Better Replacement for TTS Naturalness Evaluation

Anonymous submission to SSW 2023

Abstract

Text-To-Speech (TTS) systems are commonly evaluated in two main dimensions: intelligibility and naturalness. While there are clear proxies for intelligibility measurements such as transcription Word-Error-Rate (WER), naturalness is not nearly so well defined. In this paper, we present the results of our attempt to learn what aspects human listeners consider when they are asked to evaluate the "naturalness" of TTS systems. We conducted a user study similar to common TTS evaluations and at the end asked the subject to define the sense of naturalness that they had used. Then we coded their answers and conducted statistical analysis between codes to create a list of aspects that users consider as part of naturalness. We can now provide a list of suggested replacement questions to use instead of a single oblique notion of naturalness.

Index Terms: Text-To-Speech, Naturalness, Evaluation

1. Introduction

An important aspect of evaluating Text-to-Speech (TTS) systems nowadays is their naturalness. Recent advances in TTS systems, including deep-learning methods, have resulted in systems such as Tacotron [1] that are almost indistinguishable from real human voices. The way that such claims are represented is by reporting Mean-Opinion-Score (MOS) results that are almost 5. Mean opinion scores for TTS naturalness are generally calculated on a scale between 1 (worst) and 5 (best) as a subjective assessment by a human listener as to how natural a sample sounds. Samples for this task are generally one sentence long and selected from sources such as books.

Naturalness is but one dimension of TTS evaluation. Usually, a TTS evaluation protocol has two parts: naturalness measurement via Mean-Opinion-Scores (MOS) and intelligibility measurement via transcription error rates of Semantically Uninterpretable Sentences (SUS). TTS systems are now usually compared with each other and/or real human voices. As a result, naturalness is now regarded as an ordinal dimension of speech quality in its own right.

While the definition of the transcription task and its criteria (Word-Error-Rate or WER) is fairly clear and precise, naturalness is not so well defined. Usually, no definition of what 'natural' means is given to users – perhaps out of concern of priming them – nor is there any provision of context within which the sample occurs [2].

What is interesting, however, is that up until about 1995, "natural speech" was the preferred technical term for describing human-generated speech. There was no discussion of an abstract naturalness that synthesizers could approximate on a scale from 1 to 5. There was a very detailed discussion, on the other hand, about the quality of synthesized speech, and indeed the earliest ITU-T P.85 standard [3] for evaluating speech synthesizers was equipped with three so-called Q-type scales that were designed to measure just that. The first mention of naturalness that we can find was actually in the speech coding literature [4], where it was used to describe degradations in subjective quality and speaker recognizability that did not also affect intelligibility.

The earliest Blizzard challenges [5] faithfully measured naturalness, along with another feature called similarity, in a context in which every synthesized prompt could be compared to a gold-standard recording of the same prompt by the same voice on which the synthesizer itself had been trained, and so every synthesized sample could be interpreted as an approximation of a human-generated sample. The connection to speech coding was very clear.

A recent [6] comparison of the naturalness of TTS systems and ordinary human users shows that, by the empirical standards of the present-day TTS research community, TTS systems had reached statistical parity with human speech in its degree of naturalness at some point prior to 2013. This forces one to conclude that either the more recent quest for human-like speech quality by deep learning researchers is simply moot or that the concept of abstract naturalness is not well-founded.

Another result of that study was that users rank accented speech as less natural, in agreement with older studies [7] that had reported similarities between degradation due to synthesized speech and degradation due to foreign-accented speech, as observed through a dimensionality reduction of more ecologically valid performance measures in the context of speech interfaces for pilot's cockpits by the United States Air Force.

In earlier Blizzard challenges (as per the recommendations for the ITU-Q scales), it was not uncommon to find considerably longer prompts, with very vertically directed instructions on how to establish one's impression:

"Overall impression: Please try to imagine what your reaction would be if this were an actual telephone message from a mail order house or a request for information from a travel agency."

