

Phonology and Linguistic Diversity: Advancing Pathways to Inclusivity

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Abstract

This paper explores the interconnected roles of phonology and linguistic diversity in advancing inclusivity within multicultural and multilingual societies, using Multicultural Education Theory as its guiding framework. It argues that phonological variation, such as accents and intonation, is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but a social marker that can either facilitate or hinder equitable participation. Similarly, linguistic diversity while reflecting cultural richness and identity often becomes a source of exclusion when dominant languages are privileged over minority ones. Drawing on recent studies, the paper highlights barriers such as accent bias, linguistic hierarchies, and monolingual ideologies, which reinforce systemic inequalities in education, workplaces, and broader social contexts. At the same time, it demonstrates how valuing phonological variation, promoting multilingual education, and cultivating listener flexibility can transform language differences into resources for identity affirmation, mutual understanding, and social cohesion. The paper concludes that inclusivity requires a shift from assimilationist models of communication toward frameworks that embrace variation as a legitimate expression of identity. It recommends educational, policy, workplace, and media strategies aimed at dismantling linguistic hierarchies, reducing accent bias, and preserving endangered languages. Ultimately, the study positions phonology and linguistic diversity as powerful pathways for achieving equitable and sustainable inclusivity.

Keywords: Inclusivity, Phonology and Linguistic Diversity

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Introduction

Inclusivity has increasingly become a central concern in contemporary societies, particularly in multicultural and multilingual contexts where communication is often shaped by diverse linguistic realities. The pursuit of inclusivity goes beyond access to resources or opportunities; it encompasses recognition, representation, and respect for cultural and linguistic differences (Eden, Chisom & Adeniyi, 2024). In educational, social, and professional settings, inclusivity demands frameworks that bridge differences and foster equitable participation for all individuals, regardless of their linguistic background. Thus, one significant pathway through which inclusivity can be advanced is language, with phonology and linguistic diversity playing critical roles.

Phonology, the study of sound systems in language, affects how individuals perceive and produce speech, which in turn influences mutual intelligibility and social interaction (Salsabila, Sari, Ghazali & Lubis, 2025). Differences in accents, intonation, and pronunciation can sometimes create barriers to effective communication, leading to stereotyping, exclusion, or misrepresentation of speakers. On the other hand, Stitzinger (2025) asserts that embracing phonological diversity not only validates linguistic identities but also enriches communicative practices by making space for varied speech patterns within a shared discourse community.

Similarly, linguistic diversity, the coexistence of multiple languages and dialects within a society presents both opportunities and challenges for inclusivity (Sumartana, Hudiananingsih & Rouf, 2025). While diversity reflects cultural heritage, identity, and intellectual richness, it also necessitates deliberate strategies to ensure that language differences do not translate into marginalization or inequality. For inclusivity to thrive, linguistic diversity must be positioned as a resource rather than a barrier, fostering environments where diverse voices can be heard, valued, and integrated.

This paper, therefore, examines how phonology and linguistic diversity serve as pathways to inclusivity, highlighting their role in shaping communication, reducing linguistic bias, and promoting social integration. By framing inclusivity through the lens of sound systems and language variation, the study emphasizes the need to advance discourses that recognize linguistic plurality as a cornerstone of equitable human interaction.

Concept of Inclusivity

According to Oyeyipo, Oyekola, Salako and Babatunde (2024), Inclusivity is a principle that emphasizes equal recognition, participation, and representation of all individuals, irrespective of their differences. It seeks to create environments where diversity is not only acknowledged but valued as an essential component of human interaction. Unlike approaches that merely tolerate differences, inclusivity promotes deliberate efforts to dismantle barriers that marginalize certain groups, ensuring that everyone has equitable opportunities to contribute and thrive.

In educational, social, and professional contexts, inclusivity extends beyond physical access or demographic representation. It involves cultivating spaces where people feel respected, understood, and empowered to express their identities without fear of prejudice or exclusion (Juvonen, Lessard, Rastogi, Schacter & Smith, 2019). This means addressing not only visible markers of diversity such as gender, race, or disability but also less visible dimensions, including language, culture, and communication styles.

Language, in particular, plays a central role in inclusivity. This is because communication is the medium through which ideas, identities, and relationships are expressed, linguistic factors can either foster belonging or reinforce exclusion. Accent bias, language hierarchies, and negative attitudes toward non-dominant languages often result in systemic inequities, even within otherwise diverse settings. Thus, inclusivity demands an approach that recognizes linguistic diversity and phonological variation as legitimate and valuable expressions of identity.

