INTERCOMPREHENSION – A CASE STUDY (5)

Alina BALAGIU[1]
[1]Senior Lecturer PhD, "Mircea cel Bătrân" Naval Academy

Abstract: *The present paper is the fifth 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 answer and/or the translation could be given in English, French, Dutch, Italian, Spanish or German. The material provided is classed, according to the answers, in five sections: no answer, wrong answer, translation of some words, translation of the whole question and right answer.*
Keywords: *linguistics, reading comprehension, multilingualism, Romanian, semantics, intercomprehension.*

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 year 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 questions are: English, French, Bulgarian, Russian, Spanish, German, Catalan, Albanese, Greek, Dutch, Italian, Chinese, Polish, Czech, Turkish, Danish, Swahili, Arab, Berber, Swedish, Malaysian, Ukrainian, and Hungarian. 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 using 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 questions without being given the possibility of listening to the pronunciation. This is an important aspect of the study because the respondents could only rely on identifying graphic similarities between Romanian and the language they chose to answer in or their native language.We assume that was an inconvenient for Greeks, Bulgarians, Albanians, Russians, Turkish people, and generally speaking for people coming from the Balkans who have common traditions, culture and sayings and even words similarly pronounced. 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 FIRST QUESTION

The first question is '*Preferi să mergi la teatru, la operă, la balet sau la cinematograf?*'/ '*Do you prefer going to the theatre, the opera, the ballet or the cinema?*' The question was formulated 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. There are two words containing diacritics: '*să'* meaning 'to', used for the present conjunctive, and '*operă'* the international non user without definite article. 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, in our opinion, simple and easy to understand because it contains some words that have about the same written form and meaning in many languages 'theater', 'opera', 'ballet' and 'cinema'.

The answers to the question 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 favourable or not to intercomprehension and to the suppositions we stated in the paragraph above.

3. THE FIRST QUESTION ANSWERS:

a. No answer was given by 4 people that apparently did not recognize any word from the question. They came from Nigeria, Morocco, Albania and Turkey. Except for the Turkish person, who declared that the only language she knew was Turkish, the others declared to know English or French. 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.

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

c. A number of 25 people underlined or "translated" words from the first question as follows: three people just underlined words while 22 underlined and translated them into one of the above mentioned languages. **One word** 'cinematograf' was underlined by one person as being recognized. Another respondent underlined **two words** as being familiar to 'operă' and 'cinematograf'. The third person underlining words is of Kurd origin and he chose the first part of the sentence '*Preferi să mergi la teatru, la operă'*.

One word, 'cinematograf', was underlined and translated by 4 people from Morocco, Rwanda, Philippine, and Ghana. We suppose two of the translations were into English 'cinematography' so they were not quite to the point as long as they mentioned the art while in the sentence the meaning of the word was 'cinema'. One translation was into Dutch 'bioscop', a correct one, and another one in French 'cinematographe', also a correct one at least from the semantic point of view.

Two words were underlined and translated by 4 people in the following way: one person translated correctly 'preferi' and 'cinematograf' into French, one person also translated the Romanian words '*la operă'* and '*la cinematograf'* into French 'l'opera' and 'le cinema'. In Romanian 'la' means 'to', so that the respondent assimilated the Romanian preposition with the French article, in our opinion, although the translation is correct from the semantic point of view. Two people translated two words in English as follows: the first one the words '*teatru' and 'cinematograf' as 'theater' and 'movie'* which we consider as being correct because the meaning was spotted, and the second translated the words 'preferi' as 'border' which is without any doubt incorrect, and 'cinematograf' with 'movie', a correct translation.

Three words were recognized by seven persons as follows: two recognized and translated correctly the words 'opera', '*balet'* and '*cinematograf'* into English and French, one translated the word '*balet'* into English as 'ticket', one translated it into French considering the preposition as being the definite article 'le théatre', 'le balet', 'la cinéma', the general meaning being the same. A person from Brazil translated the Romanian words into Portuguese 'teatro', 'opera' and 'cinema'. Two people translated the Romanian words into Dutch, the first one 'teater'(the spelling is wrong), 'opera' and 'balet', the second 'de theater', ' bioscop' and 'bd', the meaning of the last word that should be the translation of 'balet' cannot be understood by us.

