

INTERCOMPREHENSION OR RETHINKING LANGUAGES WITH CLAIRE BLANCHE-BENVENISTE AND LOUISE DABÈNE

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Abstract: *Although the concept of intercomprehension (IC) has been a time-honored practice, with archives registering trade and personal exchanges among Mediterranean countries to prove it, nowadays thanks to two academics Claire Blanche Benveniste – a linguist, and Louise Dabène – an educationalist, it has found its place within teaching/learning languages. With their recent disappearance (2010, and 2013 respectively), the academic community lost two scholars and intellectuals whose influence extended far beyond the French borders. Therefore, this paper aims to pay tribute to these two figures of major reference by passing in review their personal, educational and professional background with a focus on their contributions to the development of languages seen from the intercomprehensive perspective.*

Key words: *intercomprehension, languages, didactics, plurilingualism.*

INTRODUCTION

2009 was the year that marked my first encounter with the notion of IC when I was asked to join the Redinter project [1]. It definitely constituted a turning/starting point into my academic career that switched to the field of research. Thus, I got in contact with the tremendous work of these two reputed language specialists – Claire Blanche-Benveniste (1935-2010) and Louise Dabène (1934-2013); therefore, a few years after their disappearance, conjuring up their personalities seems a good opportunity to pass in review their importance to the field of didactics. What other more appropriate way to pay tribute to someone who has inspired and just left us but to refer to the work they left behind, most often than not as a legacy? Therefore, the following should be read as an invitation to their existential as well as intellectual journey.

CLAIRE BLANCHE BENVENISTE

She was born in Lyon, in January 15, 1935, into a family of double tradition (Ashkenazi by her mother and Sephardic by her father) where mixed accents of Russian, Yiddish, Greek, Turkish, Spanish, and Portuguese accompanied all her childhood and teenage years [2]. Given this linguistic mosaic she grew up in (which she so beautifully described in an article written much later), one should not seek too far the source of her passionate interest in both the *simultaneous language learning* and *spoken language*.

She became a brilliant student with a solid background in medieval literature. Passing her aggregation examination, being certified and a doctor of literature, she was to start building herself a brilliant carrier in university: filling the post of teaching assistant in Lyon, then at Sorbonne to finish off as a Professor teaching the Exceptional Class at the University of Provence (Aix-en-Provence) where she set up an exceptional team (including the most promising language specialists of the French linguistics) who played an innovative role in the development of this discipline.

Towards the end of her exemplary career, she held the position of director of studies at *Ecole Pratique des Hautes études* in Paris and was finally appointed Professor Emeritus at the University of Provence in 2000. She also presided over the Society of Linguistics in Paris, was repeatedly invited to give lectures in French and general linguistics at the most prestigious universities. As such, she was Head of a department which produced more than 60 PhD candidates who are still continuing her work nowadays.

As a scholar, she wrote 8 books among which *L'Orthographe* whose iconoclastic characteristics raised a lot of controversy since Claire Blanche Benveniste had introduced spoken language – generally excluded from research – as the very object of her studies and reflections. Her work summarizes more than 150 papers published under her name or in co-authorship. Furthermore, she conceived and managed the journal of

research studies on spoken French (1979-2001) - *Recherches sur le Français parlé*.

Having this specialty as a starting point, she extended her activity to other domains of linguistics such as: language and spelling acquisition, prosody, sign language, sociolinguistics, and ultimately a domain where both political and theoretical stakes meet: simultaneous teaching of neighboring languages.

As a result, France acknowledged the merits of Claire Blanche Benveniste, those eminent services she had brought to education for forty years, and awarded her the highest decoration – the Legion of Honor. However, the real testimonials of recognition, the true and sincere ones which she would have no doubt preferred, have been from her former students, colleagues or simply friends; and on this I entirely agree.

