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Factors Affecting the Intelligibility of Indian English: Bridging the Communication Gap

Prof. Jaydipsinh K. Dodiya
Department of English and CLS
Saurashtra University, Rajkot

Abstract

English has evolved into a global language with diverse regional forms, known collectively as "World Englishes." Indian English (IE) is one such recognized variety, shaped by historical, cultural, and social influences. This paper explores the factors affecting the intelligibility of Indian English in international contexts, emphasizing the importance of understanding rather than conformity to native norms. It challenges the notion of a single standard English and highlights the growing shift toward communication-oriented language use. The focus is on bridging communication gaps by recognizing and respecting linguistic diversity while enhancing mutual understanding.

Keywords: *Indian English, World Englishes, Intelligibility, Communication Gap, Standard English, Global English, Linguistic Diversity, English as a Lingua Franca*

I. Introduction

A. The Global Tapestry of English and the Quest for International Intelligibility

Imagine a language that started in a small corner of the world, spoken by a handful of people, and then exploded across continents, becoming the go-to language for billions. That's English today. But this global journey hasn't left it untouched. Instead, it has blossomed into a vibrant garden of "World Englishes," each with its own unique flavor and rhythm. Indian English (IE) is one such flourishing variety, a testament to how language adapts and thrives in new cultural soils. These aren't just "mistakes" or "broken English"; they are legitimate dialects, as structured and valid as

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American or British English, shaped by centuries of interaction and the lasting legacy of British colonial influence.

This global spread forces us to rethink what "standard" English even means. Can there truly be one universal blueprint for a language spoken in so many diverse ways? The answer, increasingly, is no. We're moving away from telling people how English *should* be spoken and embracing how it *is* spoken in its myriad forms.[5] This shift brings us to the crucial concept of **international intelligibility**: the ability of speakers from different linguistic backgrounds to understand each other when English serves as their common ground. It's about effective communication, not about chasing an elusive "native-like perfection" that often serves as an unnecessary barrier.

B. Decoding Communication: Intelligibility, Comprehensibility, and Accentedness

To truly grasp how English works across cultures, we need to untangle three closely related, yet distinct, terms:

- **Intelligibility:** At its heart, intelligibility is about **recognition**. Can the listener identify the words and phrases a speaker is uttering? Think of it as decoding the sounds into meaningful units. If you can pick out the words, even if they sound a bit different, the speech is intelligible. It's the foundational layer of understanding.
- **Comprehensibility:** This goes a step further. While intelligibility is about *what* words are said, comprehensibility is about *how easy* it is to understand those words and the overall message. It's the listener's subjective experience of effort. You might recognize all the words (intelligibility), but still find it hard work to piece together the meaning (low comprehensibility).
- **Accentedness:** This is about differences. How distinct or "foreign" does a speaker's pronunciation sound to a listener? An accent might be strong, but the speech can still be highly intelligible. However, a strong accent can sometimes make listeners *perceive* the speech as less intelligible, even if it isn't.

For our journey into Indian English, intelligibility—the sheer act of recognizing words—is our primary focus. If we can't even decode the words, the deeper layers of meaning remain out of reach.

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C. Indian English: A Voice of Its Own

Indian English (IE) isn't just English spoken *in* India; it's English that has become *Indian*. It's a vibrant, established variety, deeply influenced by India's rich tapestry of local languages and the enduring echoes of British colonial rule. What makes it distinct are its "Indianisms"—unique words, expressions, and ways of speaking that are woven into the fabric of daily life. IE isn't random; it has its own systematic patterns in sounds, words, grammar, and how meaning is conveyed. It's a powerful force in Indian society, a vital part of how millions communicate every day. This article will explore the fascinating linguistic and social threads that shape the intelligibility of Indian English in our interconnected world.

II. The Sound of India: Phonological Factors and Their Impact on Intelligibility

The way Indian English sounds is perhaps its most striking feature. These unique phonetic patterns significantly influence how easily non-Indian English speakers understand it, often leading to perceptions of it being "less comprehensible." These features largely stem from the transfer of phonological patterns from India's diverse indigenous languages.

