

The Impact of Dialect and Accent Variation on English Pronunciation and Comprehension: a Literature Review

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Abstrak

Tinjauan pustaka ini meneliti dampak variasi dialek dan aksen pada pelafalan dan pemahaman bahasa Inggris dalam konteks komunikasi global, di mana bahasa Inggris berfungsi sebagai lingua franca. Berdasarkan lima studi empiris, tinjauan ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana latar belakang bahasa pertama memengaruhi pola pelafalan penutur dan bagaimana keakraban pendengar memengaruhi persepsi ucapan beraksen. Temuan tersebut mengungkapkan bahwa variasi aksen tidak eksklusif untuk penutur non-asli; bahkan variasi asli, seperti bahasa Inggris Australia, dapat memengaruhi kejelasan. Pengalaman pendengar, latar belakang fonologis yang sama, dan paparan terhadap aksen yang beragam memainkan peran penting dalam meningkatkan pemahaman. Wawasan ini menantang preferensi tradisional untuk pelafalan seperti penutur asli dan mendukung pendekatan yang lebih inklusif terhadap pengajaran bahasa dan pengembangan teknologi. Dalam lingkungan pendidikan, kejelasan harus diprioritaskan daripada kesesuaian aksen, sementara sistem pengenalan ucapan harus dirancang untuk mengakomodasi aksen bahasa Inggris yang lebih beragam. Secara keseluruhan, tinjauan ini menggarisbawahi perlunya merangkul keragaman aksen sebagai fitur alami bahasa Inggris global, yang mempromosikan saling pengertian daripada memaksakan standar yang kaku. Mengenali dan menangani keberagaman ini berkontribusi pada praktik komunikasi yang lebih adil, efektif, dan realistis dalam pedagogi dan inovasi digital.

Kata kunci: *Variasi Aksen, Dialek, Kecerdasan, Pengucapan, Persepsi Ucapan, Bahasa Inggris Global, Bahasa Inggris sebagai Lingua Franca, Pendidikan Bahasa, Teknologi Ucapan*

Abstract

This literature review examines the impact of dialect and accent variation on English pronunciation and comprehension within the context of global communication, where English functions as a lingua franca. Based on five empirical studies, the review explores how first language backgrounds influence speakers' pronunciation patterns and how listener familiarity affects the perception of accented speech. The findings reveal that accent variation is not exclusive to non-native speakers; even native varieties, such as Australian English, can affect intelligibility. Listener experience, shared phonological backgrounds, and exposure to diverse accents play a crucial role in improving comprehension. These insights challenge the traditional preference for native-like pronunciation and support a more inclusive approach to language instruction and technology development. In educational settings, intelligibility should be prioritized over accent conformity, while speech recognition systems must be designed to accommodate a wider range of English accents. Overall, the review underscores the need to embrace accent diversity as a natural feature of global English, promoting mutual understanding rather than imposing rigid standards. Recognizing and addressing this diversity contributes to more equitable, effective, and realistic communication practices in both pedagogy and digital innovation.

Keywords: *Accent Variation, Dialect, Intelligibility, Pronunciation, Speech Perception, Global English, English as a Lingua Franca, Language Education, Speech Technology*

INTRODUCTION

In today's interconnected world, English has firmly established itself as the dominant global lingua franca. It is not only the primary medium of communication in international business, science, education, and technology, but also a common bridge among people from vastly different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As English continues to spread across the globe, it is increasingly shaped by the phonological systems of its speakers' first languages (L1). This has resulted in an extraordinary range of dialect and accent variations that reflect both the individuality of speakers and the cultural diversity embedded in English usage. These variations are not merely superficial differences in speech style, they play a crucial role in shaping how English is produced and perceived. For many English learners and speakers, pronunciation becomes one of the most challenging aspects of language use. This is because it is influenced by deeply ingrained patterns of articulation from the speaker's native language. As a result, even when speakers have excellent command of English vocabulary and grammar, their pronunciation, especially when marked by a strong accent can become a barrier to communication. Derwing and Munro (2005) note that unintelligible pronunciation, more than grammatical mistakes, is often the key factor that disrupts listener understanding and causes frustration in conversation.

