Intelligibility in World Englishes

Theory and Application

Cecil L. Nelson

ESL & Applied Linguistics Professional Series

Intelligib /orld Englishes

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Cecil L. Nelson
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Intelligibility in World Englishes

"I have waited for over 20 years for a volume such as this. What is most exciting is that it brings together all the scholarly discussions, pedagogical implications, and academic issues in one single volume ... satisfying the interests of academics, language teachers, and scholars of World Englishes."
Kamal K. Sridhar, Stony Brook University, USA

"A very interesting and serious attempt to revisit and discuss a number of issues surrounding the well-known debate in applied linguistics, namely the intelligibility of English(es), particularly in the present-day context of the globalization of trade and commerce."
Vijay K. Bhatia, City University of Hong Kong

"I've been waiting for this book ... a long time ... . No one is better able to write it. ... It is highly instructive to have the question of intelligibility across the three Circles of English be constructed not only in terms of traditional pedagogical norms and economic advantages but also taking into consideration linguistic ecology, interactional pragmatics, and sociocultural realities."
Larry E. Smith, From the Foreword

Intelligibility is the term most generally used to address the complex of criteria that describe, broadly, how useful someone's English is when talking or writing to someone else. Set within the paradigm which posits that the Englishes of the world may be seen as flexibly categorized into three Circles (Inner, Outer, Expanding) in terms of their historical developments, this volume is the first to provide a comprehensive overview of the definitions and scopes of *intelligibility*, *comprehensibility*, and *interpretability* in World Englishes, addressing key topics within this paradigm:

Who—if anyone—provides the models and norms for a given population of English users?
Hybridity and *creativity* in world Englishes
Evaluating paradigms: Misinformation and disinformation
Practicalities of dealing with the widening variety of Englishes
Is English "falling apart"?

The much-debated issue of intelligibility touches not only sociolinguistic theory but all aspects of English-language teaching, second language acquisition, language curriculum planning, and regional or national language planning. Designed for students, teacher educators, and scholars internationally in these areas, each chapter includes Topics for Discussion and Assignments, and Suggestions for Further Reading sections.

Cecil L. Nelson is Professor of Linguistics in the Department of Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics at Indiana State University.

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FOREWORD

I've been waiting for this book. A long time.

I met Cecil Nelson in the summer of 1978 at the Linguistic Institute of the Linguistic Society of America which was held that year at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He was completing a PhD under the supervision of Professor Braj B. Kachru. Professor Kachru knew of my interest in the area of cross-cultural intelligibility and he said I should meet a promising young scholar who had a very good understanding of the research that had been done in this field. Because of Professor Kachru's endorsement I had great expectations. After meeting with Cecil, not only was I not disappointed, I became a great admirer of his analytical ability, his terrific sense of humor, and his tremendous skill with words.

Since that time it has been my privilege to work with Cecil on several projects. We worked together on the journal *World Englishes, Journal of English as an International and Intranational Language*. We co-authored papers and were co-presenters at international conferences. We, to my benefit, have had many conversations, in person and online.

In all of our work we have emphasized that English represents a repertoire of cultures, not a monolithic one and that so called "native speakers" of English are not the sole owners of English nor are they necessarily the best judges of what is or is not intelligible when English is used across cultures. From our research we know that they are not always found to be the most intelligible when the listeners are from different cultures and are speakers of different languages. We have also stressed that understanding is not speaker- or listener-centered, but is interactional between speaker and listener.

I have waited for this book, believing that no one is better able to write it. Cecil of course has been busy with other very worthy projects, including his wonderful book, *World Englishes in Asian Contexts* (2006), with Professor Yamuna Kachru, and

the most impressive *Handbook of World Englishes* (2006), co-edited with Professor Braj B. Kachru and Professor Yamuna Kachru.

The book is now completed. I consider it well worth the wait. It is highly instructive to have the question of intelligibility across the three Circles of English be constructed not only in terms of traditional pedagogical norms and economic advantages, but also taking into consideration linguistic ecology, interactional pragmatics and sociocultural realities.

