than the latter.

It is equally important that NS of English uplift their intelligibility to NNS and SNS of English. Therefore, in areas with more different accents, people may have better chances to understand each other because of the experiences they have in their daily routine compared to areas with no wide interaction. It also enables them to speak with clarity when communicating with others. The clarity in this context involves using stress and intonation rightly.

## **2.2 Willingness of Listeners to Understand Accents**

The level of intelligibility is also determined by how strong of an accent is used by speakers. People with either a strong native or semi-native accent may have problems with passing on their intended messages as their accent affects their pronunciation and clarity. A strong accent means that one's native language is taking over the type of English they speak. The strong accent of a NS or SNS of English will affect the intelligibility of their speech.

Many scholars ignore pronunciation as part of classroom teaching for language intelligibility (Candan and Inal, 2020). This is important because having good pronunciation is an important skill for SNS of English to be able to effectively communicate with other NS of English. The combination of mispronounced words and

overtly strong accents hinder the proper integration and assimilation of English to universal levels and therefore disrupt the ability to communicate effectively between different speakers of English.

A listeners' proficiency in a particular language also has a strong influence how they understand accented speech (Nagamine, 2020). The proficiency may emanate from paying attention or having listened several times to the same accent. A study by Nagamine (2022) examined listeners' comprehensibility and sensitivity while transcribing tasks from inner circle speakers noted that their proficiency determined the listeners' sensitivity to certain accents. The speaker's accents significantly affected Semi-native listeners compared to advanced listeners. The highlighted difficulties indicate that willingness to listen is important if one is to understand the accented speech. Without clear understanding, the accented speech will consequently disrupt the intelligibility of communication between NS and SNS of English. Other researchers, including Chan (2021) have suggested that other factors including the listener's native language, social attitudes, ethnic beliefs, biases, and perceptions further affect their ability to effectively communicate and interact in English.

### **2.3 Speed of the Words Being Spoken**

The speed at which a language is spoken affects the communication between a speaker and a listener, even in normal cases. When passing information, the listener should be able to hear and synthesize what the speaker says without difficulties. It is the same with a speech between a non-native speaker and a native speaker. Feeling comfortable in one's language is expected, which may lead to a non-speaker communicating faster than the listener can comprehend. A study by (Orikasa, 2016, as cited by Chan, 2021) surveyed the level at which a set of 31 Japanese raters identified varieties of Englishes, including (Koreans, Americans, and Vietnamese) as unintelligible. From their rating, the Americans got the lowest rating, which means their language was unintelligible. However, the rating was attributed to the speed with which the Americans uttered the words. However, it can be argued that the results could be because of the incomprehensibility of the speech at the rate the Americans spoke. It is an excellent referencing point to show that the speed at which words are spoken interferes with the intelligibility of the language across all circles. If intelligibility is interfered with, then the listener will not understand the message, and the communication will break down.

### 3 Problems of Intelligibility for NNS of English

This section will examine some of the fundamental problems of Intelligibility for NNS in their ability to comprehend spoken English when trying to communicate with NS, SNS, and other NNS of English. Specific problems of intelligibility include intelligibility problems caused by the improper pronunciation of vowel sounds, division of syllables, and placement of stress on syllables.

#### 3.1 Improper Pronunciation of Vowel Sounds

The improper pronunciation of vowel sounds is another problem that prevents NNS from effectively speaking in English. Vowel space configuration, as well as the alignment of the lexical standard of English, gives us most of the crucial and systematic models of separating English varieties (Kirkpatrick, 2020). One such case includes the major shift in vowel pronunciation that sets apart early modern English from Middle English.

