

Intercomprehension and translation studies

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Abstract— The paper is a study research on intercomprehension as a integrative part of multilingualism and its effects on the language learning and communication in a pluricultural context. The accent falls on its role in translation study. The theoretical approach concentrates of the cognitive functions of languages, the definition of the concept and on the textual, linguistic and situational dimensions of communication process. As a different perspective, intercomprehension is a tool of representing, structuring and re-structuring realities conveying unity in a diversity of cultures. The experimental part is the description of a research conducted in our faculty focusing on the impact of intercomprehension on creating repertoires and resources for translations.

Keywords- intercomprehension, multilingualism, cognitive functions, semicommunication, receptive competence.

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of intercomprehension, a rather new field in linguistic research, has been discussed for more than twenty years; the research on this concept has been conducted in project teams in Europe, the main themes being centered on its use in the process of language learning and of translation.

The approach on intercomprehension has acquired new dimensions due to the development of new theories on foreign language learning based on the concept of partial competences. In this case, intercomprehension helps learners to develop some understanding of the languages belonging to the same family or even remote languages.

The young generation is taking advantages of the web application at an even larger extent. The students in Applied Modern Languages, in our faculty are involved in projects of translation and in different types of terminological activities and, consequently, they are the main beneficiaries of a new

form of communication and information by using the web applications, one of them being the intercomprehension and translation studies. They are users and producers of products simultaneously.

Being at the beginning of their careers, they still remain amateurs in their searches. Instead, they are driven by motivation and self-initiative. They demand recognition and expect their merits be emphasized.

They search the information in different ways, try to find better solutions to questions raised by their peers from the entire world, they share information and interact.

They are the beneficiaries of multilingualism mainly in the audiovisual sector, very open to innovation. In this context, it is so evident that new forms of communication are emerging due to the Web – web applications – facilitating sharing of information, interaction and cooperation among users and creation of new contents, as well by means of social networks, blogs or wikis

II. THERETICAL APPROACH ON INTERCOMPREHENSION

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages defines plurilingual and pluricultural as complex and composite competences that allow individual to participate as social agents in intercultural communicative interactions as it is stated within the Council of Europe in 2001. In the same context, the distinction between plurilinguism as a competence and being aware of and acknowledging plurilinguism, in other terms, conveying the same value to all languages, emphasizes the acceptance of the plurality of speakers and their diverse linguistic competences.

Under these circumstances, intercomprehension allows multilingualism to become a reality in Europe.

The European multilingualism has three aims: 1) the differentiated consideration of competences and support for the development of receptive multilingualism; 2) enabling the focused acquisition of partial competences with possibilities of modular expansion – modular approach in technical language for receptive reading competence; 3) the cognitive usage of group relations between languages, such as the Romance intercomprehension research. [12]

Defining the concept. Intercomprehension refers to a relationship between languages in which speakers of different but related languages can understand each other without

intentional study. It is a form of communication in which each person uses his or her language and understands that of the other(s). [8]. It has become a common practice in multilingual societies and a pedagogical and political tool in helping communication among persons belonging to different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In fact, one cannot state that the main aim is to fully understand a text but to get the gist of a text or communication. Intercomprehension is important in language learning, newsgathering, information sharing, and in commercial contacts.

The concept of intercomprehension has been defined from several perspectives: a) intralinguistic – intercomprehension is seen as a capacity to understand speakers of a language, including dialects and varieties; b) interlinguistic – where intercomprehension is perceived as a capacity to understand speakers belonging to language families and associated with written and/or oral multilingual capacities [8] before reaching the plurilingual interaction; c) association between intercomprehension and verbal language across language families.

The studies led in the domain of intercomprehension concern languages within one family, mainly within the Romance language group. Some related languages are similar in terms of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation that speakers of one language can understand the other language without particular instructions.

This type of intercomprehension, also known under the name of *semicomunication* [7] or receptive multilingualism has several advantages. If two languages are not too distant from each other (as Romanian and Italian) the process can be observed in the field of acquisition of a third or fourth language.

One of the most important characteristics of intercomprehension is the fact that one person has two or more foreign languages at his or her disposal in addition to his or her mother tongue particularly, a broader range of multilingual repertoires is available to the multilingual speakers.

These multilingual repertoires serve as resources for the construction, transmission and use of knowledge. In receptive-passive multilingualism, in other terms, referring to as *lingua receptiva* or intercomprehension, the speakers make alternating use of their diverse linguistic repertoires. [9]

Intercomprehension is linguistic, strategic and cultural. It allows reaching the large reservoirs of information, terminology and knowledge, exchanging ideas and industrial innovations, negotiating contracts as each group of speakers tries to express knowledge in their mother's tongue, in a synthetic and precise way. In the same time, it allows the evaluation and the reliability of information and knowledge, it helps to master the competences of controlling the reliability of connaissances.