Because of this book, I am convinced that in the future when the classic scholars of intelligibility are listed, i.e. Catford (1950), Bansal (1969), and B. Kachru (1976), Cecil Nelson (2011) will be among them.

Larry E. Smith
Honolulu, Hawaii

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PREFACE

The present work is set within the context of ongoing debates over the natures, statuses, and functions of varieties of English in regions and nations across the world. Its point of view is that of the world Englishes paradigm, which was established in the 1970s and '80s under circumstances and in venues that are outlined by, for example, Kachru and Smith (2008, p. xiii) and Bolton (2006, pp. 248–251). Briefly, this approach holds that "new" varieties of English (some of them not so new, at that), such as those in India and Singapore, were established and have continued to develop following exactly the same sociolinguistic principles that have been shown to bring about present-day "native speaker" varieties of the language. The founding scholars of this interpretive framework began using the plural form "Englishes," perhaps jarring to the ears of those who are encountering it for the first time, to avoid any hint that there is *an* English (however "international") that is or that should be used everywhere for all purposes, or that is or that should be the baseline for comparative judgements about correctness, efficacy, and so forth for all varieties.

This book is intended to present in one accessible volume the key concepts of and surrounding intelligibility—briefly, making sense of what we produce, hear and see in Englishes around the world today. There are various good treatments of intelligibility in the extant literature on world Englishes, for example chapter 5 in Kachru and Nelson (2006, pp. 65–75) and chapter 4 in Kachru and Smith (2008, pp. 59–70). This work, it is to be hoped, at least matches those in terms of explicating and exemplifying the basic constructs, and then goes on to discuss attendant concepts, including the aspect of hybridity that is so much a part of today's far-flung Englishes.

The author seeks to present the issues and approaches to analysis of intelligibility for graduate students, advanced undergraduate students, and investigators of the world's varieties of English. This volume is for English teachers and teacher

educators internationally, and for those teachers and teacher educators in, for example, the UK and USA who may be stuck on or clinging to conceptions about the nature and status of English across the world that can be shown to be invalid (if indeed they ever were). I hope that these, and perhaps other readers, may find what is presented here a useful supplement within such broader-based areas of investigation.

The six chapters of the volume work from an overview of the world Englishes paradigm within which this perspective on intelligibility is situated to a consideration of how to approach teaching such a worldwide language of wider communication in its multiple contexts. Chapter 1 addresses "understanding" language within the world Englishes frame, presenting as it develops fundamental necessary constructs such as *context of situation* and *nativization*. Chapter 2 picks up the central component of the work which is introduced in Chapter 1, developing the vague notion "understanding" into the imminently more useful *intelligibility, comprehensibility,* and *interpretability* as developed by Larry Smith. Chapter 3 treats the mythological notion of a language uncluttered by other-language influences such as borrowing, working in the construct of hybridity as developed by, e.g., B. Kachru (1983) and Y. Kachru (1992). Chapter 4 presents some examples of various authors' definitions of the same words that may be used in the Smith Framework (most notably *intelligibility* and *comprehensibility*, or some variant of that latter), introductions of other terms into the field of study (e.g., *accentedness*; Munro et al., 2006), and the kinds of investigations that they have pursued. Chapter 5 treats English-language teaching (ELT) from a broad perspective, with the focus on guiding learners in achieving intelligibility across varieties. Chapter 6 ends the discussion with a look at whether the natural evolutions of various Englishes constitute a dissolution of "English," and how future attitudes toward intelligibility might be framed in sociolinguistically realistic ways (to coin a phrase).

Each chapter presents my suggestions for Topics for Discussion and Assignments. Instructors in English-using regions different from mine will undoubtedly tweak, revise or replace these starting points. Suggestions for Further Readings will, likewise, serve just as prompts, and students will profit from attending to their instructors, who will have a closer view of the context in which their courses are being offered.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work comes out of my professional, lifelong association with Professors Braj and Yamuna Kachru, evolving through my years as one of their fortunate graduate students in the Linguistics Department at the University of Illinois to the present, when I remain their student and have also received the gift of their friendship. All that I needed to know, I learned from them. Having said that, it is impossible to rank-order such relationships; I am fortunate to have become associated with Larry Smith, than whom there is no clearer observer, thinker and writer, nor more truly and thoroughly decent human being. To these three especially, among the many people who have helped me along my way in this big old world, I owe more gratitude than I can readily express.

