Chapter I

The Curtain Raiser

1.0 Business, Language and Culture:

The world over business is being carried out freely with business organizations transcending the geographical boundaries in the wake of globalization and liberalization. In other words, increasing number of companies around the world are crossing national borders to conduct business. Kenichi Ohmae (1999) aptly describes the emerging scenario as The Borderless World.

Given the emergence of the borderless world, regardless of the organization one joins, one is likely to be dealing with people who come from various national, religious, and ethnic backgrounds, besides people from diverse cultures and languages within the nation. The differences in language and culture are sure to interfere with the exchange of messages. “In almost any business situation sending and receiving messages can be more complicated between native and nonnative businesspeople.” (Bovee and Thill, 1995). It can, therefore, be inferred that the success of a business transaction depends on the quality of not just the goods but that of communication as well.

1.1 Communication Connection:

While trade transactions are marked, at the surface level, by exchange of goods and currency, they are successfully facilitated, at
a deeper level, by a seamless communication process. When one says that successful business deals are struck or a certain organization has registered increase or slump in sales, one refers to the ability of the organization to communicate effectively with business partners, clients or customers in doing business. What does one mean by saying that the communication system of an organization is effective? It means a lot more than the technology, the infrastructure, etc. Above all it points to the people involved in the process, because even the best of the technologies fail to impress customers or clients for want of effective users. "Human beings will always determine the success of any communication, no matter how quickly, how far, or in what form electronic offices can send a message." (Bovee and Thill, 1995)

1.2 Channels of Communication:

It is in this context that "employers look for people who can communicate" (Bovee and Thill, 1995). It speaks volumes about the importance of communication as viewed by employers, in the functioning of an organization. When employers look for effective communicators, their use of the term communication refers to a very broad spectrum. The expectations are not limited to communication within a community or a society or a nation, they span across various cultures and nations. "Throughout your business day, you may interact with customers, suppliers, investors, and competitors from other lands. However, communicating across national borders
is only one way your communication skills will be challenged. Communicating across language and cultural barriers at home will also challenge your skills. Without leaving your own country, you’re likely to come into contact with people from a variety of backgrounds who work in your company, industry, and community.” (Bovee and Thill, 1995).

The term communication is used to refer to one’s ability to employ the four basic skills of language use - Listening (L), Speaking (S), Reading (R) and Writing (W). These four skills are also referred to as the communication channels.

![Figure 1.1: Communication Channels](image)

From Figure 1.1 it can be noticed that business people, managers or executives in their day-to-day life spend a major portion of their time listening (45%) followed by speaking (30%) with reading and writing skills getting about 16% and 9% of their time (Bovee and Thill, 1995).
1.3 Prominence of Oral Communication:

Between oral and written communication channels, it is oral communication that gains preference, notwithstanding the importance of the written mode. "Business people rely more heavily on oral than on written communication channels for sharing information on a day-to-day basis, but they often put important messages in writing." (Bovee and Thill, 1995) Figure 1.2 indicates that face-to-face communication – an oral medium – is the richest medium, notwithstanding the fact that telephone also belongs to spoken channel.
1.3.1 Telephonic Interviews:
The prominence of oral communication skills is further enunciated by the revolutionary changes brought about by telecommunications. Telephonic interviews, which are of late becoming the accepted norm of recruitment, reinforce the need for efficiency in oral communication. The time and in turn the cost factors make it mandatory for one to possess these skills. Telephonic conversation, in contrast to face-to-face communication, provides little scope for nonverbal communication to complement speech; whereas in face-to-face communication, it is an avowed fact that, a lot of meanings are communicated through nonverbal cues.

1.3.2 Oral Communication – The Barriers
The differences in the segmental and the supra-segmental features of different languages could create concerns regarding intelligibility of speech communication. For instance the phonemic inventory of one language may not match with that of the others. Similarly, the features like stress and intonation of one language may be perceived and understood differently by speakers of other languages.

