
Intelligibility as nativeness in migrant work and employment

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Abstract

This article explores how intelligibility acts as a euphemism for nativeness in English within migrant work and employment contexts through an analytical narrative synthesis of relevant research. When intelligibility is treated as an individual trait, practice, or responsibility of migrant workers, these workers are expected to emulate a specific type of speaker, which often means emulating a native English speaker from the Global North. This individualization of intelligibility is facilitated by several workplace processes, including the construction of a singular professional voice, the skilling of oral communication, and the expectation that workers linguistically cater to customers. After drawing on literature to explain each of these processes, the article concludes with reflections on how intelligibility can be separated from nativeness in professional communication.

Key words: English, intelligibility, migrants, nativeness, professional communication

Résumé

Prenant la forme d'une synthèse narrative analytique de recherches pertinentes, cet article explore la manière dont l'intelligibilité sert d'euphémisme pour désigner la nativité en anglais dans le contexte du travail et de l'emploi des migrants. Lorsque l'intelligibilité est considérée comme une caractéristique individuelle, une pratique ou une responsabilité des travailleurs migrants, on attend de ces travailleurs qu'ils imitent un type spécifique de locuteur, ce qui signifie souvent imiter un locuteur natif anglais du Nord global. Cette individualisation de l'intelligibilité est facilitée par plusieurs processus sur le lieu de travail, notamment la construction d'une voix professionnelle unique, l'acquisition de compétences en communication orale et la nécessité de répondre aux besoins linguistiques des clients. Après avoir analysé la littérature pour expliquer chacun de ces processus, l'article conclut par des réflexions sur la manière dont l'intelligibilité peut être dissociée de la nativité dans la communication professionnelle.

Mots-clés : anglais, intelligibilité, migrants, nativité, communication professionnelle

Introduction

The nativeness and intelligibility principles represent two competing conceptualizations of and approaches to English pronunciation teaching and learning. The nativeness principle emphasizes making learners sound like *native English speakers*, whereas the intelligibility principle maintains that learners can be understood without fully altering their *nonnative* accents (Levis, 2020).¹ In the context of work in the English-speaking Global North, these principles are central to discussions about workplace pronunciation learning. Increased transnational migration in countries such as the US, Canada, and Australia has resulted in a diverse population of English speakers who must communicate across various industries, raising the question of whether mutual understanding requires workers to sound alike. While the intelligibility principle appears more inclusive by not mandating vocal homogeneity, a closer examination within migrant work and employment contexts reveals that intelligibility is not entirely distinct from nativeness.

Intelligibility operates as a euphemism for nativeness because migrant workers and jobseekers are frequently pressured to regard it as an *individual* trait, practice, or responsibility, compelling them to emulate a particular type of speaker. To substantiate this argument, this article presents an analytical narrative synthesis of existing research on workplace oral communication and examines how these conceptualizations reinforce intelligibility as nativeness for migrant workers and jobseekers. The research was primarily sourced from scholarly databases such as Web of Science and Google Scholar, using terms including “intelligibility,” “nativeness,” “migration,” and “work.” The analysis is specifically situated in settler colonial nations such as the US, Canada, and Australia, where the spoken English of migrants and other marginalized speakers is often criticized to sustain racist, classist, and colonial hierarchies (e.g., Creese, 2010). The literature review identified several recurring themes that reinforce intelligibility as nativeness: the construction of a singular professional voice for certain professions, the skilling of oral communication rather than its treatment as a collaborative activity, and, particularly in interactive service work, the expectation that workers must linguistically cater to customers.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. First, it further clarifies and critically examines the distinctions between the nativeness and intelligibility principles. Then, it addresses the oppressive perceptions of migrant (un)intelligibility in workplace contexts. These sections are followed by an overview of the conceptualizations of oral workplace communication previously outlined. The article concludes with reflections on reconceptualizing intelligibility in professional settings to challenge its dependence on nativeness.

The nativeness and intelligibility principles

As stated before, the nativeness and intelligibility principles are two opposing ideas about what the ultimate goal of English pronunciation teaching and learning

¹I emphasize the terms *native* and *nonnative* because they are not objective linguistic categories; they are ideological constructions. However, as these categories impact (racially) minoritized language users, I continue to use both terms.

should be. According to the nativeness principle, the success of pronunciation learners is measured by how well they are able to emulate all phonological features vocally projected from an imagined *native English speaker* (Levis, 2020). That is, the overall goal is to remove all traces of *nonnative-sounding* speech. The nativeness principle persists because it continues to inform various language-teaching methodologies. Historically, for example, nativeness informed early approaches such as the audiolingual method in the mid-20th century, which involved students listening to recordings of *native English speech* and imitating it (Derwing & Munro, 2015). In the present day, nativeness is upheld as an ideal in accent modification programs, a topic to be explored later, which market the idea that *native-like* pronunciation is easily obtainable if one is willing to pay for it (Blommaert, 2009). Overall, the nativeness principle may appeal to those who feel insecure about their *nonnative* accents.