"Acceptance: Please indicate whether or not you find that the voice you heard would be acceptable for such an automatic answering service by telephone."

However, these are not precisely defined instructions or definitions, as they require introspection on the part of the listener. This is in contrast to the transcription tasks for measuring intelligibility, in which the listener's accuracy is objectively measured.

In this paper, we aim to elucidate a present ambiguity in the naturalness evaluation of TTS systems. We attempt to document how users who participate in TTS evaluation implicitly define naturalness for themselves. We did this through a user study that mimics the usual evaluation of TTS systems and at the end, explicitly asked the participants to define their notion of naturalness (Section 2). Then, we coded the answers and extracted concepts from them using grounded theory [8] (Section 3). We calculated pointwise mutual

information (PMI) scores [9] to identify implicit relations between different aspects of naturalness (Section 4). We report our observations from coded data in Section 5. This includes identifying some potential problematic areas related to the definition of naturalness. We then propose a series of alternative measurements to resolve those problems (Section 6).

2. Data Collection

As mentioned earlier, it is common in TTS evaluation to measure the naturalness of generated speech. User are asked to express how natural an example prompt is. For example, in the Blizzard challenge, the user is asked:

"Now choose a score for how natural or unnatural the sentence sounded. The scale is from 1 [Completely Unnatural] to 5 [Completely Natural]."

The assumption is that the user already embodies a definition of "natural." Here, we designed a user study that closely mimics the usual TTS evaluations studies, such as the Blizzard challenge.[1]

2.1. User Study Structure

Our user study had 5 main parts, the first of which is a standard consent declaration that provides an overview of the study. The second is a demographic questionnaire that collects information similar to what is collected in a Blizzard challenge, such as their age range, whether they are native English speakers, how they would rate their English reading/listening/speaking/writing ability, etc.

2.1.1. Individual-prompt naturalness

We ask the user to perform two types of naturalness assessment. In the first type, they should assess the naturalness of a single prompt. This is usually how TTS evaluations such as Blizzard ask the user to assess a TTS system. Considering that TTS evaluation tasks also ask the user to transcribe prompts (which is used to measure the intelligibility of the generated voices), we created a combined question for each prompt that first asks the user to transcribe the text, followed by a question that asks them to assess naturalness. We tried to use questions and prompts that closely resemble those that have been used in previous Blizzard challenges and other TTS evaluations. Here are the instructions that we show to them for the naturalness assessment:

*Now rate how **natural** or **unnatural** the sentence **sounded:***

1. Completely Unnatural
2. Mostly Unnatural
3. In Between Natural and Unnatural
4. Mostly Natural
5. Completely Natural

2.1.2. Pairwise Naturalness Comparison

We also added an extra section that asks the user to perform pairwise comparison of naturalness between prompts that are generated by different systems. TTS evaluations usually do not include this because they would need a larger number of participants and longer study sessions in order to have enough data for statistical analysis. Nevertheless, relative assessments are known to have much less variance between subjects.

For this part, the user could only listen to each prompt once, and should first listen to prompt A, only after which they can listen to prompt B. After listening to both prompts, they should compare the naturalness of the two prompts. Here is the instruction that we gave them:

"Please listen to the following two voices and compare their naturalness. You should ignore the meanings of the sentences and instead concentrate on how natural or unnatural each one sounded. You can listen to each utterance by clicking on the play button beneath it. Note that you can only listen to the utterance once, and you should listen to voice A first."

We used almost identical wording to refer to naturalness in this part. They should select one of these five options:

1. Voice A is significantly more natural than voice B
2. Voice A is slightly more natural than voice B
3. Their naturalness is similar
4. Voice B is slightly more natural than voice A
5. Voice B is significantly more natural than voice A

2.1.3. Naturalness Definition

After completing the naturalness assessment of different prompts from different speakers, we ask our main question as a single post-study questionnaire:

"Please define the naturalness definition that you used to rank the naturalness of voices in this user study."