I offer my thanks to those of my students (whom I cannot easily name now) who asked me the tough questions. I have not forgotten them. I regret the inadequacy of my responses at the times; portions of this writing are my attempts to work out those topics and issues. Thank you for bringing them to my attention.

My wife JoAnn has been my support throughout this long process, as in all else. Thank you to Carmen and Bill, too.

I am indebted to Naomi Silverman, Senior Editor at Routledge, and to the Series Editor, Eli Hinkel, for their patience above and beyond, and for their continued encouragement. The anonymous reviewers of the proposal for this work (from which I trust I have not deviated too far) provided constructive and optimistic support.

Finally, I am continually the recipient of strikingly insightful observations from friends and colleagues, literally too numerous to mention. And I thank the Department of Languages, Literatures and Linguistics at Indiana State University for granting me the sabbatical semester during which this project was begun.

All the weaknesses and outright errors that will be found in this volume are my own responsibility.

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"UNDERSTANDING" AND INTELLIGIBILITY IN WORLD ENGLISHES

> I know that you believe that you understood what you think I said, but I am not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant.
>
> Robert McCloskey, *US State Department spokesman (attributed)*

Introduction

The variety of words used to talk about kinds of "understandings" and "meanings" in the epigraph above is undeniably troublesome. The possibly apocryphal interaction presumably took place between native speakers of English who seem not to have been receiving the speaker's intentions exactly satisfactorily.

Since English in recent decades has become ever more a worldwide language, a "language of wider communication," its forms and uses across groups have become ever more topics of debate. These exchanges, not infrequently heated, go on not only among academic specialists, but also in the media and among people concerned with all aspects of linguistic productivity and creativity. Discussants may attribute opponents' stands on given issues to ideology instead of a desirable pragmatism, or to one or another kind of "liberalism" instead of a reasonable acquiescence to top-down guidance from professionals, particularly language educators. Whatever the motivations for the arguments are, and whatever evidence is amassed for them, and whatever interpretations are imposed on that evidence, the controversies promise to rage on for a long, interesting time.

The field whose participants concern themselves with language as it works in societies and cultures is usually called "sociolinguistics." Sociolinguists are not interested in teaching a language as such, but they are concerned with the complicated and complicating results of that resultant learning on individuals, on groups, and on

a society. Sociolinguistic investigations range very widely, from analyzing and reporting on elements and structures in a variety of, say, English that is unique to one locality or population to concerns about the societal and economic elitism that may become associated with being "an English speaker." It is not hard to imagine that this intersection of language and society will produce many various sets of questions that call for resolution as we seek to better understand ourselves, and our relationships to others.

Intelligibility—A First Pass

"Actually, one can easily make a case for four diasporas of English," as Y. Kachru and Smith succinctly present the situation of varieties of English today (2008, p. 5). From within what we now call the British Isles, out to the present USA and Canada, to Australia and New Zealand, to parts of Africa and to South Asia, and to the Pacific Rim nations, the English language has spread more widely and more rapidly than any other tongue has before. This appearance in the widest imaginable context of cultures and other languages has brought about an immense degree of variation in all aspects of English's forms and functions. For the moment, probably anyone would agree that what people call "English" in one place is likely to sound or function differently from the "English" in another place. This lack of predictability raises all sorts of concerns about whether my "English" will work for you and vice versa. Some writers take the approach that *an* English which will serve the needs of everyone should be promulgated. Otherwise, they believe, the utility of the language across borders will be lost.