Understanding Phonology

Ramadhani, Harahap and Lubis, (2023) describes phonology as the branch of linguistics concerned with the study of the sound systems of language and how these sounds function to create meaning. While phonetics deals with the physical properties of sounds, their articulation and acoustic qualities, phonology focuses on the abstract, cognitive organization of these sounds within a particular language. It examines patterns such as phonemes, syllable structures, stress, intonation, and rhythm, all of which contribute to the intelligibility of speech and the uniqueness of a linguistic system (Odden, 2013). Phonology explains why speakers of different languages or dialects sound distinct. For instance, English distinguishes between the sounds /p/ and /b/, while certain languages treat them as variations of the same phoneme. Similarly, tone languages such as Yoruba or Mandarin rely on pitch differences to distinguish meaning, whereas English does not. These

variations reveal that phonology is not merely a technical study of sound but also a reflection of cultural and linguistic diversity.

Beyond its structural dimension, phonology has profound social implications. Accents, which are phonological variations within or across languages, serve as markers of identity, belonging, and difference. They signal regional background, social class, ethnicity, and even educational experience. However, because accents are often socially evaluated, they can become sites of prejudice. Studies show that accent bias is one of the most persistent forms of discrimination, with speakers of “non-standard” or foreign accents frequently judged as less competent, trustworthy, or intelligent despite possessing the same qualifications as native or “standard” speakers (Times Higher, 2023; The Guardian, 2025). This demonstrates that phonology is not only a linguistic system but also a socially constructed boundary that influences access, opportunity, and inclusion.

Importantly, phonology intersects with inclusivity by shaping how people are perceived and treated in different contexts. In multicultural and multilingual societies, phonological diversity is inevitable, yet dominant ideologies often privilege a “standard” accent or pronunciation as the norm. This creates hierarchies where some ways of speaking are legitimized while others are marginalized. For example, in educational settings, students who speak with stigmatized accents may be discouraged from participating, not because of lack of knowledge, but because of fear of negative judgment. Similarly, in workplaces, accent discrimination has been shown to affect hiring and promotion decisions, thereby reinforcing systemic exclusion.

However, phonology can also serve as a pathway to inclusivity when societies adopt a more open stance toward accent diversity. Recognizing that no accent or pronunciation is inherently superior dismantles linguistic hierarchies and affirms the legitimacy of all speakers. In education, this might mean training teachers to value different speech patterns rather than penalize them. In professional environments, it may involve raising awareness about unconscious accent bias and implementing equitable language policies. Inclusivity, in this sense, requires moving away from assimilationist models of speech toward frameworks that embrace variation as an expression of identity and belonging

Linguistic Diversity

Linguistic diversity refers to the coexistence of multiple languages, dialects, and speech varieties within a given society or community (Grin & Fürst, 2022). It encompasses not only the number of languages spoken but also the range of accents, registers, and vernaculars that shape how individuals communicate and construct meaning (Akram, Abdullah & Sartaj, 2025). Globally, linguistic diversity is immense; there are over 7,000 languages spoken today, reflecting humanity's cultural richness and historical depth (Morgan, 2025). This diversity is not merely a matter of communication, it embodies traditions, worldviews, and collective identities that are passed down through generations.

At the societal level, linguistic diversity signals cultural plurality and intellectual capital. Communities that embrace multiple languages benefit from broader cognitive resources, creative perspectives, and cultural exchange. However, linguistic diversity often becomes politically and socially contested, as certain languages are privileged as “standard” or “official,” while others are marginalized. This creates hierarchies where dominant languages gain institutional recognition in education, governance, and media, while minority or indigenous languages are stigmatized, suppressed, or even endangered. Such hierarchies directly undermine inclusivity by silencing voices that fall outside the dominant linguistic frame.

Within educational and professional settings, linguistic diversity presents both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, classrooms and workplaces enriched by multiple languages allow for intercultural understanding, collaboration, and innovation (Akintayo, Eden, Ayeni & Onyebuchi, 2024). On the other hand, when institutions adopt assimilationist models that favor only a single dominant language, speakers of other languages may feel excluded or forced to abandon their linguistic identities. For example, in many multilingual countries, students who use indigenous or regional languages at home may struggle in schools where instruction occurs exclusively in a colonial or dominant language. This not only limits learning outcomes but also undermines students' sense of belonging and self-worth.