At the same time, accent variation is not inherently negative. It reflects the natural evolution of language and highlights the adaptability of English as it is used in different regions and contexts. In multilingual and multicultural settings such as international conferences, multinational companies, or online platforms English often serves as a functional medium rather than a symbol of native identity. This situation, known as English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), shifts the focus of communication from native-like fluency to mutual intelligibility. Jenkins (2000) argues that insisting on native-speaker pronunciation norms is both unrealistic and unnecessary, especially when the majority of English interactions today occur between non-native speakers.

However, one of the key challenges in this area is understanding how listeners process and adapt to unfamiliar accents. A distinction must be made between accentedness how different a speaker's pronunciation is from a perceived standard and intelligibility, which is the listener's actual ability to understand the message. Munro and Derwing (1995) emphasize that a speaker can be heavily accented and still be highly intelligible, especially if the accent is consistent and predictable. Conversely, a speaker with only a mild accent might be difficult to understand if their speech includes unfamiliar intonation patterns or prosody. These findings challenge the simplistic assumption that clarity is directly tied to "native-sounding" speech.

Interestingly, emerging research such as Xie and Fowler (2013) introduces the Interlanguage Speech Intelligibility Benefit (ISIB), a phenomenon where non-native listeners may comprehend fellow L2 speakers more easily than native speakers. For example, a Chinese learner of English might find another Chinese speaker's English easier to process due to shared phonetic expectations and similar articulatory habits. This shared linguistic background can lead to higher predictability, reduced cognitive effort, and more effective communication, even if the pronunciation deviates from native norms. Despite these insights, many English education systems and speech technologies still prioritize standard native accents (e.g., American or British English) as the model of correctness. This often leads to unrealistic goals for learners and underrepresentation of diverse speech patterns in tools like speech recognition systems. As Kirkpatrick (2007) and Seidlhofer (2011) suggest, what is needed instead is a more inclusive, intelligibility-based approach that acknowledges and accommodates the plurality of English accents.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the impact of dialect and accent variation on English pronunciation and comprehension by reviewing empirical studies from both phonetic and cognitive perspectives. Rather than viewing accent as a flaw, this research treats it as a dynamic part of language use that must be better understood. Through this literature-based analysis, the paper seeks to highlight key patterns, challenges, and opportunities in global English communication, particularly in educational and technological contexts. Ultimately, this review argues for a more nuanced and open-minded approach to pronunciation, one that values clarity and communication over conformity to native norms.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative literature review approach as its primary research method. Rather than conducting original experiments or collecting new field data, this method focuses on synthesizing existing scholarly research related to dialect and accent variation in English pronunciation and comprehension. A literature review is especially suitable for identifying key concepts, comparing multiple findings, and uncovering patterns across different studies, which can help develop a broader understanding of the topic. The choice of this method aligns with the study's goal: to map out how variations in accent and dialect affect both the production and perception of English speech across diverse linguistic contexts.

Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The review draws on five peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2005 and 2017. These articles were selected based on the following criteria:

- They directly address topics related to accent or dialect variation, particularly in relation to English pronunciation and comprehension.
- They include empirical data, whether from experimental phonetics, acoustic analysis, speech recognition studies, or listener perception experiments.
- They provide a balance of native and non-native English contexts, ensuring that the review represents both L1 and L2 English speaker experiences.
- The studies offer diverse perspectives, ranging from cognitive processing to technological applications, allowing for a comprehensive view of the research landscape.

The five articles selected for this review were chosen based on their methodological rigor, thematic relevance, and contribution to understanding how accent and dialect variation affect English pronunciation and comprehension. Each study offers a unique lens whether through phonetic analysis, listener perception, or technological application that enriches the overall discussion, as detailed in the selected works as follows.