Questions about the present and future utility of English as a language of wider communication arguably constitute the key issue in the global squabbles about what or which English people should learn and use. The usual phrase is the comparative "wid*er* communication," which a composition instructor might criticize as an "incomplete comparative—you need a *than* here." It is used consistently in the literature to designate a language that has spread outside its homeland and its historically basic population of users. Thus, the extent of such a language has become "wider" than it was in its geographic distribution and its number of speakers, but perhaps more importantly in the diverse range of peoples who come to employ it. Well-known examples of such languages are Arabic, French, Greek, Sanskrit, and Spanish (in alphabetical order, not chronologically as to the eras of their respective spreading), and in our present times, English. Although Mandarin Chinese and Hindi, to name two prime examples, are languages with very many users, they are not included in lists of languages of *wider* communication because they have not spread out in the way that Arabic did or that English has. Presentations of this concept may be found in Burchfield (1994b, especially pp. 7–8), B. Kachru (1982a, and 2005, pp. xv–xviii), Fishman (1982), and Trudgill and Hannah (2002, pp. 3–8).

The necessary criterion of a language, that it be usefully communicative, is often termed "intelligibility," and concerns about intelligibility both inform and fuel

discussions of *which* English and *whose* English should be models and standards for teaching, learning, and acquisition across the world. (See a set of focused treatments of this basic issue in Greenbaum, 1985; Quirk and Widdowson, 1985b; and Svartvik, 1985.) Questions of "Standard English" and "good English" are often set in terms of ease, directness or effectiveness of communication, which are all presumed to require an at least largely common code. We agree a priori that no two varieties of English are exactly alike: they are "varieties," after all. So the question becomes how much they have to have in common in order for us to consider them so. Users want to know whether their English will serve them with other users who are not of their immediate neighborhood, circle, region, or nation. Teachers of English want to be sure that they are teaching their students English that will meet their needs, or perhaps that they are teaching "right" English, without any particular regard for or investigation of learners' perceptions of their needs.

This concern about utility and acceptability across diverse populations is not a problem that arises for speakers of less widely distributed languages, and might not be a problem for languages that have an established single authority to arbitrate "correctness," whether that standard is written down or is geographical or class centered. This is the situation often attributed to French, because of its conservative *Académie*, though even that might be argued by someone knowledgeable about the uses of French in "the provinces" and in the Francophone countries. But for English, anyway, questions and worries such as the following always come up: "If I pronounce this vowel this way, will it cause me to be misunderstood?" "I could understand her better if she didn't cut off her end-of-word consonants," "How slowly (or fast) do I have to talk before these people will stop looking at me like that?" We could think of many more features and criteria to wonder about.

It is clear from everyday observation that there is no such thing as completely congruent pan-language intelligibility across the varieties of any widespread language, or even within a single given variety of a language. With exposure and practice, most speakers acquire more open-mindedness and "comfort" regarding the usage of others, as has been pointed out, for example, by Catford (1950), who wrote of lowering the "threshold of intelligibility." In this, Catford was referring to the degree of exposure to another language or variety of a language which made a speaker familiar with it. More familiarity lowers one's intelligibility threshold, i.e., makes the speech in question more accessible, reduces resistance, and thus allows or evinces greater intelligibility. As did Firth in his conception of a *context of situation*, Catford brings out the importance to intelligibility of criteria outside of the language proper, such as relevant objects and elements in the speech situation, including "perceived attitudes" of the participants (pp. 13–14; the same sorts of criteria are noted by Smith, e.g., 1992). Stereotyping undoubtedly plays some part in language users' broad acceptance of other varieties; to US English speakers, for example, an Irish or a French accent may be regarded as having an appealing "sexiness" that an Eastern European one does not, while Hispanic accents are often openly disparaged in North America (by non-Hispanic English speakers).

We frequently encounter broad generalizations about Englishes that are made without addressing issues related to registers, genres, and discourse styles. One does not have to go to exotic locales to find that this is true. (And by "exotic," I intend that an Indian user of English need not look to its forms and uses in the far-away USA any more than the North American needs to look to Britain.) Lexical elements, for example, take on quite different meanings and uses depending on where you find them; for example, "net," an ordinary and easy word, means quite different things in conversations about information technology and commercial fishing. Simple demonstrations of this kind of polysemy may be seen in this excerpt from a newspaper column about bridge (the card game):

> South wanted to open one no-trump. With a decent heart holding, he overcalls one no-trump. And North raises to game. Against three no-trump, West leads the heart four, low from a low tripleton in a suit partner bid that he has not supported.
>
> *Phillip Adler,* Terre Haute Tribune-Star, *23 July 2007, B*

While presumably transparent to any bridge player, this passage is entirely opaque to me, though I am "a native speaker" of English. Its usages range from the esoteric, like the item *tripleton* and the phrase *a suit partner bid*, to the apparently technical uses of ordinary words such as *raises* and *supported*.