A. The Dance of Vowels

The vowel system in Indian English often takes a different path compared to accents like British Received Pronunciation (RP) or General American English (GAE):

- **Monophthongization:** Imagine a smooth glide in a vowel sound, like the "ai" in "face" or the "oh" in "goat." In IE, these diphthongs often flatten out into single, pure vowel sounds. So, "face" might sound more like "fess" ([e:]) and "goat" like "goht" ([o:]).
- **Vowel Shifts:** Other vowels also find new homes. The short "i" in "pin" might stretch into a longer "ee" sound ([i:]), making "pin" sound like "peen." The "a" in "cat" might shift to an "eh" sound ([ɛ]), making "cat" sound like "ket."
- **Trap-Bath Split:** Like RP, most IE speakers keep the "a" in "class" or "staff" long, like the "ah" in "spa" (/ɑ:/). However, younger generations, influenced by American media, are increasingly blurring this distinction.

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- **Spelling Pronunciation:** Indian languages often have a very direct link between how a word is spelled and how it's pronounced. This carries over to English. So, unstressed syllables that would normally be softened to a "schwa" (like the "uh" in "about") often retain their full vowel sound in IE. "Sanity," for instance, might be pronounced with a clear "i" at the end ([ˈsæniti]) instead of a softer "uh" ([ˈsænəti]). Similarly, words ending in 'a' often get a long "ah" sound, so "India" might be /ˈɪn. ɖɪ. aː/ and "sofa" /ˈsoː. faː/.

These systematic vowel variations, while natural within IE, can subtly alter the phonetic cues that listeners from other English varieties rely on for word recognition, requiring them to adjust their ears.

B. The Consonant Story

The consonants in Indian English also tell a unique story, shaped by the sounds of India's native tongues:

- **Unaspirated Plosives:** Take the "p" in "pin" or the "t" in "top." In many English accents, these sounds come with a little puff of air (aspiration). In IE, that puff is often absent, making "pin" sound like [pɪn] rather than [pʰɪn]. This is because in Indo-Aryan languages, the distinction between aspirated and unaspirated plosives is phonemic, and English stops are often mapped to the unaspirated ones.
- **Retroflex Stops:** This is a hallmark of IE. The "t" and "d" sounds, which are typically made with the tongue touching the ridge behind the teeth in other Englishes, are often pronounced as "retroflex" sounds in IE. This means the tongue curls back slightly, giving words like "certificate" ([sərʈifikeʈ]) and "London" ([ləndɖən]) a distinct, sometimes perceived as "heavy," quality.
- **Dental Fricative Substitution:** The "th" sounds in "thin" (/θ/) and "then" (/ð/) are rare in most major Indian languages. So, in IE, "thin" often becomes "tin" ([t̪ʰɪn]) and "then" becomes "den" ([d̪en]), using dental stop sounds instead.
- **V/W Merger:** Many Indian languages don't differentiate between the "v" and "w" sounds. This often leads to a merger in IE, where both "wet" and "vet" might sound identical ([ʊɛt]), using a sound somewhere between the two. This can, understandably, lead to confusion.

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- **Z Substitution:** The "z" sound, as in "zero," is also absent in many Indian languages. Consequently, many IE speakers replace it with a "j" sound, making "zero" sound like "jiro" ([ˈdʒiːro]) and "rosy" like "rojy" ([ˈroːdʒiː]).
- **Consonant Cluster Simplification:** For some speakers, especially from rural backgrounds, complex consonant clusters at the beginning of words can be challenging. They might insert a vowel to break up the cluster, so "school" could become "ischool" (/isˈkuːl/).

These systematic changes in consonant sounds directly impact intelligibility by altering the very distinctions that help listeners recognize words in other English varieties.

