

Cecil L. Nelson. 2011. *Intelligibility in World Englishes: Theory and Application*. UK: Routledge

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“Wronging” English seems to be a pet peeve of many Filipinos. While watching beauty pageants, the Filipino audience often looks forward to the question-and-answer portion, not only to listen to the candidates’ answers, but also to hear their English. When a candidate commits a deviation from what is believed to be Standard English, more often than not, there are two responses from the audience. The first is scoffing – as experienced by 17-year old Janina San Miguel during the Binibining Pilipinas 2008 pageant. The second is teasing – as experienced by Venus Raj during the 2010 Miss Universe competition. After every international beauty competition, an afterword on how the Philippine candidate’s English fared against other contestants ‘English seems to be expected. This critical mentality towards spoken English reveals a lack of acceptance for the variety that is spoken by Filipinos. The local English is not fully accepted as a variety that is understandable, or in more formal terms, intelligible.

As intelligibility is that quality of language that requires the full grasp of the human mind, awareness of the intelligibility of English varieties is understandably low in the Philippines and elsewhere, even among academic circles. Thus, Cecil L. Nelson’s new book *Intelligibility in World Englishes: Theory and Application* is a welcome and essential guide to anyone who wants to have a deeper understanding of cross-cultural (in a broad sense)

communication, to anyone who wants to understand how unity in diversity is possible, and anyone who wants an academic justification for a speech community to speak English the way they do.

Every chapter of Nelson’s book begins with a thought-provoking quotation relevant to the theme, followed by a detailed discussion of issues and concepts based on personal observations and a review of related literature. At the end of each chapter, Nelson provides the reader with a set of topics for discussion and assignments which may be used for individual or group study. After this set is an additional paragraph where he suggests additional readings and comments on their usefulness in the further understanding the theme of the chapter. The book is clearly intended for students of spoken English.

Nelson’s illustrations echo in familiarity and relevance. To describe various situations, Nelson draws from his personal experience not only as an academic but also as an ordinary person citing instances from what may be day-to-day situations. He also tries to provide examples from around the world and in different forms. In his discussion on Englishes in popular culture, he even mentions the infusion of English in K-Pop (Korean pop music) and J-Pop (Japanese pop music). Nelson even makes mention of a miscommunication between himself and a Filipino student. He had to repeat the word “rocket” several times because his student mistook Nelson’s pronunciation for the term for “racket” and had mistakenly elaborated on crime.

In his first chapter entitled “‘Understanding’ and Intelligibility in World Englishes, Nelson addresses the

following question: Why is understanding a concern among speakers of a single language—the English language? He answers this question by locating the discussion on understanding within the context of the plurality of Englishes. Nelson presents the situation of English, a language of wider communication, as a result of Y. Kachru and Smith's (2008) four diasporas of English. These diasporas did not result to a single dominant language, but rather to the development of varieties of the English language. Because of this diversity, there is a greater concern to understand and be understood and this is where the notion of intelligibility comes in. Simply put, he defines intelligibility as “a necessary criterion of a language, that it be usefully communicative” (p. 2). However, Nelson notes that intelligibility is not as simple as it seems. The concept is surrounded by controversy because of the need to understand context of situation (Firth, 1935), attitudes towards varieties of English (Prator, 1968; Selinker, 1972; Hall, 1976), and the role of culture. Furthermore, while discussing understanding, Nelson provides the reader with a comprehensive backgrounder of B. Kachru's world Englishes paradigm (1985 and later) and its effect on research in recent years. Finally, to end the introductory chapter, Nelson qualifies the notion of understanding by putting forward Smith's (1992) framework which involves the three levels of intelligibility, comprehensibility, and interpretability.

In “Intelligibility, Comprehensibility, Interpretability,” which is the second chapter, Nelson expands the discussion on Smith's framework for intelligibility. It begins

by problematizing variation, which is a necessary feature of any language. Nelson examines each component of Smith's framework: Intelligibility refers to the capacity to recognize a word based on its utterance. Comprehensibility refers to the capacity to assign a lexical definition. Interpretability refers to the capacity to identify meaning and intention. For each component, readers are provided with a clear definition, situational examples, and a basic discussion of issues. The latter part of the chapter provides a historical sampler of studies on intelligibility. One of the highlights of the chapter is the monumental research on components of intelligibility among varieties of English by Smith and Rafiqzad (1979). This involved 1,300 subjects from 11 countries. Nelson interestingly presents results and conclusions of the 1979 research as well as later studies by Smith and Bisazza (1982), and Smith and Nelson (1985). This narrative clearly shows the reader the evolution in understanding intelligibility in Englishes.

