



East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences

ejass.eanso.org

Volume 8, Issue 4, 2025

Print ISSN: 2707-4277 | Online ISSN: 2707-4285

Title DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/2707-4285>



EAST AFRICAN
NATURE &
SCIENCE
ORGANIZATION

Original Article

Dialectology and Dialect Intelligibility

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Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.8.4.3911>

Date Published: ABSTRACT

04 November 2025

Keywords:

*Dialectology,
Dialect,
Dialect Intelligibility,
Language,
Accent,
Factors Influencing
Intelligibility.*

This paper defines and talks about dialectology in the context of traditional dialectology. Here, we see how the early researchers were able to collect data and the various methods they used. We also see how traditional dialectology faced a lot of criticism. As time passed, researchers were able to use new methods which involved the use of technology. This is discussed in the sociolinguistics dialectology section. The relationship between dialectology and linguistics, together with its relationship outside linguistics, has been tackled as well. The paper also talks about dialect intelligibility in relation to dialect and language, how we can use dialect intelligibility to define dialect and language using various examples from different parts of the world, including Africa and the exceptions brought about by using dialect intelligibility to define language and literature. Last but not least, the paper also discusses different factors which affect dialect intelligibility.

APA CITATION

Benard. L. M. (2025). Dialectology and Dialect Intelligibility. *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 8(4), 210-217. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.8.4.3911>

CHICAGO CITATION

Benard, Lilian Mumbi. 2025. "Dialectology and Dialect Intelligibility." *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences* 8 (4), 210-217. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.8.4.3911>.

HARVARD CITATION

Benard. L. M. (2025), "Dialectology and Dialect Intelligibility", *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 8(4), pp. 210-217. doi: 10.37284/eajass.8.4.3911

IEEE CITATION

L. M., Benard "Dialectology and Dialect Intelligibility", *EAJASS*, vol. 8, no. 4, pp. 210-217, Nov. 2025.

MLA CITATION

Benard, Lilian Mumbi. "Digital Transformation in the Creative Media: Opportunities, Risks, and Research Questions". *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, Vol. 8, no. 4, Nov. 2025, pp. 210-217, doi:10.37284/eajass.8.4.3911

INTRODUCTION

According to Collins Dictionary, dialectology is the study of dialects and dialect features. It examines

how sounds, words, and grammatical forms vary within a language (Britain, 2015). On the other hand, Accent is a unique mode of pronunciation

within a given language that is specific to a country, region, or social class (Jones, 2017). Based on this definition of dialect and accent, we can say that a dialect deals with grammatical structures and words used within a language, while accent refers to the variation of sounds used within a language. Traditional dialectology concentrated on rural speech using maps and surveys, whereas sociolinguistic dialectology takes into account urban regions and a varied range of speakers. Mutual intelligibility, or the degree to which speakers of various dialects or related languages can comprehend one another, is a fundamental idea in this discipline. Though there are several exceptions, this aids in differentiating between a language and a dialect. Intelligibility is influenced by a variety of factors, including gestures, culture, and attitude, among others.

On the whole, dialectology focuses on the geographical distribution of different accents and dialects, though it has begun to investigate social factors like age, gender and position in society too. This paper examines dialectology as a critical area of linguistics, including its historical evolution, methodological approaches and intersection with sociolinguistics. It goes on to argue that, while mutual intelligibility is a useful criterion for distinguishing dialects from languages, the phenomenon is shaped by a variety of linguistic, social, and cognitive factors, including gestures, linguistic distance, cultural affiliation, and speaker attitudes, among others, which complicate rigid classifications and highlight the nuanced nature of language variation.

TRADITIONAL DIALECTOLOGY

The systematic study of dialects started over a century ago. One of the earliest research studies aimed to draw up linguistic atlases which showed the distribution of different dialect forms geographically. This research was motivated by the desire to counter a mainstream view in historical linguistics at the time that all sound changes were constant and without exception. In order to show the

widely varying and seemingly random distributions of dialect forms, dialectologists tried to show that linguistic changes did not affect all words in the same way and were often irregular. For example, the dialect landscapes of Europe showed substantial variability even in small areas, and it was their task to plot this wealth of diversity, as they were mainly interested in lexical variation, that is, to refer to the same thing using different names when used in different regions. The data and results collected during this time are still valid and used to this day because they give a picture of the variety of different dialect structures used at a particular point in time. Some of the methods used in traditional dialectology to collect data include the following:

Use of Linguistic Maps or Atlases

According to the UK English Dictionary, a linguistic map is a map showing the distribution of linguistic features or languages over a certain geographical area, thus indicating the distribution of numerous phonological, morphological, lexical, or other features of the dialects of that area. They can be in the form of display maps or interpretative maps. **Display maps**, the more common ones, transfer the results of each of the items indicative of dialect variation onto a map, and thus reveal a geographical perspective. Each utterance of an informant is associated with a distinct symbol. Therefore, these maps give detailed information about the entire survey.