Many NNS do not understand the correct number of vowel sounds or use the correct vowel sounds attached or embedded in each syllable when they pronounce words in English. While many other languages such as Japanese only have five vowel sounds, standard AmE, as shown in **Chart 3**, has four times as many vowel sounds. These include five long vowel sounds (/ā/, /ē/, /ī/, /ō/, /ū/), five short vowel sounds (/ă/, /ĕ/, /ĭ/, /ŏ/, /ŭ/), and 10 other vowel sound combinations (/uh/ ('schwa'), /oi/, /ow/, /oo/, /ar/, /er/, /or/, /air/, /ear/, /ire/, /ore/, /ure/).

| long vowels | short vowels | 2-letter combinations | long vowel + er |
|-------------|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| ā           | ă (ah)       | oy / oi               | air (ā + er)    |
| ē           | ĕ (eh)       | ow                    | ear (ē + er)    |
| ī           | ĭ (ih)       | oo                    | ire (ī + er)    |
| ō           | ŏ (oh)       | ar                    | ore (ō + er)    |
| ū           | ŭ (uh)       | er                    | ure (ū + er)    |
| oo          | ə Schwa      | or                    |                 |

**Chart 3 – Vowel Sounds in Standard AmE**

As a result, NNS with fewer vowel sounds in their own language often have a hard time pronouncing words in English. And because many NNS of English often only learn words in English by memorizing their spelling, they often mistakenly believe there are only five vowel sounds in English (the vowel letters A, E, I, O, and U). Furthermore, they

will often only use their long vowel sounds, use the improper version of long or short vowel sounds, or simply replace English vowel sounds with one of the vowel sounds in their own language.

Metamorphosis of English has led to the emergence of certain phonetic terms that required the tongue to be raised, especially in the case of long vowels. The vowel shift is said to have accounted for several irregularities troubling English and learners of today. It highlights the reason why learners of today need to learn long and short vowel syllable pronunciation. The requirement for learners to pronounce a long *ā* with (eɪ) and a short *ā* as (æ) can represent an illustration of the same. The shift also explains the many current haphazard spellings of English words since the trend increasingly caught attention. It also explains the reason English students should memorize or disregard the morphophonological interchanges of words such as southern and southeast BrE.

The effect of the shift was established earlier in this paper, where Kretzschmar (2020) highlighted the difference in vowels as different speakers tried to standardize English. However, certain features in pronunciation express the unstable side of the low or back vowels in AmE. A quick illustration of standout irregularities is a pronunciation in Pennsylvania English where one finds words such as dawn and don merged. Such a merger highlights the combination and borrowing from different areas, including pronunciation from the Eastern parts of England. About such mergers and borrowing, one is reminded that even for native speakers, the continuous phonological change creates significant problems concerning intelligibility even where the listener is highly familiar and has had enough exposure to the English variety.

### **3.2 Correct Division of Syllables**

The division of syllables determines how one puts stress on those syllables. By understanding the relationship between the division of syllables and syllable stress then, one can differentiate the two. As we have seen in many instances, speakers use segmentation to determine how phonetic sounds will be attributed to the pronunciation, and syllable division is analyzed in the same line. Segmentation involves the breakdown of words into various sounds, also referred to as phonemes. However, syllables differ with segmentation; they are single vowel sounds unbroken within a word. They are mostly made up of a single or two vowels, but a consonant saliently accompanies one. For

instance, it is known that all words have at least one syllable. The division of these syllables in words differs in the various world Englishes, which causes intelligibility problems.

Problems begin to arise in places where native Englishes have defined syllables while the other varieties lack such defined syllables in pronunciation or spoken English. As highlighted in Levis (2018), the syllabic structure will signify where the stress of words is allocated, especially in long vowels, which are known to attract more stress than short ones. Semi-native and nonnative Englishes may not differentiate when it is a long vowel or a short vowel. Therefore, when communication between a native and nonnative speaker happens, the probability of unintelligible judgment occurring is high due to the difference in divisions of syllables and the other features which goes hand in hand with correct allocation of syllables, such as stress.

### **3.3 Correct Stress of Syllables**

Unintelligibility has many facets, including concerns about articulation and delivery of words, sounds, intonation, and placing the correct stress on syllables (Patil, 2018). Different varieties of English may place stress on different syllables in certain words which may cause confusion and distort the meaning of such words. Levis (2018) states that misplacing words stress can ultimately interfere with communication, thus causing an intelligibility problem in the English language. For instance, when using a word that is central to passing a certain message, listeners may take long trying to decode what one is trying to say because they do not understand what is being said (Levis, 2018).