Those who are only narrowly prepared in the observation of natural-language phenomena may commonly base linguistic analyses and discussions on *decontextualized* properties of lexical items and of grammar. However, experience and attention quickly reveal that almost any language device or element may be used in effective ways between participants who relate what is being said to the *context of situation*, to use Firth's term. Firth, an early proponent in Britain of considering the contexts in which a language exists and is used, wrote that each of us "carries his culture and much of his social reality about with him wherever he goes" (1935, p. 27). In this conception, virtually anything might be relevant to making a communicative event effective—that is, for a speaker and receiver to apprehend messages, nuances and each other's attitudes about what is being said in compatible ways. Context may be determined more narrowly, as in differentiating types of social situations, or more broadly, as in the usages of speakers who are from a particular culture and those who are not. A dinner guest who says "I can't eat that" in response to being offered a particular dish may be motivated by religious or other ideologically determined restrictions on what she considers edible, or by health concerns, or may just intend to indicate "Thank you, but I couldn't eat another bite (of anything)!"

Pronunciation plays its part in working communication, to be sure, and it can be affected noticeably by the context of situation. For example, I can talk to a small pet animal or a very young child in a high-pitched voice and even with altered productions of segments ("widdle" for "little," for instance) and get away with it in almost any circumstances in which those encounters might occur, but it would

never do for me to speak in that way in a class in anything but a demonstration of just this point. "Where is she?" will work without any previous spoken reference to "her" as long as both the speaker and hearer share various bits of knowledge—that "she" is someone whom we both know about, who might reasonably be expected to be here or nearby at this time of day, that there is no other "she" in the plausible context who readily matches this one, and so on. Other categories of examples will occur readily to the reader.

So, in fact, almost nothing we can say is communicative without its situation. When beginning students of English are taught and led to practice "How are you? ... Fine, thank you very much," they must have some sort of meeting and greeting situation in their heads. It is unlikely that these phatic phrases are ever introduced in a classroom without some reference to their utility and the ways they are carried out in just such situations. We can leave aside for our present purpose the intricacies of arguments about "Fifty Thousand Innate Concepts" (the title of the chapter in which Pinker discusses this and related issues) versus polysemy versus "conceptual semantics" (the theory "that word senses are mentally represented as expressions in a richer and more abstract language of thought"). It is clear from everyday observation that "[Word meanings] can be precise because the concepts zero in on some aspects of reality and slough off the rest" (Pinker, 2007, p. 150). Thus, examples such as "one waitress tells another *The ham sandwich wants his check*" (p. 150) and the narrative voice in *The Hobbit* saying of Gandalf that "Wizards after all are wizards" (Tolkien, 1938, p. 20) are not gibberish—and no one thinks that they are. Their contexts of use sort out the users' intentions for us.

Perhaps most early treatments of intelligibility, such as that of the Indian phonetician Bansal (1969, *The Intelligibility of Indian English*), treated pronunciation exclusively, and regularly invoked comparisons with received pronunciation (RP), as did Bansal's, or with some other "standard" and "native" variety of English. For example, Bansal (1969, p. 171) wrote about "further details of *divergences* [in Indian English] *from RP*," and asserted that "The sentence stress, rhythm, and intonation patterns in Indian English are not always in accordance with the *normal* RP patterns. ... The location of the intonation nucleus is not always at the place where it would be in *normal* English" (emphases added). Bansal started from the presumptions that the RP British variety of English was the "correct" one and that anyone who was not speaking correctly—as thus defined—was trying to, but was straying more or less far from the target. These assumptions are not cogent, given the world context of Englishes today. As the Nigerian language scholar Ayo Bamgboṣe (1998, p. 10) wrote on this point:

> It used to be thought that such intelligibility was 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 attitude is shown in pejorative judgements on some varieties of non-native Englishes, such as Prator's (1968).