INTERCOMPREHENSION – A CASE STUDY (6)

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Abstract: *The present paper is the sixth 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 different questions in Romanian and answer them in one of the following languages English, French, Dutch, Italian, Spanish or German 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. According to the answers, the respondents are divided into some categories, starting from those who did not answer, going on to people who underlined and/or translated from one word to the whole sentence and finishing with those who provided an meaningful answer.*

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 question 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 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 questions without being given the possibility to listen to them being pronounced. 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, Turks, 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 ANSWERS

The first question is *'Bei ceai, cafea sau lapte dimineața?'/ 'Do you drink tea, coffee or milk in the morning?'* 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. There is only one word containing diacritics: '***dimineața***' an adverb meaning 'in the morning'. 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 could be, in our opinion, easy to understand due to the word '**cafea**' that have about the same written form and meaning in many languages. The second question is *"Ai un loc de muncă sau eşti şomer?/ Do you work or are you unemployed?"* This question, by contrast, contains three words with diacritics, there is no international word, and the written form of the words does not have connection with other languages to make similarities between them and decide for a logical answer as long as you do not know the target language.

The sentences were chosen following different criteria in order to demonstrate the difference in understanding related to: the words with diacritics versus those without, international words versus those specific to a certain language.

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 favorable or not to intercomprehension and to the suppositions we stated in the paragraph above.

The first question:
a. No answer was given by 24 people that apparently did not recognize any word from the question. They came from Albania Belgium, Bolivia, Cameroon, Columbia, France, Ghana, Nigeria, Mexico, Morocco, Somalia, and Turkey. Except for the Turk 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 47 people underlined or translated words from the first question as follows: 6 people just underlined words while 41 underlined and translated them in one of the above mentioned languages.

Out of those **six** respondents underlining one word, **five** underlined the same word '*cafea*' that they recognized as being 'coffee'. Only one person underlined the whole interrogative sentence as being recognized. It may be possible that he could understand the meaning but because of his poor knowledge of Dutch (the translation should have been given in one of the languages suggested in the instructions and the only language he could communicate in, was Dutch), he was not able to translate the meaning, as long as the only languages that he could speak were Turkish and Kurdish.

The answers of the respondents who translated some words can be divided into several categories according to the number of words translated.

One word was underlined and translated by 34 people out of which 30 underlined and translated the word '*cafea*' into English 'coffee', French 'café', 'le café', Dutch 'coffie', or other languages correctly or incorrectly written: 'cafe', 'coffy'. One person underlined and translated '*ceai*' into French 'le thee'.

Two people underlined and translated the conjunction '*sau*' with the English 'or', interesting enough, as long as one was coming from Sweden speaking Swedish, English, German and Dutch while the other one was coming from Cameroon speaking English and French.

One person from Morocco underlined and translated the adverb '*dimineața*' with the word 'dimimer', perhaps from the French word 'diminuer' meaning 'to diminish'.

Two words were underlined as being recognized and translated by 4 respondents. Two of them correctly translated '*cafea sau*' into French 'café ou'. One Polish respondent translated both '*ceai*' and '*cafea*' with 'caffie' and 'coffee', perhaps the first word with the meaning café like 'coffee house', but we do not know for sure why two words differently written looked so similar to that person. Another person underlined the words '*cafea*' and '*dimineața*' and translated the first both words into English and French, the first with 'coffee' and the second as 'reducing' or in French 'diminution', the resemblance between the French and the Romanian words is obvious, unfortunately they just look similar, the meaning is different.