Scholars have argued over the importance of teaching word stress in the L2 as evidence indicates that stress configurations form a critical part of word recognition. Words that are spoken with the expected stress get recognized quickly as opposed to those without unexpected patterns. Words spoken with improper stress will be difficult to recognize and less intelligible (Levis, 2018). They will be mistaken for other words or not understood completely, making communication difficult.

Consequently, wrongly stressed words contribute to misunderstanding in several ways. Miss-stressing of some words may lead to loss of intelligibility or even incomprehensibility. For instance, (Levis, 2018) states that stressing the noun /verb (permit) can have stress at the beginning or the end. Another study by Gooskens and Schneider (2019) examining

intelligibility of speakers from the Saru Kuviana and Saru Mwerani found out that accumulated differences in pronunciation of words especially in word stress and vowel quality made it for the two cultural speakers to communicate well though from the same region.

It, therefore, goes back to the principle that spoken language does not include set spaces between specific words; thus, listeners are allowed to decode a speech depending on its components. Therefore, representation of intended words must be activated and inhibition of those not intended toned down. The reason for such an action is because words compete to get recognized depending on how segmental or suprasegmental data is made available. Most listeners in the English language pay more attention to segmental cues of stress than other things such as pitch and intensity follow. Laitinen (2022) backs the argument by stating that pronunciation features can only be divided into segmental and suprasegmental features regardless of the type of language. He explains that segmental aspects highlight the continuous speech segments, which include vowels and consonants. The suprasegmental features relate more closely to the higher percentage of the speech units, including word intonation, stress, and rhythm. The stress of syllables, therefore, plays a critical role in the measurement of language intelligibility.

In short, evidence has shown consistently, intelligibility is not only a problem of communication between NS and SNS, but also with NNS of English. The English language has metamorphosized across different cultures and social groups, and the clarity of articulation of certain words has become a big issue across the different types of English used as a Lingua Franca. Through this process, it has changed in its formal and functional usage (Patil, 2018). That highlights why a writer Achebe from Nigeria, states that it is not compulsory or necessary for NNS to strive to use English in the same way that NS of English do.

As highlighted, intelligibility is affected by various factors not limited to dialect differences, vocabulary, and phonological systems (Gooskens and Schneider, 2019). Unintelligibility is more associated with the aspects of accent affecting pronunciation, sound articulation as well as word stress leading to misunderstanding of messages and meanings (Patil, 2018). This makes it crucial for NNS to understand the proper use of

vowel sounds, division of syllables and proper accent or stress of syllables when speaking English.

## CONCLUSION

An understanding of intelligibility helps expound greatly on the different verities of English and how they all fit into the universal realm of English as lingua Franca. Intelligibility plays an important role in establishing how different groups of speakers can manage useful communication by understanding each other's speech. Many features of different varieties of spoken English merge in a way that fosters mutual intelligibility. The level of intelligibility is measured by speech phonetics, intonations, stress, accents, and dialects. Consequently, having a clear understanding of these features in one's language when communicating with different people makes their speech more intelligible.

Problems of Intelligibility are not only experienced by SNS or NNS of English but oftentimes by NS of English. Accent forms the biggest challenge for NS of English, followed by grammatical mismatches and stressing of syllables. In SNS and NNS, the biggest challenge related to intelligibility is typically phonetics and pronunciation, as many of these groups try to merge their native accents and pronunciation with NS of English. This does not necessarily mean that one lacks comprehensibility of the language. Misunderstandings between two people are often caused by factors including a mere lack of attention and willingness to listen, the judgmental mentality of the speaker's accent, and a listener's prior exposure to the variety of English being spoken. All these and other aspects form the building block of intelligibility and its effects on one's ability to comprehend and communicate using spoken English.

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