Our goal was to let the user complete the evaluation of the prompts as they would in other TTS evaluations and only then ask them to define naturalness.

2.2. Speaker Prompts

We included 20 different speakers in our study: 5 professional speakers (one from the original training data of Blizzard 2013 and 4 other professional speakers), 5 native Indian speakers, 5 native (but not professional) North American speakers, and 5 TTS systems from Blizzard 2013 (systems B, C, D, H, K). We selected our samples from the Blizzard 2013 challenge because that was the final year that they used English as their main task.

For each speaker, we selected two different sentences to eliminate the effect of text on performance. TTS evaluations generally do this. The sentences were selected from the set of the sentences that were used for Blizzard 2013 challenge.

2.3. Participants

We wanted our user study to be similar to the Blizzard challenge. Therefore, it was designed as a web-based study that could be completed over the internet. We recruited participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk [10]. 175 participants completed the study. Amazon Mechanical Turk has been used in various Blizzard challenges and also by different researchers for evaluating TTS systems.

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[1] Considering that we have both human and TTS-generated voices in our study, our ethics board did not allow us to tell the participants that they are evaluating TTS generated voices (which is common in TTS evaluations). Instead, they allowed us to use the phrase "evaluate computer-generated speech."

3. Coding

3.1. Codes

We used grounded theory and the emergent coding approach that is presented in chapter 11 of [8] for coding. We started with one pass of analyzing all definitions and extracting codewords from them. Each time we saw a new keyword in an answer, we added it to the code list and considered it for the remaining answers. The output of this phase was 146 codewords, while each answer had on average 4.85 keywords.

Most of these codewords only appear in a few answers. For example, more than 85% of them appeared in less than 10 answers, two thirds of them appeared in less than 5, and over one third only appeared in a single answer.

Then, we started to combine codewords that were closely related to each other or were used in the same context with the same meaning. For example, we grouped codewords Tell and Express together because both describe the same action. Another example is the grouping of codewords Human, People, Person, Mind, Everyone, and Someone that were used to refer to a human user speaking. This pass reduced the number of codewords to 39 codes, with an average of 4.61 codes/answer.

3.2. Concepts

After finalizing the set of codes, we grouped similar and related codes into concepts [8]. We performed multiple iterations of grouping to finally come up with five concepts. The concepts and related codes are presented in Table 1, along with the number of answers that have that code.

3.2.1. Speech Properties

The first concept consists of codes that describe properties of speech. Half of all answers (88) had at least one of these codes. This shows that for at least half of the users, naturalness does in fact relate to the correlates of speech that we as speech researchers seek to measure.

In this concept, the main codes were Clarity (34%), Understand (27%), Accent (23%) and Tone (16%). This shows that users usually attempt to focus on the clarity of the voice and intelligibility. Because we did not overtly assess intelligibility with these subjects, it is possible that the appearance of intelligibility here does not reflect how subjects would define naturalness in a setting where it was complementary to transcription error.

Another important code here is Accent. 11% of answers have a word that expresses this code (words such as Native, American, Indian, and Foreign).

There was also a clear disagreement between users about whether they should or should not consider accent as part of naturalness. While most users think that having an accent does not reduce naturalness (such as saying “Even if it were foreign, it could still sound natural” or “… not including accents which I did not use as a basis.”), another contingent believe that it does (e.g., equating naturalness with speaking with an American accent: “If the person had an American accent, I thought it was more natural than an Indian accent.”) This is in contrast to the less nuanced finding in [6] that people rank speakers with Indian accents as less natural than speakers with North American accents.

