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Who Must Adapt? Institutional Listening Asymmetry as a Framework for Rethinking Intercultural Competence in Higher Education

Quem deve se adaptar? A assimetria institucional da escuta como referencial para repensar a competência intercultural no ensino superior

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Abstract

This conceptual paper develops the Institutional Listening Asymmetry Framework (ILAF) as a critical extension of intercultural competence scholarship in higher education. Existing approaches frequently emphasise individual adaptability, openness and communicative competence while paying less attention to how responsibility for achieving understanding is distributed. Drawing on Critical Intercultural Communication, Raciolinguistics, Critical Race Theory, Institutional Whiteness, Colonialingualism and Communication Accommodation Theory, ILAF shifts analysis from individual competence towards the relationship between speakers, listeners and institutions. The framework identifies three interconnected analytical levels: interactional, ideological, and institutional, and five dimensions: speaker adaptation burden, listener reflexivity and responsibility, communicative legitimacy, institutional mediation, and communicative reciprocity. ILAF provides a framework for examining when intercultural communication becomes asymmetrical and how institutions may reproduce or challenge such inequalities. It offers a foundation for future empirical validation and for developing more reciprocal and institutionally accountable approaches to intercultural communication in higher education.

Keywords: Institutional listening asymmetry, Intercultural competence, Raciolinguistics, Higher education

Resumo

Este artigo conceitual desenvolve o Quadro de Assimetria Institucional da Escuta (ILAF) como uma extensão crítica dos estudos sobre competência intercultural no ensino superior. As abordagens existentes frequentemente enfatizam a adaptabilidade individual, a abertura e a competência comunicativa, ao mesmo tempo que prestam menos atenção à forma como a responsabilidade pela obtenção da compreensão é distribuída. Com base na Comunicação Intercultural Crítica, na Raciolinguística, na Teoria Crítica da Raça, na Branquitude Institucional, no Colonialinguismo e na Teoria da Acomodação da Comunicação, o ILAF desloca a análise da competência individual para a relação entre falantes, ouvintes e instituições. O quadro identifica três níveis analíticos interligados - interacional, ideológico e institucional - e cinco dimensões: carga de adaptação do falante, reflexividade e responsabilidade do ouvinte, legitimidade comunicativa, mediação institucional e reciprocidade comunicativa. O ILAF fornece um referencial para examinar quando a comunicação intercultural se torna assimétrica e como as instituições podem reproduzir ou desafiar tais desigualdades. Oferece uma base para futura validação empírica e para o desenvolvimento de abordagens mais recíprocas e institucionalmente responsáveis à comunicação intercultural no ensino superior.

Palavras-chave: Assimetria institucional da escuta, competência intercultural, raciolinguística, ensino superior

Introduction

Intercultural competence has become an increasingly important concept within internationalised higher education. Universities routinely emphasise communication across cultural differences, global citizenship, inclusivity and the capacity to engage effectively with diverse academic communities. Within much of the established literature, intercultural competence is consequently conceptualised through individual attributes such as openness, empathy, cultural awareness, adaptability and communicative flexibility (Deardorff, 2006; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Baker, 2011). These perspectives have made important contributions to understanding intercultural interaction. However, they tend to assume, either explicitly or implicitly, that communicative responsibility is reasonably reciprocal: participants encounter difference, adapt to one another, and develop greater mutual understanding.

Such an assumption becomes problematic when intercultural communication takes place within unequal institutional and social relations. Communication does not occur between abstract cultural actors occupying equivalent positions. Speakers and listeners enter encounters with differently valued accents, racialised identities, linguistic repertoires, professional statuses and degrees of institutional legitimacy. Raciolinguistic scholarship has demonstrated that perceptions of language cannot be separated from racialised expectations about who constitutes a legitimate speaker (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Rosa & Flores, 2017). Similarly, research on accent discrimination shows that judgements of intelligibility and

competence may be shaped as much by listener expectations and social positioning as by the linguistic characteristics of speakers themselves (Lippi-Green, 2012). From this perspective, the question is no longer simply whether individuals possess sufficient intercultural competence, but *how responsibility for successful intercultural communication is distributed and who is expected to adapt when communication becomes difficult.*

This problem is particularly significant within higher education. Universities increasingly recruit internationally mobile and racially diverse academic staff while simultaneously operating through historically established norms concerning academic communication, authority and professionalism. These norms are frequently presented as neutral, yet scholarship on institutional whiteness demonstrates how apparently universal standards may reflect historically dominant ways of speaking, behaving and occupying academic space (Ahmed, 2012; Puwar, 2004; Joseph-Salisbury, 2019). Likewise, colonialingual perspectives draw attention to the continuing influence of colonial language hierarchies on what is regarded as appropriate, educated or legitimate communication (Meighan, 2023). Expectations of “clarity,” “professionalism” and “intelligibility” therefore warrant critical examination not because these qualities are inherently problematic, but because their application may make some speakers disproportionately responsible for overcoming communicative difference while leaving dominant listening practices comparatively unexamined.