C. The Rhythm and Melody: Prosodic Features

Beyond individual sounds, the overall "music" of Indian English—its stress, rhythm, and intonation—is profoundly unique and significantly affects how it's understood:

- **Syllable-Timed Rhythm:** English is typically a "stress-timed" language, meaning stressed syllables pop out at regular intervals, with unstressed syllables squeezed in between. Most Indian languages, however, are "syllable-timed," giving almost equal weight to every syllable. This rhythm carries over to IE. So, a phrase like "I'm thinking of you" might be pronounced with each word retaining its full vowel sound and relative stress, rather than the typical reductions you'd hear in other Englishes.
- **Word Stress/Accentuation:** Where the emphasis falls on a word in IE is often influenced by the speaker's native language. This can lead to stress on syllables that would be unstressed in other English varieties, or even the same stress pattern for both the noun and verb forms of a word (e.g., "permit" as ['pɜrmɪt] for both).
- **Intonation Patterns:** IE generally uses a falling intonation for statements and commands, similar to many English varieties. However, rising intonation is frequently heard in yes-no questions, tag questions, and even some "Wh-" questions, which can sound different to non-IE listeners.

These prosodic features are explicitly noted as making IE "less comprehensible to speakers of non Indian/South Asian English". In fact, research suggests that errors

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in rhythm and intonation can be "a more potent force in the loss of intelligibility than phonetic errors". The shift to a syllable-timed rhythm, in particular, can make it harder for non-IE listeners to follow the natural flow and emphasis of speech, increasing their cognitive effort.

III. Words and Meanings: The Lexical and Semantic Landscape of Indianisms

"Indianism" is a delightful umbrella term for the unique words, expressions, and turns of phrase that give Indian English its distinctive flavor. While these linguistic gems enrich IE and reflect its deep cultural roots, they can also become unexpected hurdles for speakers of other English varieties.

A. New Words on the Block: Neologisms and Unique Lexical Items

Indian English is wonderfully creative, constantly coining new words or adopting terms to perfectly capture unique cultural concepts or fill linguistic gaps.

- **"Prepone":** This is a classic! It means to reschedule something to an earlier date, the perfect opposite of "postpone." While perfectly clear in India, it's a head-scratcher for most non-IE speakers.
- **"Godown":** A term borrowed from Malay, meaning a warehouse. If you hear this, you might need a moment to figure it out.
- **"Air-dash":** To make a quick trip by air. You can probably guess the meaning, but the term itself is uniquely Indian.
- **"Time pass":** Refers to the act of passing time aimlessly. "What's your time pass?" means "What do you do for fun?"
- **"Four twenty" or "420":** This isn't just a number; it's a term for a swindler or cheat, directly from a section of the Indian Penal Code. Without that cultural context, it's completely opaque.
- **"Canteen":** In IE, this often means a cafeteria, which can be confusing for non-IE speakers who associate it with a military or workplace dining area.
- **"Crib":** In IE, to "crib" means to complain. In other Englishes, it might mean a baby's bed or to cheat on a test.

These unique words, while efficient and clear within the IE community, directly compromise universal intelligibility as they are unfamiliar or their meaning is not immediately inferable to speakers outside this variety.

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B. Familiar Words, Different Meanings: Semantic Shifts and Reassignments

One of the trickiest aspects of IE is when words you *think* you know take on entirely different meanings. These semantic shifts can lead to genuine misunderstandings:

- **"Out of station":** In IE, this simply means being out of town on business. In Standard American English (SAE), it's an old-fashioned or very specific term.
- **"Taking my lunch":** In IE, this means eating lunch. Simple enough, but the phrasing is distinct.
- **"Invigilate an exam":** This means to proctor an exam. While common in British English, it's less so in SAE.
- **"Giving or writing an exam":** This is a classic reversal! In IE, it means a student is *taking* an exam. Imagine the confusion if you're expecting a teacher to be "giving" the exam!
- **"Taking the class":** Another reversal, meaning *teaching* the class.
- **"I have a doubt":** This means "I have a question." In other English, "doubt" implies uncertainty, not a query.
- **"He passed out from college this year":** In IE, this means "he graduated from college." In SAE, "passed out" usually means to faint.
- **"My uncle expired":** Used to mean "my uncle passed away." In SAE, "expired" is typically for inanimate objects or documents.
- **"Hotel":** This is a big one! In IE, "hotel" frequently refers to a restaurant, which can lead to significant miscommunication about dining and lodging plans.

