INTERCOMPREHENSION – A CASE STUDY (4)

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Abstract: *The present paper is the fourth part of an extended research on Intercomprehension. It is based on a case study in which a group of eighty-eight (88) recipients were asked to read two questions in an unknown language, mainly Romanian, and answer them in order to demonstrate that comprehension of a language they had never studied or heard of before, is possible. This study is based on reading comprehension. The questions were written in Romanian and the task was to underline the word/words they were able to understand and provide an answer to demonstrate their ability to decode the message. The translation and/or the answer could be given in English, French, Dutch, Italian, Spanish or German. The material provided is divided, according to the answers, in five sections: no answer, wrong answer, translation of some words, translation of the whole question and right answer.*
Keywords: *intercomprehension, reading comprehension, multilingualism, Romanian, message.*

1. METHOD OF RESEARCH. RESPONDENT PROFILE.

The present paper is part of an extended research on Intercomprehension. It starts from the assumption that people speaking different languages can have at least limited understanding of an unknown language, no matter what group of European languages they belong to or have knowledge of. The target language chosen for this study was Romanian. Two questions were given to 88 speakers of different languages.

The people questioned ranged from 18 to 60 years old, men and women with different levels of education: housewives, workers, students, teachers, economists, engineers, freelancers and so on. They come from different continents, covering almost all countries and languages. The languages spoken by the people answering the question are: Albanese, Arab, Berber, Bulgarian, Catalan, Chinese, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Malaysian, Polish, Russian, Spanish, Swahili, Swedish, Turkish, and Ukrainian. Most of them know or speak English, French and Dutch at various levels, from beginners to native speakers. The instructions were written in English, French and Dutch, for a wider coverage:

'*Read the following question, underline the words you can understand and write the translation in one of the following languages: English, French, Dutch, Italian, Spanish or German. If you can understand the question, give a short answer in one of the languages above mentioned, or in Romanian.*' The native speakers of English, French, Dutch, Italian, Spanish or German (the target languages) had the chance to answer in their mother tongue, while the others could only choose the foreign language they were more comfortable with from the target group. All respondents were asked to mention the country of origin and the languages they know (or they assume to know).

As the study tested reading comprehension, the respondents could only read the question without being given the possibility to listen to it being pronounced. This is an important aspect of the study because the respondents could only rely on identifying graphic similarities between Romanian and their mother-tongue or the language they chose to answer in. We assume that was an inconvenient for Greeks, Bulgarians, Albanians, Russians, Turks, and mainly for people coming from the Balkans who have common traditions, culture and vocabulary. Although the written form may be different, the question read in Romanian by someone could have been understood easier, if not as a whole at least some words.

2. ANALYSIS OF THE ANSWERS

The first question is *'Cu ce mijloc de transport vii la şcoală?'*/ *'What means of transport do you use to come to school?'* The question was formulated in such a way so that it would contain words having as few diacritics as possible (in Romanian, like many other languages, there are many specific diacritics) in order not to make the sentence too complicated for the respondents. The only word containing diacritics is '*şcoală*' meaning *'school',* containing the letters '*ş*' pronounced like the English *'sh'* and *'ă'* pronounced like the

vowel sound in '**the**' The interrogative sentence was supposed to meet certain conditions: length, clarity, words from the core vocabulary and a message to be understood. This interrogative sentence is simple and easy to understand because it contains the international word 'transport'. It should be also easily understood for the people who know English and Dutch due to the resemblance between the Romanian word '*şcoală*' and the English and Dutch word *'school'.*

The second question is *'Eşti căsătorit(ă), necăsătorit(ă) sau divorţat(ă)?'/ Are you married, unmarried or divorced?'* This question contains only one word with no diacritics, it is a basic sentence asking for information about the status of the person. The word '*divorţat(ă)'* meaning *'divorced'* might be recognized by people who speak English and Romanic languages.

The sentences were chosen in order to demonstrate the difference in understanding between a sentence including some, or containing mainly words with diacritics and a sentence without such words.

The answers to the questions can be divided into several categories: **no answer**, **wrong answer**, **translation of some words**, **translation of the whole question**, **right answer**. Each category will be analyzed separately in order to establish connections between Romanian and the target languages. In the end, conclusions will be drawn with regard to their being favorable or not to intercomprehension.