It is from this theoretical and empirical problem that the concept of *Institutional Listening Asymmetry (ILA)* emerges. ILA refers to a patterned condition in which responsibility for achieving successful communication is distributed unequally across speakers, listeners, and institutions. Under conditions of high listening asymmetry, speakers whose linguistic or social identities are positioned as different undertake disproportionate communicative labour, such as modifying accent or pronunciation, slowing speech, simplifying language, monitoring tone, repeating explanations, or avoiding culturally specific references- while listeners face comparatively limited expectations to develop interpretive flexibility or critically examine their own assumptions. Institutions may reinforce this imbalance when policies, evaluation systems and professional norms conceptualise communication primarily as a speaker competency rather than a relational accomplishment.

ILA overlaps with existing concepts but addresses a different analytical problem. Raciolinguistic scholarship and the notion of the White listening subject illuminate how racialised ideologies shape perception (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Linguistic profiling and accent-discrimination research identify processes through which speech becomes a basis for judgement and exclusion. Emotional and identity-labour perspectives illuminate the additional work undertaken by minoritised individuals when navigating institutional environments. ILA builds upon these perspectives but shifts analytical attention towards the *distribution of*

communicative responsibility itself. It asks not only *how particular speakers are heard*, but *who is required to act when understanding fails, whose communicative practices become objects of correction, whose listening remains institutionally unexamined, and how organisational structures reproduce or challenge these patterns*.

This article develops ILA from a concept into the *Institutional Listening Asymmetry Framework (ILAF).* The framework is intended not as an instrument for judging whether individuals are interculturally competent, but as an analytical approach for examining the conditions under which intercultural competence is demanded, enacted and evaluated. It conceptualises communication across three interconnected levels: *interactional, ideological and institutional*, and proposes five dimensions through which listening asymmetry can be examined: *speaker adaptation burden, listener reflexivity and responsibility, communicative legitimacy, institutional mediation, and communicative reciprocity.*

The paper therefore makes three contributions. First, it shifts the unit of analysis in intercultural competence research from the individual communicator towards the wider communicative system in which speakers, listeners and institutions participate. Second, it places *listening and communicative responsibility* at the centre of intercultural analysis, challenging speaker-deficit explanations of misunderstanding. Third, it develops a framework capable of generating theoretically testable propositions and guiding future empirical research into how linguistic, racialised and institutional inequalities shape intercultural communication.

The central proposition underpinning ILAF is straightforward but consequential: *intercultural competence cannot be meaningfully understood without examining how the responsibility for achieving understanding is distributed*. A communicative environment may appear highly intercultural while remaining profoundly asymmetrical if some participants must continually adapt while others retain the privilege of remaining communicatively unreflexive. Reframing intercultural competence in these terms moves the debate from the question of *who is competent* towards the more structural question of *who is required to do the work of intercultural understanding, and under what institutional conditions.*

Conceptual Methodology

The Institutional Listening Asymmetry Framework (ILAF) was developed through an iterative process of empirical abstraction and conceptual synthesis. Its empirical point of departure was a completed six-month ethnographic doctoral study examining intercultural communication within a UK higher education institution. The wider study combined sustained classroom observation with interviews involving five racially minoritised academics and 32 students, student focus groups, fieldnotes and institutional document analysis. Analysis of

these data identified recurring patterns in which minoritised academics undertook considerable communicative work, including repetition, linguistic accommodation, self-monitoring, modification of pace and tone, and cultural recalibration—to maintain intelligibility and professional authority. These practices were not consistently accompanied by equivalent expectations for listeners to adapt, while institutional discourses frequently located communicative responsibility within individual speakers.

These empirical patterns provided the basis for the initial concept of Institutional Listening Asymmetry (ILA): the unequal distribution of responsibility for achieving communicative understanding. The present chapter develops that empirically generated concept into a broader analytical framework rather than reproducing the original empirical analysis. Framework development involved bringing the observed patterns into dialogue with bodies of scholarship addressing complementary aspects of the problem: intercultural competence, Communication Accommodation Theory, raciolinguistics, Critical Race Theory and institutional whiteness, colonialingualism, and accent discrimination. These literatures were selected because they illuminate, respectively, individual adaptability, communicative accommodation, listener perception, racialised institutional power, linguistic hierarchy, and communicative legitimacy.

