Speech intelligibility:

A generalized latent variable approach on utterances' entropies

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November 22, 2022

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Finantial support: The project was financed by the Flemish Government through the Research Fund of the University of Antwerp (BOF).

Competing interests: The authors declare they have no conflict of interest regarding this manuscript.

Keywords— intelligibilty, children with coclear implants, utterances' entropy, generalized linear latent and mixed model.

Abstract

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1 Introduction

Intelligible spoken language requires all core components of speech perception, cognitive processing, linguistic knowledge, and articulation to be mastered (Freeman et al.; 2017). In that sense, its attainment carries an important societal value, as it is considered a milestone in children's language development; and more practically, it is qualified as the ultimate checkpoint for the success of speech therapy, and the "gold standard" for assessing the benefits of cochlear implantation (Chin et al.; 2012).

But what is speech intelligibility?. Intelligibility can be broadly defined as "the extent to which a speaker's message is actually understood by the listener" (Munro and Tracey; 1999), and in a more narrow sense, it refers to the listener's ability to successfully decode the words in a message (Freeman et al.; 2017; Kent et al.; 1989; van Heuven; 2008; Whitehill and Chau; 2004). The latter definition is more helpful, as it sets a clear contrast with comprehensibility, which involves the listener's ability to understand the message and its intent (Munro and Tracey; 1999; Smith and Nelson; 1985).

However, indifferent of its broad or narrow definition, the literature also reveal that intelligibility can be compromised by features of the communicative environment, such as noise (Munro; 1998); by features of the speaker, like speaking rate (Munro and Derwing; 1998) or accent (Jenkins; 2000; Ockey et al.; 2016); or features of the listener, like vocabulary mastery (Varonis and Susan; 1985). Moreover, all of the above further emphasizes its dynamic nature, where changes in intelligibility stem from online adaptations of the speaker to the listener and/or the context.

Considering the above, we can say that speech intelligibility generates considerable interest among researchers for its societal value, but its measurement pose interesting challenges.

In that sense, the literature suggests two perspectives from which intelligibility can be assessed: the message and listener's perspective (Boonen et al.; 2020, 2021). The first, also known as acoustic studies, is focused on assessing separately particular characteristics of the speech samples, e.g. their pitch, duration, stress, or the articulation of vowels and consonants (Rowe and Levine; 2018). Whereas the second, also known as perceptual studies, is centered on making holistic assessments of the speech stimuli, e.g. measuring their overall quality (Boonen et al.; 2020, 2021). The former is justified by the fact that by using speech samples we can detect articulatory, acoustic, and auditory characteristics of intelligible utterances. In contrast, the latter is justified on the fact that intelligibilty is an intuitively understood notion, i.e. "something" that anyone can judge, but because of its entanglement with other features of the communication, it can be measured only indirectly (Guilford; 1954; Stevens; 1946).

Focusing our attention on perceptual studies, "objective rating" methods on children's utterances recovered from spontaneous speech tasks have received special attention, because of their high level of ecological validity (Boonen et al.; 2021; Ertmer; 2011; Flipsen; 2006; Hustad et al.; 2020). In these methods, listeners transcribe children's utterances orthographically (or phonetically), which later are used as information to construct an entropy score that expresses the degree of (dis)agreement in the transcriptions (Boonen et al.; 2021; Shannon; 1948). As a result, the scores are characterized by their clustered and bounded nature. The first is because the data have multiple measurements per child (one per utterance). While the second is because the score values are expresed in the continuum between zero and one.

Therefore, "objective rating" methods try to infer intelligibility from the extent to which a set of transcribers can identify the words contained in the utterances (Boonen et al.; 2021). In other words, the method gets a proxy measure of the speaker's intelligibility as judged by a listener, a snapshot of his/her performance under a specific set of circumstances (Hustad et al.; 2020). Moreover, the epistemological certainty in such 'snapshot' as a measure of intelligibility, stems from the design and steps taken to collect the data.

However, although the literature is clear on the benefits of the aforementioned method to (indirectly) quantify intelligibility (Boonen et al.; 2020, 2021; Hustad et al.; 2020), we notice the statistical procedures used to model such data are not at par of the measurement procedure's sophistication.

First, previous research have dealt with the data clustering, but ignored its bounded nature, where averaging was considered a valid option for modeling (Boonen et al.; 2021). We argue that the latter practice is not appropriate, as with bounded data not only the location (average), but also the spread (variance), of the entropies' distribution might inform about the speaker's intelligibility (McCullagh and Nelder; 1983).

The preceding statement is easier to understand with a thought experiment. Imagine three children with different patterns for ten entropy measures, all reporting the same mean entropy of 0.5. The patterns are: (a) scores closely agglomerated around 0.5, (b) scores loosely aglomerated around 0.5, and finally, (c) half of the scores agglomerated around 0.1 and the other half around 0.9. From the mean score we can say that the three children have an "average" level of intelligibility. However, from the spread of the scores we can notice that more uncertainty (to the asesssment of "average") should be assigned to child (c), followed by (b) and finally (a). This just mean that we can be more confident that child (a) has an "average" level of intelligibility, than in the other two cases, where (c) represent one extreme example of uncertainty. In that sense, we can easily notice that not only the average but also the spread of the entropies' distribution informs intelligibility.

Considering the previous, it is clear that more sophisticated statistical procedures, that integrates all these pieces of information, could improve our intelligibility estimates (McElreath; 2020).

Second, although the literature suggest the entropy scores capture the intelligibility of a child, it is clear that they can still be considered a surrogate of what it intends measure. Notice the previous can be stated because we observe multiple entropy scores per child, and that these scores are not "intelligibility" scores, but entropy scores. Therefore we can say that these multiple outcomes are a manifestation of a child's intelligibility, but such manifestation is measured with uncertainty (error), i.e. there is an unobserved (latent) intelligibility construct that is responsible for what it is observed on the entropy scores and their variation.

Therefore, if we hope to understand or intervene on the factors that drives speech intelligibility, first one needs to "construct" a children' *intelligibility* scale (Carroll; 2006), allowing us to test our research hypotheses at the appropriate level. Furthermore, the literature suggest that failing to model this phenomena as a "latent construct" would lead us to incorrect inferences (deHaan et al.; 2019).

Considering all of the above, the aim of this reasearch is to propose a novel analysis of the entropy data using a Bayesian implementation of the Generalized Linear Latent and Mixed Model (GLLAMM) (Rabe-Hesketh et al.; 2004a,c,b, 2012; Skrondal and Rabe-Hesketh; 2004). The statistical procedure offers four benefits. First, it allows to appropriately model the bounded nature of the entropy data. Second, it provides a way to "construct" the speaker's latent intelligibility scale. Third, it allow us to test our research hypothesis at the appropriate level. And fourth, as a result from the first two, we successfully avoid producing false confidence in the parameter estimates, which help us to produce correct statistical inferences (McElreath; 2020).

We find that when the proposed method is used to investigate the speech intelligibility levels of normal hearing (NH) versus hearing-impaired children with cochlear implants (HI/CI), in a data composed of ten utterances recordings from thirty two NH and HI/CI children selected from a large corpus of spontaneously spoken speech collected by the CLiPS research center, it brings bring new insights about the use of replicated entropy scores to measure intelligibility. Furthermore, the method also provide a way to assess how some factors affect the (under)development of children's intelligibility.

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