A. The first question: *'Cu ce mijloc de transport vii la şcoală?'/ 'What means of transport do you use to come to school?'*

a. No answer was given by anyone. All the respondents understood at least one word from the sentence, or they were very attentive and willing to perform the task because it was the first sentence.

b. There was no **wrong answer** which demonstrates that the people understood the message of the sentence and answered accordingly.

c. A number of 18 people underlined or "translated" words from the first question as follows: **one word,** '*transport*', was just underlined by 1 person, and was underlined and translated by 9 people from India, Tunisia, Morocco, Myanmar, Somalia, Rwanda, Philippine, and Ghana. It is quite difficult to mention the languages the word was translated into, because the forms were: '*transport*' and '*transportation*', except from one person who underlined one word and translated it in French '*le moyene de transport*'/ 'means of transport'. **Two words** were underlined and translated by 3 people in the following way: the words '*transport*' and '*şcoală*' were underlined as being recognized by one person, but only the second word was translated into English and both words were underlined and correctly translated by other two respondents. **Three words** '*mijloc de transport*' were recognized by one person from Spain who translated them '*medio de transporte*', while another person underlined four words '*transport vii la şcoală*' numbered three words,

excluding the preposition, and translated them as '*transport par ècole*', omitting the verb, fact repeated by another respondent who underlined five words from the Romanian sentence and incorrectly translated them as '*le transport vers l' ècole*'. Almost all the words were underlined and translated by two people from Belgium, a teacher and a Master in Economics student; the omitted word was the first interrogative pronoun '*ce*' '*what*'. One of them also figured out the included subject (you) and translated it in Dutch, fact that was really unexpected.

d. The translation of the whole first question was performed by 15 of the people who were involved in the case study. The English translation was given by 9 people out of whom 5 used the verb 'go' instead of 'come', only one person used the right verb, however, the meaning remained mainly the same, while one person used the verb 'commute', which also may be used in the context. Two people one from Cameroon and the other one from Kenya translated the question slightly different altering the meaning '*Where do you get your transport to go to school?*' and '*Means of transport from one point to another*'. Five respondents translated the question in French and four out of five translated correctly the verb '*venir*', perhaps because the Romanian form '*vii*' resembles the French one '*Quel est le moyen de transport pour venir à l' ècole?*', only one person modified the question and also the meaning '*Est ce que tu viens à l' ècole en transport en commun?*'. One person from Belgium translated the sentence into Dutch '*Hoe ga jej naar school?*' and the translation was correct.

e. The fifth group of 55 people provided **the correct answer to the question** and some of them also underlined the words they could understand, translated them or even translated the whole sentence. The answers were provided as follows: 2 in Spanish, 1 in Portuguese, 9 in English, 12 in French, and 12 in Dutch.

The Spanish speakers, one from Spain and the other from Bolivia, also translated the sentences and one of them provided a full answer '*Vengo con el metro, y luego a pie*'. The Portuguese speaker from Brazil gave only the answer '*Venha a pé para escuola*'.

The 9 respondents in English can be divided in two groups: those who gave complete answers underlining the words '*transport*' and '*şcoală*' (6 people), and 3 people who wrote the means of transport they are riding, underlining the same two Romanian words above as being recognized.

From the total number, 21 answered in French, 11 by mentioning the means of transport used and 10 giving their answers in sentences. Out of the first group 2 just wrote the means of transport, 5 also underlined two, three or even four words and translated them '*transport*', '*ècole*' and '*moyen*' being the frequent translations, while 4 people translated the whole sentence.

A number of 13 respondents wrote their answers in Dutch in the following way: 4 of them mentioned the means of transport used and also underlined the words '*transport*' and '*şcoală*' and translated them, 8 answered in complete sentences some of them underlining the same two Romanian words, and 1 translated the question and answered it in a sentence '*Ik kom naar school met de tram*'. The rest of 9 people just wrote the answer in one word that could have been in any language '*tram*', '*metro*' and '*bus*', so we cannot say exactly the language, one of the respondents gave the answer partly in Romanian '*trenul şi tram*', also underlining the whole sentence as a sign of understanding every word.