Three words were recognized by 4 persons. Two French-speaking persons underlined and translated '*cafea sau lapte*' as 'café au lait', translation which has not the same meaning as the Romanian phrase, the difference is between the alternative 'coffee or milk' and the mixture as in 'white coffee'. One Arab respondent underlined and translated correctly all the nouns denoting drinks 'thé – café – lait', while another Arab respondent underlined and translated 'bei' as 'bierre', 'cafea' as 'café' and the end of the adverb '*dimineața*' that he translated as 'tea'.

d. The translation of the whole question was performed by 6 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 of the whole sentence. The translations are quite different as meaning and as language used 5 are in English and one in French. One translation having as starting point '*cafea*' has no connection to the initial meaning 'Next year, cafés will be smaller?' and so does the next one, also starting from the same Romanian word as the one above 'Is the coffee finished?'. The French translation 'Veut-tu café avec ou sans lait?' started from the two words recognized '*cafea*' and 'l*apte*', and the result was 'Do you want coffee with or without milk?' The next three answers are closer to the initial meaning, two of the respondents recognizing the words tea and coffee 'Do you drink tee, coffee….?' and 'Something tea, coffee or……?' and the third one performing an approximately exact translation 'Do you drink tee, coffee or milk?' The only word the Belgian respondent could not understand was 'in the morning'.

e. The fifth group of 11 people provided **an answer to the question** and some of them also underlined the words they could understand. The answers were diverse and so were the languages they were provided in. There were four answers in Dutch: two short ones, 'water' and 'caffie', and the other two providing also translations. The first one 'maaltijd coffie of' meaning 'always coffee with' and the answer was 'Bij het eten drink ik water.' meaning 'While eating I drink water', which is very similar to the English form and could be accepted as a proper answer regardless the period of the day. The second translation was 'Drink je koffie met halved melk?' meaning 'Do you drink half coffee half milk?' and the answer was 'Nee, ik drink geen caffie' meaning 'No, I drink no coffee', which also can be accepted as an answer that is in accordance to the question.

Two answers were given in French 'Je prand souvent du thé' meaning 'I often drink tea' and 'Pour le santé je doit diminuer le café' meaning 'I have to diminish the coffee to be healthy'. They are logical answers and according to the information asked although the second person might have thought that '*dimineața*' can have a connection with 'diminuer'.

The next two answers were given in two Latin languages Portuguese: 'Nao', and Spanish: 'Bebo café', and the translation of part of the sentence was also provided 'Bebes cacao, café o leche desnatada?' meaning 'Do you drink cocoa, coffee or skimmed milk?', 'desnatada' could have been an equivalent for '*dimineața*'.

The other two answers were provided in English, although one person was from Spain 'I like coffee' and the other one from Venezuela and her answer was 'I drink coffee in the morning', one answer in which the adverb was also understood.

The last answer to be analyzed is the one provided by a Belgian teacher who underlined the whole sentence but the word 'lapte' as being understood, and gave the answer into Romanian, even if not entirely correct from the grammatical point of view, but we are not interested here in the accuracy of the answer as long as the respondent was able to use the given instrument which here is Romanian ' Bea cafea' the correct answer is 'Beau cafea'.

CONCLUSIONS FOR 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:

24 did not recognize any word;
0 gave wrong answers;
47 recognized some words;
6 translated the question and answered;
11 answered the question.
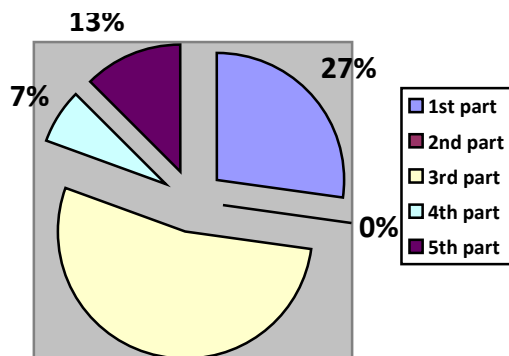
The percentages demonstrate that 27% of the recipients (the first two groups) could not perform the task. The causes can be various starting with lack of interest for the project, lack of knowledge or poor knowledge of the languages they declared to know. From the linguistic point of view, Romanian which 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 53%, who underlined the Romanian words and translated them correctly. The first word of the question, which is a verb, 'bei' was easily recognized by the Spanish speakers as long as the form is about the same in Spanish 'bebes'. The nouns 'coffee' 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 20% 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 adverb 'in the morning'.