From the perspective of inclusivity, linguistic diversity should be viewed as a resource rather than a barrier (Wijayanti, 2024). Valuing multiple languages and dialects affirms that no single linguistic variety holds a monopoly on legitimacy or intelligence. Policies that promote multilingual education, encourage the use of local languages alongside global ones, and normalize varied speech patterns in public discourse foster environments of equity and respect. Such

recognition ensures that all individuals, regardless of their linguistic background, can participate meaningfully in society.

Theoretical Framework

Multicultural Education Theory

Multicultural Education Theory, pioneered by James A. Banks, is an educational framework that emphasizes equity, social justice, and cultural pluralism within learning environments and society at large (Banks & Banks, 1989). The theory holds that students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds should not be treated as obstacles to success but as valuable assets that enrich the learning process and strengthen social interaction (Banks & Banks, 1989). It argues for the creation of systems, curricula, and practices that reflect the cultural diversity of learners while dismantling structural inequalities that perpetuate exclusion. In this sense, multicultural education goes beyond simply acknowledging diversity; it promotes the active recognition of all cultural and linguistic identities as legitimate, thereby affirming the principle that every individual deserves equal opportunities to learn, participate, and thrive.

One of the central contributions of Multicultural Education Theory is its call for integration across multiple dimensions (Banks, 2009). It emphasizes the inclusion of diverse cultural perspectives in content and curriculum, ensuring that learners can see themselves represented in what they study. It advocates for equity pedagogy, in which teachers employ methods that enable students from all cultural and linguistic backgrounds to achieve equally, while also encouraging the reduction of prejudice through the cultivation of positive attitudes toward difference. Perhaps most importantly, the theory seeks to restructure institutional cultures so that schools and other social systems empower rather than marginalize, validating cultural and linguistic variation as central to inclusivity.

Viewed through this theoretical lens, the focus of this paper on phonology and linguistic diversity becomes particularly meaningful. Phonological differences such as accents and intonation patterns are more than linguistic variations; they are markers of cultural identity and belonging. When schools, workplaces, and social institutions stigmatize these differences, individuals are excluded not because of a lack of competence but because of bias. Multicultural Education Theory provides a foundation for challenging such exclusion, insisting that all accents and speech patterns be regarded as legitimate and valuable. In this way, phonology becomes a

pathway to inclusivity, not through assimilation into a “standard” model of speech, but through the recognition of variation as an expression of identity and equality.

The theory also shows the importance of linguistic diversity as a resource rather than a liability. Societies enriched by multiple languages and dialects have the opportunity to draw on wider cognitive resources, cultural knowledge, and creative capacities. Multicultural Education Theory positions such diversity at the heart of inclusive education, supporting practices such as translanguaging and multilingual instruction that allow learners to draw on their full linguistic repertoires. By doing so, institutions affirm minority and indigenous languages, resisting linguistic hierarchies that privilege dominant or colonial languages while relegating others to the margins. This approach not only enhances educational outcomes but also empowers learners and communities by affirming their cultural identities.

Finally, although the theory was originally developed in the context of education, its principles extend naturally into broader social and professional settings. Accent bias in employment, stereotypes in media representation, and linguistic profiling in public spaces all reflect the systemic inequalities that Multicultural Education Theory seeks to address. By applying this framework, the study reveals how inclusivity can be fostered in multiple contexts through equitable policies, intentional representation, and the dismantling of linguistic hierarchies. Thus, Multicultural Education Theory offers not just an educational model but a societal framework that links language practices to wider goals of equity, social justice, and democratic participation.

Phonology and Linguistic Diversity as Pathways to Inclusivity

Phonology, the study of the sound systems of language, plays a crucial role in promoting inclusivity. The way people speak their accents, intonation patterns, and pronunciation often shapes how they are perceived in social and educational contexts. Research indicates that speech can be heavily accented yet remain fully intelligible, demonstrating that “native-like” pronunciation is not the sole determinant of effective communication (Derwing & Munro, 1997). This distinction challenges the common bias that equates standard accents with competence and highlights the importance of valuing intelligibility over conformity. When institutions and communities recognize accented speech as a legitimate form of expression rather than a deficit, they create communicative spaces where more individuals feel respected, understood, and included.

Exposure to diverse phonologies further enhances inclusivity. Carey and Szocs (2024) found that listeners who are familiar with different accents are more likely to rate those accents as comprehensible, illustrating that inclusion depends not only on speaker adaptation but also on listener flexibility. By cultivating environments where varied speech patterns are regularly encountered, whether in classrooms, workplaces, or media, societies can reduce accent bias and foster a greater sense of belonging. Such exposure transforms phonological differences from obstacles into opportunities for connection and mutual understanding.