Louise Dabène

Let us now follow Louise Dabène's academic career [3]. The excellent training she had received as a student-teacher at L'École normale supérieure of Fontenay-aux-Roses during 1954-1958 prepared her for the position of Spanish teacher (once her aggregation exam passed) which she held at the pilot high school of Sèvres between 1958-1967. Passionately fond of methodological innovation in language teaching, she had already implemented innovative communicative and audio-visual approaches. After earning her doctoral thesis in Letters and social sciences in Hispanic linguistics, she served as associate professor and then as a full professor at Stendhal University of Grenoble. Her 25-year career is notable not only for the institutional creations that gave visibility and scientific legitimacy to language teaching and greatly contributed to the emergence and recognition of the field as a separate domain but also for the multiple innovative initiatives in the field of research in sociolinguistics and language teaching. In this respect, it is worth mentioning the language centers she (co)-founded: CDL (Language Education Center), CDF (French Didactics Center), Lidilem laboratory (Linguistics and Foreign and Native Language Teaching) which provided the institutional foundation for teaching this *young* discipline seeking academic legitimacy, as well as marking a milestone in the recognition and international prestige in both language teaching and sociolinguistics research. As support to the publication and dissemination of all this research work within the community of researchers, the LIDIL journal was born in 1989, having Louise Dabène as its editor until 1998.

With her dynamism and dedication, she took up the challenge to federate French applied linguistics associations to ensure the French presence in the world of AILA (International Association of Applied Linguistics) by creating COFDELA (the French Confederation of Applied Linguistics) in 1994. Moreover, her initiatives in favor of language teaching revolved around associations. Created in 1987, following the collaborative efforts of a small team

of passionate linguists gathered around Louise Dabène, ACEDLE (Association of researchers and teachers of foreign languages) provides a forum for scientific dialogues, exchanges and reflections on the teaching of different languages which is open to both teachers and researchers who are encouraged to meet and work together. Under the ACEDLE umbrella, regular workshops and publications contributed to the epistemological evolution of didactics [4].

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE IC DEVELOPMENT

As a team member of two consecutive projects – Redinter (2008-2011) and Intermar (2011-2013) – having IC at their core, I am particularly indebted to the work of these two pioneers in the field of IC. The work of Claire Blanche Benveniste in the field of IC in romance languages is encapsulated in the *Eurom 4 method* in use by several European universities in order to simultaneously teach 4 romance languages. It is the result of a 3 year-experiment conducted within the universities of Lisbon, Salamanca, Rome and Aix-en-Provence. This method of language learning addresses adults who speak one romance language and wish to *understand* one, two or even three other Latin languages. The accompanying CDROM envisages the study of a newspaper article in each language within 24 lessons. The 24 newspaper articles are accompanied by annotations which aim at providing learners with the necessary tools to pinpoint the main differences that make vocabulary, syntax and morphology difficult with a view to overcoming language barriers. The recorded texts are read by native speakers and are followed by text translations, remarks on the syntax, morphological explanations, an encyclopedia on geography, institutions, numbers, etc., a glossary and a brief contrastive grammar/prosody of Romance languages.

Her experiment with IC involving her French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese students revealed that each of them was able to read in the other three languages after forty hours of study. She accounted for this

learning/teaching experience in one of her numerous papers where she pointed out the existence of transparent words vs. opaque words and suggested the technique called "phantom word" in order to retrieve the meaning of the words [5].

Although very actively engaged in the study of IC, C.B. Benveniste left but a few explicit definitions of the concept: "understanding languages without speaking them", "the phenomenon by which speakers understand each other at least partially in a chain of mutually intelligible dialects" [6, 7].

In line with this approach, Louise Dabène was of the opinion that all the potential of the linguistic relationship had not been exploited to the full and highlighted the need to positively reconsider its role especially with teaching Romance languages. As a result, in the early 1990s, she put in practice this idea (dwelling on neighboring languages) and was to be seen as a founder of IC. Back then the European context was favorable to the launch of a project she maliciously chose to call Galatea: in Greek mythology the nymph Galatea had preferred Acis, a simple shepherd, to Polyphemus the one-eyed cyclop who were the perfect illustrations of the concept of IC (embodied by Acis) vs. monolingualism (in the person of Polyphemus).

As seen so far, L. Dabène had a rich and consistent career that strongly influenced research on language contacts in France from the point of view of both sociolinguistics and didactics. At the moment of her retirement in late 1998 the already established and acknowledged field language methodology had considerably evolved epistemologically towards a didactics of plurilingualism through original and innovative projects, namely the large-scale European projects on IC among speakers of Romance languages (Galatea, Galanet, etc) and language awareness (Evlang), which proved sustainable in time.

CONCLUSIONS

Personally, I haven't had the privilege to meet either of these "great ladies of French linguistics"; however, I have used to great advantage the books they wrote as well as their research work, which I am sure not only contributed to the evolution of the integrated language didactics but also are inspirational to all researchers and students alike in the field of language didactics and particularly IC didactics

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