These semantic shifts, particularly reversals, can cause immediate and profound miscommunication, as the listener's established understanding is directly contradicted.

C. Double the Words, Double the Meaning: Compounding and Reduplication

Indian English loves to combine words and repeat them, a linguistic habit borrowed from Indian languages:

- **Compounding:** Words are joined to create new terms. Think "plate meal" (a fixed-portion meal), "hill station" (a town in the hills, often a resort), or "pass percentage" (the percentage of students who passed an exam). You might also hear
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- "foreign-returned" (someone who has lived abroad) or "cousin-brother" (to specify a male cousin, as many Indian languages distinguish gender in familial terms).
- **Reduplication:** Repetition of a word or phrase for emphasis, distributive meaning, or numerical range. For instance, "I bought some small small things" means "I bought some *really* small things," and "I have to study study for the test" means "I have to study *very hard*." And "Why you don't give them one one piece of cake?" means "Why don't you give them *each* a piece of cake?"

These structures can appear grammatically unusual or redundant to non-IE listeners, increasing processing effort.

D. Lost in Translation: Literal Idioms and Phrases

Indian English frequently features direct, literal translations of idioms and common phrases from indigenous Indian languages.

- **"Open or close the lights":** A direct translation meaning "turn on/off the lights." It sounds grammatically awkward to non-IE ears.
- **"What's your good name?":** A literal translation of a Hindi phrase ("Aapka shubh naam kya hai?") meaning "What is your proper/auspicious name?" used instead of "What is your name?" It can sound overly formal or quaint.
- **"My sister is eating my head":** This is a direct translation of a Hindi idiom meaning "my sister is annoying me." Without knowing the idiom, it's utterly unintelligible.
- **"Today morning" and "yesterday night":** Direct influences from Indian languages, used instead of "this morning" or "last night."

These expressions often lack direct equivalents in other English varieties and can lead to complete unintelligibility or a perception of grammatical awkwardness for non-IE speakers.

IV. The Rules of the Game: Grammatical and Syntactic Variations Affecting Intelligibility

Indian English plays by its own set of grammatical and syntactic rules, often influenced by the structures of India's native languages. These variations, while perfectly logical within IE, can sometimes trip up listeners accustomed to other English norms, impacting mutual intelligibility.

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A. Verbs and Tenses: A Different Rhythm

One common grammatical pattern in Indian English is the **use of the progressive aspect (the "-ing" form) with stative verbs**, which typically describe states rather than actions and don't usually take continuous forms in standard English:

- Instead of "I understand it," you might hear "I am understanding it."
- Instead of "She knows the answer," you might hear "She is knowing the answer."

This extends to using the progressive for **habitual or completed actions** in ways that are non-standard:

- "I am doing it often" instead of "I do it often."
- "Where are you coming from?" instead of "Where have you come from?" (implying origin, not current movement).

This grammatical transfer can cause a momentary processing delay or a perception of grammatical "incorrectness" for non-IE listeners.

B. Articles and Prepositions: Subtle Shifts

Articles ("a," "an," "the") and prepositions ("on," "to," "about") are small words that carry big meaning, and their usage in IE often differs:

- **Article Omission/Inconsistency:** Many Indian languages don't have articles, so IE speakers might omit them or use them inconsistently. You might hear "I am master's student of Computer Science" instead of "I am *a* master's student *in* Computer Science," or "What is wrong with paper?" instead of "What is wrong with *the* paper?" Sometimes, "one" is used instead of "a," as in "She gave me one book."
- **Prepositional Deviations:** Prepositions can be deleted, inserted unnecessarily, or used incorrectly. Common examples include "pay attention on" instead of "pay attention to," "discuss about" instead of simply "discuss" (as "discuss" is a transitive verb), and "convey him my greetings" instead of "convey my greetings to him."

While context often helps, these differences can make sentences sound grammatically incomplete or ambiguous to non-IE listeners, requiring extra mental effort.