Conceptual comparison focused on four questions: where communicative responsibility is located; how speaker adaptation and listener responsibility are conceptualised; how legitimacy and intelligibility are produced; and how institutional structures mediate communication. Through iterative comparison between the empirical patterns and these theoretical perspectives, recurring processes were organised into three analytical levels: interactional, ideological and institutional, and five dimensions concerning adaptation burden, listener responsibility, communicative legitimacy, institutional mediation and reciprocity. The six propositions developed later in the chapter translate the relationships among these dimensions into claims intended for subsequent empirical testing rather than presenting ILAF as an already validated model.

The Problem of Symmetry in Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence (ICC) has developed through several influential traditions, but a common concern across much of the literature is how individuals acquire the attitudes, knowledge and skills necessary to communicate effectively across cultural differences. Deardorff's (2006) process model, for example, identifies respect, openness and curiosity as foundational attitudes that contribute to cultural self-awareness, knowledge, empathy and adaptable communication. Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) similarly conceptualise intercultural competence through the capacity to communicate both effectively and

appropriately across cultural contexts. These approaches have been valuable in moving intercultural communication beyond simplistic knowledge of national cultures towards more dynamic understandings of communicative capability.

Baker's (2011) concept of intercultural awareness advances this position by questioning essentialist understandings of culture and recognising that intercultural encounters involve fluid, emergent and negotiated identities. Rather than assuming that competent communication requires mastery of fixed cultural codes, intercultural awareness emphasises participants' capacity to negotiate cultural frames and recognise the complexity of intercultural interaction. Such developments are important because they shift attention away from deterministic accounts of national culture. Nevertheless, even more dynamic approaches leave an important question comparatively underdeveloped: *how is the responsibility for making intercultural communication successful distributed among participants?*

The issue is not that conventional ICC models explicitly claim that communication is equal. Rather, their predominant emphasis on developing individual competence can create an implicit *symmetry assumption*. If successful intercultural communication depends upon openness, empathy, adaptability and communicative flexibility, it is easy to presume that these capacities are similarly available to, and expected from, all participants. Yet intercultural encounters occur within social and institutional relations in which speakers and listeners do not necessarily possess equivalent authority, linguistic legitimacy or freedom to remain unadapted. Consequently, identical expectations of "adaptability" can have profoundly different implications depending upon who is expected to adapt and under what conditions.

This distinction becomes particularly important when intercultural competence is institutionalised through professional-development programmes, teaching evaluations and expectations surrounding communication. A lecturer who modifies pronunciation, slows speech, simplifies vocabulary or continually checks comprehension may readily be classified as demonstrating intercultural adaptability. However, focusing only on the lecturer's behaviour leaves another part of the communicative relationship relatively invisible: *what adaptation is required from the listener?* If one participant repeatedly modifies their communicative practices while another can disengage, complain about unfamiliar speech or continue to interpret difference through familiar linguistic expectations, the interaction may demonstrate considerable individual adaptability while remaining structurally asymmetrical.

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) helps expose part of this problem. Giles and colleagues conceptualise communication as a process in which participants may converge towards or diverge from one another's communicative practices, with accommodation shaped by identity, social relationships and interactional goals. This relational emphasis is important

because it recognises that communication involves adjustment between participants rather than simply the acquisition of individual skills. Yet accommodation itself cannot automatically be equated with equality. Convergence may be voluntary and reciprocal, but it can also occur because one party experiences greater social or institutional pressure to accommodate. The analytical question therefore shifts from whether accommodation occurs to *who accommodates whom, why, at what cost, and with what consequences for identity and legitimacy.*

Critical intercultural scholarship provides an important foundation for asking these questions. Scholars including Dervin (2016) and Holliday (2018) have challenged cultural essentialism and the tendency to conceptualise intercultural encounters as interactions between stable cultural groups. Such critiques foreground power, representation and the politics through which cultural difference is produced. However, greater attention is still required to the micro-politics of communicative responsibility: the everyday distribution of the work required to achieve intelligibility and recognition.

From speaking competence to listening responsibility

A particularly significant limitation of speaker-centred models is that intelligibility can appear to reside primarily in the person speaking. The speaker is clear or unclear, comprehensible or incomprehensible, competent or deficient. Raciolinguistic scholarship fundamentally complicates this assumption. Flores and Rosa (2015) argue that linguistic practices are perceived through racialised ideological frames, meaning that judgements about linguistic appropriateness cannot be separated from the listener through whom those practices are interpreted. Their conceptualisation of the White listening subject is particularly significant because it relocates analysis from supposedly deficient racialised speakers towards the ideological position from which speech is heard.