The second question: *"Ai un loc de muncă sau eşti şomer?/ Do you work or are you unemployed?"*

a. No answer was given by 57 people that apparently did not recognize any word from the question. They came from different countries, spoke different languages, and most of them were people being more confident in French.

b. By **wrong answer** we understand an answer that has no connection to the question asked. Such answers prove that the message could not get to the receptor and the communication could not take place. For this particular question there were 5 answers, each of them starting from the false translation of the word '*şomer' as 'summer'*. The diacritic

under the letter 's' proved to be essential for a correct understanding of the sentence. The answers were different but following the same patern, the place to go in summer, regardless the language they were provided.

c. A number of 24 people underlined or translated words from the first question as follows: 6 people just underlined words while 41 underlined and translated them in one of the above mentioned languages. Three people just underlined words: '*şomer', 'sau',' eşti şomer'.*

Eighteen people underlined the word '*şomer'* and translated it into different languages, 8 into French 'eté*',* 8 into English 'summer*',* 1 into Dutch 'zomer*',* and one into Spanish 'verano*'.* Three respondents underlined and/or translated differently: one person translated the Romanian word '*şomer'* with 'some, amount', other two people underlined and translated correctly two words '*sau eşti*', one into French 'ou es-tu' and one into Dutch 'of is' (even if the form of the verb is for the third person singular while in Romanian it is the second person singular).

d. The translation of the whole question was performed by 2 of the people who were involved in the case study. One person translated the interrogative sentence into Dutch 'Waar ga je deze zomer vacantie?' meaning 'Where do you go in your summer holiday?', evidently starting from the same wrong translation of the 'false friend' '*şomer',* while the other person translated into English the first part of the question 'Is there a place.......?' translation which is the best version for the given interrogative sentence.

CONCLUSIONS FOR THE SECOND QUESTION

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

57 did not recognize any word;
5 gave wrong answers;
24 recognized some words;
2 translated the question and answered;
0 answered the question.

6% 3%0%
7%
84%

Legend:
- 1st part
- 2nd part
- 3rd part
- 4th part
- 5th part
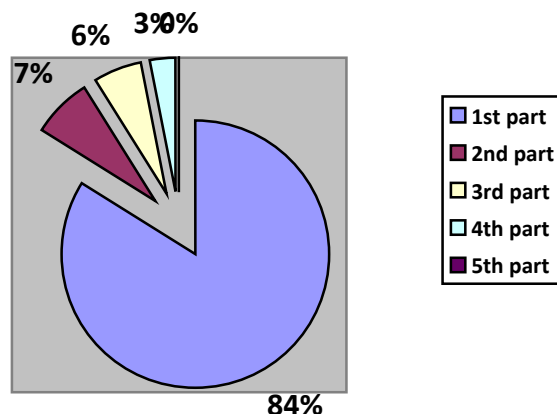
The percentages demonstrate that the task could not be performed. The conclusion is that the word giving the meaning of the sentence is '*şomer'* that looks like the English, Dutch or German words used to designate the corresponding season.

3. 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.

For the first question the correct translation or the right answer was provided by 20% of the recipients, and 53%

translated correctly or underlined as being recognized at least one word which in most cases was the international word 'coffee'. That means that more than half of the respondents got the message, demonstrating that for this particular situation, intercomprehension at the reading level is a possibility.

For the second interrogative sentence the situation is different, as long as the word giving the meaning of the sentence could not be understood. Although the Romanian word '*şomer*' comes from the French 'chômeur', it could not be recognized by the French speakers due to the great difference in the written form. In the case of this particular sentence the reading comprehension in a language that people do not know proved to be almost impossible.

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