

Keynote Lecture

Speech Intelligibility in a Multilingual World

Authors: Jette Hansen Edwards

Affiliation: The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Outline

This keynote begins by reframing a familiar but enduring question: what does it mean for speech to be intelligible in an increasingly multilingual world? While speech intelligibility has long been examined within second language acquisition and World Englishes research, the talk argues that intelligibility is not a fixed property of speech, but a dynamic, relational phenomenon that emerges at the intersection of speakers, listeners, languages, and social contexts. By foregrounding the constructs of intelligibility, comprehensibility, accentedness, and acceptability, the keynote highlights how judgments about speech are shaped as much by expectations and ideologies as by acoustic or phonological form, with particular consequences for English and other global languages.

The plenary then explores the complex constellation of linguistic and social factors that shape intelligibility. Linguistic features at multiple levels—segmental and suprasegmental patterns, fluency, and semantic-grammatical choices—interact with speaker and listener variables such as proficiency, prior experience with languages and varieties, and deeply held attitudes toward speakers and cultures. These interactions reveal intelligibility as a shared accomplishment rather than an individual deficit, challenging traditional speaker-centered models and underscoring the role of listeners in the co-construction of meaning.

A central focus of the keynote concerns linguistic bias, particularly in relation to accented speech. Although decades of research have demonstrated that phonological features influence intelligibility, there is still no consensus on which features matter most, or how their impact varies across listener backgrounds. The keynote argues that social evaluations of accent frequently outpace actual communicative breakdown, reinforcing inequities and privileging certain varieties over others. Recognizing and interrogating these biases is presented as essential for advancing theory, informing pronunciation pedagogy, and promoting more equitable communicative practices in multilingual and multicultural settings.

The keynote concludes by looking ahead to new methodological and technological frontiers in speech intelligibility research. Emerging tools such as eye-tracking, functional near-infrared spectroscopy (fNIRS), and artificial intelligence open new possibilities for examining real-time processing and neural alignment during interaction. By integrating linguistic theory, social insight, and cutting-edge technology, the plenary envisions a future of intelligibility research that is not only more precise, but also more humane, inclusive, and responsive to the realities of global communication.