However, this principle is not without its obvious problems. To begin, the nativeness principle disregards existing research showing that it is extremely difficult to convert a *nonnative* accent into a *native-sounding* one after puberty (e.g., Flege et al., 1995). Thus, upholding nativeness as the ultimate pronunciation goal sets an unrealistic standard for many learners. Another significant problem concerns the principle's political nature. Although nativeness and, by extension, nonnativeness might appear to be straightforward linguistic categories, they operate as racialized, classed, and national distinctions between different groups of English speakers. Whereas the label of *native English speaker* connotes an upper- or middle-class White person from a Global North nation such as the UK or US, *nonnative English speaker* signals someone racialized as non-White from a country formerly colonized by one of those nations (Jeong & Lindemann, 2025; Kubota & Lin, 2006; Ramjattan, 2024). This arbitrary distinction speaks to the colonial spread of English around the world, in which White colonizers used the language to reinforce ideas about the (linguistic) inferiority of colonized populations, thereby positioning them as *nonnative speakers* of the language (Motha, 2014; Phillipson, 1992). Who constitutes a *native* or *nonnative English speaker* is ultimately steeped in raciolinguistic ideologies, which are socially shared perceptions that frame the language practices of racially minoritized groups as perpetually deficient, even when those practices match those of privileged White groups (Flores & Rosa, 2015). These ideologies are held by individual *native English speakers* as well as *nonnative English speakers* who internalize them. They are also upheld by institutional policies and practices that establish nativeness as the standard for oral communication (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Ramjattan, 2024). A critical examination of the nativeness principle, then, reveals that striving for *native-like* pronunciation entails whitening one's speech while never being perceived as having attained the desired standard (Ramjattan, 2022, 2023).

Due to the unreasonable and oppressive elements of the nativeness principle, the intelligibility principle is promoted as a more ethical alternative. Whereas the nativeness principle focuses on *accentedness*—the degree to which a *nonnative speaker* sounds similar to a *native speaker*—the intelligibility principle focuses on whether listeners understand the speaker and the effort required to understand

the speaker, referred to as comprehensibility (Derwing & Munro, 2015; Jeong & Lindemann, 2025; Levis, 2020). This principle asserts that all English speakers can be understood in any accent, and that the goal of pronunciation teachers is to help these speakers find their own *path* to intelligibility.

If intelligibility must be pursued, then it should be considered the end goal of oral communication (Jeong & Lindemann, 2025; Levis, 2020). One implication of this conceptualization is that pronunciation is not the sole dimension of intelligibility. Speakers can draw on various linguistic and other semiotic resources to make themselves understood (Levis, 2020). For example, if a listener cannot interpret a speaker's pronunciation of a word, the speaker can use a synonym or gesture to convey the intended meaning. A further implication is that listeners share responsibility for successful communication with speakers. The cognitive effort listeners invest and the ideologies that shape their perceptions of the speaker can either facilitate or hinder understanding (Jeong & Lindemann, 2025; Nagai & Everhart, 2022). From this perspective, intelligibility is co-constructed by speakers and listeners.

Yet, despite offering a more ethical and accurate account of successful oral communication, the intelligibility principle is often misinterpreted. One misconception is that focusing on intelligibility *reduces standards* by ignoring phonological aspects of *native-English-speaker* pronunciation, which is deemed a superior way to speak (Levis, 2020). A related misconception positions the intelligibility principle as a compromise with the nativeness principle in which learners identify and acquire features of *native* pronunciation deemed essential for understanding (Jeong & Lindemann, 2025; Levis, 2020). As Jeong and Lindemann (2025) posit, these misinterpretations reinforce ideologies of nativeness by upholding the imagined *native English speaker* as the arbiter of *correct* and *incorrect* pronunciation. More fundamentally, they treat intelligibility as an individual quality of speech rather than something achieved through interaction (Jeong & Lindemann, 2025; Nagai & Everhart, 2022). By focusing on what constitutes intelligible speech rather than on how interlocutors achieve mutual understanding, these interpretations continue to rely on ideologies of nativeness intertwined with raciolinguistic ideologies (Ramjattan, 2026). Together, these ideologies continue to shape how speech is perceived and evaluated.

Treating intelligibility as an inherent property of speech risks categorizing particular groups as inherently intelligible or unintelligible (Ramjattan, 2026). This issue is examined in greater detail in the subsequent section on workplace perceptions of migrant (un)intelligibility.