“Oral communication usually presents more problems than written communication... Even if the other person speaks your language, you may have a hard time understanding the pronunciation if the person is not proficient. For example, many nonnative English speakers cannot distinguish between the English sounds v and w, so they say
"wery" for "very". At the same time, many people from the United States cannot pronounce the French *r* or the German *ch.*

"Also, people use their voices in different ways, which can lead listeners to misunderstand their intentions. Russian speakers, for instance, speak in flat, level tone in their native tongue. When they speak English, they maintain this pattern, and non-Russian listeners may assume that the speakers are bored or rude. Middle Easterners tend to speak more loudly than Westerners and may therefore be mistakenly considered more emotional. On the other hand, the Japanese are soft-spoken, a characteristic that implies politeness or humility to Western listeners."

"Idiomatic Expressions are another source of confusion..." (Bovee and Thill, 1995).

1.4 A Review of Earlier Studies:

"...People from different countries usually have different languages, but it seems that they share the same desire to understand each other even under difficult circumstances..." (Suenobu, Kanzaki and Yamane, 1989: 159). Here one can note that intelligibility takes the center seat. In this section an attempt will be made to review a few of the earlier studies on intelligibility.

1.4.1 Intelligibility of Indian English: Dr R K Bansal carried out a pioneering study of 'Intelligibility of Indian English' at University of London in 1967. In this study the attempt was to arrive at intelligibility of English spoken by Indian speaker
vis-à-vis the English spoken by native speakers to native and non-native users of English. Towards this end he had recorded Indian speakers and obtained feedback on their intelligibility from listeners representing various nationalities. It may be said that, with due regard to the commendable work done by Dr Bansal, the study was carried out with little homogeneity in the speaker sample. The speakers whose sample speeches were tested for intelligibility belonged to different levels of academic and social status. However, the study was successful in giving shape to what was later referred to as Indian English.

1.4.2 Intelligibility: An Evaluation of Some Features of English Produced by Swedish 14-Year Olds: This study by Margareta Olsson dealt with the effects of grammatical and lexical errors in non-native speech. The basic premise for Olsson’s study is that all other studies were more phonetically oriented and less lexically or syntactically. Olsson’s study considers the evaluation of communicative competence more important than the assessment of formal correctness, while she does 'not dispute the usefulness of foreign language instruction in which the goal is formal correctness' (Olsson, Margareta 1977: 144). Despite the commendable contribution the study made to understand intelligibility, it may be said that it was predominantly oriented towards written corpuses. While the
factors aiding intelligibility were talked about, they were valid more from the lexical or syntactic point of view.

1.4.3 From Error to Intelligibility: A study of the Japanese Learner’s Perception and Production of English: The study was carried out by Prof Mineo Suenobu in association with Kazuo Kanzaki and Shigeru Yamane at Institute of Economic Research, Kobe University of Commerce, Kobe in 1989. The research work was presented with a strong inclination towards Error Analysis. The research work was a compendium of papers on perception and production of English by Japanese learners. One of the papers, An Experimental Study of Intelligibility of English Spoken by Non-Natives, mentions that “out of the 2000 sentences they produced, we focused on 50 which included typical mistakes Japanese often make. Then we prepared a form on which those 50 sentences were typed out and we directed the native speakers to correct or paraphrase each of the sentences...” (Suenobu, Kanzaki and Yamane, 1987: 141) The procedure adopted in the study has the inherent error of transforming speech into written text. This would have resulted in loss of information about speech perceptions from speech perspective. To aptly put it in the authors’ words “The present study is limited by the fact that spoken English was transformed into written forms and that non-verbal aspects of the language were disregarded.”
Over and above the non-verbal aspects the transformation of spoken English into written forms would have resulted in loss of information about speech characteristics like pronunciation, tempo, voice quality, effectiveness.

The review of the earlier studies presented in this section indicates that the whole body of research carried out in the past examined intelligibility but avoided looking at pronunciation, tempo, voice quality as aiding intelligibility. Though some studies emphasized the need for communicative competence, there was hardly an effort to look at the effectiveness.

1.5 India in the Global Context:

The winds of liberalization and globalization have impacted a major part of the globe. India has been no exception to it. It was in 1991 that the Indian markets were opened up to a large extent for foreign players, breaking loose from license raj (refers to the colonial rule). After 1991, the Indian subcontinent has not remained the same so far as the economy is concerned. The question is “What has changed?”

