INTERCOMPREHENSION: A CONCEPT IN EVOLUTION

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ABSTRACT

The paper deals with the interdisciplinary concept of intercomprehension, becoming increasingly of use in today's linguistics, educational science and sociolinguistics. Based on the idea of searching for cues towards comprehension between languages belonging to the same language group, presenting both genetic and typological affiliations, it became a rich source of reflection and a basis for didactic applications. The aim of the paper is to see the evolution of the concept and to identify some of the basic parameters of intercomprehension-based educational practices.

Keywords: linguistics, language, language teaching, intercomprehension, transparency

INTRODUCTION

Intercomprehension (or cross-comprehension) is the capacity of the communicating subject to understand, to a certain extent, other linguistic codes than those he/she masters or those of which he/she is able to make a partial use and to find a way to communicate efficiently in situations when he/she is exposed to such codes. This interdisciplinary concept arose in the 80s of the 20th century and is situated on the intersection of theoretical and applied linguistics. In other terms, it belongs to the field of foreign language teaching applying a specific theoretical framework of contrastive linguistic, sociolinguistics and linguistic pragmatics. Once it found its place in methodology of foreign language teaching, the concept has been progressively worked and re-worked by various European and Latin-American scientists and practitioners in order to put forward its theoretical value and to propose the ways of its application in communication and in teaching practice.

The aim of this paper is to show the interdisciplinary potential of intercomprehension as a concept and to sum up some of its historical background. After presenting some aspects of its theoretical framework, the evolution of the concept will be shown through various scientific and educational initiatives that were realized during last decades, mostly in Europe and Latin America. Finally, some fundamental features of intercomprehension-based educational practices will be put forward, as they result from the actual state of research.

THEORETICAL BASES

Originally, intercomprehension emerges from contemporary Romance linguistic thinking marked by pragmatic viewpoints. In our opinion, two crucial points can be identified which form theoretical bases of the concept. These two "starting points" are related to two distinct levels of linguistic analysis.

First, there comes the structuralist and post-structuralist concept of transparency (in case of intercomprehension the focus is on transparent words, segments and/or transparent "zones") as opposed to opacity, reworked by GARS (*Groupe aixois de recherche en syntaxe*), a French research group headed by Claire Blanche-Benveniste. The main focus of Blanche-Benveniste's research is on spoken syntax, specifically on the movements on syntagmatic and pragmatic axes in order to construct the utterance. Simultaneously though, she develops an interest for multilingual comprehension, responding in part to the issues rising up in a plurilingual European society in need of communication. Reflecting the philosophical call for plurilinguism of our society which is commonly considered as an incontestable fortune but facing the practical impossibility to reach a perfect plurilinguism of individuals, its optates for passive (receptive) plurilinguism, representing a better quality of communication at a lower cost and responding better to heterogenous needs of language users in the process of language acquisition. Thus, asymetric knowledge of languages is progressively accepted and simultaneous acquisition of more languages becomes an alternative objective to those that used to be, traditionally, defined in language teaching.

Secondly, intercomprehension is inspired by the works of the Geneva linguistic school of E. Roulet. Roulet and his disciples analyzed functional relations between constitutive parts of human communication. They modelled the conversation (or, monologal and dialogal discourse in general) putting forward a hierarchic system of conversational units, with an organized theory of conversation behind it. Intercomprehension theory makes the most of Geneva school's writings when it comes to the notion of *compétence discursive* (discursive competence). Discursive competence, to be distinguished from the more traditional concept of communicative competence, the sense of which has been progressively narrowed in language teaching, is – to put it simply – the ability of the language user to comprehend and to construct discourse. In the Geneva school's perspective, adopted more recently by some theoricians of intercomprehension, discursive competence is dynamic, auto-regulative and pluridimensional, having a strategic, affective and cognitive component. Some of the intrinsic components of the discursive competence enable the communicating subject to make a transfer of comprehensive and productive strategies and to obtain a synergy when building up knowledge and skills in new, unfamiliar languages. Thus, intercomprehension is seen as a "capacité à co-construire du sens, dans le contexte de la rencontre entre des langues différentes, et d'en faire un usage pragmatique dans une situation communicative concrète" [1]. In other words, it is a capacity to understand an unfamiliar language using the previously built discursive competence of the language user.