Migrant (un)intelligibility at work

In this article, *migrant* first functions as a technical designation for a person who moves to another country, normally for the purpose of finding employment. Moreover, *migrant* serves as an umbrella term for different kinds of migrants, ranging from immigrants—who permanently settle in a host country—to international students—who may stay only temporarily. By *migrant worker*, I refer to any worker classified as a migrant, but also to a person whose labour migrates, which will

be discussed later in relation to call centre work.² Thus, *migrant* is a capacious term with multiple meanings. Following Kunz (2020), I understand *migrant* to be a polysemic term in the ideological sense because it is typically used to hierarchize groups of people. That is, in Western contexts in particular, *migrant* has become a synonym for people who are racialized as non-White, come from the Global South, and are positioned as *deficient* in terms of technical knowledge, linguistic background, and culture (Krysa et al., 2017; Kunz, 2020).

For the purposes of this article, the alleged deficiency concerns how well migrants are understood. In English-dominant labour markets and workplaces, where they may be further classified as *nonnative English speakers*, migrants are typically maligned for unintelligible speech (Abodunrin et al., 2023; Blommaert, 2009; Hideg et al., 2024). There are several reasons for such criticism. First, there is the idea that listening to speech noticeably different from one's own is cognitively taxing, as may occur when a *native English speaker* listens to *nonnative* speech, thereby increasing the likelihood of misunderstanding that speech (Hideg et al., 2024). Moreover, listeners use migrant accents to further stereotype and stigmatize migrants themselves on the basis of race, class, nationality, and so on (Hideg et al., 2024; Ramjattan, 2022, 2024). Therefore, the concern over migrant unintelligibility is often the auditory manifestation of racism, classism, xenophobia, and other forms of discrimination against migrants. What is particularly egregious here is how unintelligibility gets attached to the accents of migrants rather than the oppressive listening practices that create this unintelligibility.

Understanding how the label of unintelligibility is tied to migrants in the workplace requires recognizing how the workplace itself creates pressure for increased scrutiny of migrant workers' intelligibility. Given how language is increasingly recognized as a site of oppression in the equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) policies of organizations (Ciuk et al., 2023), concerns over the intelligibility of migrants can operate as a euphemistic way to lament their perceived inability to emulate nativeness, which, as discussed above, is a racially exclusionary construct. In other words, the focus on EDI in many workplaces forces employers and workers to find more *covert* vocabulary to criticize the speech of their migrant colleagues. But why is there a need to comment on migrant worker speech in the first place?

One answer to this question concerns how work is typically accomplished in today's global economy. Under neoliberal capitalism, which has overseen the growth of service- and knowledge-based industries, spoken language is often the primary means of completing job tasks (Boutet, 2012; Heller & McElhinny, 2017). Consider, for instance, the most mundane of activities such as a fast-food worker taking a customer's order either in person or through a drive-thru speaker. For the customer to receive their food, the worker must ask them what they would like to order and then repeat the order to ensure it was recorded correctly. These everyday communicative tasks are often based on a neoliberal ideology of language. Rather than treating

²I recognize that *migrant worker* has classed connotations as it is often used to describe migrants engaged in precarious, low-paid, and blue-collar work such as agriculture. However, the migrant workers and jobseekers described in this article mostly work in the knowledge- and service-based industries, which prioritize oral communication.

it as a complex, context-specific social practice, neoliberalism positions language as a technical skill that can be mastered by anyone with sufficient effort (Allan & McElhinny, 2017; Heller & McElhinny, 2017). In the example of fast-food work, this is evident in how workers are trained to use scripted language to take and repeat orders in an identical manner, all without considering that these functions may vary in each worker-customer interaction (e.g., Leidner, 1993). Intelligibility appears important in these tasks because worker speech must be understood by customers. However, this view once again ignores how intelligibility is interactionally achieved. Both the worker and customer must understand each other to correctly place the order (Jeong & Lindemann, 2025; Nagai & Everhart, 2022). Under neoliberalism, then, intelligibility is further individualized, as the focus is on modifying workers' speech rather than creating workplace conditions that foster mutual intelligibility.

This individualization of intelligibility is frequently intensified for migrant workers. Neoliberalism conceptualizes language as a skill detached from history, culture, and politics, thereby overlooking its role in perpetuating inequality (Allan & McElhinny, 2017; Heller & McElhinny, 2017). Even when migrant voices are rendered unintelligible due to racism and other forms of oppression, neoliberal frameworks expect migrant workers to address these barriers through self-improvement, specifically by modifying their speech (Ramjattan, 2022). This perspective is prevalent in employment language training programs, which prioritize correcting the perceived linguistic and cultural deficits of migrants rather than addressing the structural oppression underlying these deficits (Allan, 2013; Allan & McElhinny, 2017). When unintelligibility is framed as an individual deficit resulting from not conforming to the *native-English-speaker* ideal, nativeness is ultimately reinforced as the standard for professional communication. The following sections examine how this reinforcement is produced through specific conceptualizations of oral workplace communication.