Linguistic diversity, encompassing the presence of multiple languages and dialects within a community, complements the inclusivity offered by phonology. In multilingual contexts, individuals are empowered to communicate using the full range of their linguistic repertoires, which strengthens identity affirmation and social equity. Educational studies highlight the benefits of translanguaging, where teachers encourage students to draw on all their languages to learn and express ideas. This approach not only enhances cognitive development and academic performance but also signals to learners that their languages and accents are valued, cultivating a more inclusive learning environment (Wijayanti, 2024).

The promotion of multilingual education also supports epistemic inclusion, allowing students to engage with knowledge through meaningful linguistic channels rather than being forced into a dominant language framework. In Sub-Saharan African contexts, adopting multilingual teaching practices has been shown to improve student engagement, retention, and understanding while fostering respect for learners' home languages and cultures (Barrett, Milligan, Sane & Bowden, 2025). By validating diverse languages and dialects, institutions dismantle linguistic hierarchies that perpetuate exclusion and marginalization, enabling all individuals to participate fully in social and educational life.

Barriers to Inclusivity

One of the most significant barriers to inclusivity is the widespread phenomenon of accent bias, particularly against speakers with non-standard or foreign accents. A large-scale meta-analysis of hiring interviews found that applicants with standard accents were favored over non-standard-accented speakers by about half a standard deviation, even when their verbal responses were identical (Maindidze, Randall, Martin-Raugh & Smith, 2025). This suggests that accent bias is rooted less in actual differences in conveyed information and more in evaluators' stereotyped

perceptions of competence and warmth (Drożdżowicz & Peled, 2024; Maindidze et al., 2025). Moreover, this bias appears to intersect with gender: women with non-standard accents are more likely to be penalized than men in similar situations, highlighting how accent prejudice often compounds other biases (Maindidze et al., 2025).

Another barrier arises from linguistic hierarchies and monolingual ideologies in many multilingual societies, certain languages (often colonial or globally dominant ones) are privileged as the legitimate or “prestigious” languages of education, government, and business. This privileging often marginalizes indigenous or minority languages, both in formal instruction and in public life (Akkari & Thiam, 2024). The legacy of colonial language policies has left many African educational systems heavily reliant on former colonial languages, resulting in a disconnect between students’ home languages and the languages of instruction (Akkari & Thiam, 2024). As a result, students may struggle to fully engage with content delivered in a second or third language, negatively affecting learning outcomes, self-confidence, and overall educational equity.

A further obstacle is listener inflexibility or limited exposure to diverse accents. Drożdżowicz and Peled, (2024); Yaw and Ferronato, (2025); Quam and Creel, (2021) suggested that listeners’ unfamiliarity with certain accent varieties can lead them to perceive accented speech as less intelligible or competent even when objectively the speech is comprehensible. Such biases can reduce willingness to accommodate or adjust, effectively placing the full burden of clear communication on the speaker. Moreover, perceptions of reduced processing fluency when listening to non-native or unfamiliar accents often do not align with actual comprehension difficulties, further skewing listener judgments (Drożdżowicz & Peled, 2024; Quam & Creel, 2021).

In educational systems, especially where monolingual instruction is the norm, the exclusion of students’ home languages often exacerbates disadvantage. When instruction shifts abruptly from a child’s first language in early grades to a foreign or official language in later grades, the transition can be poorly planned. This creates a “language transition gap” a period during which learners may not have adequate proficiency in the second language to fully grasp academic content (Akkari & Thiam, 2024). Even when policies ostensibly support multilingualism, implementing cohesive bilingual or multilingual education models from preschool to university remains a major challenge, often due to resource constraints, insufficient teacher training, and inconsistent policy implementation (Bwowe, Masha & Nikisi, 2024). In practice, students may be taught with one

language in primary school, then forced to switch to a different language of instruction, sometimes without gradual scaffolding leading to lower comprehension, disengagement, and widening achievement gaps (Akkari & Thiam, 2024).

Finally, systemic linguistic discrimination and profiling represent a subtler but equally pernicious barrier. In many settings, accent-related stereotypes intersect with ethnicity, race, social class, or nationality to create bias. Listeners might unconsciously categorize foreign-accented speakers as out-group members, interpreting their speech through lenses of prejudice rather than purely linguistic difference (Drożdżowicz & Peled, 2024). This can lead to implicit bias, influencing everything from how listeners perceive a speaker's fluency to how they evaluate the speaker's intelligence, credibility, or even personality (Drożdżowicz & Peled, 2024; Tolmacheva & Tareva, 2023). These attentional and perceptual biases are often difficult to detect or prove, making them harder to address through simple policy changes.