Table 1: *Concepts and Codes.*

Concept	Code	Answer Count
Speech	Accent	20
	Clarity	30
	Emotion	4
	Flow	11
	Noise	5
	Pause	11
	Pitch	3
	Pronunciation	11
	Tone	14
	Smoothness	8
	Speed	3
	Understand	24
Typological	Computer	48
	Everyday	9
	Generated	24
	Human	64
	Mechanical	10
	Normal	22
	Reading	7
	Real	18
Descriptors	Adjective	18
	Adverb	13
Reflective Process	I	53
	Feel	4
	How	15
	Comparison	18
	Like	45
	Mean	14
	Quality	5
	Rank	11
	Should	7
	Whether	14
Receiving Information	Hear	23
	Speak	26
	Speech	21
	Sounded	83
	Tell	4
	Understand	24
	Voice	66
	Word	21

3.2.2. Typological

The second concept were typological classes used to define naturalness. Here, there is a tacit assumption that there are two classes of speech: natural and unnatural, and so defining naturalness involves enumerating the properties that distinguish them. Two-third of all answers use at least one of these codes.

In general, these two groups are Humans (55%) and Computers (42%). In addition to using those nouns, they also used descriptive adjectives to this effect: Generated (21%), Mechanical (9%) and Reading (6%) for computers and Normal (19%), Real (16%), Everyday (8%) for humans.

3.2.3. Receiving Information

The third concept consists of words that describe how information is conveyed to the user from the prompt. The majority of answers (85%) have at least one such code. The top codes in this concept are Sounded (56%), Voice (45%), Speak (18%), Understand (16%), and Hear (16%).

They can be grouped into two sub-concepts: those that related to generation (Speak, Speech, Tell, Voice, and Word) and those that related to receipt (Hear, Sounded, and Understand).

3.2.4. Reflecting Process

The fourth concept is the group of words that convey a process of reflection on the definition of naturalness. Two thirds of answers have at least one such code. The most common one is I (46%) (that is a combined code for words such as I, my, me, we, etc.), which shows that users are attempting to express what naturalness means to them vs. to someone else. Only a small number of answers (6%) have the code Should, reflecting an attempt at a normative, global definition of naturalness.

Other common codes in this concept are Like (39%), Compare (15%), and Whether (12%). They are used alongside typological concept codes to express that users consider a rating by naturalness to be tantamount to finding the typological class (human or computer) that the prompt belongs to. This again reflects that natural is equivalent to human-generated and unnatural to computer-generated. For example, one user says "Naturalness to me means something that comes out of the person."

3.2.5. Descriptors

The fifth concept was adjectives and adverbs that they use to better express their idea. For example, they may say "understand easily". 17% of answers have such a descriptor.

4. PMI

One of the most important concepts in NLP is Pointwise Mutual Information (PMI) [9], because it is commonly used to measure how commonly two words appear together. The PMI of two words *x* and *y* is defined as:

$$PMI(x,y) = log_2 \frac{p(x,y)}{p(x)p(y)}$$

In this formula, *p(x)* is the probability of *x* appearing in the text, *p(y)* is the probability of *y* appearing in the text, and *p(x,y)* is the probability of both *x* and *y* appearing in a text.

Here, we calculated probability as relative frequency to the total number of answers (175). Then we calculated PMI for all code pairs. The results are shown in Figure 1. In this figure, only the PMI for pairs that appeared together (i.e., *p(x,y)*>0) is shown. Color coding is used to give a visual overview of scores: red cells are negative values, yellow cells are between 0 and 1, and green cells are above 1. Note that only the lower half of the matrix is shown because of the symmetry of the PMI score.

Figure 2 shows only pairs with PMI>1. It also separates the 5 concepts from each other.

The observation in Figure 2 is the relatively high co-occurrence of codes in the speech concept. For example, the code Speed has high PMI with codes such as Pause, Pitch, Pronunciation, and Tone (all of them >2 and PMI(Speed,Pitch)=4.281 which is the highest PMI score in our data). The second highest PMI is PMI(Pitch, Emotion) = 3.866. This is also expected.

The Pause code also has high PMI with Tone (2.506) and Smoothness (2.577). The latter is interesting because it may serve to define smoothness. There is also high PMI between Pitch and Tone (3.059) which is expected.