Four words were underlined and translated by two respondents. The first one translated the following words into English: 'theater', 'opera', 'ballet', 'cinematography', the last one being the name of the art not the place you go to see a film. The second person translated the words into French as follows: 'preferer', 'opera', 'balet' and 'cinema', the written form of the words is not quite the correct one, but the meaning is.

Five words were understood by 5 respondents and regardless the language they translated the words into, they were the same and correctly translated: 'prefer', 'theatre', 'opera', 'ballet' and 'cinema'.

d. The translation of the whole question was performed by 17 of the people who were involved in the case study. Some of them also underlined the words they could understand in order to make the translation.

One person translated the sentence correctly into Spanish '*Preµeres ir al teatro, opera, ballet o cinematograµa?'* and **two** into Dutch '*Vor wat ben je het liefst: theater, opera, ballet of film?'* and '*Waar van has je het meest: van theater, opera, ballet of cinema?'* The French translation was provided by **six people** out of whom four translated '*Préfére-tu, le théâtre, l'opéra, le ballet ou le cinéma*?', without recognizing the Romanian form of the verb "go" and assimilating the Romanian preposition '*la*' to the French definite article. Another French version, provided by a native, was: '*Préfére-tu la magie de théâtre, de l'opéra, du ballet ou le cinéma*?' where the Romanian verb '*mergi'* (go) was assimilated to the French noun 'magie' in a very imaginative way. The last French version '*Quel preference aime-tu, l'opera, le balet ou le cinema*?' was a little different from the other due to the verb 'like', which is not correct in the French sentence but the respondent sensed an empty space after the verb 'prefer'.

There were **eight people** translating the sentence into English, three in the form '*Do you prefer theatre, opera, ballet or cinema*?' that proves that the respondents were not able to depict the verb 'go' from the Romanian sentence; nevertheless, the holistic meaning was understood. The translation of the other five was

complete and correct '*Do you prefer to go to theatre, opera, ballet or cinema*?'

e. The fifth group of 42 people provided **the correct answer to the question** and some of them also underlined the words they could understand. Out of these, **nine people** provided the answer in **English** as follows: one person rendered the answer 'documentary' and underlined the Romanian word '*cinematograf'*; four people underlined the words they could understand which were the same: *'preferi', 'teatru', ' operă', 'balet', 'cinematograf'*, and gave different answers in complete sentences; one person underlined the nouns from the sentence, translated the interrogative sentence correctly and provided a one-word answer; a person from Venezuela underlined the recognized words, translated the question into Spanish and provided the answer in English, and the last two people underlined the words they recognized, translated them and gave the answers.

Eight people answered in Dutch as follows: one person gave the short answer: 'theater'; one person answered in a sentence; two people underlined the words they could understand and gave short answers; one respondent underlined the words, translated them into Dutch and provided the answer in a sentence; three people translated the interrogative sentence and provided the answer in a full sentence, one of them translated the question into French before giving the answer into Dutch, this last person was from Belgium and spoke French, Arab and Dutch.

Here should be mentioned another person, a Dutch teacher, knowing eight languages, among others Latin, who answered using Romanian words '*Prefero la operă'*. Although two of the words are indeed Romanian, the first one sounds Italian due to the ending in 'o' which is not typical for Romanian language.

Four respondents provided answers into **Spanish**. Three of them gave short answers into Spanish; they neither underlined nor translated any words. One person translated the question first and then gave a short answer in Spanish 'Prefero cine'. Twenty people preferred to give the answer in French as follows: nine gave a short answer; two underlined the words *'preferi', 'teatru', ' operă', 'balet', 'cinematograf'*, as being recognized and gave an answer; seven underlined and translated the words they understood, mainly the same words underlined by the respondents of the previous group, and finally provided an answer; two people translated the question, '*Préfére-tu, le théâtre, l'opéra, le ballet ou le cinéma*?', without recognizing the Romanian form of the verb 'go' and assimilating the Romanian preposition '*la*' to the French definite article, and provided a short answer.