Interpretative maps, most of the time, are based on display maps or other comparable dialect geography projects as their primary source. The elicited data is used to make more general statements in terms of picking out responses for a particular item that predominates in different areas. Interpretative maps simplify display maps as they represent the relevant trends and their distribution, while the rare items are omitted, and the very frequent items indicate a trend.

Questionnaires

Questions would be direct or indirect. An example of a direct question is: "What do you call a cup?" And the respondents would give their answers. An example of an indirect question includes this question: "What is this?" Here, they would show a particular object, and the respondents would give their answers. Questions could also be formal or informal. In formal questions, researchers would have a list of what they want to ask. The researchers use imagination in an informal setting. They would also use talking questions, reverse questions, and completing questions, among others.

TRADITIONAL DIALECTOLOGY: CRITICISM

Traditional dialectology is being criticised by the critics due to the following reasons:

- Most of the research studies were conducted on a very small population of old, rural male respondents. It should also include the young, women and those living in cities.
- Critics argued that one-word answers to questionnaires were too narrow to provide a really accurate account of how people used language. They suggested that dialectology should study a continuous and relaxed conversation, which would also highlight variability within the speech of the individual, not only providing examples of more everyday language.

SOCIOLINGUISTIC DIALECTOLOGY

In the 1960s, dialectologists were able to record the speech of dialect speakers by using tape recorders. This allowed them to save the linguistic material for examination at a later time. Due to the rise of social linguistics, a lot of production of recording and the knowledge that some linguistic factors may have a role in some social problems in west African societies made dialectologists to focus on urban areas such as, New York (Labov, 1966), Detroit (Wolfram, 1969), and Norwich (Trudgill 1974) and

the community as a whole instead of a small subsection of it. What the researchers recorded during data collection enabled them to analyse continuous speech and also to examine how consistently speakers used different dialect forms in their speech. Through quantitative research, it became possible to look at the relative proportions of various dialect variants utilised by individuals and by aggregation by age, gender, ethnic groupings, and other factors in society.

In summary, dialectology, both traditional and sociolinguistic, is essential to any researcher. They demonstrate how language is inherently diverse, both in collective and individual conversations. In addition to reminding scholars and proponents of more formal approaches to language study that dialect diversity should not be disregarded in theoretical accounts of linguistic structure, the nature of regional dialects highlights that non-standard varieties, like their standard counterparts, have "grammars."

DIALECTOLOGY AND LINGUISTICS

As everyone knows, a dialect is a specific variety of a language whose syntax and lexicon differ from other varieties that are also linked with social or regional groups, whereas an accent is a unique way of pronouncing words that is related to social or regional groupings. Some linguists attempt to characterise various accents and dialects using phonetic, syntactic, and lexical characteristics rather than categorising distinct language variations as correct or wrong. Others ponder why some dialects are more commonly known than others. While some accents are well recognised, others are more difficult to locate geographically. In the study of listeners' perceptions, Montgomery (2006) lists the top five most recognised dialects of British English:

- 'Scouse' (Liverpool)
- 'Geordie' (Newcastle)
- 'Brummie' (Birmingham)

- ‘Cockney’ (London)
- ‘Manc’ (Manchester)

Fascinatingly, all of the aforementioned accents are urban variants that come from big, usually well-known UK cities. This demonstrates that accent recognition might be influenced by geographic scale. Linguists must take into account additional variables such as age, gender, and class when examining accents and dialects. Their opinions can be either **descriptive**, where linguistic change between variations is an unavoidable element of it, or **prescriptive**, where some varieties are fundamentally superior or inferior to others.

DIALECTOLOGY OUTSIDE OF LINGUISTICS

Dialectology is a topic open to the general public. It is not restricted to linguists because every day, people use accents and dialects from direct contact with individuals to variations in films, television and radio. Although this diversity is a vital part of language, it is also the major factor why certain accents have been looked down upon or stigmatised. Everyone has his or her own accent, and because of this, people may be keen to comment on other people’s accents either positively or negatively.