Some of the speech codes also have high PMI with reflecting process codes. For example, we have PMI(Feel,Noise) = 3.129 and PMI(Quality,Speed)=3.544. The first one is interesting in that people feel the need to subjectively qualify their perception of Noise.

The Tell code also has high PMI with a few other codes: PMI(Tell,Reading) = 3.644, PMI(Tell, Feel) = 3.451, and PMI(Tell, Mean) = 2.644.

The Mechanical code has high PMI with Pause (2.255), Tone (1.907), and Noise (1.807), which again serves to interpret the term. For example, this is the definition that a participant given that refers to this:

"According to me, naturalness means being more in contact with nature, something like a real voice with background noises, change in voice etc."

	Clarity	Emotic	Flow	Accent	Noise	Pause	Pitch	Pronu	Tone	Smoot	Speed	Under	Compi	Everyc	Gener	Humai	Mecha	Norma	Readir	Real	Adject	Adverl	I	Feel	How	Compa	Like	Mean	Qualit	Rank	Shoulc	Wheth	Hear	Speak	Speec	Sound	Tell	Voice	Word
Clarity																																							
Emotion																																							
Flow	-0.92																																						
Accent	0.222	1.129	0.67																																				
Noise	1.807																																						
Pause			3.117	-0.33																																			
Pitch		3.866																																					
Pronunciation	1.892			-0.33																																			
Tone	-0.26	2.644	2.184	0.322	1.322	2.506	3.059																																
Smoothness	-0.46		2.577	1.129		2.577		0.992	0.644																														
Speed						2.407	4.281	2.407	2.059																														
Understand	0.959			-0.46				0.407																															
Computer		1.451	0.407	0.544		-0.01	0.281	-1.59	0.059	-0.13		-0.4																											
Everyday	-0.63									1.281																													
Generated		0.866	0.407	0.129	0.544	-0.59	1.281		0.059	-0.13		-0.72	1.529																										
Human	-1.46	-0.55	-0.01	0.129	-0.87	-2.01			-0.77			-0.13	0.567	-0.13	0.451																								
Mechanical			1.67		1.807	2.255			1.907	1.129		-0.46	-1.46			-0.29																							
Normal		0.992	0.532	-0.33	1.67	-0.47			0.184	-0.01		-0.59	-1.59	1.407	-0.01	0.577	1.255																						
Reading	0.737			0.322				1.184				0.059	0.059		0.059	-0.36																							
Real		1.281	-0.18	-1.04	0.959	-0.18				0.281		-1.3	0.018	0.111	-0.3	0.741	-0.04	0.822																					
Adjective	0.696			-0.04		0.822		0.822	0.474			1.696	-1.3		-1.3	-0.72	0.959	-1.18		-0.89																			