Rosa and Flores (2017) further demonstrate that race and language are mutually constituted rather than analytically separable phenomena. From this perspective, perceptions of accent and intelligibility may reflect more than objective linguistic distance. Listeners bring expectations concerning what competent, professional, or authoritative speech should sound like. Lippi-Green (2012) similarly demonstrates how accent becomes socially consequential when varieties are constructed as normal while others are marked and evaluated.

This insight has profound implications for intercultural competence. If intelligibility is relationally produced, then competence cannot logically remain principally a property of speakers. *Listening across difference must itself constitute intercultural work.* A listener confronted with unfamiliar pronunciation, vocabulary, or communicative style can attempt clarification, increase attentional effort, develop familiarity with linguistic variation, and critically

reflect upon expectations of what legitimate speech should sound like. Failure to consider these processes creates a theoretical imbalance in which speaker adaptation becomes visible as competence while listener non-adaptation remains largely unnamed.

ILA develops the raciolinguistic shift from speaker to listener one step further. Whereas the listening-subject perspective helps explain how speech becomes racialised in perception, ILA asks what follows from that perception: Who adjusts? Who repeats? Whose language becomes subject to correction? Who can withdraw from the interaction? And what role does the institution play in distributing those responsibilities?

A colonialingual perspective deepens this critique. Meighan (2023) demonstrates how contemporary linguistic hierarchies remain shaped by colonial histories that privilege languages and varieties while positioning others as inferior. In UK higher education, therefore, linguistic standards cannot necessarily be separated from the historical processes through which forms of English acquired institutional legitimacy. Concepts such as “clarity,” “appropriate communication” and “professional English” may perform necessary pedagogical functions, but they also require critical examination when the standards against which clarity is assessed remain unmarked.

The problem is therefore not the expectation that academics communicate clearly. Clarity is pedagogically necessary. The problem arises when clarity is conceptualised unidirectionally: speakers must become intelligible, while listeners are not correspondingly expected to become capable of listening across linguistic difference. Under these conditions, the language of competence can obscure an unequal distribution of communicative labour.

From individual competence to communicative conditions

This critique requires neither abandoning intercultural competence nor dismissing adaptability, empathy and openness as undesirable. On the contrary, these remain essential to intercultural communication. The conceptual problem concerns their distribution. If openness is necessary, whose openness is required? If adaptability is valued, who adapts? If empathy is fundamental, towards whom must it operate? If successful communication requires effort, who performs that effort?

These questions suggest that the appropriate unit of analysis cannot be the individual communicator alone. It must include the *communicative relationship and the institutional conditions surrounding it*. Universities do more than provide locations in which intercultural encounters occur. Through teaching standards, student evaluations, complaints procedures, professional-development expectations, and institutional discourses of communication, they help determine which communicative practices are recognised as legitimate and where responsibility lies when communication becomes difficult.

This leads to the central conceptual problem ILAF addresses. Intercultural competence may coexist with substantial communicative inequality. Indeed, those occupying less institutionally privileged positions may display exceptionally high levels of adaptability precisely because the communicative environment is asymmetrical. High individual competence should therefore not automatically be interpreted as evidence of an interculturally competent institution.

The distinction can be expressed as two contrasting analytical questions:

Conventional Intercultural Competence question: What capacities enable an individual to communicate effectively across cultural differences?

ILAF question: How are the capacities, responsibilities, and costs required to achieve effective intercultural communication distributed among speakers, listeners, and institutions?

The second question does not replace the first. It exposes a dimension that the first cannot adequately capture. *Institutional Listening Asymmetry begins where individual competence ceases to explain who is doing the work of intercultural communication.*

Power, whiteness and linguistic legitimacy

These communicative relationships also operate within institutional structures. Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides an important basis for understanding how apparently neutral practices can generate unequal racialised consequences. Its emphasis on the ordinariness of racism directs attention beyond explicit prejudice towards routine norms and institutional practices, while counter-storytelling enables experiences marginalised by dominant accounts of institutional neutrality to become analytically visible (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Institutional whiteness provides a related explanation for how particular norms become established as apparently universal. Ahmed (2012) demonstrates how organisational commitments to diversity can coexist with institutional practices that leave dominant arrangements substantially intact. Puwar (2004) similarly shows how historically privileged identities can function as implicit norms against which other bodies become conspicuous or “out of place.” Applied to communication, these perspectives raise questions about why particular accents, communicative styles, and linguistic repertoires become visible as difference while others remain comparatively unmarked.