3. CONCLUSIONS OF THE CASE STUDY, FIRST SENTENCE.

According to the results of the answers, a pie chart shows the percentage of the recipients who performed the first task as follows:

- 0 did not recognize any word corresponding to the 1st Qtr;
- 0 gave a wrong answer corresponding to the 2nd Qtr;
- 18 recognized the same word corresponding to the 3rd Qtr;
- 15 translated the question and answered corresponding to the 4th Qtr;
- 55 answered the question corresponding to the 5th Qtr.
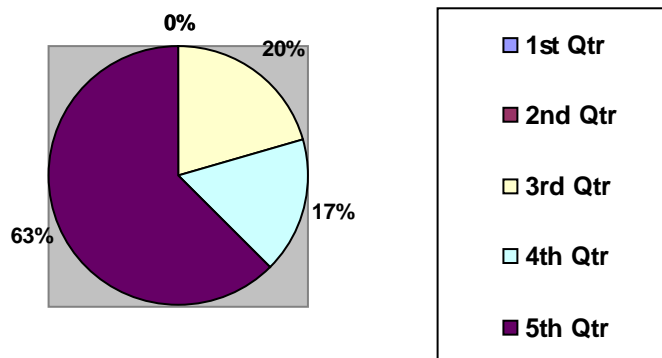
The percentages demonstrate that the number of people who could not perform the task (the first two groups) is zero. The next group of participants representing 20%, underlined between one and three words, and all of them translated the underlined words correctly. The international word '*transport*' is one of the key words in understanding the message of the question together with the word '*school*' that was also recognized and translated by almost all respondents. The rest of the words could be guessed from the context. If we add the percentage of the people who translated the sentence with those who gave correct answers to it, we are going to obtain the very high percentage of 80%.

B. The 2nd question: '*Eşti căsătorit(ă), necăsătorit(ă) sau divorţat(ă)?/ Are you married, unmarried or divorced*?'

a. No answer was given by 26 people who apparently did not recognize any word from the question. They came from: Albania, Armenia, Burma, Cameroon, Columbia, France, Ghana, Morocco, Nigeria, Philippine, Poland, Rwanda, Somalia and Turkey.
Except for the Turks who declared that the only language they knew was Turkish, the others declared to know English, French or Arabic, and the person from Columbia spoke Spanish. The conclusion that could be drawn is that either the level of French or English was too low to allow them to

recognize the whole message or separate words, or they simply did not pay enough attention to the task, which can be applied to the Spanish speaker who should have understood or recognized at least some words, as long as Spanish is a Romanic language and the vocabulary is very similar, or because of the diacritics the words looked too strange to be recognized.

b. There was no **wrong answer** which demonstrates that the people who succeeded to answer understood the message of the sentence and answered accordingly.

c. A number of 24 people underlined one or more words from the sentence and/or translated the words as follows: one person from Morocco, speaking French, Arab and a little Dutch 'recognized' only one word '*căsătorit(ă)*' and translated it as '*de huis*' (the house); 9 respondents underlined as the recognized word '*necăsătorit(ă)*', one giving no translation, only one person translated it correctly by the French word '*celibataire*', while the other 7 people wrongly translated the word by '*necessary*' 2 of them, '*necessité*' 3 of them, 1 of them '*necessair*', and also 1 person '*nationality*'. The Romanian word '*divorţat(ă)*' was underlined as being recognized and translated by 9 respondents as follows: with the French word '*divorcé*', which was correct by 6 people, using the Dutch word '*gescheiden*' also correct by 1 person, by the English word '*divorced*' by 1 person too and the last answer given by one person was '*divertissement*', which was obviously wrong.

Two words from the sentence were underlined and translated by 3 people as follows: the words '*necăsătorit(ă)*' and '*divorţat(ă)*' were translated by a Belgian person as '*necessary*' and '*divorced*', the first word is incorrect and the second correct; a Turkish person translated '*necessity*' and '*divert*', both incorrect, and a Spanish person translated '*casado*' and '*divorciada*', both correct.

