READING INTERCOMPREHENSION – A CASE STUDY

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Abstract: The present paper is part of an extended research on Intercomprehension. It is based on a case study developed on a group of eighty nine subjects who were asked to read two questions in an unknown language for them (Romanian). This case 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 translation and/or the answer could be given in English, French, Dutch, Italian, Spanish or German. Their answers should demonstrate that reading comprehension of a language people have never studied or heard of before, is possible.

Keywords: reading, questions, message, intercomprehension, Romanian

1. Introduction

A definition of inter-comprehension is necessary in order to understand the main concept of the study. Inter-comprehension is "the development of the capacity to co-build a meaning when different languages get in contact and pragmatically use it in a specific communicative situation. In other words, inter-comprehension is also the capacity to understand a language (without necessarily having studied it before) in a given context by using the developed discursive competence." (Capucho, F. 2004) The present paper analyses the answers and draws conclusions based on a survey that had as starting point these two definitions of inter-comprehension "understanding between individuals, who may not use, in a given situation, the same language or languages, but who will still strive to communicate with each other, interact, orally or in writing, face to face or at distance, co-constructing meanings" (Santos 2010). The case study 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 written text is a type of communication whose creators are not present

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and which is called in the analysis to our survey Reading Intercomprehension. The target language chosen for this study is Romanian. Two questions were given to 88 speakers of different languages. The answers to these questions have been analyzed according to different criteria: semantic, phonetic, lexical and structural.

2. Method of research

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 for the questionnaire 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 into 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'. 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 each question without being given the possibility to listen to it being pronounced aloud. 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.

The first question is a general interrogative sentence about the person's routine containing two verbs at the present: "Do you stay in or go for a walk on Sundays?" which in Romanian has a different structure because of the absence of the auxiliary verb "*Duminica stai acasă sau mergi la plimbare*?" The word order in Romanian is not fixed as it is in English but, on the other hand it is similar to other Latin languages. The second question is "Where do the Winter Olympic Games take place this year?", a 'Wh-question' with one verb at the present and the Romanian form: "*Unde se desfăşoară Jocurile Olimpice de iarnă din anul acesta*?"

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A certain structure in analysing and comparing the two sets of answers was necessary so that the answers to the questions were divided into several categories (although other categories are possible):

- **no answer** – meaning that therespondent has no clue about the meaning of the question, either because the sentence is too long or too different from his native language or the languages he/she knows (up to a certain extent);
- **inadequate answer** – meaning that the respondent thinks that he/she knows one or some words that are somehow similar to his/her language, but these very words are 'false friends' misleading the person to a wrong path;
- **translation of some words** – situation in whichthe person recognizes only some words that sound familiar (they can just underline the words), but he/she does not want to take the risk of giving an answer because he/she does not understand the whole meaning, or the sentence is too difficult to be understood;
- **translation of the whole question** – as mentioned in the instructions, the respondent may choose to translate the sentence if they can understand it. Although it might not be considered intercomprehension, as long as it does not involve an answer, at least the action of translating can be considered as reading comprehension, however, when we learn a second language we first translate the questions and the answers into and from the mother tongue;
- **adequate answer** – meaning intercomprehension at the reading level. It may be used for sending messages on internet being a real form of communication.

Each category will be analysed separately in order to establish connections between Romanian and the languages they answered in (or the native languages that influences their answers). In the end, conclusions will be drawn with regard to their being favourable or not to intercomprehension according to the higher or lower percentage of adequate answers or correct translations. The statistics for each question and for each category can prove the initial presumptions true or false.

3. The analysis of the answers for the first sentence

"*Duminica stai acasă sau mergi la plimbare*?" which has the English equivalent: "Do you stay in or go for a walk on Sundays?"

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No answer was given by 39 respondents who obviously could not understand the question. They did not underline or translate any Romanian word.

Inadequate answers were given by 2 people: one from Netherlands answered 'yes' and another one from Brazil gave the answer 'nao' meaning 'no'. We cannot draw a conclusion out of these answers so we consider them as being wrong.

