
Reviewed by Michael Carey (University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia)

This collection of articles is an eclectic mix of empirical research and theoretical discussions that make a substantial contribution to an emerging interdisciplinary field: Second language pronunciation assessment (and testing). The editors, Talia Isaacs and Pavel Trofimovich, point out in the Introduction that the field has taken its current shape and gained impetus during the last decade, with seven articles published in Language Testing journal on the topic in the period 2010-2015, while only two appeared in the previous 25 years. This has coincided with the growing acceptance of World Englishes as a mainstream area of study, crossing over into the field of second language pronunciation research most noticeably after the publication of Jenkins’ (2000) treatise on the Lingua Franca Core (LFC) of pronunciation priorities. Jenkins indicated that pronunciation assessment would need to be reconceptualised through the World Englishes lens in the future and this is indeed a recurrent topic threaded throughout this collection, featuring in the fourth section with perspectives on English as a lingua franca.

The book, also available as an open access ebook to download for free, comprises 14 chapters divided into four thematic sections. The authors span generations in applied linguistics; some are seasoned researchers in the field whose experience is evident, others are emerging researchers. The Introduction (Part 1) provides a summary of the key themes, constructs and interdisciplinary perspectives in second language pronunciation assessment. The chapters in Part 2 apply insights from the broader language testing literature to discussion and empirical investigation of pronunciation assessment constructs. Part 3 contains perspectives on
pronunciation assessment from psycholinguistics and speech science. The chapters in part 4 provide discussions on sociolinguistic, cross-cultural and lingua franca perspectives in pronunciation assessment. Part 5 contains the editors’ concluding remarks. The remainder of this review summarises and critiques select chapters that interested me because they added fresh theoretical perspectives to the field, contained insights from empirical research that moved knowledge forward, or raised important issues that would provide research topics for other researchers.

In Part 2, Kevin Browne and Glenn Fulcher’s *Many Faceted Rasch Measurement* analysis of rater familiarity bias is the most robust study I have seen to date. It confirms the existence of rater familiarity bias found in prior studies and affirms the ‘theoretical stance that the construct of fluency more generally, and intelligibility more specifically, is situated as much within the listener as the speaker’ (p. 50). The authors conclude that the speech processing model applied to the role of the interlocutor (or speech test rater) should not position the listener as ‘a passive recipient of the speaker’s output, for which the speaker is completely responsible’ (ibid). Their recommendations for pre-empting rater familiarity bias are matching raters with candidates on the basis of equivalence in interlanguage familiarity, or providing accent familiarity training to raters. These suggestions are practically difficult to implement, but should be considered in future research to address a problem very much worthy of investigation.

Also in Part 2, Ute Knoch reviews language assessment and testing constructs, validation frameworks and bias, identifying areas for future research hitherto not covered, or inadequately covered, in the area of pronunciation assessment. She compares and contrasts pronunciation rating with the rating of other productive and receptive skills, explains the pros
and cons of holistic and analytic scales, the difficulty in determining the basis of criteria and descriptors, and various other issues. This review provides fertile ground for identifying new research directions in pronunciation assessment research. Some of Knoch’s suggestions for research based on prior studies include: examination of raters’ thought processes and alignment with pronunciation assessment constructs; the suitability of scale layout for user decision-making purposes; washback on learning and teaching; and the influence rater orientations and decision-making styles have on test takers’ pronunciation scores.

Part 3, “Perspectives on Pronunciation Assessment from Psycholinguistics and Speech Science” was the most methodologically interesting, but it also highlighted the sometimes irreconcilable paradigmatic differences that exist between the methods utilised in applied linguistics and socio-linguistics (constructivist) and speech science (reductivist). For instance, Joan Mora and Isabelle Darcy’s study of the relationship between cognitive control of executive functions (working memory, attention and inhibition) and pronunciation in a second language reviews the research on the individual learner difference in pronunciation proficiency, finding a non-linear relationship between pronunciation proficiency and other language skills. They present a well-controlled laboratory study that assessed ‘the relationship between L2 learners’ individual differences in cognitive control and their pronunciation accuracy [L2 speakers’ ability to produce two pairs of minimally distinctive segmental contrasts], measured through acoustic analysis of L2 speech and raters’ judgements of perceived comprehensibility and accentedness’ (p. 97).

However, the study is based, in part, on the assumption that the speaker’s ability to exercise ‘inhibitory control’ over L1 interference contributes to L2 pronunciation accuracy. An alternative view is that the learner’s motor sensory awareness and phonological knowledge of
their own L1 is very useful explicit input and should be utilised cognitively, not inhibited. Perhaps we need to reconceptualise the concept of interference and start researching how L1 phonological features can be utilised systematically as a positive point of reference in analytic, phonological awareness building approaches (Carey, 2015).