The third chapter on “Hybridity, Creativity and Intelligibility in World Englishes” exposes the myth of a pure English language by discussing hybridity—every language is infused with bits and pieces of another. In the first part of the chapter, Nelson leans heavily on studies by B. Kachru (1983) in presenting the different degrees of hybridity, its effects on language and its effects on various speakers. He addresses the issue of losing one's identity by asserting that mixing languages is so natural that it often goes unnoticed “as long as the transfers were effected by and put into the language of confident and

proficient users of English who did not fear they would lose their identities over [foreign words that referred to] a cup of hot drink or a plate of tasty chicken...” (p. 53). In the second part of the chapter, Nelson examines hybridity in the context of multilingualism and creativity. Examples of world literature in English are provided to demonstrate the creative function of hybridity. Consequently, hybridity in English is also found in advertising and popular culture where the mixing of languages are used to reference to modernity, intimacy, and other purposes.

In the fourth chapter, entitled “Other Conceptualizations of Intelligibility,” Nelson presents an array of research on intelligibility with concepts that complement Smith’s framework. Among the studies are those of: Van der Walt (2000), who uses intelligibility and comprehensibility in the same way as Smith; Bansal (1969), whose notion of intelligibility rests on the speaker’s ability to be understood clearly; and Munro, Derwig, and Morton (2006), who introduced the notion of accentedness. Nelson examines the strengths and weaknesses of each approach in some detail. The chapter also includes a discussion of the work of Jenkins (2007) on the Lingua Franca Core of non-native speakers of English. In order to achieve intelligibility among different groups of language speakers, she proposes English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) based on the said core. Although Nelson appreciates Jenkins’ proposal, he is skeptical about the viability of ELF, the basis of allowing and disallowing certain pronunciations, and the creation of structures that favor native speaker norms.

The fifth chapter on “Intelligibility in English Language Teaching” is devoted to intelligibility in English language teaching (ELT). Nelson addresses the perennial question, “Which English should be taught?” ELT is already riddled with problem areas related to the world Englishes framework. One is the resistance of certain communities to acknowledge their local variety of English and their consequent persistence in the belief that what is taught in school is an inner circle variety. Another area involves the implications of variation. As Bhatt (1995) observes, some intuitions of Indian English are not available to speakers of other varieties. Another is the notion of interlanguage and the determination of the boundary between interlanguage and deviations of English varieties. Nelson provides starting points for further discussions in these areas. Nonetheless, he maintains that the English that should be taught should be the kind that is best for the context of learners. Moreover, when it comes to teaching intelligibility, Nelson concedes that it is impossible to teach all possible communicative contexts. After a brief critique of the incompatibility of structural and audio-lingual ELT approaches to intelligibility, he appears to favor the communicative approach. Among the teaching methods, Nelson finds this to be the most balanced between form and content. Thus, it offers second and foreign language learners the most opportunity to be exposed to intelligibility and shifting communicative contexts.

In the final chapter, “Intelligibility and the On-Going Expansions of Englishes,” Nelson focuses on the future of English and

intelligibility. Media pundits have portrayed variation in English as a force that will destroy the language. Nelson responds with the assertion that variation has always been present among geographical location, gender, age, etc. Furthermore, usage ultimately depends on the individual equipped with “linguistic free will (Simon, 1980)” who changes the way he uses the language at any given situation. The chapter further discusses related issues on standards and the legitimacy of non-native varieties of English. Nelson concludes the chapter by writing, “The upshot is that diversification and difference do not equal devolution (p. 110).” He notes that in the same way that the historical emergence of new terms which denote “move” is viewed as a positive phenomenon that enriches the language, varieties of English should be welcomed with the same spirit.

What is commendable about Nelson’s book is his perspective on teaching intelligibility. He does not stop with communicative language teaching, which more often than not teaches communicative competence in a native-speaker environment. He goes to the next level communicative language teaching plus. In particular, Nelson mentions Baumgardner’s (1987) approach to ELT using local variety newspapers whose target

audience speaks both English and a local language (i.e. Urdu). By doing so, students of different cultures learn to spot and adjust to the nuances of a hybrid language.

In his book, Nelson is consistent in asserting openness to change. Rooted in the variety-welcoming paradigm of world Englishes, Nelson’s notion of intelligibility is not only concerned with the capacity to make one’s self understood, but also with making one’s self understand. This openness is even seen at the end of the book as Nelson reflects on the future of English and intelligibility. He explicitly states that he does not know for certain what the future linguistic landscape looks like but will be willing to adapt to change anyway.

All in all, the book is an excellent compendium of theories and issues surrounding understanding and misunderstanding spoken English. It provides a scientific basis for the acceptability of language varieties, and explains the larger framework of world Englishes where each variety is sufficient and perfect for its own speech community. Thus, after reading this book, more informed and understanding readers may never again go back to looking down on the way others speak English.