- 1) Premananth et al. (2016) conducted an articulatory and acoustic analysis of Indian English, focusing on how speakers' first language influences the way they produce English sounds. Their study provides important insights into the systematic nature of non-native pronunciation patterns and how these can impact speech clarity.
- 2) Xie & Fowler (2013) explored how Mandarin-accented English is perceived by both native English listeners and Mandarin-speaking listeners. Their concept of the Interlanguage Speech Intelligibility Benefit (ISIB) offers a fresh perspective on how shared L1 backgrounds can actually enhance understanding among non-native speakers.
- 3) Tjalve & Huckvale (2005) approached the issue from a technological standpoint by developing a computational model that simulates accent-related pronunciation differences. Their work is particularly relevant for improving automatic speech recognition systems, which often struggle with accent diversity.
- 4) Cox & Fletcher (2017) focused on Australian English, a native variety, and highlighted how even within native dialects, phonological features can differ significantly from more widely taught standards such as British or American English. Their findings remind us that intelligibility challenges are not exclusive to non-native speakers.
- 5) Adank et al. (2009) examined how listeners process familiar and unfamiliar native accents, especially in noisy environments. Their findings underscore the role of accent familiarity in comprehension and reveal how cognitive load increases when processing speech from unfamiliar accent patterns.

These sources were obtained through online academic databases such as ScienceDirect, JSTOR, and Taylor & Francis Online, using search terms like "English accent variation," "pronunciation intelligibility," "non-native speech perception," and "dialectal influence on comprehension."

Data Analysis Procedure

Once the studies were selected, the review followed a thematic synthesis approach. Each article was read carefully and coded based on key variables: (1) the type of accent or dialect

studied, (2) the linguistic features examined (such as vowel shifts or phoneme substitution), (3) the listener population (native or non-native), and (4) the impact on comprehension and intelligibility.

These themes were then grouped into broader categories to identify recurring patterns, contrasts, and implications. The synthesis aimed not only to summarize what each study found but also to draw meaningful connections between them, especially regarding how accent variation influences real-time communication and listener effort. Special attention was given to findings that challenge common assumptions (e.g., that native speech is always more intelligible) and those that suggest practical solutions, such as inclusive teaching models or accent-aware technology.

Through this structured and comparative review, the study aims to bring together insights from various researchers to better understand how accent and dialect variation shape spoken English in real-world contexts. Rather than simply summarizing each article, the analysis focuses on drawing meaningful connections between them, highlighting both consistent findings and areas of disagreement. This approach not only helps to clarify how pronunciation and comprehension are influenced by linguistic variation, but also opens the door for rethinking how we approach these issues in language education and communication practice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The review of five selected studies reveals several recurring themes concerning how dialect and accent variation influence both the production of English pronunciation and the listener's comprehension. Although the methods and contexts of these studies differ, common threads emerge that help paint a broader understanding of how accents affect real-world communication. These themes can be categorized into three key areas: (1) articulatory and acoustic modifications in speech production, (2) the role of listener familiarity and shared L1 background, and (3) implications for education and speech technology.

Articulatory and Acoustic Shifts in Pronunciation

One of the most noticeable ways dialect and accent variation shows up in English is through how people physically produce speech how they form sounds, place stress, and control rhythm. These articulatory and acoustic differences are shaped by a speaker's first language (L1), and they can have a strong impact on how clearly that person is understood when speaking English. In the study by Premananth et al. (2016), researchers explored how Indian English speakers pronounced English words differently due to the influence of their native language. They found that many non-native speakers tend to replace unfamiliar English sounds with those that are more common or easier in their own language. For example, the English [θ] sound, like in "think," doesn't exist in many Indian languages. So, it often gets replaced with [t] or [s] resulting in words like "think" sounding more like "tink" or "sink."

Now, this kind of substitution doesn't mean the speaker is wrong or careless it's actually a very natural process called phonological transfer. Our mouths and brains are trained by our first language, and that training doesn't just disappear when we learn a new one. What's interesting is that these substitutions tend to follow patterns. They're not random mistakes; they're consistent strategies used to make communication possible with the tools a speaker already has. But these pronunciation changes can have consequences. In everyday conversation, they might go unnoticed or cause only small moments of confusion. But in more formal or high-pressure settings—like presentations, job interviews, or even automated speech systems—these differences might lead to misunderstanding or misrecognition. For instance, a voice assistant trained only on American English might completely fail to understand a speaker with an Indian English accent, even though the speaker is perfectly fluent.