Three words '*căsătorit(ă)*', '*necăsătorit(ă)*' '*divorţat(ă)*' were underlined and translated by 2 respondents in the following way: one French person correctly translated the words as '*celibataire*', '*marié*' and '*divorcé*' while a person from the Central African Republic translated them in French and English as '*necessity*', '*house*' and '*divorced*', which means that only one word was correctly translated.

d. The translation of the whole first question was performed by 12 of the people who were involved in the case study: 3 people translated the question in English, all of them correctly. Some of them also underlined the words they could understand in order to make the translation.

Five of the translations were in French, four of the respondents succeeded to perform the task correctly, one out of four also depicted the difference between the masculine and feminine form of the Romanian word '*divorţat(ă)*' and gave the translation accordingly '*divorcé(e)*'. The fifth person translated '*Est-ce que c'est nécessaire de divorcer*?' '*Is it necessary to get a divorce*?', proving that the only word she could understand was '*divorce*'.

The translation was done in Dutch by 2 people, who got the meaning of the question even if they did not translate all the words 'Ben je getrauwd, …of gescheiden?'; the word '*not married*' was not translated, and another important thing is that the two persons are language teachers.

The last two translations were wrong as a whole although the first respondent understood some of the words. A person from Greece wrote '*Is a lawyer necessary for a divorce?*' and the other from UK translated '*This questionnaire requires your understanding*'.

e. The fifth group of 26 people provided the correct answer to the questions and some of them also underlined the words they could understand and/or translated the question.

There were 12 people who answered using only one word or a very short phrase as follows: 2 in English, 4 in French, 2 in Dutch, 3 in Spanish, and one in Romanian although he is a Belgian teacher '*Eşti căsătorit*'. We could consider the last answer as being almost a sentence, although incorrect in Romanian, the correct answer should have been '*Sunt căsătorit*', however, any reader would understand the message without any problem.

Other 14 people answered in a sentence that was more or less complete. One respondent answered in Spanish '*Soy soltero, pera tenga novia*' and also translated the question in Spanish with the differences between the masculine and feminine form that is a characteristic of many Roman languages '*Estás casado(a), saltero(a), o divorciado(a)?*'.

An answer in English was preferred by 5 people who also underlined or translated words from the sentence, while an answer in French was given by 4 people. Other 4 respondents gave answers in Dutch, three of them mentioning their marital status, and the fourth one stating the same thing but about his parents '*Mijn ouders zijn getrouwd*', but proving that he understood the general meaning.

According to the results of the answers a pie chart shows the percentage of the recipients who performed the second task as follows:

26 did not recognize any word corresponding to the 1st Qtr;
0 gave wrong answers corresponding to the 2nd Qtr;
24 recognized some words corresponding to the 3rd Qtr;
12 translated the question and answered corresponding to the 4th Qtr;
26 answered the question corresponding to the 5th Qtr.
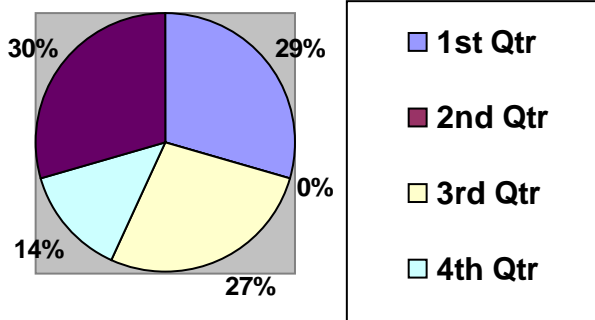
The task was correctly performed by 44% of the recipients who translated the whole sentence or offered a correct answer. According to the answers received the sentence was more difficult to be understood correctly by some of the participants because of the diacritics.

4. FINAL CONCLUSIONS

The case study involved people from all over the world, speaking as natives a diversity of languages from different Indo-European, Sino-Tibetan, Niger-Congo and Afro-Asiatic groups. The great majority were also speakers of French, English and Dutch. Although the recipients were given several languages to choose from, interestingly enough, no one answered in German or Italian. The correct translation or the right answer was provided by 80% of the recipients for the first question and 44% of the respondents for the second question, that means more than half of the participants for the first sentence and less than that for the second sentence that presumably was more difficult, demonstrating that for this particular situation, intercomprehension at the reading level is a possibility but it depends on the vocabulary used in the sentence and the frequency of diacritics that generally hinder understanding.

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