DIALECT INTELLIGIBILITY

It is also known as mutual intelligibility.

According to Richard Nordquist (2019), this is a situation in which two or more speakers of a language or closely related languages can understand each other.

Or when two speakers of closely related languages or dialects can communicate with each other without using a 3rd language to help them communicate. It is also the degree to which speech can be understood.

Dialect intelligibility helps us to distinguish between language and dialect.

LANGUAGE

According to Collins dictionary, a language is a system of communication which consists of a set of sounds and written symbols which are used by the speakers of a particular country or region for talking or writing. A collection of mutually intelligible dialects also forms a language.

Examples of languages include:

The English language

The French language

The Swahili language, among others.

DIALECT

On the other hand, a dialect can be defined as a regional variety of language distinguished by features of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation from other regional varieties and constituting together with them a single language according to Merriam-Webster dictionary. Sub-divisions of a particular language make a dialect.

Example,

The English language has the following dialects:

London dialect,

British dialect,

South African dialect, among others.

This means that the London dialect, the British dialect and the South African dialects are sub-varieties of the English language.

In Swahili, there are:

Kiunguja spoken in Zanzibar and Tanzania.

Kiamu spoken in Lamu and adjoining parts of the coast.

Kimvita spoken in Mombasa and other parts.

Therefore, Kiunguja, Kiamu and Kimvita are sub-varieties of the Swahili language.

In Kenya, we have different languages and their dialects. An example is the Kamba language, one of the Bantu-speaking communities that migrated from the Congo forests to the eastern parts of Kenya. The Kamba language has 3 main dialects, which include:

The Makueni dialect

The Kitui dialect, and

The Machakos dialect.

These dialects are named according to the regions in which they are spoken.

Within all these languages, that is, the English language, the Swahili language and the Kamba are dialects which are mutually intelligible, meaning speakers speaking these dialects can clearly understand each other. For instance, people speaking the Makueni dialect, Kitui dialect and Machakos dialect can clearly understand each other. Trudgill (2000) supports this by saying that dialects are mutually intelligible varieties, but languages are so linguistically different that their speakers are unable to understand each other.

However, this is not always the case, as intelligibility can also be used to differentiate between language and dialect. Sometimes, languages can be mutually intelligible too. For example, the Scandinavian languages: Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish, are considered different languages mostly because of political reasons, yet they are mutually intelligible. In other words, speakers of these three languages are able to understand one another with ease.

Another example is the Serbian and Croatian languages. These 2 are considered different languages, yet their speakers can readily understand and communicate with each other. In fact, these 2 languages may be even closer to each other than the Scandinavian languages are, but speakers of “Serbo - Croatian” insist that they are two different languages. The major difference between the 2 languages is mainly lexical, with very few

differences in pronunciation and grammar. The perceived differences are mainly brought in by other factors such as different alphabets, religions and ethnicity (Gookens, 2017).

In other cases, dialects belonging to the same language may lack mutual intelligibility. For instance, German would not be considered a single language because some German dialects are mutually unintelligible. Also, in Chinese Mandarin and Cantonese are not mutually intelligible, yet they are dialects of the same language. In the Swedish language, some of its dialects are not mutually intelligible.

In another situation, we can say that mutually intelligibility is often asymmetric. That is, one group of speakers has more difficulty understanding the other variety, and one variety understands the other variety better. This has been shown in pairs like German and Dutch. Dutch speakers understand German speakers better than German speakers understand Dutch speakers. Gooskens, Van Bezooijen and Van Heuven (2015) did research on this and presented Dutch and German cognate nouns to Dutch and German children between 9 and 12 years of age who did not know the other language or a related dialect, and who all expressed positive attitudes toward the other language, its speakers and the country. The Dutch subjects proved to be significantly better at understanding the German cognates than the German subjects were at understanding the Dutch cognates. (The Handbook of Dialectology, 2018, pp. 207-208)

We can say that mutual intelligibility can be used to show the relationship between language and dialect, but not without various exceptions, which have been discussed above.

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE INTELLIGIBILITY OF A LANGUAGE

How a certain language is understood can be influenced by a lot of factors, thus increasing or lowering the level of intelligibility. The factors include the following:

Gestures

Gestures play a vital role in communication. Speakers utilise gestures to convey their ideas when speaking, which raises the level of comprehension between them and the audience. The building blocks for constructing a language are provided by gestures. Speakers in all cultures gesture when they talk, and the topics that elicit gesture can be as simple as a child's board game (Evans & Rubin 1979) or as complex as kinship relations (Enfield 2005). Even congenitally blind individuals, who have never seen anyone gesture, move their hands when they talk (Iverson & Goldin-Meadow, 1998), thus highlighting the importance of gesture in communication.