Some words were underlined or translated by 18 people. Most of them (14) underlined or translated the first word "*duminica*", but only 6 respondents got the right meaning, the others translated the word as: 'dominion' (Kenya), 'cofe' (Ghana), 'Dominique' (Rwanda, Central African Republic), 'Dominican' (Cameroon), 'demain' (Mozambique), 'verminderen' one of the meanings in English is 'diminish' (Belgium). As it can be seen the translations were contaminated by different French words either proper or common nouns, except the Belgian who was influenced, perhaps, by English. Unexpectedly, two people underlined and translated correctly the verb '*mergi*' with 'to go'; they were from India and Ukraine. One respondent from Tunis underlined 2 words as follows: one '*duminica*' and '*acasă*' with 'dimanche' and 'maison' and another one from Albania underlined and translated 3 words: 'Sunday', 'home' and 'go'. Other 2 respondents recognized the Romanian conjunction '*sau*' meaning 'or' and translated it accordingly.

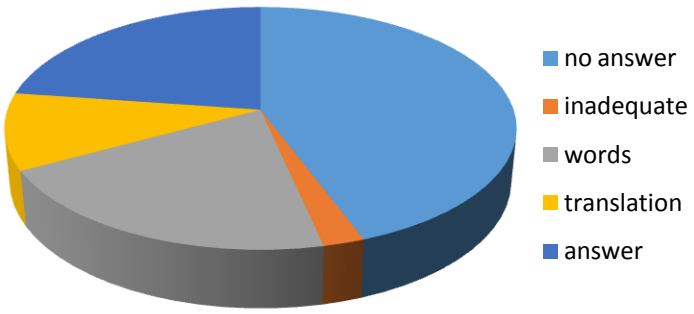
Translation of the whole question was performed by few people, but many translated the first clause, the one that was the most important for the meaning of the sentence. A total of 9 people translated either the sentence or the first clause. Out of them 6 people from Poland, Bulgaria, France, Belgium and Tunisia translated the first clause correctly. Perhaps that was due to the similarities of French and Romanian as Latin languages, showing that the intercomprehension functions very well between languages from the same family. The Polish and Bulgarian persons might have understood the verb and the adverb 'at home' in Romanian 'acasă'. The other 3 people translated the whole sentence as follows: the person from Greece translated correctly "On Sunday do you go out or stay at home?" perhaps because he had knowledge of English, French and Italian; the one from Belgium translated "Will you be home on Sunday or go to swim?" which is not far from the main meaning except from the verb 'swim'. The Belgian knows Dutch, English, French, Italian, Russian and Chinese, so in our opinion the Latin languages, especially Italian helped a lot. The last translation might also be considered inadequate: "Sunday is a day of work for plumbers?" it was done by a person from United Kingdom

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who recognized the words 'Sunday' and the misleading '*plimbare*' (walk) associated with 'plumbers'.

Adequate answers were given by 20 people who just answered or also translated the sentence mentioning the place they go on Sundays or the fact that they stay indoors.



From the chart above we can see that 44.32% of the respondents did not answer, perhaps because they could not see any resemblance between Romanian and their native languages or the languages they know. On the other hand more than 55% of the people, regardless their mother tongue or the other languages they could speak understood at least one word or were able to give adequate answers to the first question.

4. The analysis of the answers for the second sentence

The second question is "Where do the Winter Olympic Games take place this year?", a 'Wh-question' with the Romanian form: "*Unde se desfăşoară Jocurile Olimpice de iarnă din anul acesta*?"

No answer was given by 32 respondents who did not receive any stimulus connected to the sentence.

Inadequate answers were given by 2 people both from Armenia who answered 'ja'. We should mention here that they did not write anything at foreign languages they knew. Perhaps they just could not understand any of the words.

Some words were underlined or translated by 40respondents. Out of the total number 9 people just underlined one or more words as being familiar to: '*Jocurile Olimpice*' (6 respondents), '*anul*' (1 respondent), '*acesta*' (1 respondent) and '*anul acesta*' (1 respondent). Other 9 people underlined and translated the word '*Olimpice*' by 'olimpique', 'Olympic' and 'olimpico' while other 3 underlined and translated the words