There are four factors that determine intercomprehension: reception, awareness, ideology and institutional language policy.

The receptive intercomprehension relies on the inference phenomenon, commonly present all over the world. Intercomprehension is inherent and acquired. Inherent, because the language features are available to speakers prior to any language learning. Acquired, because language learning requires previous connaissances that are profitable for understanding parts of the related languages.

In this case, there are languages that are mutual intelligible and other that are not. [1]

Awareness is the second factor that determines intercomprehension. The speakers become aware of this mutual intelligibility of languages.

The attitudes can stimulate or block comprehension among communities and languages. The more equally the two groups are represented in terms of number of status, the most probable it is that comprehension is used [5].

The fourth factor is related to the institutional language policy – language practice at work place. The degree of cooperation among persons working in the same enterprise determines the degree of intercomprehension. [2]

Intercommunication can be a beneficial tool in language teaching.

Starting from the statement that language learning means the development of competences of communication and of understanding and producing discourses, three dimensions are to taken into account, as being common to all languages: the *textual*, *linguistic* and situational dimensions.

The textual dimension comprises the text formats, types of sequences, rules of cohesion and coherence, rules of progression and other elements.

The linguistic dimension implies phonetics, lexicology, semantics, morphology and syntax. The situational dimension is given by the social and cultural usages, by the interactive and pragmatic ones.

Due to these dimensions, intercomprehension, as an appropriate method, may be applied to language learning, that is developing those skills and competences to construct a meaning when two languages are in contact and can be pragmatically used in a precise situation of communication.

Construction of realities. Constructing a meaning is the result of a complex cognitive process. Starting from the cognitive functions, there are several stages in succeeding in constructing realities endowed with meanings.

Firstly, the stage of constructing external images, then, turning these images into concepts, and integrating the latter into a system of abstract constructions at a higher level.

Language has this faculty of constructing a grammar the subject recognizes and uses in order to produce discourses which are as many ways of expression of thinking [5]. In this case, the individual is an actor situated in the very centre of his/her development, as he/she constructs his/her own knowledge.

Indeed, construction means structuring. One cannot speak about a simple gathering or accumulation of connaissances, but a re-structuring or reality, by levels. The reasoning is

simple since man constructs mental representations reflecting the world around him. He produces, combines mental objects, later memorized and communicated to the others.

The mental objects are exteriorized under the shape of objects. The next stage is to stabilize objects and representations in a selective way, the selective stabilization. This phenomenon is the effect of culture and nature.

By virtue of these remarks, there is a close relationship between mental representations and intercomprehension. The latter relies on the speaker's discovery of an intentional meaning by means of the inferences. The meaning is included in "something" that pre-existed its interpretation. This "something" can be an information, a message or a representation. Interlocutors can inter-understand if there is a certain relation between what is discovered by one and what is to be discovered by the other [3].

Thus, to communicate means to produce and interpret indices represented as thinking frames and intercomprehension is a process of construction and of stabilization of meaning.

The use of intercomprehension in language teaching shows the fact that languages do not exist in isolation as there are links between and among languages enabling language learning. In this case, translation is a major instrument in applying intercomprehension in language learning.

One can start from the premise that students have resources knowledge that can be exploited and one of the teacher's tasks is to make them aware of this knowledge and to enable them to use it by adopting the most appropriate strategies.

The knowledge individuals possess are grouped in several categories, as are defined by Doyé [6].

- *General knowledge* – or encyclopaedic knowledge determines understanding. Intercomprehension builds on this type of knowledge to achieve comprehension.
- *Cultural knowledge* – language is not only structures and words but is also culture and communication.
- *Situational knowledge* – each text is embedded in a situation. Oral discourse and written texts tend to depend on contextual elements which operate as basic understanding of the text. This category includes knowledge about genres and the ability to adapt to new situations.
- *Behavioural knowledge* – one own's culture can interact with other cultures entailing the recognition of non-verbal signs and their interpretation on the basis of already acquired behaviourly knowledge.
- *Pragmatic knowledge* – the situation in which a text appears shows the purpose it serves.
- *Graphic knowledge* – starting from the already encountered writing systems, learners tend to make associations with the writing system used in a given text.
- *Phonological knowledge* – learners make inferences to discover the meaning of spoken languages.
- *Grammatical knowledge* – learners make assumptions about the grammar structures in a given text starting from the

previously grammatical systems.