Gestures such as movement of hands, face and other parts of the body that people spontaneously produce when speaking and mouth movement reflect important aspects of oral communication (Kita & Ozyurek, 2003). Experimental studies have shown that subjects who see accompanying gestures while hearing native speech pick up significantly relevant information than subjects who do not (Graham & Argyle, 1975). So, the more people use gestures during communication, the more language intelligibility increases and when people do not use gestures during communication, the level of intelligibility decreases.

Linguistic Distance

This is the degree of difference between the two languages. A speaker may comprehend a language more easily if it is linguistically comparable to their original tongue than one that is not. Phonetic, lexical, and grammatical distance are some of the ways that linguistic distance is introduced. For example, cognate words (words that share an origin with another word) are crucial to making languages mutually intelligible. The lesser the linguistic distance, the greater the proportion of cognate words between two languages. The higher the percentage of cognate words between 2 languages, the lower the linguistic distance. The distance

between two languages can be calculated by measuring mutual intelligibility between languages by using each language's mass of words through lexicostatistics. If 2 different language varieties have a high degree of mutual intelligibility, the linguistic distance must be small. If they have a low degree of mutual intelligibility, the linguistic distance is large (Gookens, 2017).

Contact and Experience

Contact and experience play a vital role in mutual intelligibility because one is exposed more to a given language when he or she interacts and has experience with speakers of that language, hence enabling them to learn more and faster, especially because they are able to have first-hand information from that language. So, the higher the contact and experience of a given language, the higher the level of intelligibility. The lower the contact and experience of a given language, the lower the level of intelligibility.

Culture

According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, culture is the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group. Within the confines of a society, culture shapes the language that is used, including the way that particular terms are employed to promote the culture. People who are interested in or knowledgeable about these cultures are more likely to be able to understand the language since they are dedicated to learning about it; conversely, people who are not interested will have a low level of intelligibility. Therefore, culture plays a crucial role in defining a language's intelligibility.

Attitude

This is another major factor when it comes to determining the level of intelligibility of a given language. Subjects may be influenced by their positive or negative biases and attitudes toward the country and its speakers. So far, it has not been possible to establish why speakers may have a

negative attitude towards a given language. It may be a result of poor intelligibility or poor intelligibility as a result of negative attitudes caused by another factor. Language attitude research shows that people have stereotypical associations with given languages. Giles, Bourhis and Davies (1982) suggested two possible reasons why stereotypes occur.

The first one is an imposed norm-hypothesis which stresses the importance of extra-linguistic factors such as social connotations and cultural norms. A language is considered attractive when its speakers are socially privileged. The second one is an inherent value-hypothesis which is linguistically based and argues that some languages are more aesthetically pleasing due to their sound characteristics. So, these negative attitudes towards a given language lead to low intelligibility, while a positive attitude to a given language leads to a high degree of intelligibility (The handbook of Dialectology, 2018).

Education and Socioeconomic Status

Children who come from homes with lower socioeconomic status acquire language at a slower rate than those from homes with a higher socioeconomic status. This is because children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and whose parents usually have less formal education, are spoken to less and have low exposure to that language. This therefore makes them slower in producing and internalising complex syntactical structures, hence having low intelligibility in that given language.

On the other hand, their peers from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are read to more frequently, exposed more, and hence develop language at a faster rate, increasing the level of intelligibility.

CONCLUSION

In dialectology, various methods of collecting have been discussed, and most of them are being used to

date. We can also see how critics criticised the traditional dialectology. The relationship between dialectology and linguistics exposes us to the meaning of accents and the top 5 dialects of British English. In dialectology outside linguistics, we are able to think outside the field of linguistics and in everyday situations. In dialect intelligibility, we get to know the relationship between language and dialect and find out more about English, Swahili and Kamba from Africa and their respective dialects.

We conclude that dialect intelligibility can be used to define language and dialects, but there are exceptions which tend to differ from defining language and dialects in terms of dialect intelligibility. We also see how factors like gesture, attitudes, among others, can influence the intelligibility of a language either positively or negatively. Indeed, dialectology and dialect intelligibility are very important and interesting topics for all linguists.

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