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'*unde*' (where) by the word 'and' (Kenya), '*anul*' with the right word 'year' (Cameroon) and '*acesta*' with the Dutch word 'vooronde' that does not have the same meaning. A number of 16 respondents underlined and translated two words, mainly '*Jocurile Olimpice*' that were recognized and translated into French 'Jeux Olimpiques', into Spanish 'Juegos Olimpicos', into English 'Olympic Games' and into Dutch 'Olimpische Spelen'. A respondentfrom India translated into English the words 'Olympics' and 'annually' for 'anul'. The second translation is not the correct one because the the right word in English is 'year'. And finally, a person translated the word '*olimpice*' and '*anul*', the first one was translated correctly but the second one was misunderstood and translated as 'anuler' or 'cancel' because the Romanian word has about the same form as the French 'anuler'. This is also the reason why many of the answers and translations talked about the Olympic Games being cancelled. Three people underlined and translated three Romanian words: '*jocuri olimpice*' and '*anul*' into Dutch 'Olimpische Spelen' and 'jaar', into Spanish 'Juegos Olimpicos' and 'año', and into French ' Jeux Olimpique' and 'ancestral', the last Word is obviously incorrect.

Translation of the whole question or at least the part of the question that gives the holistic meaning was performed by 7 people as follows:

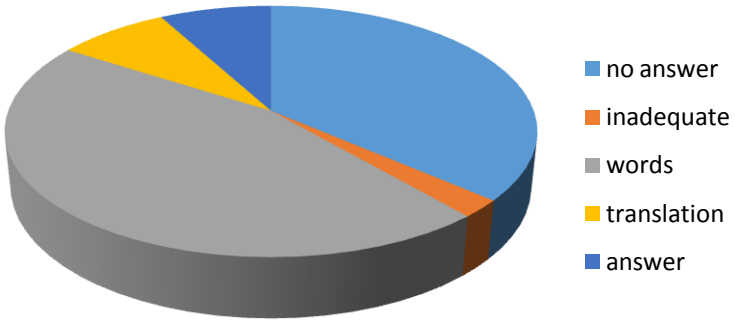
- A person from Belgium translated correctly the sentence in Dutch "Wanner virden de Olimpische Spelen dit jaar plats?" the only word omitted was 'winter'.
- A person from UK translated: "The Olympic Games of this year will be cancelled" perhaps due to the Romanian word resembling with 'annul'.
- Another person from Belgium translated: "When will the winter Olympic Games of next year be organized?" which is very close to the meaning, the only difference being the use of future instead of present. And the same translation was given by a Greek person, again not sure about the action taking place in the past or the future.
- Three French respondents translated: "Jeux Olympiques d'hiver cette année" that means the first part of the sentence was not understood but the meaning was; "Ou …Jeux Olympique…hiver… année" which proves that the meaning was caught; "Pour quelle raison Jeux Olympique qui ont etê annulés?" proving that part of the meaning was understood.

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Adequate answers were given by 7 people who just answered or also translated the sentence also making comments about the winter Olympic Games.

If we convert the answers into a pie chart, the result will be different from the chart made for the first set of answers.



The biggest part of the chart is represented by words translation 45.45%, the chunk of no answers is 36% of the total numbers of answers, the inadequate answers count as 2.27% while the translations of the sentence and the adequate answers have an equal percentage of about 8%. The percentage of people who understood part of the sentence is about 64% in comparison to only 36% of people who could no figure out what the question was about.

5. Conclusions

The general conclusion is that the presumption we started from proved to be real, at least concerning the two sentences taken into discussion. People from different countries talking, or having knowledge of another language can understand a text in a totally unknown language such as Romanian. In our opinion reading comprehension or intercomprehension is more difficult than oral intercomprehension because people are not helped by the gestures, mimic, voice intonation, on the contrary, sometimes the diacritics used in some languages may impede the understanding. The two sentences are of a medium difficulty because they do not contain many words (the first sentence has 7 words and the second sentence has 10 words), the grammar structure is quite simple with the verbs in the present, and from the lexical point of view the second sentence is in advantage having the international word '*Olimpice*' and '*Jocuri*' that can be guessed as being games as part of a well-known phrase. The first sentence on the other hand could have been better understood by people speaking Latin languages. If we take into consideration the word

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'annul' meaning cancelled, we can understand that from the semantic point of view the meaning could be very easily altered by so called "false friends", words that have the same form as a word from a language we know, but not the same meaning.

Making a comparison between the answers rendered that appear in the pie charts we can see that for the first sentence the percentage of people who did not answer is greater than the percentage of persons who did not answer from the second sentence. The reason is the international word used in the second sentence. There were only few people who gave inadequate answers both for the first and the second sentence. For the first sentence, although we have stated that it is more difficult than the first, the number of people who rendered adequate answers is considerably higher.

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