

## INTERCOMPREHENSION AS A METHOD OF TRANSLATORS' AND INTERPRETERS' TRAINING

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### ABSTRACT

Foreign language teaching methodologies make a frequent use of linguistic know-how. Intercomprehension, or interlinguistic comprehension, may be a part of it. The aim of the paper is to present the concept and see its utility in translators and interpreters training keeping in mind that the theoretical and methodological framework for strengthening intercomprehensive (receptive) skills of translator trainees must always be developed in a close connection to the translational basis.

**Keywords:** language, teaching, intercomprehension, translator, interpreter

### INTRODUCTION

Theories of foreign language teaching often successfully use linguistic knowledge. It is agreed that the theoretical basis of general linguistics is useful, among others, for translators and interpreters-to-be. Of course, simultaneously, it is necessary to keep in mind the quality of their translational training. Among linguistic knowledge in translational training, we can imagine intercomprehension. The aim of this paper, proposed as a continuation and a partial reformulation of our reflection on the perspectives of translators' and interpreter's training [1], is to introduce the concept and to ask whether, when and how it can be useful to strengthen receptive skills of the future translator and/or interpreter.

### WHAT IS INTERCOMPREHENSION?

Intercomprehension is the way of communicating in which communicating subjects use languages unfamiliar to their interlocutors. In spite of the difference of codes, communication happens successfully and does not need a means of mediation. Intercomprehension is perceived as a component of the communicative competence, as a communication strategy and – more generally – as a methodological approach available in foreign language teaching.

Intercomprehension is the capacity to understand a foreign language and to come to terms with an interlocutor using a language different from ours. In order to develop it, we must arm ourselves with knowledge about parenthood relations between languages, their differences and similarities and to improve our skills in reception of the unfamiliar language(s). A Portuguese expert F. Capucho, referring to the linguistic tradition of E. Roulet's Geneva school, underlines, while defining intercomprehension, the importance of multistratic discursive competence of the language user. This competence, if it is developed, can be a basis for a successful reconstruction of meaning in multilingual communication and a basis for new pragmatic treatment of the message in the sense of obtaining perlocutive effects [2].

Intercomprehension is a natural communication strategy available to many language users in exolingual communication contexts, such as business or holiday trips to countries where unfamiliar languages are spoken. It is a strategy that imitates spontaneous communication behaviour.

#### INTERCOMPREHENSION-BASED FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING PRACTICES

In the field of methodology of foreign language teaching, intercomprehension represents a relatively new approach that can be designed as plurilingual. Basically, it is possible and desirable to train language users to communicate in their own language and to understand at the same time people who speak other languages. According to that, language teaching and learning does not have to be limited to accumulating linguistic facts, but should be based on a new approach to discourse as a translinguistic phenomenon.

Intercomprehension, as an approach to language education, differs from traditional ways of foreign language teaching in several aspects. First, traditional ways of teaching suppose that the language will be learned from the beginning. Previous knowledge makes us „false beginners“ which is sometimes seen more like a complication than a facilitation of the language acquisition process. Second, language teaching always aims at – though it is rarely reached – acquiring the language competence of the native speaker. Third, the student is advised to be cautious when it comes to similarities between languages, as it might be „red herrings“. It is recommended to use the foreign language as much possible, the use of the mother tongue of learners being confined to certain very strictly defined cases [3].

Intercomprehension, on the contrary, gives the possibility to overcome frontiers between languages, to discover similarities and common points between related languages or even between distant ones. All this is obtained through texts to be understood or ideas to be formulated. The approach is based on the following presumptions. First, every language is learned on the background of already existing linguistic and communicative stock. Languages that belong to this stock interfere in a positive or negative way. Second, the aim of language teaching and language acquisition is to integrate, as efficiently as possible, the foreign language being studied into the stock of linguistic knowledge and skills of the learning subject. Third, deliberate or subconscious transfer realized by the subject makes an influence on the components of his/her plurilingual portfolio. This influence is bidirectional and dynamic, controlled to a various degree, depending on the status of language codes in contact and on the values they represent for the language user. Intercomprehension makes the best of the positive potential of interference, mainly when it comes to related languages. Finally, code mixing and code switching in foreign languages teaching and learning are fully accepted. These strategies can contribute to gain new knowledge about the foreign language and in foreign language, without denying the importance of linguistic norms in different languages.

#### IMPROVING INTERLINGUISTIC AWARENESS

The concept of intercomprehension appears in language teaching methodology in the 90s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and its meaning is progressively enlarged from multilingual reception between related languages through multilingual interaction of related languages to multilingual interaction of distant languages. A vast amount of research on

intercomprehension of several language groups actively used in Europe has already been realized. Romance languages are considered as very appropriate for this kind of studies. The same would probably be true for Scandinavian, Germanic and Slavic languages. However, to this day, Slavic languages are the less researched and intercomprehension has been the less applied in their teaching in comparison to other language groups.

Intercomprehension, i.e. construction and deepening of receptive skills in foreign languages, consists in the fact that we lead the learner towards a reflection on language and towards acquiring strategies which will enable him/her to understand, partly or totally, exolingual production. Among these strategies, there is comparison, identification of similarities, inferring and getting to know linguistic norms and rules. Notions of positive and negative transfer, transparency and transparent zone are crucial. The most frequent types of activities and tests are reading comprehension tasks centered on the overall comprehension of the text and/or on comprehension of details, aiming at understanding of selected words and segments of the text. A lot of tasks concern lexical relations between words. Of course, they are realized on the background of contrastive and typological study of languages. This kind of systemic approach is applicable even in very tightly culturally bound fields of study such as lexicology, terminology and phraseology. The importance of interlinguistic study of phrasemes as „images of the world“ [4], for instance, has been demonstrated from ethnolinguistic and cognitive perspective [5].