Cox and Fletcher (2017) highlight that accent variation is not exclusive to non-native speakers. Their analysis of Australian English a native variety reveals phonological features such as broader diphthongs and fronted vowels that differ from British or American English. While these are not linguistic errors, they may still pose challenges to intelligibility, particularly when speakers of different native dialects interact without prior exposure. This underscores that even among native English users, dialectal variation can influence comprehension, challenging the assumption that native speech is uniformly intelligible.

The takeaway here is simple but powerful: Everyone speaks with an accent. And all accents bring with them certain patterns of pronunciation that can affect how speech is heard and understood. Recognizing this helps us move away from judging accents as “good” or “bad,” and toward understanding them as part of how language lives and breathes in different communities.

Listener Familiarity and the Role of Shared L1

While pronunciation plays a crucial role in speech intelligibility, comprehension is equally influenced by the listener's familiarity with the speaker's accent. In many cases, successful communication depends not solely on how words are articulated, but on whether the listener has prior exposure to the phonetic and prosodic features of the speaker's speech. This underscores the relational nature of intelligibility, where both speaker and listener contribute to the communicative outcome.

Xie and Fowler (2013) introduced the concept of the Interlanguage Speech Intelligibility Benefit (ISIB), which highlights that non-native listeners may comprehend accented speech from fellow L2 speakers more effectively than native listeners. In their study, Mandarin L1 speakers demonstrated significantly better understanding of English spoken with a Mandarin accent than native English listeners did. This suggests that shared phonological background facilitates greater predictability in speech perception. Listeners are able to draw upon familiar segmental and suprasegmental cues, thereby reducing processing effort and improving overall intelligibility. Similarly, Adank et al. (2009) investigated how listeners process different English accents in noisy conditions. Their findings confirmed that accent familiarity significantly enhances listening accuracy, even under adverse auditory environments. When exposed to familiar accents, participants were more efficient in recognizing words and phrases, indicating that familiarity enables listeners to anticipate and adapt to pronunciation variations. In contrast, unfamiliar accents imposed a higher cognitive load, requiring increased concentration and effort to interpret the message accurately. This cognitive burden can impair real-time communication, particularly in high-stress or time-sensitive interactions.

The implications of these findings extend to a wide range of global communication contexts. In international classrooms, for instance, students may encounter difficulty not because a lecturer's English is incorrect, but because the accent is unfamiliar. Similarly, in business or customer service environments, interlocutors with diverse accents may experience mutual miscomprehension due to limited exposure rather than linguistic incompetence. This points to the necessity of promoting accent inclusivity and developing listening flexibility as core components of language education and intercultural training.

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that adaptability in communication is reciprocal. Speakers often unconsciously modify their speech when they sense that their interlocutor is struggling to understand a phenomenon known as speech accommodation. This process involves adjusting pronunciation, tempo, or lexical choices to enhance clarity. The dynamic interplay between speaker adaptation and listener accommodation reflects the interactive nature of spoken communication, where intelligibility is co-constructed rather than delivered unilaterally.

In essence, the findings reviewed in this section highlight that intelligibility is not an inherent property of the speech signal alone, but is also shaped by listener experience, expectations, and cognitive strategies. Greater exposure to a variety of English accents can significantly improve comprehension and reduce communicative barriers. As English continues to function as a global lingua franca, fostering an awareness of accent diversity and promoting adaptable listening strategies will be essential to achieving inclusive and effective communication.

Technology and Educational Implications

In today's increasingly digital and multilingual society, the influence of accent variation extends beyond interpersonal interactions into the realms of technology and education. Tools such as voice assistants, automated subtitles, and speech-to-text applications have become integral to everyday communication. However, many of these technologies are trained predominantly on native English speech, often sourced from speakers of a narrow demographic background. This

raises a crucial concern: how effectively can such systems respond to users who speak English fluently, but with a different accent?