A colonialingual perspective adds an important historical dimension. Meighan (2023) argues that contemporary linguistic hierarchies remain connected to colonial processes through which languages and varieties acquired legitimacy and authority. This is especially significant within English-medium higher education, where concepts such as “clarity,”

“professionalism,” and “appropriate English” may appear neutral while drawing upon historically produced linguistic hierarchies.

ILA does not imply that standards of clarity should be abandoned. Clear communication remains fundamental to effective teaching. The issue is *unidirectional clarity*: circumstances in which speakers are repeatedly expected to become more intelligible while listeners face little corresponding expectation to become more capable of listening across linguistic difference. The question is therefore not whether standards should exist, but whose communicative practices establish those standards and where institutions locate responsibility when they are not met.

Accommodation, reciprocity and communicative labour

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) provides a further interactional foundation for ILA. CAT conceptualises communication as a process in which individuals may converge towards, diverge from or maintain communicative practices in relation to others (Giles et al., 1991). Importantly, accommodation is influenced by identity, social relationships and interactional objectives rather than representing purely linguistic adjustment.

However, accommodation does not necessarily imply reciprocity. Convergence may reflect mutual adaptation, but it may also arise because one participant faces greater pressure to adjust. A speaker who repeatedly changes pronunciation, vocabulary, pace, or communicative style while the listener remains unchanged demonstrates accommodation, but the communicative relationship itself may remain asymmetrical. This distinction makes it necessary to ask not simply whether accommodation occurs, but *who accommodates whom, under what pressures, and at what personal or professional cost.*

This is particularly important because communicative labour can become invisible precisely when it is performed successfully. An academic who continually anticipates misunderstanding, adjusts speech and monitors listener responses may appear highly interculturally competent. Yet high individual competence can coexist with an institutionally unequal communicative environment. Indeed, extensive adaptability may sometimes be evidence of asymmetry rather than evidence that an institution itself is interculturally competent.

The conceptual space for Institutional Listening Asymmetry

The perspectives considered above illuminate different components of unequal intercultural communication. Raciolinguistics explains how speech is interpreted through racialised listening positions; CRT and institutional whiteness locate apparently neutral communicative practices within wider relations of power; colonialingualism historicises

linguistic legitimacy; and CAT explains processes of communicative adaptation. Yet none takes as its principal analytical object the institutional distribution of responsibility for producing mutual understanding.

ILA occupies this conceptual space. It begins from the proposition that communicative inequality is produced not only through what people say or how others hear them, but also through who is expected to undertake the work required for communication to succeed. This requires shifting the unit of analysis from the individual communicator towards the relationship among *speaker, listener, and institution.*

The distinction can be expressed simply. Conventional ICC primarily asks:

What capacities enable individuals to communicate effectively across cultural differences?

ILA adds a different question:

How are the responsibilities, adaptations and costs required to achieve intercultural understanding distributed among speakers, listeners and institutions?

These analytical perspectives are complementary rather than mutually exclusive. ILA does not reject intercultural competence; it provides a critical means of examining the conditions under which competence is demanded and enacted. Adaptability, openness and empathy remain important, but their presence alone cannot demonstrate equitable intercultural communication if some participants carry substantially more responsibility for making the interaction succeed.

This establishes the conceptual foundation for the *Institutional Listening Asymmetry Framework (ILAF)* developed in the following section. ILAF formalises this argument by identifying the levels and dimensions through which communicative responsibility can be systematically analysed within higher education.

Table 1
Conceptual Comparison: ILAF and Related Perspectives

Existing perspective	Mainly explains	What remains insufficiently explained
Raciolinguistics	How speech is racialised in perception.	Who bears responsibility after misunderstanding occurs.
Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT)	How communicators accommodate, converge or diverge.	Whether accommodation is unequally imposed and institutionally structured.
Institutional whiteness	How dominant institutional norms become normalised and reproduce racialised power.	How communicative responsibility is distributed among speakers, listeners and institutions.

Existing perspective	Mainly explains	What remains insufficiently explained
Colonialingualism	How colonial histories produce and sustain linguistic hierarchies and legitimacy.	How responsibility for communicative adjustment operates across speaker, listener and institution.
Institutional Listening Asymmetry Framework (ILAF)	How adaptation, listening responsibility, communicative legitimacy and institutional accountability are unevenly distributed.	Integrates speaker, listener and institution to explain the distribution of communicative responsibility and its costs.