Framings of intelligibility as nativeness in oral workplace communication

The professional voice

Understanding how intelligibility functions as nativeness requires an examination of the concept of a professional voice. Rather than being innate, a professional voice is treated as a construct that must be learned and performed (Boutet, 2012; Martin & Darnley, 2024). Acquiring this voice involves adopting a *vocal mask* for impression management (Martin & Darnley, 2024). For example, a restaurant server may use a cheerful tone to convey eagerness to serve diners, regardless of their actual physical or emotional state. In this context, the professional voice serves to conceal the speaker's true condition. The determination of what constitutes a vocal mask, however, is shaped by listeners' expectations regarding how a speaker should sound (Eidsheim, 2019). Consequently, adopting an intelligible vocal mask must align with listener perceptions of who qualifies as an intelligible speaker in the workplace.

To illustrate this point, I use the construction of a professional voice in US broadcast journalism as a case study. This professional context ties intelligibility to an ideal broadcaster voice through the notion of *neutrality*. While broadcaster neutrality is popularly conceptualized as the ability to report the news impartially

(Powers, 2024b; Schudson, 2001), it is also treated as a feature of speech. Possessing a *neutral-sounding* voice is presumed to ensure intelligibility and seemingly erases vocal traces of a broadcaster's specific geopolitical and ethnoracial origins, thereby appealing to a mass audience (Powers, 2024a, 2024b). At the phonological and prosodic levels, the components of a neutral broadcaster voice range from coronal stop deletion (removing the /t/ phoneme in a word like *wrist*) to the *correct* placement of stress in particular words (Neil et al., 2003; Strelluf, 2015). Even though neutrality, as a means to intelligibility, operates on the notion that broadcasters can vocally free themselves of any type of identification, the supposedly neutral voice is itself socially identifiable.

In particular, the intelligible broadcaster voice is synonymous with a voice that uses *Standard American English* (SAE), a variety of the language noted for its alleged clarity to all listeners (Garbes, 2024, 2025; Powers, 2024a, 2024b). Despite its purported universality, SAE is geopolitically and ideologically confined. Along with being associated with the Midwestern US, this variety of English, including its accent, is imagined to be projected from White, middle-class speakers from the region (Bonfiglio, 2002; Powers, 2024a, 2024b). According to Bonfiglio (2002), the connection between this standardized variety of English and middle-class whiteness started in the early 20th century with demographic comparisons between the Midwestern and eastern US. That is, in contrast to urban centres in the eastern US, which experienced increased immigration and linguistic diversity, the Midwest was perceived as *linguistically and racially pure* as it was not *contaminated* by immigrant and racially minoritized populations, who could influence how the English language was spoken in the region (Bonfiglio, 2002). Put simply, SAE is a product of racist and xenophobic histories.

Therefore, a professional broadcast journalist voice emulates a White, *middle-class native speaker* of SAE. The implication is that journalists who cannot or do not emulate this voice may be deemed unfit to perform their job duties. For instance, Powers (2024a) notes that Spanish-speaking journalists were often told that their *Spanish-accented English* was not clear enough for viewers. Even in contexts where Spanish pronunciation would be appropriate, it was strongly discouraged by broadcasting agents, which is detailed below:

Spanish-speaking journalists ... may work their way up but face criticism for choosing to use authentic Spanish pronunciations when they have the ability to sound “accentless.” Some who advise on-air talent voiced concerns about such pronunciations becoming a distraction. “If you have someone who’s a Spanish-speaking journalist but their English is perfect, there’s no accent, but when they get to their name or certain words it’s suddenly a very strong accent, it can go a little overboard,” says Adams, the broadcast consultant/agent. (Powers, 2024a, p. 103)

What is noteworthy here is the word *distraction*. A distracting accent is not necessarily synonymous with an unintelligible accent. For example, pronouncing the surname Rodríguez with a trilled /r/ would not hinder an English-speaking

listener's comprehension. Thus, the issue is not intelligibility; it is the notion of hearing phonological traces of the Spanish language on television. Therefore, institutional requirements for *accentless* speech do not solely serve the technical purpose of being understood. They can function as a means for workers to vocally erase their linguistic and ethnoracial differences for a hypothetical audience (Ramjattan, 2022).