Overcoming Barriers to Inclusivity

Addressing the barriers to inclusivity requires both structural reform and attitudinal change. One critical step is to tackle accent bias at institutional and societal levels. Organizations in education, employment, and media must explicitly recognize accent discrimination as a form of inequality comparable to racial or gender bias. Research has shown that structured interview formats, awareness training, and explicit rater guidelines help minimize the role of accent prejudice in hiring and assessment contexts (Yang, McAllister & Huang, 2023; Maindidze et al., 2025). In classrooms, teachers can be trained to focus on intelligibility rather than accent conformity, thereby shifting evaluation from how something is said to what is being communicated. This reorientation not only ensures fairer judgments but also reinforces the idea that communicative competence is not tied to a single "prestigious" accent.

A second strategy lies in fostering listener flexibility through deliberate exposure and training. Studies demonstrate that listeners who regularly encounter diverse phonological patterns rate such speech as more comprehensible, highlighting that inclusion is not solely the speaker's responsibility (Carey & Szocs, 2024). Schools and workplaces can create programs where learners, staff, and community members are exposed to multiple accents through teaching materials, collaborative projects, or media representation. Listener training workshops that combine exposure with reflective dialogue can help people confront their unconscious biases and develop empathy

toward speakers from varied linguistic backgrounds. By shifting the focus from speaker adaptation to shared responsibility in communication, institutions cultivate environments where mutual understanding becomes the norm.

Equally important is addressing linguistic hierarchies embedded in educational systems. Policies that enforce a single dominant language of instruction perpetuate exclusion, particularly in multilingual contexts where learners' home languages differ from the official medium. A growing body of evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa shows that multilingual education which uses home languages alongside official languages in instruction improves comprehension, retention, and identity affirmation (Barrett et al., 2025). Translanguaging practices, where students are encouraged to draw on their full linguistic repertoires, also enhance cognitive development and signal that all languages are valued resources (Wijayanti, 2024). By integrating these approaches, schools dismantle linguistic hierarchies and make inclusivity a lived reality rather than an abstract principle.

Finally, sustainable inclusivity requires cultural and representational change. Media and creative industries play a powerful role in normalizing linguistic diversity, yet many professionals report feeling pressured to abandon their natural accents to fit industry expectations. Campaigns and productions that deliberately showcase multiple accents and dialects as legitimate voices of authority, artistry, and expertise counteract this pressure. At the same time, governments and organizations can invest in revitalization projects for endangered or marginalized languages, thereby extending inclusivity beyond immediate communication to cultural preservation. Such initiatives challenge the prestige of a single "standard" and position diversity as an asset to collective identity.

Conclusion

This study has shown that phonology and linguistic diversity are powerful pathways to inclusivity when they are embraced as resources rather than barriers. Accents, intonation, and language variation are not merely linguistic features but expressions of identity that shape belonging and participation. Yet, as highlighted, accent bias, linguistic hierarchies, and monolingual ideologies continue to reinforce exclusion across education, workplaces, and society. Drawing on Multicultural Education Theory, the study emphasizes that inclusivity requires moving beyond assimilationist models to frameworks that affirm all linguistic expressions as

legitimate. By promoting multilingual education, reducing accent prejudice, and protecting minority languages, societies can dismantle systemic inequalities and build equitable spaces where every voice is valued.

Way Forward

1. Schools should embrace multilingual and translanguaging approaches that integrate learners' home languages alongside official or global languages. Teachers should be trained to focus on intelligibility rather than conformity to a "standard" accent, ensuring that students' diverse phonological expressions are validated rather than stigmatized.
2. Governments and policymakers should design and enforce inclusive language policies that protect indigenous and minority languages, promote multilingual education, and ensure gradual language transitions in schools to prevent learning disadvantages.
3. Organizations should recognize accent bias as a form of discrimination comparable to racial or gender prejudice. Fair recruitment and promotion processes should be supported through structured interviews, rater training, and explicit anti-bias guidelines.
4. Media outlets and cultural institutions should normalize diverse accents and languages in authoritative, professional, and artistic roles. This visibility helps dismantle stereotypes and positions linguistic diversity as part of mainstream culture.
5. Educational institutions, workplaces, and communities should promote programs that expose individuals to diverse phonologies, encouraging empathy, awareness, and flexibility among listeners. This reduces unconscious bias and fosters more inclusive communication.
6. Stakeholders should invest in revitalization programs for endangered and marginalized languages. Protecting linguistic heritage is not only a matter of inclusivity but also of cultural sustainability.

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