The Institutional Listening Asymmetry Framework (ILAF)

Institutional Listening Asymmetry (ILA) refers to a condition in which responsibility for achieving successful communication is distributed unequally across speakers, listeners and institutions. It occurs when communicators are expected to undertake disproportionate adaptation to secure intelligibility, legitimacy or acceptance, while comparatively less responsibility is placed on listeners to accommodate difference or on institutions to examine the communicative norms through which competence is judged.

The *Institutional Listening Asymmetry Framework (ILAF)* develops this concept into an analytical framework for examining how communicative responsibility is organised. It does not replace existing models of intercultural competence or assess whether individuals are interculturally competent. Instead, it asks whether the conditions within which competence is exercised are reciprocal and equitable. Its unit of analysis is therefore not the speaker alone, but the relationship among speaker, listener and institution.

Three Analytical Levels

ILA operates through three interconnected levels.

The three analytical levels were derived by distinguishing where communicative asymmetry is enacted, how it is legitimised, and how it is institutionally sustained. The interactional level captures the distribution of communicative labour in everyday encounters; the ideological level examines the assumptions shaping judgements of intelligibility and legitimacy; and the institutional level considers how organisational practices reinforce or challenge these expectations. Together, they connect observable communicative practices with the wider relations of power through which responsibility is distributed.

At the *interactional level*, asymmetry becomes visible in everyday encounters through practices such as repetition, simplification, accent modification, clarification, self-monitoring, disengagement, and communicative repair. The central question is who performs the work required to maintain understanding.

At the *ideological level*, ILAF examines assumptions through which voices, accents and communicative practices become associated with clarity, professionalism, competence or authority. These judgements may shape who is readily heard as legitimate and whose communication becomes marked as requiring modification.

At the *institutional level*, attention shifts to policies, procedures and organisational practices that distribute communicative responsibility. Teaching evaluations, complaints processes, professional standards, staff development and student expectations can either reproduce asymmetry by locating communication problems predominantly within speakers or promote reciprocity by recognising listening as an institutional responsibility.

The three levels are mutually reinforcing. Interactional experiences may reflect broader linguistic ideologies, while institutional practices can legitimise expectations that subsequently shape classroom encounters.

Five Dimensions of ILAF

The framework proposes five interconnected dimensions through which listening asymmetry can be analysed.

The five dimensions were developed by organising the recurring empirical and theoretical concerns underpinning ILA into interconnected areas of analysis. They capture who bears the burden of communicative adaptation, the responsibility assumed by listeners, how communicative legitimacy is constructed, and how institutions mediate these processes. The final dimension, communicative reciprocity, considers the extent to which responsibility for achieving understanding is shared rather than disproportionately imposed. Together, the dimensions connect the interactional, ideological and institutional levels of ILAF and provide a structured basis for analysing how listening asymmetry is produced and sustained.

Speaker adaptation burden concerns the extent to which speakers are expected to modify pronunciation, accent, vocabulary, pace, tone, cultural references or other communicative practices. Adaptation is not inherently problematic; asymmetry emerges when it becomes disproportionately concentrated on communicators.

Listener reflexivity and responsibility concern the extent to which listeners recognise their contribution to successful communication. This includes willingness to engage with unfamiliar linguistic practices, seek clarification, develop listening flexibility and reflect critically on assumptions concerning intelligibility and competence.

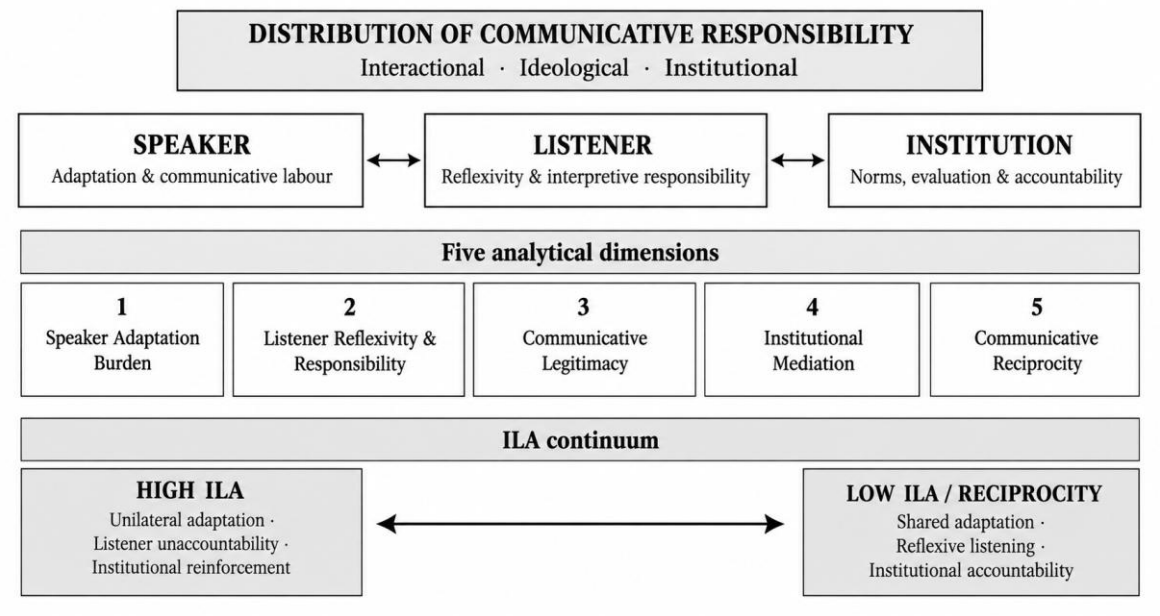
Communicative legitimacy captures how speech becomes connected to judgements of credibility, professionalism, knowledge and authority. ILAF asks whether linguistic practices must continually demonstrate legitimacy while others are institutionally presumed legitimate.