A more egregious consequence is that journalists may not receive credit for their behind-the-scenes work. For instance, Garbes (2024) notes that journalists may be barred from reporting on their own stories if their speech is not *native-sounding* enough. In the following excerpt, a Latinx journalist recounted how a Chinese colleague was prevented from presenting a story that she had already prepared:

Her English was good. It did sound like it was her second language, but you could understand every word that she's saying without any strain. And she reported this story that was on the front page of the morning newspaper in town. She produced a radio version of that story. The editor wanted this white man to re-track her voice because she had an accent. (Garbes, 2024, p. 689)

This experience highlights how workers can be evaluated through raciolinguistic ideologies, which frame their spoken English as inherently deficient on account of their racialization (Flores & Rosa, 2015). In this context, having an undesirable accent can be a professional liability, thereby preventing opportunities for career growth.

The insistence on a singular professional voice within a given profession reinforces the association of intelligibility with nativeness by embedding it in a specific vocal model. When the construction of an intelligible voice is based on the archetype of a White, middle-class, *native-English-speaking* individual, achieving intelligibility necessitates emulating this form of nativeness. This neglects the reality that intelligibility is a communicative objective attainable through a diversity of accented voices (Jeong & Lindemann, 2025; Levis, 2020). Another mechanism that individualizes intelligibility and reinforces nativeness is the framing of oral communication as a learnable skill, which is addressed in the following subsection.

Oral communication as a skill

As Urciuoli (2008) notes, under neoliberal capitalism, jobseekers are expected to translate their personhood into a *bundle of skills* to sell themselves as valuable workers in the labour market. One particularly salient bundle of skills is *soft skills*, which can be generally defined as "one's abilities to adapt, problem-solve, collaborate, resolve conflicts, empathise, negotiate and persuade, in both written and spoken modes of communication" (Kerekes & Sinclair, 2023, p. 123). The latter part of this broad definition suggests that soft skills are tantamount to communication skills. That is, being able to collaborate or negotiate with colleagues requires communication, particularly oral communication. An implicit assumption here is that intelligibility is crucial to accomplishing these communicative tasks. For instance, successfully negotiating with a colleague during a meeting requires the

colleague to understand the terms of the negotiation. For migrant jobseekers whose accented voices are deemed unintelligible, learning oral communication skills for the workplace requires training to make their accents more intelligible.

This is a major point in the marketing of privatized accent modification programs, which purportedly help migrant jobseekers improve their oral communication skills by enhancing the phonological quality of their accents. Sicola (2014), an accent modification trainer based in the US, reinforces this message in the following description of her services:

The objective of accent training for my clients ... is to develop a functional intelligibility, so that the listener is able to focus on and process the message at the rate of speech, without a delay caused by the need to filter and interpret unpredictable sound combinations and other vocal distractors. For each client, we collaboratively set development goals that reflect their professional goals, such as delivering high-impact presentations or participating more effectively in meetings. (p. 208)

As outlined in this description, accent modification is a means of delivering an engaging presentation or conversing dynamically during a meeting, for example. In this regard, accent modification might be understood as a type of *reskilling* program for migrant jobseekers who are *deskilled* through their existing accents, which allegedly prevent them from fully displaying their soft skills and overall professional competence (Guo, 2015; Ramjattan, 2023). By being heard as intelligible, migrant jobseekers and professionals can ensure that they are skilled oral communicators in their (prospective) workplaces.

Underlying the ostensibly altruistic rationale for accent modification is the problematic conceptualization of oral communication—and, by extension, intelligibility—as a technical skill to be mastered. While oral communication is inherently complex and collaborative, framing it as a skill presumes that this complexity can be reduced to discrete, individually learnable components (Urciuoli, 2008). When these components include accent and intelligibility, the responsibility for successful communication is placed solely on speakers, disregarding the role of listeners in facilitating or impeding understanding. Consequently, migrant jobseekers may be compelled to modify their accents in anticipation of listener expectations, rather than engaging in mutual communicative adaptation.

Similar to the previous discussion of the professional voice, reskilling oneself with a new accent reinforces the idea that achieving a particular type of English nativeness is necessary for professional success. Consider, for instance, the following comment from Sicola (2014), who explains why certain migrants are not compelled to purchase accent modification:

Some people who speak other dialects of English, such as Indian English, ... as a native language, do not consider themselves—and are not—[nonnative speakers], per se. Combine this with the fact that many of them attended American universities [and] may even have

been living and working in the US for a decade or two. At that point, they are fully accustomed to the sounds of SAE [Standard American English] pronunciation. ... As a result, they often do not seem to realize that this acclimation is uni-directional, not mutual. (pp. 207–208)