While the concept of transparent zones, which „peuvent être jugées lisibles par un lecteur débutant dans une langue étrangère à partir des seules connaissances extraites dans sa langue maternelle" [2], appears already at a very early stage of thinking about intercomprehension and persists until today as one of the core concepts, the importance of discursive competence is stressed in the more recent works on intercomprehension. This conceptual evolution, passing from the syntactic level to the level of discourse, reflects developments in thinking upon language in theory and in teaching methodology applications.

CONCEPTUAL WORK

When it comes to research on intercomprehension, it is not our point to describe thoroughly the state of the matter, as it was presented elsewhere and more than once. We would rather show the progressive development of the concept at various stages through the evolution of different methodological parameters.

The concept of intercomprehension was developed by large international teams through research tasks defined on European level. Starting points and main directions were outlined in pioneering research tasks: a series of "Gala-"projects, then EuRom4/EuRom5 and the EuroCom series.

The series of "Gala-"projects (i.e. Galatea, Galanet and Galapro) led by the Grenoble University in the 90s of the 20th century and later on, in collaboration with – among others – Lyon, Madrid, Aveiro and Barcelona, focus on introduction of intercomprehension to university public (students, teachers, teacher trainers and university policy makers) and bring along an important amount of underlying conceptual work. Among highly valuable aspects of these series is the choice of action-oriented approach to language teaching and learning, embodied in the chatroom-style interaction (synchronous or asynchronous, both written and oral) within and among target groups, offering open tasks and aiming at a simulation of complex situational contexts.

The EuroCom team was founded in 1998 in Hagen and supported by Hessen Media and European Commission. It has four main axes. Three of them are concerned with language groups: Romance languages (EuroComRom) [3], Slavic languages (EuroComSlav) and Germanic languages (EuroComGerm). The fourth axis, EuroComDidact, has set as objective to do empirical research on languages acquisition and language teaching based on intercomprehension in various contexts.

The research entitled EuRom4, realized under Lingua 1 scheme in 1991 – 1994 (then extended in 1995 – 1997) and directed by C. Blanche-Benveniste, representing INALF (Institut national de la langue française – National Institute for French Language), involving universities of Rome, Salamanca and Lisbon, was defined as an exercise of multilingual comprehension and focused on the simultaneous acquisition of three genetically related (Romance) languages at a time. It marks the early stage of the evolution of the concept of intercomprehension as it limits its application field on related languages belonging to the same language branch, on written comprehension oriented towards journalistic texts.

Apart from these three large research enterprises which we consider of crucial importance for defining intercomprehension as a theoretical concept and a method of language teaching, a long list of research projects and grants realized in the field of intercomprehension in the past two decades can be established. Most of them succeeded the pioneers and further developed initially formulated theses enlarging original visions and opening towards new methodologies and applications in more or less innovative ways. For instance, the ICE research (the abbreviation stands for *Intercompéhension européenne* – European Intercomprehension), launched in 1994, was directly inspired by EuRom4 and continued in the same direction. Its value consists in applying the concept on the neighboring languages, not only on the related ones. Main objectives are based on those of EuRom4: enable language users to read texts of written press and to take part in discussions in one's specific work domain. Empirical testing of lessons

aiming at simultaneous acquisition of Germanic languages and development of methods applicable on all European languages represent an added value.

An overview of the vast research territory which opens with intercomprehension lets appear several indicators of a progressive evolution of the subject matter in time: a) target group (considered in terms of age, education and profession), b) channel/support (written, oral, audiovisual, electronic/interactive), c) skill(s) to build up (receptive and/or productive), d) language(s) involved as "source" language(s), e) language(s) involved as "target" language(s) – their number and identity (in terms of genetic and/or typological classification) and f) relation between "source" and "target" language(s) (related, neighbor or distant languages).