Adverb	-1.16		0.291	-0.57					-0.06			0.751	0.488		0.751	-0.25				-0.42	-0.42																		
I	-0.6		0.264	0.209	-0.6	0.264		-0.74	-2.08	1.045		0.723	0.226	1.553	-0.54	0.045	0.401	0.434	1.238	0.138	-0.45	-0.39																	
Feel	1.544				3.129								-0.13		0.866	0.451					1.281		-0.28																
How	-0.36	1.544	0.085			1.085	1.959	0.085	0.737	0.544		-1.04	0.281	0.374	0.544	-0.13	0.222	0.67	0.737	1.696			-0.6																
Comparison	-0.63		1.407	0.544	0.959	-0.18			1.474	0.281		-1.3	0.504	0.111	0.696	0.451		1.144		0.111	0.111	0.581	-0.12		0.374														
Like		0.959	0.5	-0.04	-0.36	0.085	0.374		-0.26	0.959		-1.63	0.767	-0.21	0.834	0.483	0.222	0.822	0.737	1.111		0.259	0.319	-0.04	0.86	0.111													
Mean		1.644		-0.68	1.322		2.059					0.059	-0.36	0.474		0.644	1.322	0.184	0.837	1.796	-0.53	-0.06	1.086	1.644	-0.26	-0.53	0.737													
Quality				0.807				1.67	1.322		3.544		-0.46			0.129		1.67					-0.6			1.959	0.637												
Rank	0.67		0.532	1.255		0.532		0.532		0.992		0.992	0.992		-0.59	-0.42	0.67	-0.47	1.184			1.291	1.264			0.822	-0.5													
Should	1.737							2.184		1.644		1.644	-0.94		1.059	-0.36	1.322	0.184			1.474		-0.08				-0.85													
Whether	-0.26		0.184			1.184			0.837			1.381	-0.36		0.644	0.229	0.322	-0.82	2.421		1.059	-0.06	0.501	1.644	-0.26	0.474	0.474													
Hear	0.828		0.468	-0.39	1.606	0.468				0.928		-0.07	-0.66	2.08	-0.07	-0.75		-0.53		-1.24	-0.24		0.9	1.928		0.343	-0.24			-0.53		0.705								
Speak	-1.16	1.751	0.291	0.429		0.291		0.291	0.528	0.751		-0.25	0.488	1.166	-0.25	0.921		1.291	-0.06	1.166	0.166	0.05	0.608	0.751	0.429	0.903	0.718	1.265		0.876	-0.06	0.943	-0.77							
Speech	0.152		1.599	0.322		0.599		-0.4	0.252	1.644		0.474	-0.94	1.474		-0.36	0.737	1.184	0.252	0.889	-0.11	-0.64	0.653		0.737	-0.11	0.567			1.921		0.252	0.535	-0.06						
Sounded	-3.81	1.094	0.219	0.231	-1.23	-0.37	-0.49	-2.37	0.094	0.094		0.209	0.866	-0.08	0.679	0.553	0.357	0.541	0.286	-0.08	-0.27	0.563	0.366	-0.91	0.509	-0.08	0.811	0.286	0.357	0.442	-1.71	-0.13	-0.43	0.641	0.286				
Tell				1.129												1.036		0.992	3.644		1.281		1.308	3.451			-0.04	2.644				1.644		0.751		0.094			
Voice	-0.04	0.407	-0.47	0.085	0.67	-0.05		-1.05	-0.08	0.407		-0.18	0.281	-0.18	0.281	0.314	0.407	0.269		0.696	-0.18	0.706	0.071	-0.59	-0.18	-0.18	0.374	-0.4	0.085	0.947	-0.4	-1.4	0.205	0.166	0.014	0.219			
Word	0.737	2.059	1.184	0.322		2.184	1.474	1.599	0.252	1.059	1.474	0.796	-0.94		-1.53	-1.36	0.737	-0.4	0.252	-0.11	0.889	-0.64	-0.35	2.059	0.152	-0.11	-0.11	1.252		0.599		1.252	-0.46	0.68	-0.33	-0.3	1.059	-0.18	