There are several noteworthy points about this comment. To begin, the use of *per se* to suggest some ambiguity in describing *Indian English* as a kind of *native* English highlights the idea that speaking a variety of English perceived as foreign is apparently insufficient for workplace intelligibility. That is, since the linguistic norm in the US is SAE, which is perceived to be free of any *impurities* from other languages (Bonfiglio, 2002), speaking Indian English, with its phonological influences from an array of Indian languages, is treated as a *corrupted version* of English (e.g., Mirchandani, 2012).³ Therefore, vocally reskilling oneself requires adhering to racist and colonial perceptions of various Englishes. The comment also acknowledges, somewhat paradoxically, that it is possible to become aurally accustomed to another accent over time. However, whereas speakers of marginalized Englishes can learn to understand privileged varieties, the converse is apparently not true, since, as Sicola implies in her final utterance, speakers of privileged varieties would not be willing to reciprocate. This speaks to the unequal power relations reproduced in everyday interactions, in that marginalized speakers are expected to bear the sole burden of communication when conversing with their more privileged counterparts, who are already perceived as using correct forms of speech (Lippi-Green, 2012). If one does not already speak with an SAE accent, for example, then it is necessary to engage in the labour of accent modification to match one's interlocutors who possess such an accent.

Because accent modification, as a type of laborious communication skills training, can be critiqued for promoting a deficit perspective of speech deemed *nonnative* or *pseudo-native*, training providers often posit that their services are less about erasing an accent than about adding to one's phonological repertoire (e.g., Grover et al., 2022; Sicola, 2014). That is, accent modification allows a speaker to easily retrieve new phonological and prosodic resources to satisfy various communicative encounters. This argument is once again advanced by Sicola (2014), who states that accent modification simply entails *enhancing* communication skills:

Just as actor Hugh Jackman, after studying with renowned dialect coach Jess Platt, was able to imitate a standard American accent for his role as Wolverine in the *X-Men* movie series without having to “lose” his Australian accent, ... pronunciation development for NNSs [nonnative speakers] is also an *additive* skill as they learn to perceive and produce new phonetic contrasts. It is indeed the lack of these contrasts that result [sic] in the “foreign accent” in the first place. ...

³It is important to clarify that the *native* varieties of English spoken by White immigrant and domestic populations (e.g., *Irish English*, *Southern US English*, etc.) are also subject to such deficit perspectives (Lippi-Green, 2012). However, the current discussion simply focuses on the distinction between *Indian English* and *Standard American English*.

Accent training is skill enhancement, not remediation, just like any other professional development [original emphasis]. (p. 210)

Although the positive framing of accent modification appears to empower migrant clients by providing them with an additional professional voice, this perspective continues to rely on native-speakerist assumptions that suggest that *foreign* or *nonnative* speech is inherently insufficient for professional contexts. If accent modification is considered an additive skill, the addition required is one that aligns with English nativeness. Ultimately, the concept of skill in this context serves less as a measure of technical competence and more as a mechanism for concealing structural inequalities (Guo, 2015). Thus, *nonnative English speakers* are expected to acquire what their *native-speaking* counterparts already possess to be regarded as sufficiently intelligible for employment.

Unequal workplace interactions

Another process that ties intelligibility to nativeness is the unequal power relations in customer service work. Especially in Global North countries, migrants are increasingly present across a range of service sectors, from healthcare to hospitality (Bourdin et al., 2024). These migrant service workers, along with service workers in general, typically occupy a subordinate position relative to customers because they are expected to meet customers' needs. This expectation can be exacerbated when migrant workers and their customers have different linguistic backgrounds. Indeed, if a service worker is positioned as a *nonnative English speaker* and their customer is a *native English speaker*, the expectation is that the latter is already a capable communicator and is thus under no obligation to facilitate communication with the former (Bourdin et al., 2024; Doe et al., 2025). Therefore, when a *native-English-speaking* customer fails to understand their *nonnative-speaking* service provider, it is the responsibility of that worker to ensure intelligibility.

Such an occupational responsibility may be especially pronounced when service work occurs over the telephone, where there are no visual cues, such as facial expressions and gestures, to facilitate mutual understanding (Doe et al., 2025). This is especially the case in the context of transnational call centre work. In this context, the voices and labour of workers from countries such as India and the Philippines *virtually migrate* to English-speaking countries in the Global North to perform tasks ranging from providing customer support to selling mortgages (Aneesh, 2006; Mirchandani, 2012). Because of the apparent linguistic differences between these Global South workers and their Global North callers, there are often complaints from the latter about not understanding the former, which is exemplified by this Australian caller:

I rang directory service and got a Filipino accent, and I couldn't understand a word he said, he couldn't understand a word I said and he was meant to be looking up a telephone number for me. (Rao Hill & Tombs, 2011, p. 656)

As demonstrated by this comment, there is a consequent need for call centre agents to engage in accent training not only to make themselves understood but also

to understand their clients. The issue, however, is that such training reproduces hierarchies between worker and customer.