Institutional mediation examines how organisational structures reinforce or challenge communicative inequality. The relevant question is whether institutions frame communication difficulties principally as speaker deficiencies or recognise responsibility across speakers, listeners and institutional conditions.

Communicative reciprocity concerns the overall balance of intercultural work. It represents the extent to which adaptation and responsibility move in multiple directions rather than being concentrated on those positioned as linguistically or culturally different. Reciprocity therefore provides the normative counterpoint to institutional listening asymmetry.

These dimensions should not be treated as independent variables. For example, high speaker adaptation burden combined with low listener reflexivity and institutional reinforcement of dominant linguistic norms would indicate comparatively *high ILA.* Greater listener responsibility, institutional accountability and mutual accommodation would indicate *lower ILA and stronger communicative reciprocity.*

Figure 1
Institutional Listening Asymmetry Framework (ILAF)



Note. Figure 1 synthesises ILAF by locating its five dimensions across the relationship between speaker, listener and institution, with communicative conditions ranging from high listening asymmetry to reciprocal communicative responsibility.

Propositions of the Framework

ILAF advances six propositions that can guide subsequent empirical investigation.

The six propositions were derived by translating the framework's dimensions and their relationships into analytically testable claims. P1 addresses speaker adaptation burden; P2 connects adaptation with listener responsibility; P3 concerns communicative legitimacy; and

P4 captures institutional mediation. P5 extends these processes across racialised and intersecting relations of power, while P6 identifies communicative reciprocity as the condition through which asymmetry may be reduced. Together, the propositions specify how the dimensions of ILAF are expected to interact across its three analytical levels.

P1- Adaptation Burden: Communicative asymmetry increases when responsibility for adaptation is disproportionately concentrated on speakers positioned outside dominant linguistic or cultural norms.

P2- Listening Reciprocity: Intercultural competence becomes asymmetrical when speaker adaptability is expected without corresponding listener reflexivity and accommodation.

P3- Communicative Legitimacy: Listening asymmetry intensifies when linguistic difference becomes associated with judgements concerning professional, intellectual, or pedagogical legitimacy.

P4- Institutional Reinforcement: Institutional policies and evaluative practices reproduce listening asymmetry when communication difficulties are predominantly attributed to speakers rather than understood relationally.

P5- Racialisation and Intersectionality: The distribution and consequences of listening asymmetry are shaped by racialisation and its intersections with language, nationality, gender, class and other socially significant positions.

P6- Reciprocal Transformation: Institutional listening asymmetry decreases when responsibility for intercultural communication is explicitly shared across speakers, listeners and institutions.

These propositions make ILAF empirically contestable. The framework therefore provides not a predetermined explanation for every communicative difficulty but a set of relationships that future research can test, refine or reject.

Boundary Conditions and Scope

ILAF originated from analysis of racialised and linguistically diverse encounters in higher education and retains raciolinguistics and structural power as central theoretical foundations. It should therefore not be used to imply that all communication difficulties constitute discrimination or that every instance of speaker adaptation represents inequality. Speakers retain pedagogical and professional responsibilities for communicating accessibly.

The presence of communicative difficulty or adaptation does not, by itself, constitute ILA. ILA is indicated where there is a patterned or disproportionate distribution of responsibility for resolving communicative difficulty, particularly where this is connected to unequal relations

of legitimacy, power or institutional expectation. Mutual accommodation, including speakers adjusting their communication to enhance understanding, may therefore represent ordinary reciprocal communication rather than asymmetry. The critical distinction lies in who is repeatedly expected to repair communication, whose practices are problematised, whose listening is scrutinised, and whether institutional arrangements reinforce or challenge this imbalance.