Figure 1: *PMI of code pairs.*

	Clarity	Emotio	Flow	Accent	Noise	Pause	Pitch	Pronu	Tone	Smoot	Speed	Understa	Comp	Everyd	Gener	Huma	Mecha	Norma	Readir	Real	Adject	Adverb	I	Feel	How	Comp	Like	Mean	Qualit	Rank	Shoul	Whether	Hear	Speak	Speecl	Sound	Tell	Voice	Word
Clarity																																							
Emotion																																							
Flow																																							
Accent		1.129																																					
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Human																																							
Mechanical			1.67		1.807	2.255			1.907	1.129																													
Normal					1.67									1.407			1.255																						
Reading								1.184																															
Real		1.281																																					
Adjective												1.696																											
Adverb																																							
I										1.045				1.553					1.238																				
Feel	1.544				3.129																1.281																		
How		1.544				1.085	1.959													1.696																			
Comparison			1.407						1.474									1.144																					
Like																				1.111																			
Mean		1.644			1.322		2.059										1.322			1.796			1.086	1.644															
Quality								1.67	1.322		3.544							1.67								1.959													
Rank				1.255															1.184			1.291	1.264																
Should	1.737							2.184		1.644		1.644			1.059		1.322				1.474																		
Whether						1.184						1.381							2.421		1.059			1.644															
Hear					1.606									2.08										1.928															
Speak		1.751												1.166				1.291		1.166								1.265											
Speech			1.599							1.644				1.474				1.184												1.921									
Sounded		1.094																																					
Tell				1.129												1.036			3.644		1.281		1.308	3.451			2.644				1.644								
Voice																																							
Word		2.059	1.184			2.184	1.474	1.599		1.059	1.474													2.059				1.252				1.252					1.059		

Figure 2: *Code pairs with PMI>1.*

5. Analysis

While PMI provides an overview of how different codes appear together in an answer, it does not give a complete overview of how users define naturalness with these codes. In this section, we provide the results of our deeper inspection of answers by way of a few important summarial points.

5.1. A priori definition of Naturalness

As we mentioned earlier, it is common among speech researchers to assume that there is an *a priori* definition of naturalness. We have observed multiple instances of participants assuming the same thing, who therefore believe that there is no need to define naturalness. Some of them seem to consider naturalness to be a primitive quality that defies definition. Here are two example user's answers:

"I'm not sure what you are asking, we were asked to rank which voices sounded more natural and less like computer-generated voices."

"What? if it sounded more natural I voted it to sound more natural. what is this question asking?"

Our other observations reveal that the view of naturalness as an agreed-upon primitive cannot be completely correct.

5.2. Lack of confidence in defining naturalness

We also observed a lack of confidence in some participants in the existence of a universal definition of naturalness. The use of codes from the reflecting process concept, such as *I* and *Mean* shows that the users express *how they define naturalness* and not *how it is defined for everyone*. This suggests that we could remove ambiguity by providing a clear and concise characterization of naturalness (or as we will discuss shortly, using multiple substitution to cover different aspects of it).

Another cause of this perceived lack of universal definition could be the difference between people in assigning numerical (or level-based) scores to prompts. This can be referred to as the normalization problem. One way of preventing this error is to ask the users to compare the naturalness of two prompts together (rather than asking them to individual rank them) as we did.

5.3. Inconsistent and contradicting definitions

We also noticed that sometimes users have contradictory opinions about how different properties of speech affect naturalness. The most prominent example is the speaker's accent. Referring to the accent of the speaker was a common theme, although they used different terms to do it (such as Accent, Native, Indian, American, Foreign, etc.). And while most of the people who used such terms were trying to say that this factor does NOT affect naturalness, there are examples to the contrary:

"If the person had an American accent, I thought it was more natural than an Indian accent."

As mentioned above, previous research [6] has revealed that even if most users think that they are ignoring accent, in practice they would rank speech samples with accent as less natural. This can be a matter of unconscious bias.

Our proposed solution to explicitly pick a subset of criteria and ask the user to rank the samples based upon that. We will discuss this in the next section.

5.4. Equity with being human

We noticed that people usually equate naturalness with being generated by a human (i.e., being human-generated at its source, even if recorded). This is consistent with the prevailing technical use of "natural speech" among speech researchers until the 1990s. Although users referred to aspects such as understandability and clarity, their main criteria for assessing naturalness seem to be cues that reveal the true generative source of the prompt as human or artificial.

This is an important point to consider. If people equate naturalness with human-generated voices, then no computer-generated voice can be completely natural other than through deception. It is unclear whether questions about naturalness could ever serve their originally intended purpose if viewed through the lens of discovering a potential deception. This would imply, for example, that informing human subjects that a prompt had been computer-generated would bias them against assigning a high naturalness score.