- *Lexical knowledge* – the new language can be learnt by means of the international vocabulary and that of the vocabulary the learners possess when the languages are closely related to the one they want to comprehend. In this case, there are three language families in Europe: Romance, Germanic and Slavic.

On average, an adult European has 4000 recognizable words at their disposal. These words can be considered as international ones as they are similar in most European languages.

III. THE RESEARCH STUDY

In this context, we conducted a research in the field of terminology and translation studies with the group of students in master degree programme of *Translation and Interpretation from French into Romanian* within the Faculty of Letters of *Transilvania University of Brasov, Romania*. The group is composed of students having different ethnic origins, Hungarian, German, Romanian, and Moldavian.

The common language of the group is French as a foreign language in our case and English for some of them. From this point of view, the group is rather heterogeneous.

The method we used is the *transfer-based deduction strategies* to enable multilingual receptive competences. The texts provided were in Italian, Spanish and Portuguese. We avoided the texts in German and Hungarian because of the ethnical composition of the group. The texts we chose were partly specialized containing terms from the field of tourism and geography.

The experiment comprised two phases, the first one being based on simple observations of images and of isolated words or sequence of words. The second phase exceeded the observation. The receptive comprehension and the use of short sequence of sentences were the targets.

The texts were grouped in two categories, the first containing formulas of greetings, names of countries and regions, recognizing maps and stereotypes and the second category containing stories news and gathering. At the end of each stage, students were asked to answer the questions in a questionnaire.

The answers were to be given in Romanian. Afterwards, the answers obtained were interpreted. The students were given the first set of simple texts accompanied by images containing forms of greetings, name of countries and regions. The students were asked to recognize the elements in the languages they could not speak.

The second set of texts contained stereotypes focusing on the non-verbal communication- gestures, keeping silence, body language, proximity. Pictures were used to help the explanation of sentences.

The students were asked to recognize gestures, to recognize the situation of communication and the common words related to the meaning of the non-verbal situation.

The second stage of the experiment covered more complex situations of communication: a story and a newspaper activity. The same story was provided in the languages the students could not speak. They had to read it three times.

The questionnaire contained the following questions: Can you sum up the story in a few lines? Do you already know anything about the story? What elements have helped you to understand? As you read it, do you understand some parts of the story? Which parts did you understand? Why do you think you understood these parts? Do you understand any words? Which words? What do they mean?

The students were able to recognize the story, even some parts, some words and even longer sequences of words, isolated or even related among them. The good results depended on: the previous encyclopedic and cultural knowledge, pictures, individual words, repetitions, words showing similarities in their mother tongue, words being similar in other languages.

The newspaper activity was centered on a weather report since there was a wide range of text formats (photos, advertising) and the text was better understood, it could be easily detected, a large amount of paralinguistic and graphic information, familiar elements in the text (proper names and international words) could be found.

This activity implies an active component – people are interested in the weather and the affective component – weather and geographical means are associated with leisure and travel.

Besides, this activity implies the recognizable maps, the names of places, internationally used weather icons, repetition of message in full text, and the universal figures.

Then, the students were given several multilingual repertoires of specialized texts (politics, tourism, computer science) in related languages. We could observe that these repertoires helped them to understand the meaning of segments of entire specialized texts. The modular approach for receptive reading competence was adopted.

The complementary aim was that of enabling them to achieve multilingualism, to acquire the receptive competence in one language group and the interlingual reading competence in all the languages of the group and the receptive competence of reading comprehension alongside with the oral understanding in scarce cases, mainly for the terminology study, there where the terms in different specialized domains were not defined, or whose translation was uncertain.

We applied the method of plurilingual reading comprehension as a skill for picking up new findings from non-English countries. We have remarked that intercomprehension works in specific domains that have an international vocabulary in terms of learning – such as topics that are common European policy.

As our students are specialized in the terminology of foreign trade and tourism, we have noticed that intercomprehension is important in commercial contracts and that it could promote tourism and help consumer relations.

IV. CONCLUSION

Intercomprehension can be a language teaching method as it can help to guess, discover tendencies, decode and anticipate. All kinds of previous knowledge are used to make *deductions*, thus, these types of *connaissances* helps understanding.

The method of *transfer-based deduction strategies* enables multilingual receptive competences and its effect is that of Europeanness- the awareness of belonging to the cultural space and to the same cultural diversity in the same time, in other terms, the awareness of cultural unity and cultural diversity. On the one hand, the method promotes the understanding and learning of the so-called small neglected languages, or the languages of the minorities, on the other hand, is a subtle form of teaching the mutual respect and tolerance towards different cultures.

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