4. CONCLUSIONS DRAWN FROM THE ANSWERS AT THE FIRST QUESTION

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

- 4 did not recognize any word;
- 0 gave wrong answers;
- 25 recognized some words;
- 17 translated the question and answered;
- 42 answered the question.

19% **48%**

Slice 1
Slice 2
Slice 3
Slice 4
Slice 5

28%

0% 5%
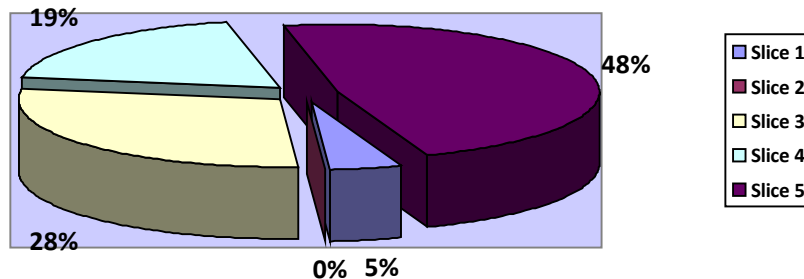
The percentages demonstrate that 5% of the recipients (the first two groups) could not perform the task. The causes can be various starting with lack of interest for the project, lack of knowledge or poor knowledge of the languages they declared to speak. From the linguistic point of view, Romanian which is a Romance language could be easily understood by speakers of other Romance languages such as French, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese. The question contains words that could also be recognized and understood by speakers of languages from the Germanic group. This hypothesis was demonstrated by the next group of participants, representing 28%, who underlined the Romanian words and translated them correctly. The first word of the question, which is a verb, '*preferi*' was easily recognized as long as the form is about the same in French 'preferer', Spanish 'prefero' and in English 'prefer'. The nouns could be included in the category of international words, so they were recognized by speakers who were part of either the Romance or the Germanic family of languages.

The task was correctly performed by 67% of the recipients who translated the whole sentence or offered a correct answer. According to the answers received the only part of speech more difficult to be understood correctly was the verb 'go'.

5. ANALYSIS OF THE SECOND QUESTION:

The second question is *"Ai mâncat vreodata mămăligă cu brânză)?/ Have you ever eaten polenta and cheese?"* This question, in comparison with the first one, contains words with diacritics, there is no international word, the type of food mentioned is traditional, and as far as we know it can be found in the Balkan area.

The sentences were chosen in order to demonstrate the difference in understanding related to: the words with diacritics versus those without, international words versus words which are specific to a certain language and more, the fact that some messages can be decoded by people coming from the same area who share the same type of culture, and comprehension could be part of the cultural awareness.

6. THE FIRST QUESTION ANSWERS:

a. No answer was given by 77 respondents out of 88 demonstrating the fact that any part of the question was incomprehensible to the readers.

b. 'No etiendo nada' was the answer of a Catalan person who gave a good answer for the first question.

c. Few respondents tried to give the **translation of some words** or underlined one or more words trying to find a

meaning. One person underlined '*ai*' which is the auxiliary verb from the Past Tense '*ai mâncat*', but provided no translation, although underlining a word means understanding it. A person from Tunisia underlined the word '*brânză*' and translated it as '*bronzé*' perhaps due to the similarity of letters and length of the two words, although they do not have the same meaning. A respondent speaking French translated '*ai mâncat*' by using the French '*vous manque*', the meaning is 'lack' with no connection to the Romanian form of the verb 'eat'. A respondent from Kenya assimilated the Romanian word '*mămăligă*' with the word 'mamal', perhaps due to the first part of the noun. Another respondent tried to translate some words and came with 'in' and 'my field'. Surprisingly, a Belgian respondent depicted the correct translation for the verb, however, the person has studied Italian and Latin and it is a Dutch teacher.