The framework instead becomes relevant where communicative difference interacts with unequal expectations, legitimacy or institutional power. Although developed within higher education, ILA may potentially operate in other multilingual and intercultural settings. Its applicability to workplaces, healthcare, public services or other institutional contexts should, however, be established empirically rather than assumed.

Similarly, ILAF should not be restricted automatically to racial difference. Regional accent, class, disability, gender, migration status and other positions may influence listening asymmetry. Yet extending the framework beyond its raciolinguistic origins requires attention to the specific relations of power operating within each context.

Applications to Higher Education

ILAF provides a framework through which universities can examine intercultural communication beyond individual competence. At classroom level, it can be used to investigate whether lecturers and students share responsibility for achieving understanding, including how unfamiliar accents, communicative styles and cultural references are negotiated. Rather than assuming that difficulty necessarily indicates deficient teaching, ILAF directs attention towards both speaking and listening practices.

The framework can also inform analysis of student evaluations, complaints, teaching observations and professional-development processes. Institutions could examine whether terms such as “clarity,” “professionalism” and “communication skills” are applied consistently or whether they disproportionately problematise linguistic or racialised groups.

At organisational level, ILAF could support an institutional listening audit examining how communication responsibilities are represented across policies, student induction, staff development and quality-assurance processes. Its purpose would not be to remove standards of effective communication, but to determine whether those standards recognise communication as relational and encourage reciprocal intercultural responsibility.

Implications for Research and Practice

For research, ILAF shifts attention from measuring individual intercultural competence towards examining the distribution of communicative labour. Future studies could investigate each dimension qualitatively or quantitatively and compare patterns across disciplines, institutions and national contexts. The framework also creates opportunities to examine relationships between speaker adaptation, listener behaviour, institutional policy and perceptions of professional legitimacy.

For practice, ILAF suggests that universities should develop intercultural listening alongside intercultural speaking. Student induction and intercultural education can incorporate engagement with accent diversity, clarification strategies and reflection on linguistic assumptions. Staff development should support effective communication without presenting assimilation towards dominant linguistic norms as the default solution. Institutions should also scrutinise how accent-related comments enter teaching evaluations and complaints and whether existing procedures adequately recognise racialised and linguistic bias.

The broader implication is a redistribution of responsibility. An interculturally competent university should not merely employ highly adaptable individuals; it should create conditions in which speakers, listeners and the institution itself participate in the work of understanding.

Limitations and Future Validation

ILAF is currently a conceptual framework rather than a validated measurement model. Its foundations derive substantially from critical intercultural, raciolinguistic and institutional scholarship and from the empirical context through which ILA was initially identified. Its proposed dimensions and relationships therefore require independent testing.

The next stage should involve qualitative validation across multiple higher education institutions and more diverse academic and student populations. Attention should be given to cases that contradict the framework and to circumstances in which adaptation is reciprocal rather than asymmetrical. Cross-national research would also establish whether ILAF travels beyond the linguistic and institutional conditions of UK higher education.

Following qualitative refinement, the dimensions could be operationalised into observable indicators. This may eventually support development of an Institutional Listening Audit and, if empirically justified, an Institutional Listening Asymmetry Scale. Such measurement should follow rather than precede conceptual and empirical validation.

Conclusion

This paper has proposed the *Institutional Listening Asymmetry Framework (ILAF)* as a critical extension of intercultural competence scholarship. Its central argument is that effective intercultural communication cannot be understood solely through the capabilities of individual communicators; it also requires examination of how responsibility for achieving understanding is distributed.

By connecting speaker adaptation, listener reflexivity, communicative legitimacy, institutional mediation, and reciprocity across interactional, ideological, and institutional levels, ILAF shifts attention from *who is interculturally competent to who performs the work of intercultural understanding.* It does not reject adaptability, clarity, or intercultural competence. Rather, it asks whether these expectations operate reciprocally and equitably.

The framework remains open to empirical testing and refinement. Its value will ultimately depend on whether research across different populations and institutional contexts supports, modifies, or challenges its propositions. Nevertheless, ILAF offers a basis for conceptualising intercultural competence not merely as an individual capacity, but as a shared communicative and institutional responsibility.

Declarations

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Research ethics. The present chapter is a conceptual contribution and does not report new empirical data.

Data availability. No new data are presented in this conceptual chapter.

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