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C. Asking Questions: A Different Tune

How questions are formed in Indian English can also diverge from standard patterns:

- **Lack of Inversion:** Standard English usually inverts the subject and auxiliary verb in questions ("Are you going?"). IE speakers might skip this inversion, relying on intonation to signal a question: "Which way you are going?" instead of "Which way are you going?"
- **Generic Tag Questions:** Instead of specific tag questions like "aren't you?" or "didn't she?", IE often uses generic tags like "isn't it?" or "no?" regardless of the main verb or tense. So, "You're going, isn't it?" or "He's here, no?" are common. The "no" tag is often a direct borrowing from the Hindi particle "na," used more as an interactive marker to seek confirmation or engage the listener.

These simplified structures can make questions sound like statements or appear informal to non-IE listeners, potentially causing confusion about the speaker's intent.

D. Word Order and Plurals: Shifting Perspectives

Subtle shifts in word order and how plurals are formed also characterize IE:

- **Word Order Deviations:** You might hear "Who you have come for?" instead of "For whom have you come?" or "They're late always" instead of "They're always late." Another common one is "My all friends are waiting" instead of "All my friends are waiting."
- **Pluralization of Mass Nouns:** Mass nouns (like "furniture" or "charity") are often pluralized in IE. So, "He performed many charities" might be used instead of "He performed many acts of charity," or "alphabets" for "alphabet."
- **"Yes" and "No" Agreement:** This is a particularly interesting pragmatic difference. If asked, "You didn't come on the bus?", an IE speaker might reply, "Yes, I didn't" (meaning "Yes, it is true that I did not come on the bus"). In standard English, the reply would be "No, I didn't" (meaning "No, I did not come on the bus"). This can lead to direct factual misunderstandings.

These systematic differences can disrupt the expected flow of information for non-IE listeners, requiring them to re-parse sentences and potentially leading to misinterpretations.

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V. Beyond Words: Sociolinguistic and Pragmatic Factors in Indian English Intelligibility

The intelligibility of Indian English isn't just about its sounds or grammar; it's deeply woven into the social and cultural fabric of India. English in India isn't just a language; it's a living, breathing part of society, constantly interacting with local languages and cultural norms.

A. The Multilingual Dance: Code-Switching and Code-Mixing

India is a land of countless languages, and this rich linguistic environment means English is constantly in close contact with indigenous tongues. This has given rise to **code-switching** (seamlessly moving between languages within a conversation) and **code-mixing** (dropping words or phrases from one language into another). These practices are common and widely accepted within the Indian speech community, evident in the popularity of "Hinglish" (a blend of Hindi and English) in media like movies and daily soaps, which are "adored by domestic audiences."

While this linguistic fluidity makes communication vibrant and efficient within India, it can become a significant barrier for listeners unfamiliar with the specific blend of languages. For someone outside India, especially a monolingual English speaker, a sudden Hindi word in an English sentence can lead to an immediate communication breakdown. This shows that intelligibility isn't just about language; it's about shared linguistic and cultural repertoires.

B. Cultural Nuances in Conversation: Communication Styles and Discourse Markers

The way people communicate, whether directly or indirectly, also plays a role. Eastern cultures, often built on communal and hierarchical structures, tend to favor indirect communication, a contrast to the more direct styles common in Western societies. While the direct impact on intelligibility is not explicitly detailed, these cultural nuances in how meaning is conveyed can certainly lead to misinterpretations.

Indian English also has its own set of discourse markers—those small words or phrases that guide a conversation—heavily influenced by Hindi and other Indian languages.

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- The particle **"no"** (derived from Hindi "na") is frequently used at the end of sentences for interaction or confirmation, like "You are coming no?" or "We are going, isn't it?"
- **"Only" and "itself"** are often used for emphasis, as in "I was in Delhi only" (meaning "I was *only* in Delhi") or "We can meet today itself" (meaning "We can meet *today, definitely*"). The frequent use of intensifiers is another transferred Hindi strategy.

The nativization of discourse markers and communication strategies can alter the perceived meaning or tone for non-IE listeners, potentially leading to misinterpretations of speaker intent or attitude, thereby impacting pragmatic intelligibility.