d. The **translation of the whole question** was provided by three people. One of them, from England, translated the sentence totally wrong 'Are there machines that burn?' and we cannot see any connection between the form or the meaning of the two sentences. A person from Spain, who obviously did not understand the question, provided the following translation 'Echar de menos a tu madre o padre?' with no connection to the meaning. Another respondent, from Greece, gave an approximately correct translation '*Do you like/ ever eat corn bread?*', identifying the fact that the question is about food even if he could not identify the dish exactly. This answer proved intercomprehension that is not understanding the details but being capable of getting the main idea and in this particular case to provide an approximate translation.

e. Only one person coming from Bulgaria provided a **right answer** that was more like an explanation 'A dish prepared with corn (flour) and cheese' which is the correct translation of the Romanian food but he left out the first part of the sentence. However, the meaning was caught.

7. CONCLUSIONS DRAWN FROM THE ANSWERS AT THE FIRST QUESTION

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

- 77 did not recognize any word;
- 1 gave wrong answers;
- 5 recognized some words;
- 3 translated the question;
- 1 answered the question.

89%

Slice 1
Slice 2
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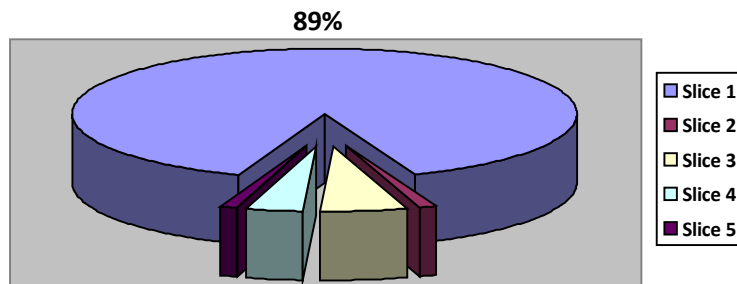
The percentages demonstrate that 89% of the recipients (the first two groups) could not perform the task. For this particular question the percentage demonstrates that the sentence was too difficult to be understood. The reasons are those mentioned at the beginning of the paper: many diacritics, specific Romanian words denoting traditions of the country.

8. 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 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.

Taking into account the results of each series of answers, the conclusion is that understanding and generally speaking interaction (in this particular case the answer) depends on the type of statement. The first statement is a general one including international words or words that can be easily recognized by people speaking in several languages, while the second statement is a particular one made of words that denote a certain aspect of the Romanian culture. There is also a difference of grammatical structure between the two sentences: the verb of the first one is in the present while the verb of the second sentence is in the past. The diacritics from the second sentence also hinder the comprehension, while in the first sentence there are only two words containing diacritics.
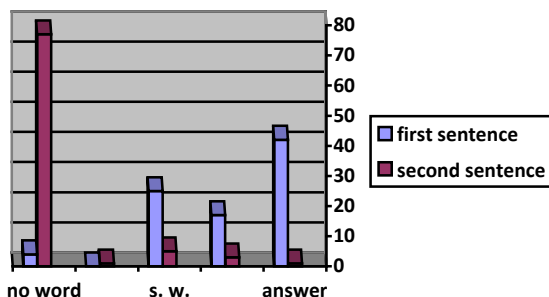
The discrepancy between the two sentences from the comprehension point of view is proved by the percentages showing the people who did not succeed to perform the tasks so they could not recognize any word (the first two columns). While the task could not be performed by 5% of the respondents for the first sentence, the number of 89% for the second is a proof for what it was stated above. The number of people who provided wrong answers is insignificant in comparison to those who recognized and translated from one to almost all the words. More people succeeded in translating the whole first sentence, proving comprehension in meaning and form. Only people coming from the Balkans, sharing some common traits of culture, the same life style and sometimes having common words for things and phenomena, although pronounced differently, could understand the second sentence and give an approximate translation. The fact that people can understand each other, in written form, is partially sustained by the answers provided for the first question, and only meeting certain conditions for the second.

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