It is important to note that transnational call centres typically operate in former colonies of English-speaking empires, thereby requiring agents to converse in English with inhabitants of imperial centres (Inoue, 2018). While Indian agents often talk to British callers, for example, Filipino agents frequently converse with callers in the US. These colonial connections serve as a foundation for reproducing colonial relations between the two communicative parties. Indeed, although many call centre workers in India and the Philippines have already mastered English due to the colonial history of the language in their respective countries, they are nevertheless positioned as *nonnative English speakers*, and are consequently required to undergo training to *neutralize* phonological traces of their *inferior* Englishes to enhance their intelligibility (e.g., Aneesh, 2015; Mirchandani, 2012; Padios, 2018). As a vocal standard, intelligibility often becomes a code word for emulating the Englishes of former colonizers, a point illustrated by an Indian agent who notes the importance of *sounding neutral*, particularly for callers based in the US:

In India, we speak English in a different [manner], and in the States, it is in a different way. ... A neutral accent. Neutral. Means they can understand what we tell. Like [for example] “schedule”—they say *schedule*. ... And the American accent you have more *r*’s rolling, there’s a stress on the *r*’s. ... You’re not supposed to speak anything except English, except American English. (Mirchandani, 2012, p. 46)

Here, attaining a *neutral accent* entails sounding *more American*, thereby engaging in phonological practices like pronouncing the /k/ in *schedule* or emphasizing the /r/ phoneme in particular words. As the agent mentioned, the overall point of vocal emulation is to ease oral communication for Western callers, not necessarily to enhance workers’ general speaking skills. Furthermore, if this vocal emulation is done for the purpose of intelligibility, then call centre agents must conceptualize intelligibility in relation to what their interlocutors understand intelligible speech to be (Highet, 2023). Therefore, if intelligible speech is tied to their own *native English* voices, the implication is that the worker must emulate this nativeness to be considered an effective service provider.

Another site where nativeness is closely linked to effective service provision is the communicative labour of international teaching assistants (ITAs) in North American higher education. Given the ongoing neoliberalization of higher education, which consistently frames education as a private good to be delivered by teachers—now positioned as service providers—to student-customers, the expectation is that teachers deliver this private good through speech deemed intelligible enough for students to aurally consume (Kim, 2020). Yet, for ITAs whose foreign accents are often deemed unintelligible to *native-English-speaking* student populations, their ability to engage in this educational service delivery can be hindered (Kim, 2020; Ramjattan, 2025). While student and institutional perceptions of their unintelligibility are frequent products of racism and xenophobia directed at ITAs

themselves, ITAs are nevertheless responsible for changing their accented voices since they are positioned as service providers who must make the learning process as seamless as possible for student-customers (Kim, 2020; Lippi-Green, 2012; Looney, 2022).

Making the learning process seamless is often thought to be accomplished by mimicking the *native-English-speaking* student, which is a point articulated by an Iranian teaching assistant working at a university in Canada:

So I teach a lot of native-English-speaking students in my tutorials. I know that they are like my customers since they are paying for an education, and I am the one who needs to give them this education with my teaching. And I also know that they might not always catch what I mean because I sometimes stress a word not like a native speaker or confuse the W and V sounds in English. ... I don't want my customers, so to speak, to be frustrated by having to figure out what I'm saying. So I put in effort into making my accent sound like theirs as much as possible. (Ramjattan, 2025, p. 44)

These remarks notably combine a neoliberal understanding of education with an ideology of native-speakerism. If ITAs are supposed to deliver the education for which students are paying through speech, and must subsequently make their speech as easy to decipher as possible, then the most efficient means to do so is to sound similar to students, thus emulating their nativeness in English. In the end, then, the authority that students gain by being positioned as customers allows them to reinforce their linguistic authority associated with their native speakerhood, albeit indirectly.

Severing intelligibility from nativeness

This article has examined how migrant jobseekers and workers are compelled to conceptualize intelligibility in terms of emulating English nativeness. The maintenance of a singular professional voice, the skilling of oral communication, and the expectation that workers linguistically cater to customers are among several workplace processes that *individualize* intelligibility, requiring individuals to vocally emulate others—primarily *native English speakers* from the Global North. These examples demonstrate that intelligibility is ideologically charged rather than neutral (Rajagopalan, 2010). While intelligibility may be technically defined as the capacity to be understood, the *process* of achieving this capability is deeply ideological. As discussed, the acquisition and practice of intelligibility in the workplace are shaped by native-speakerist logics, underpinned by raciolinguistic and neoliberal ideologies. Specifically, English nativeness is constructed around the notion that vocal whiteness is superior to nonwhiteness (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Ramjattan, 2022), and this racialized conception is obscured by neoliberal perspectives that detach language from its historical and political contexts (Heller & McElhinny, 2017; Ramjattan, 2026). The central question, therefore, is how intelligibility can be disentangled from nativeness in professional communication.