C. English as Our Own: Social Class, Prestige, and "Indianization"

In India, the way English is spoken carries significant social implications. Speaking English, particularly with a British Received Pronunciation (RP) accent, is often associated with social class and prestige.This social stratification influences how speakers might adapt their English, potentially aiming for pronunciations perceived as more globally intelligible or prestigious.

However, there is also a strong and growing trend towards the "Indianization" of English, which involves adapting English to local tastes, cultural nuances, and linguistic patterns. This adaptation fosters a sense of "ownership" among Indian speakers, giving them the confidence to innovate and transform the language to fit their communicative needs. This creates a dynamic tension where identity and local communicative needs can outweigh perceived global intelligibility.

VI. The Listener's Role: Factors in Perceiving Indian English Intelligibility

Intelligibility is not solely an inherent characteristic of a speaker's speech; it is a dynamic and interactive process significantly influenced by various listener factors. The listener's background, experiences, and cognitive processes play a crucial role in how well they perceive and understand non-native accents, including Indian English.

A. The Bilingual Advantage: Linguistic Background of Listeners

Research consistently shows that **bilingual listeners tend to find non-native speech, including Indian accents, more intelligible than monolingual listeners do**.

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This suggests that exposure to multiple linguistic systems cultivates greater cognitive flexibility or a more robust phonetic and phonological processing system, making bilingual individuals more adept at decoding diverse accents.

However, studies have not consistently confirmed an additional advantage for bilingual listeners who happen to share the same native language as the non-native speaker. This implies that while multilingualism fosters general "accent tolerance," the benefit may not be further amplified by a shared L1 between the listener and the non-native speaker.

B. The Power of Practice: Exposure and Familiarity with Accents

A critical factor influencing intelligibility is the listener's **exposure and familiarity with a particular accent**. A lack of familiarity can significantly compromise intelligibility , while increased familiarity can lead to more positive attitudinal evaluations.

Studies on Indian English highlight the nuanced role of familiarity. Experienced IE listeners, such as native Hindi or Telugu speakers fluent in IE, can accurately differentiate subtle L1-dependent differences in IE productions. In contrast, naive listeners (e.g., American-English speakers with limited exposure to IE) struggle to perceive these subtle distinctions within IE. Interestingly, these same naive listeners are very adept at distinguishing between different native Indian languages (e.g., Hindi from Telugu) when spoken in their original form. This underscores that familiarity exists on a spectrum, and experienced listeners develop fine-tuned perceptual systems to adapt to specific phonetic and prosodic patterns.

C. The Brain's Workload: Cognitive Processing and Working Memory

Processing foreign-accented speech generally imposes a higher **cognitive load** on listeners, requiring more mental effort to decode the message. When encountering non-native speakers, listeners tend to adapt by increasing their reliance on **top-down processes**—such as using contextual cues and existing expectations—and consequently extracting less detailed information from the linguistic input itself. This adaptation is often driven by an expectation of lower linguistic competence from the non-native speaker.

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The capacity of a listener's **working memory** plays a crucial role; individuals with higher working memory capacity are better able to adjust their processing and more effectively rely on context to anticipate upcoming speech. This suggests that adapting to accented speech is an effortful process requiring sufficient cognitive resources.

While a foreign accent may have minimal detrimental effect on intelligibility in *simple* tasks (e.g., isolated word recognition), it can significantly decrease intelligibility in *complex* tasks, such as understanding university lectures. In demanding situations, the added burden of processing an accent can deplete cognitive resources, leading to reduced overall comprehension and learning outcomes.

D. More Than Just Sounds: Listener Attitudes and Bias

Listeners' attitudes toward a particular accent can significantly alter their judgment of intelligibility. The perception of Indian English accents is complex, with some studies indicating positive social attitudes while others point to potential biases. Positive social attitudes towards Indian English voices have been observed, leading to phonetic convergence by listeners. This aligns with Communication Accommodation Theory, suggesting that positive social feelings can lead to greater listener adaptation. For instance, one study found participants had the strongest positive social attitudes towards Indian English voices, rating them highest for friendliness and tying with RP for intelligence, leading to greater phonetic convergence.