5.5. Measuring intelligibility as a part of naturalness

The last observation that we want to report is how people used aspects such as *Clarity* and *Understand* to characterize naturalness. These concepts, especially understandability, are usually considered to be part of intelligibility tests (transcription tasks). This suggests that the usual partitioning of tests into intelligibility and naturalness may not be completely well-founded. It is unclear, for example, whether having a separate test of intelligibility would completely remove intelligibility from consideration in an assessment of naturalness.

6. Proposed Alternatives

In the previous section, we presented some of the problems of current approaches to measuring naturalness. To solve them, we propose a set of alternative questions to use instead of a single question about the naturalness of a prompt. These alternative questions can be grouped into two sets: speech properties and human-similarity.

6.1. Measuring Speech Properties

The first set consists of five aspects of speech properties to consider. They include *Clarity*, *Understandability*, *Fluency*, *Pronunciation*, and *Accent*. We selected these aspects based on the main speech properties that users mentioned in their definitions, including the codes with highest repetition. We did not distinguish between *Fluency* and *Pauses* because their differences may not be clear to many users. Furthermore, some of the aspects such as *Tone* and *Pitch* are not used very consistently across users. We can use a 5-point or 3-point Likert-scale question for each. For example, for the Clarity aspect, we can ask the following question:

"Please rate how clarity of the voice in each prompt, on a scale of 1 (completely unclear) to 5 (perfectly clear)"

The question can also be framed as agreement by the user. For example, we can instead ask the user:

"Please describe whether you agree or disagree with the following statement (1 means strongly disagree to 5 means strongly agrees): The speaker speaks clearly."

The benefit of the second type is that we can use the question and potential answer format for all 5 aspects (clarity, understandability, fluency, pronunciation, and accent). It also focusses attention on the user's own personal assessments, rather than on considerations of universality.

6.2. Measuring the Human-Similarity

The second set of questions focusses on whether a prompt is human-generated. We propose the following three questions:

1. Please select whether the voice sounds more like a human or a computer (mostly like a computer, a bit like a computer, in-between a computer and a human, a bit like a human, mostly like a human)
2. Please select how mechanical or natural the voice sounds (mostly mechanical, a bit mechanical, neither mechanical nor normal, a bit natural, mostly natural).
3. Determine whether the voice sounds like it is being read from a text or being said spontaneously during a conversation (more like being read from a written text, partly being read from a text and partly being said spontaneously, mostly said spontaneously).

These questions are essentially asking the same thing, but at three different levels: first to conclusively resolve any would-be deception as to human vs. computer; second by attending to the main property associated with these types of voices (note that 'natural' here is narrowly used in opposition to mechanical); then third by resolving the second-greatest and still remaining typological consideration: scripted vs. spontaneous. This third consideration was clearly visible in some of the definitions that users provided such as:

"Naturalness to me means something that comes out of the person. He's not reading something, he's saying something that is coming out of his mind."

7. Conclusion and Future Work

In this paper, we revisited the problem of what naturalness means when evaluating TTS systems. We argued that the current approach of measuring naturalness simply by asking about it is not sufficiently well defined. We conducted a study that asked to users to perform similar TTS evaluations and at the end ask what naturalness definition they used. We coded the answers and grouped them into concepts.

We performed a co-occurrence analysis and also an in-depth textual analysis of the answers provided and presented our main observations: an assumption that there is no need to define naturalness at all, alongside the paradoxical lack of a universal definition for it, contradictory aspects in the definition of naturalness, the interpretation as human vs. computer, and overlap with intelligibility.

We presented a set of alternative questions and measurements to use instead of a single question to rank naturalness. The main takeaway of our paper for TTS researchers is that there is a need to clearly define naturalness for participants, and furthermore to clearly distinguish its different aspects during evaluation.

We plan to conduct a follow-up study that uses these new questions alongside the existing practice of overall naturalness, with and without intelligibility assessments.

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