Intercomprehension can be worked at every level of curricular and extra-curricular language teaching and learning. However, so far it has been done mainly at its lower levels (the most often at primary school). Apart from that, it is often present in the teacher training university programs. Still, it seems useful to use the intercomprehension-based approach in university programs other than educational ones, namely those focusing on learning language for specific purposes, translation and interpreting study programs and interdisciplinary study programs of applied linguistics that are becoming an integral part of the study offer of many colleges and universities.

A translator and/or interpreter working at his intercomprehensive skills can possibly broaden his/her sphere of activity. Above all, we mean those who work as assistants at various positions in firms, enterprises and business societies. Their work makes them respond to very heterogeneous demands and tests the flexibility of their reactions even in situations that do not necessarily correspond to their profile (in terms of their languages of expertise). Translator and interpreter often takes care of the daily agenda and can be possibly confronted with an unfamiliar language at any time. He/she may find useful to adopt transfer strategies and to improve his/her awareness of transparent zones in the unknown languages on the basis of general knowledge of linguistic evolution and language systems.

How to apply intercomprehension in order to develop linguistic awareness of the translator? How to arrange knowledge of linguistics phenomena so as to be helpful to intercomprehension of the future translator and/or interpreter? Let us illustrate these questions by an example.

When studying morphosyntax of the chosen language, each translator trainee gets some knowledge of contrastive-linguistic nature about the verbal aspect. He/she learns, for instance, that in Romance languages imperfect tenses are opposed to preterite tenses, the



former expressing continuous (progressive, imperfective) actions, the latter punctual or habitual (perfective) action. Despite this knowledge, presented to translator trainee as a series of linguistic facts, he/she rarely gets back to it actively later, in his/her translating practice, to use it as a cue to decipher unfamiliar texts.

We should make the future translator and interpreter (let us think of him/her as a native speaker of a Slavic language and having a Romance language as target) aware of relations of parenthood between languages showing him/her the real complexity of syntactic and semantic relations. The point of reference is simple. Verbal aspect is a grammatical category that receives a different kind of realization in Romance languages and in Slavic languages. Slavic languages have formal, lexical-morphological indicators of aspectuality [6]. Most often, they take forms of independent lexemes, i.e. elements observable in the surface structure of the language. The semantic opposition is not necessarily expressed in the morphological structure of the word by the presence of flective (conjugation) affixes; rather it is expressed by derivation affixes. On the other hand, in Romance languages, there is a certain kind of relation between the category of verbal aspect and the category of verbal tense. The basic opposition between imperfectivity and perfectivity shows mostly in the morphology of conjugation paradigms, and clearly in the system of the past tense forms. However, this relation is less often expressed in the surface structure than it is the case in the Slavic languages. The presence of a verbal morpheme indicating aspect is rare. The opposition between imperfect and preterite tenses is an example illustrating the surface visibility of aspect. Still, it represents only one aspect of aspectuality, which yet becomes the core of the verbal aspect presentation and one of the main questions of the semantic syntax of Romance languages in school and university practice. The fact that the verbal aspect in Romance language is often identified on the basis of lexical or contextual means is almost completely left out [7].

We suggest to present questions related to verbal aspect to a translology student in a different way: as an interaction of different kinds of means of expression, as it is stated above. Besides, why shouldn't we give the translator trainee a systematic, comparative-contrastive, typological or areal view of aspectuality? We are convinced that in the case of Romance languages, knowledge of conjugation paradigms of the imperfect and preterite tenses would be useful not only in the studied language, but also in other languages belonging to the Romance group. If he/she understands systemic solutions applied to the verbal aspect category in most languages of the same language group, instead of having a limited of only one (or two) language(s), as it often the case given the study possibilities and choices, we can definitely expect an improvement of the interlingual communicative competence. In this way, a basic knowledge of verbal morphology in Romance languages (the same is true for the Slavic languages) would represent a solid basis for identification of transparent elements in unfamiliar languages.

#### A "POLITICALLY CORRECT" SOLUTION

Why should we speak about intercomprehension? Given the more or less positive attitudes of the political and educative actors in our societies towards the English language and given the less favourable position of the Romance, Germanic, Slavic or other languages, promotion of plurilingualism and multilingualism needs adequate tools that will prove their efficiency in motivating students to study other languages besides

English. The possibility to develop receptive skills in several languages without aiming at their perfect mastery will arise the interest in discovering languages.

Given the polarization of the declared and the real language politics in our societies, intercomprehension will certainly find its way to the European territory, where the plurilingualism of the individual, opposed to the multilingualism of the society is set as an objective. Yet, what plurilingualism do we mean? Certainly not the one that consists in putting together several „monolinguisms“. We mean the one in which one plurilingual competence associates, motivates, manages and broadens the dynamics of language resources available to the individual.

#### CONCLUSION

Intercomprehension, as a new approach to teaching and learning, based on the mobilization of language resources of the individual with the aim to develop receptive language skills is one of possible ways to strengthen plurilingualism in a direct contact of various languages. The learner stimulates his/her capacities, searching for a logic of similarities between the familiar and the unfamiliar language and improves his/her professional background and understanding in concrete situations of communication.

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