Tjalve and Huckvale (2005) addressed this issue by developing a computational model capable of simulating how speakers from various linguistic backgrounds pronounce English. This type of research is essential for enhancing the flexibility and responsiveness of automatic speech recognition (ASR) systems. Ideally, these technologies should be inclusive capable of understanding English as spoken by a Nigerian teacher, an Indonesian student, or a French engineer, each using distinct phonological features shaped by their native languages.

When systems lack this adaptability, speakers with non-standard or less-represented accents are often at a disadvantage. Misrecognition by voice interfaces can lead not only to frustration but also to a deeper sense of linguistic exclusion. This reflects not just a technological limitation, but a broader issue of linguistic bias embedded within digital tools. As such, speech technologies must evolve to reflect the phonetic realities of global English usage. A parallel concern exists within the sphere of language education. Traditional English teaching has long emphasized the goal of achieving native-like pronunciation. However, this expectation is increasingly viewed as both unrealistic and unnecessary. As Jenkins (2000) asserts, intelligibility not imitation should be the primary aim of pronunciation instruction. The focus should shift toward enabling learners to be understood clearly by a wide range of interlocutors, regardless of their accent.

This reorientation has practical implications. Learners benefit when they are encouraged to articulate English in a way that aligns with their linguistic identity, while still achieving clarity. Exposure to diverse English accents can enhance listening skills and intercultural awareness. Similarly, teachers must be equipped with strategies to foster inclusive classrooms, where accent variation is normalized rather than corrected. When both technology and education begin to reflect the true diversity of English, communication becomes not only more effective but also more equitable.

Synthesizing the Findings

Across the five studies reviewed, a consistent and compelling theme emerges: accent and dialect variation are not barriers to communication, but integral elements of how English functions in a global context. These variations, rather than being marginal anomalies, are central to the lived experience of English users worldwide.

From the perspective of production, speakers naturally bring the influence of their first language into their English pronunciation. As demonstrated by Premananth et al. (2016), these influences often result in systematic and predictable articulatory patterns, shaped by the phonetic and phonological structures of their L1. Such variation is not the result of carelessness or error, but rather an adaptive response to linguistic constraints. On the perception side, listener experience plays an equally significant role. Both Xie and Fowler (2013) and Adank et al. (2009) show that intelligibility increases when listeners are familiar with an accent, or when they share the same linguistic background as the speaker. These findings disrupt the commonly held assumption that native English is inherently easier to understand. In reality, intelligibility is a dynamic and relational phenomenon, shaped by familiarity, exposure, and cognitive adaptability.

This evidence calls for a broader reconsideration of how we define “good” English. Rather than privileging a singular standard, we must recognize that English is a pluralistic and adaptive language spoken in diverse ways by people around the world. When we move away from rigid norms and embrace phonological variation, we open up space for more inclusive and authentic communication practices.

Furthermore, these studies remind us that successful communication is co-constructed. It is not solely the speaker’s responsibility to conform to a listener’s expectations, nor the listener’s duty to decode unfamiliar speech without support. Communication is most effective when both parties are prepared to adapt whether through speech accommodation or increased listening flexibility. These insights not only challenge prevailing notions of linguistic correctness but also offer a roadmap for how we might navigate English use in increasingly multicultural environments. Educational institutions, policy makers, and language professionals alike must consider how

curriculum design, teacher training, and assessment methods can evolve to reflect the real-world linguistic diversity of English.

Ultimately, accent variation should not be viewed as a deviation to be corrected, but as a natural expression of linguistic identity. Whether in classrooms, conferences, or conversation, embracing accent diversity enhances mutual understanding and affirms the legitimacy of all English users. As English continues to evolve as a global lingua franca, the ability to navigate its many voices may be one of the most valuable communicative competencies of our time.