Severing this connection entails a collective refutation of the idea that workers need to be intelligible to a particular type of speaker, as well as the notion that a particular type of speaker gets to be the model of intelligibility (Oram, 2021; Rajagopalan, 2010). It is important to clarify here that such refutation cannot solely be accomplished pedagogically. Although it may initially seem reasonable to develop employment and on-the-job training where speakers and listeners of all linguistic backgrounds learn how to *create* intelligibility through shared communicative effort, these types of pedagogical interventions will not lead to lasting change unless the organizational structures and processes that condition individuals to hear intelligibility in a singular manner are addressed (Macnamara, 2018). In the context of this article, these listening structures include valuing a professional voice, the skilling of oral communication, and unequal service encounters. Because these structures are deeply situated in wider systems of white supremacy and capitalism, which require large-scale revolutionary action to dismantle, it is neither feasible nor appropriate to provide clear-cut recommendations on how each of the structures should be revised. Instead, I offer an ambivalent reflection on how they *could* change, recognizing both the limits and the possibilities of doing so. The purpose here is not to be pessimistic, but rather to demonstrate how transforming listening structures requires careful thought and consideration.

To begin, how can a professional voice be rejected as a listening structure? Because employers treat voice as a qualification to be assessed in fields such as broadcast journalism, one potential answer is to reframe the assessment criteria for workers. Rather than judging them on how closely they emulate an ideal voice, employers could evaluate job candidates on how well they handle potential miscommunication. For instance, in the context of a job interview, employers could ask applicants to describe strategies they would use when they could not pronounce a particular word that needed to be understood by an audience. By listening for applicants' descriptions of how they would handle miscommunication rather than the sounds of their accented voices, employers can remind themselves that intelligibility must be created, not possessed. Yet, an issue with this recommendation is that it might not prevent employers from relying on raciolinguistic ideologies when assessing job candidates. Would they ask only about resolving misunderstandings for candidates they deem *nonnative-English-speaking*? Moreover, if they believe there are normative ways to handle miscommunication, employers might unfairly judge applicants for not giving the correct answer. This leads to the issue of treating engagement in oral communication as a technical skill, which is another listening structure to address.

Moving away from the skilling of oral communication is difficult under neoliberal capitalism because the expectation is that jobseekers need to market themselves as an amalgam of skills that the labour market seemingly desires (Urciuoli, 2008). A modified accent, for example, is a skill that a migrant jobseeker can market because it allegedly signifies their ability to assimilate to workplace communicative cultures that uphold a singular manner of speech (e.g., Guo, 2015). What needs to be changed here is not the individual jobseeker, but rather the organizations

in which they seek work. Specifically, organizations should conduct ongoing audits to determine whether the ways they conceptualize work in relation to oral communication reinforce nativeness (Ramjattan, 2023). For instance, when crafting a job description that requires candidates to engage in extensive talking, organizations should consider how they could support workers in performing this duty—such as providing listener training for other employees—thereby avoiding the need to homogenize candidates' speech. This type of intervention may help frame intelligibility as a collective effort.

However, this type of change strategy is not equally available across all workplace contexts. As discussed in the section on service work, for example, the need to linguistically cater to customers can force migrant workers to define (un)intelligibility in relation to how their *native-English-speaking* interlocutors perceive them to sound. One proposed method to alleviate this issue is to eliminate the need for interaction altogether, which involves practices such as increasing customer self-service options (e.g., self-checkout systems) and placing workers in non-customer-facing positions (Bourdin et al., 2024). In addition to potentially alienating workers and shifting unpaid labour to customers, the main issue with hiding the migrant worker from the customer is that it reinforces the idea that certain voices should not be heard at work in the first place. The ongoing question for service industries, then, is how to deliver satisfactory service to customers in an array of accented voices.

Conclusion

As these reflections indicate, separating intelligibility from nativeness necessitates institutional and structural transformation. The existence of a professional voice, the skilling of oral communication, and the expectation that workers linguistically cater to customers all contribute to the individualization of intelligibility, thereby reinforcing the alignment of intelligibility with nativeness. Recognizing that listening practices are shaped by these processes allows us to consider how intelligibility might be heard more flexibly, both in the workplace and beyond.

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