Part 4, “Sociolinguistic, Cross-cultural and Lingua Franca Perspectives in Pronunciation Assessment” contains three theoretical discussions and an empirical study (not reviewed herein) on the conundrum of whether to use the native speaker as a model and standard for pronunciation research, instruction and assessment. Alan Davies discusses the topic eloquently from both sides, but with a preference for the native model. His contention is that the native speaker still has a place as we will always require a target model, or models, or a set of standard phonological features, but his preference would be for Received Pronunciation (RP) as the standard language model, or idealised native speaker. A 40-year diachronic study (Harrington et al., 2000) of the Queen’s speech – Her Majesty being the archetypical RP model – provides strong evidence that the idea of a standard pronunciation is highly problematic, as all accents are pushed and pulled about the acoustic vowel space over time by social and geographic change. Given enough time, standardised descriptions of language become outdated and the native speaker models of that dialect or, in the case of RP, the sociolect, will have no model speakers and only the written code will remain.

The next chapter in this section by Stephanie Lindemann is a comprehensive theoretical review of native speaker variation and the misconception of non-native speaker “error”. In contrast to Davies, she concludes:

…an accuracy-based measure of pronunciation is likely to be somewhat arbitrary, especially for pronunciation of vowels, which varies widely among native speakers.
Instead, a focus on the speaker’s consistency in the vowel qualities used, regardless of whether these qualities match a particular native variety, would be more relevant (p.204).

The last chapter in this section titled “Pronunciation Assessment in Asia’s World City: Implications of a Lingua Franca Approach in Hong Kong”, by Andrew Sewell, describes the current reality of English as a lingua franca in the world’s most ‘super diverse’ global city. Sewell proposes that we should develop our assessment of English as a lingua franca through the lens of functional load, in a broader sense, to determine the informational relevance of phonological features as they contribute to lingua franca intelligibility. Sewell approaches this topic through a discussion of the feasibility of adopting an intelligibility-oriented assessment of lingua franca in Hong Kong. He identifies the following problem in his approach: “…the lingua franca approach runs into a possible problem, in that sociolinguistic factors such as stigmatization may tend to override the ‘rational’ criterion of intelligibility” (p. 249). He deals with this with a pragmatic solution that “aims to achieve a certain amount of change in terms of local orientations towards teaching and testing pronunciation, while not antagonizing local language users or gate-keeping institutions” (p. 249).

We have only scratched the surface in our understanding of how best to assess pronunciation. This book explicitly raises many interesting questions for researchers to follow up, and many of the chapters set my mind racing with new directions and questions for my own research and the higher degree research students I mentor in this field. In this way, the book was a treasure trove of insights that unite various specialised disciplines to provide an illuminating representation of the field.
The authors provide fresh perspectives on much-cited topics such as: intelligibility versus nativeness as the standard (Luke Harding; Kazuya Saito, Pavel Trofimovich, Talia Isaacs & Stuart Webb; Alan Davies; Stephanie Lindemann); functional load (Andrew Sewell); validation and the user experience of pronunciation rating scales (Harding), and rater bias through interlanguage familiarity (Kevin Browne & Glenn Fulcher; Laura Ballard & Paula Winke). Emerging topics include the role of the listener in the phonological loop (Ballard & Winke); lessons to learn from other test constructs such as writing (Ute Knoch); Cognitive control and pronunciation (Joan Mora & Isabelle Darcy), and the construct issue of speech rating subscales overlapping with other subscales, e.g., fluency (Harding; Browne & Fulcher) and lexis (Saito et al.). One topic that is conspicuous by its absence is a treatment of the various methods of testing pronunciation within high stakes tests such as oral proficiency interviews (IELTS), multiple-rater assessment of recorded speaking tests (TOEFL iBT), and automated speaking tests (Pearson Versant). Also, although the chapters all focus on topical aspects of second language pronunciation, not all of them align directly with the book’s title; one tangentially addresses the role of pronunciation in the assessment of second language listening assessment (Chapter 5) and one chapter makes no mention of assessment (Chapter 7). However, this is a minor criticism and does not take away from the value of these contributions.

Developments and evidence-based insights in speech science research have begun to blend with empirical studies viewing speech as a socially-situated functional practice within globalised human interaction to develop a vibrant new research area. Pronunciation specialists currently straddle multiple fields to understand the dynamic properties of second language speech, its learning, teaching and assessment. This collection brings together perspectives with disparate methodological origins and competing ontologies, hopefully
setting the tone for future interdisciplinary understanding and cooperation in the pursuit of knowledge in this fascinating and continually evolving field.

References


*Journal of the International Phonetic Association*, 30(1-2), 63-78.


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