The answer: the whole market scenario has changed leading to the entry of a host of foreign companies (multinationals and transnationals). While the entry of foreign companies has thrown open employment opportunities, it has necessitated the use of a fairly acceptable and more importantly intelligible language. Here it is English – the language of international acceptability. "Now that
English is a means of global communication, what should be the aim of pronunciation teaching? The tacit assumption has always been that we should aim to make learners 'intelligible'” (Taylor, David S. 1991).

1.6 Need for Research:
All of the arguments presented above support the view that oral communication channel, despite some of its shortcomings, is the most preferred or oft-used channel by most (almost all) of the businesspersons. With the multicultural and linguistic business scenario prevalent in general the world over and in India in particular, it assumes greater proportions of importance.

Given the multilingual scenario in India, the English used by people from different states/regions tends to be of as many shades as are the regions, which the users represent. When businesspersons representing two linguistically different states interact with each other, there is a very high probability of unintelligibility leading to communication gap. There is this very famous example of an announcement - “It is for the information of all invitees that there are snakes in the hole” - made at a wedding reception, listening to which all the invitees started running helter-skelter. Here pronunciation proved to be the spoilsport leading to miscommunication. The announcement was actually meant to be, “It is for the information of all the invitees that there are snacks in the hall”. This is just the tip of the ice-berg in an ocean of
(mis)communication. The question, which arises in one’s mind, is "If intelligibility problems could arise at such level in a communication transaction between compatriots, what would it be like in case of people representing two different nations?" These kinds of situations arise because of the myopic view people hold regarding the appropriate use of language in particular and communication in general.

With the multinational companies (MNCs) setting their eyes on India as a long-term investment avenue, it is quite obvious that their major workforce requirements have to be met by qualified Indian youth. Choosing to work for MNCs where there is a higher probability of interaction with people from different cultures and languages, one cannot remain complacent with one’s minimal ability to use intelligible English. Till very recently one could get away saying it is all right as long as people from one’s region could understand one. However, the job opportunities occurring outside one’s region force one to get out of the region; this, in turn, necessitates the use of language in a manner intelligible to others (to those who do not belong to that region).

Therefore, it is important and imperative that people involved in a social / business transaction be intelligible to each other. It is noted that a host of the factors mentioned – pronunciation, culture and the context - come in the way of intelligibility. Thus speech intelligibility would prove to be a fascinating area of study.
It is worth a mention that many earlier studies have had "intelligibility to and by native speakers as their base". That "there are now some 300-400 million non-native speakers as opposed to 340 million native speakers...it is equally possible that transactions and interactions in English among non-native speakers (with no native speaker involved) outnumber those that involve native speakers interacting with native speaker" (Taylor, David S. 1991), makes the study of intelligibility of speech communication among non-natives alongside that of non-native and native more relevant. Hence the ability to communicate in English so that one's audience finds one intelligible is imperative. Thus one has to be sure of how one can become more intelligible to one's listener. Rather than trying to find out who is or has to be intelligible to the others, it would make sense to look at how one can become more intelligible. Therefore, in this context, a study of the factors that aid or hamper intelligibility would be quite relevant and fascinating.

A perceptual study oriented to the study of phonetic features and voice characteristics that contribute to or hamper intelligibility could take care of the listener's point of view. While context and culture are also the factors, which contribute to intelligibility, the study carried out from a phonetician's point of view pays little attention to the same.

As mentioned earlier, with the entry of a host of multinational companies setting up their business bases in India, a study of
intelligibility in a business scenario is aimed at. Thus the subjects (the speakers) are understandably management graduates and the judges (the listeners) are the ones who represent organizations, businesses or professions at various levels. They are the ones with whom the subjects are expected or likely to interact in their normal course of job.

1.7 Summary:

This chapter has highlighted

- The role of various communication channels in general and the oral communication channel in particular.
- The preferences of businesspersons to use one channel (the oral channel) over the other channels.
- A review of the earlier studies.
- How changing Indian business situations / cultures are necessitating the use of language in a more appropriate way to aid intelligibility.
- The need for current research.