Table 1. Overview of Key Studies on Dialect and Accent Variation in English Pronunciation and Comprehension

No.	Author(s)	Study Focus	Participant Profile	Key Findings	Implications
1	Premananth et al. (2016)	Articulatory and acoustic features of Indian English accent	Indian English speakers (non-native)	Non-native speakers substitute unfamiliar English phonemes with L1 equivalents; substitutions follow predictable, L1-based articulatory patterns.	Highlights the importance of L1 influence on pronunciation; useful for speech training and ASR optimization.
2	Xie & Fowler (2013)	Listener perception and the Interlanguage Speech Intelligibility Benefit (ISIB)	Mandarin-speaking listeners and speakers	Mandarin-accented English is more intelligible to Mandarin L1 listeners than to native English listeners, due to shared phonetic expectations.	Challenges native-speaker bias; supports intelligibility-based communication models.
3	Tjalve & Huckvale (2005)	Computational modeling of accent variation for speech technology	Simulated speech data with accent parameters	Developed a model to predict and simulate pronunciation variation across accents; demonstrated value in improving automatic speech recognition (ASR) accuracy.	Emphasizes the role of inclusive modeling in technological applications; supports development of adaptive ASR.
4	Cox & Fletcher (2017)	Native dialect variation within Australian English	Native Australian English speakers	Documented systematic phonological traits (e.g., diphthong broadening, vowel fronting) that diverge from standard varieties (British/American).	Suggests that even native accents affect intelligibility; challenges the notion of a fixed “standard” English.
5	Adank et al. (2009)	Comprehension of familiar vs.	Native English	Listeners understood familiar	Stresses the role of

unfamiliar accents under noisy conditions	listeners in experimental settings	accents more accurately under adverse conditions; unfamiliar accents increased cognitive processing effort and listening difficulty.	exposure and familiarity in comprehension; applicable to teaching and listening training.
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CONCLUSION

This literature review has examined how dialect and accent variation affect both the production of English pronunciation and its comprehension by listeners, drawing insights from five empirical studies. The findings consistently show that accent is not merely a superficial feature of speech, it is deeply connected to a speaker's linguistic background, identity, and communicative context. Likewise, the listener's ability to understand speech is not simply a matter of hearing, but of experience, familiarity, and cognitive adaptation.

From a phonetic and articulatory perspective, speakers inevitably bring the influence of their first language (L1) into their English pronunciation. As shown by Premananth et al. (2016), non-native speakers tend to substitute unfamiliar English sounds with ones that are more familiar or accessible based on their L1. These patterns are systematic and predictable, and rather than being considered "errors," they should be understood as natural and adaptive strategies for achieving intelligibility. Similarly, Cox and Fletcher (2017) demonstrated that even native dialects, such as Australian English, contain significant phonological features such as vowel shifts and unique stress patterns that can impact mutual comprehension, especially in cross-dialectal interactions.

On the perceptual side, listener experience plays an equally crucial role. The Interlanguage Speech Intelligibility Benefit (Xie & Fowler, 2013) highlights how listeners who share the same L1 as the speaker are often better at understanding accented speech than native English listeners. Adank et al. (2009) further support this by showing that listeners understand familiar accents more easily, especially in noisy environments. These findings remind us that intelligibility is not a fixed property of the speaker's voice alone; rather, it is a dynamic interaction between speaker and listener, shaped by exposure, familiarity, and openness to variation.

The implications of these findings are significant, particularly for education and technology. In the classroom, teachers should prioritize intelligibility and communicative clarity over accent correction or conformity to native norms. Language learners must be empowered to speak English clearly and confidently in their own voices, without feeling pressure to imitate a specific accent. Likewise, speech recognition technologies must evolve to be more inclusive of global accent diversity. When systems are only trained on limited accent models, they risk excluding large groups of proficient English speakers whose speech does not match the "standard" dataset.

Moreover, these discussions point to a deeper issue: how we define "correct" or "good" English. The traditional focus on native speaker norms is no longer sufficient in a world where English functions as a global lingua franca. Instead, we need to recognize that English is spoken in many ways, and all of them are valid when they achieve mutual understanding. Viewing accent variation as a natural part of global English, rather than a problem, allows for more inclusive and realistic communication practices.

In conclusion, acknowledging and addressing accent diversity is essential in responding to the realities of how English is used across different cultures and communities. Rather than striving for uniformity in speech, our collective efforts whether in education, research, or technology—should focus on enhancing mutual intelligibility, promoting inclusive communication, and equipping individuals to navigate a linguistically diverse world with confidence and understanding.

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