However, other research indicates negative biases. Studies on employability have shown that Indian-accented English was rated lower in customer-facing jobs compared to non-customer-facing jobs, suggesting potential discrimination based on accent. This highlights that perceived "intelligibility" can sometimes be a proxy for other social judgments.

VII. Conclusion

A. Weaving the Threads: A Synthesis of Factors

The intelligibility of Indian English (IE) is a multifaceted construct, shaped by a complex interplay of systematic linguistic and extra-linguistic factors. Phonologically, IE exhibits distinct vowel and consonant variations, such as monophthongization, unaspirated plosives, retroflex stops, and the merger of /v/ and

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/w/. Its prosodic features, including a syllable-timed rhythm and L1-influenced stress placement, also significantly differentiate it from stress-timed English varieties. Lexically and semantically, IE is characterized by unique "Indianisms," including neologisms like "prepone," semantic shifts (e.g., "doubt" meaning "question"), extensive compounding and reduplication, and literal translations of Indian language idioms. Grammatically and syntactically, IE displays variations in verb and tense usage (e.g., progressive with stative verbs), article and preposition patterns, question formation (lack of inversion), and word order.

These linguistic features are largely influenced by the phonology, grammar, and pragmatic norms of India's indigenous languages, leading to a distinct and legitimate variety of English. While systematic within IE, these features can present challenges to intelligibility for listeners accustomed to other English varieties. Crucially, intelligibility is not solely a speaker characteristic; it is a dynamic process heavily mediated by listener-related factors. These include the listener's linguistic background (bilinguals often perceive higher intelligibility), their exposure and familiarity with non-native accents (experienced listeners discern subtle L1 influences within IE), their cognitive processing abilities (accents increase cognitive load, especially in complex tasks), and their attitudes and potential biases towards specific accents.

B. Charting the Course: Implications for English Language Teaching and Intercultural Communication

The complex, interactive nature of intelligibility necessitates a paradigm shift in English language education and intercultural communication training. The findings strongly support the English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) perspective, which prioritizes intelligibility over the pursuit of native-like "perfection" in pronunciation teaching. English language teaching should therefore focus on features that carry a high functional load—those elements of pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar that are most critical for word and utterance recognition and for conveying core meaning. This approach acknowledges that the goal is effective communication, not necessarily accent eradication.

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For intercultural communication, awareness of IE's systematic variations is crucial for both speakers and listeners. Speakers of IE can aim for clarity by being mindful of features known to hinder intelligibility for non-IE listeners, particularly in high-stakes or critical communication contexts. Simultaneously, listeners from other English varieties should actively develop adaptive listening strategies. This involves cultivating greater tolerance for diverse accents, engaging in perceptual learning through exposure to various Englishes, and consciously challenging any inherent biases they may hold towards non-native accents. The understanding that communication breakdowns are often shared responsibilities, rather than solely attributable to speaker deficiencies, is paramount. This holistic approach fosters mutual accommodation, enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of global English communication.

C. Looking Ahead: Directions for Future Research

Despite significant progress, several areas warrant further empirical investigation to deepen the understanding of intelligibility in World Englishes. There is a pressing need for more research focusing on **non-native speaker to non-native speaker (NNS-NNS) interaction**, as this represents the most probable interlocutor scenario in global English communication today.Such studies should move beyond one-way data collection to explore the dynamic interaction between NNS speakers.

Future research should also continue to meticulously **differentiate between intelligibility, comprehensibility, and interpretability** in diverse communicative contexts. This will allow for a more nuanced understanding of where communication breakdowns occur—whether at the level of word recognition, meaning comprehension, or the interpretation of speaker intent.

Furthermore, more in-depth investigation into the impact of **accent strength, shared L1 background, and the role of cognitive load in complex, real-world communicative tasks** (e.g., English-Medium Instruction lectures) is essential. Understanding how sustained cognitive effort affects deeper learning and information retention in such demanding environments will provide valuable insights for pedagogical practices. Finally, continued exploration of the **psychosocial attributes influencing accent perception and bias** is crucial to address the social and

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ideological dimensions of intelligibility and to mitigate potential discrimination based on accent.

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