All of these aspects help determine the nature of the research on intercomprehension and let us perceive its evolution. As far as the target group is concerned, we observe two major tendencies. First of all, intercomprehension-based teaching aims, so far, either at children of primary schools or at university public, less focus being given to the secondary school students. This is, to us, a remarkable observation. Teachers and teacher trainers are not neglected, on the contrary, they represent a direct and sometimes unique focus group of some of existing research (it is the case, among others, of Galapro). Another tendency is to focus on target groups defined by their profession, the actual trend giving priority to research on intercomprehension in mixed workgroups.

The question of preferred channel (support), as well as the question of language skill(s) to be worked and improved in intercomprehension-based language education, are more complex ones. Clearly, the evolution of choices that concern these parameters goes hand in hand with the evolution of information and communication technologies and the evolution of methodology approaches to foreign language teaching. Thus, if EuRom4 was based on reading texts of written press, Miriadi, Lingalog, Limbo and others give space to interaction, scenarios, role plays, simulations and other newer methodological tools. Still, traditional reading comprehension is not abandoned and it continuously reappears. When it comes to skills, comprehension as a receptive skill is a dominant one, being associated to the use of written as well as spoken supports. It is the enlargement of written comprehension to the comprehension in general which represents, in this sense, the major step in the evolution of the thinking on intercomprehension.

Finally, there comes the question of source and target code(s). In this case, it must be said that source code(s) are not necessarily mother tongues of learners. We rather associate them with familiar languages. The target languages are the unfamiliar ones, which are supposed to become less illegible to the native speaker in the process of intercomprehension-based educative practice. Some researchers, among them some of the pioneers, go for simultaneous acquisition of several languages, others stick to one-to-one approach, i.e. choice of one source language and one target language. To our day, no survey is available about the advantages and disadvantages of simultaneous and non-simultaneous language acquisition, neither there is a strict preference of the two in the intercomprehension research and applications. Still, an evolution can be seen in the relation of the source and target language which is admitted for building up intercomprehension skills. Originally, intercomprehension work was done on genetically and structurally related languages (the learning process stayed within the frontiers of a language group, most often it focused on selected Romance languages,

less often Germanic languages, very rarely Slavic languages). Later, however, the field of application enlarged to include neighboring languages and even distant (non-related) ones, supposing that what counts most is the capacity of transfer of language knowledge even between language codes that do not show structural or genetic affiliations.

As we can see, while mapping intercomprehension research space, we come across constitutive oppositions that pre-determine fundamental and inevitable choices to be made when designing language teaching projects. A more consequent analysis of these markers imposes itself, though, in order to identify main tendencies in the orientations of the intercomprehension-based theories and practices.

INTERDISCIPLINARY NATURE OF INTERCOMPREHENSION

Intercomprehension can be apprehended as a practice, a capacity and a strategy. It is a practice of communicating (regardless of the channel) in one's (mother or familiar) tongue with an exolingual language user. It is a capacity to familiarize with unknown codes through transparencies and transfers. It is a strategy of streghtening discourse competence.

All of the above mentioned shows a strong interdisciplinary character of intercomprehension. Apart from the already presented linguistic theories that underly the concept, we must point at its sociolinguistic aspects, as intercomprehension is valuable when it comes to phenomena arising from the contact of languages. In this sense, its connections to code switching, code mixing and transfer phenomena must be examined. Moreover, intercomprehension can be apprehended as a tool of language politics. According to Doyé: „Les réponses politiques à la question du multilinguisme se situent entre les deux extrémités d'une suite continue de positions et d'orientations : d'un côté, les politiques de réduction de la diversité et, de l'autre, le maintien et le développement de la diversité" [3]. Intercomprehension is a contribution to the preservation of the linguistic diversity and, as such, it responds to the needs of a pluricultural and plurilingual society.

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