CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERCOMPREHENSION BETWEEN ROMANCE LANGUAGES

ROMANIAN AND FRENCH (CASE STUDY)

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Abstract: This Case Study aims to depict some traits of intercomprehension between two Romance languages– Romanian and French – as they result from answers on a written questionnaire rendered to 39 people, whose first or second language is French. The participants had to ascertain their competence in reading comprehension either by answering 10 questions in Romanian,or by translating into French the words they could understand. After separate analysis of the set of answers for each question, a comparison of all the answers and the degree of overall understanding is accomplished. The characteristics of comprehending (or not) words and groups of words are accountedin order to discover specific traits of intercomprehension between Romanian and French. We started from the supposition that the origin of words plays an important part in understanding among people speaking Romance languages, and also that the length of the sentences might affect in a negative way the cognizance of the respondents.

Keywords: Intercomprehension, reading comprehension, Romanian, Romance languages, second language.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is part of an extensive Case Study having as central point the concept of intercomprehension. The aim of the paper is to find out if people who speak French as their second language or those who have minimal knowledge of French language can comprehend questions in Romanian, which is also a Latin language. Intercomprehension is a fairly new domain of study in linguistics within the European Union. The multilingualism of Europe at cultural level needs to be maintained, but at the same time people traveling from one country to another for different purposes in an open, unrestricted space need to communicate, preferably in their native languages, to be understood and given an answer. This process can take place either by using a lingua franca, or by intercomprehension. Filomena Capucho provides a widely accepted definition of this type of communication:

> "the capacity to understand and to be understood in an unknown language by means of different communicative modes or strategies" (Capucho, p. 17).

The fact that this paper is based on intercomprehension between people speaking languages that are part of the same family, Romance languages, makes us understand that **intercomprehension** between related languages like Romanian and French, is the speakers' capacity to understand people who speak or write in the other language by referring to the similarities between their mother tongue and that particular language."

Starting from the previous definition that implies reading in the process of understanding, we based our study on reading comprehension. However, the case study is part of a research in the field of Applied Intercomprehension (Todor Shopov, 2003) like most of the projects developed in time upon this concept like Intercom, Redinter, Intermar etc. Shopov was the one that made the dichotomy

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between the *Applied Intercomprehension* and the *Intercomprehension Analysis:* "I shall consider aspects of intercultural communication by means of Intercomprehension as types of applied research."

Intercomprehension can be used in informal situations mainly in spoken form (van Klaveren, de Vries, ten Thije, 2013) and, according to the studies we have conducted concerning engineering terminology in technical and scientific texts (Balagiu, Zechia, 2016), especially in written form involving reading comprehension of the texts. The Dutch authors mentioned above also make the dichotomy between *intercomprehension* that implies understanding of a language of the same family and *lingua receptive:*

> "A form of multilingual communication, in which people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds both speak their own language but still understand each other, without the help of an additional language".(p. 22)

Although the present paper analyzes the characteristics of intercomprehension because we take into consideration Romance languages, at least part of it may be attributed to lingua receptive, as it is defined above, if we take into consideration the fact that part of the respondents mentioned French as the second language.

2. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the paper is to find out the characteristics of reading comprehension within Romance languages, mainly between two languages of Latin origin: Romanian and French. We decided for French because there were 39 respondents involved in the case study who considered French as their second language, although, as it can be seen in the following subchapter, some of them have knowledge in several languages. The questionnaire used allowed us to gather information regarding the country of origin and the languages spoken by each participant. Their main task was to read 10 sentences in Romanian and give answers according to what they had understood. If their comprehension was reduced to part of the sentence or several words or even one word, they had to underline the words and/or translate them. Some of the participants both translated the questions and answered them. The interrogative sentences are very different in terms of length, complexity and vocabulary, although all of them are informal questions about daily routine, preferences, opinions and status.

Respondent profile

The part of the case study comprising people who speak French as a second or first language involved 39 subjects from different countries, with various education levels from secondary school to Master degrees, from unemployed to managers and teachers. The respondents had ages ranging from 18 to 60, and were involved in many types of activities. As common trait they all mentioned French as second or first language, although some of the respondents could manage perhaps a basic conversation in several other languages that are not necessarily part of the Romanic family of languages. However, 12 people from Belgium and France probably speak French as mother tongue even though only 3 of them reported it as the only language they spoke, the rest might be citizens of the two countries mentioned before but speaking a different first language. For a better understanding of the linguistic profile of the participants we provide some details below about the place of origin and languages known. The languages are given in the same order they were mentioned by the respondents in the questionnaires.

There are 13 respondents from the following countries in Europe:

- one from Check Republic speaking Check, French, English, Spanish, Slovak, Polish;
- five from Belgium out of which:
  - 2 speak only French; 2 speak French and English; 1 speaks French, Arab and Dutch.
- seven from France out of which:

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- 1 speaks French; 2 speak French, English and Spanish; 1 speaks French, English and German; 3 speak French, English, German and Dutch;

There are 24 respondents from the following countries in Africa:
- fifteen from Morocco out of which:
- 2 speak Arab and French; 1 speaks Arab, French and English; 1 speaks Arab, French and Spanish; 3 speak Arab, French and Berber (a branch of the Afro-Asiatic language family); 2 speak Arab, French and Dutch; 1 speaks Arab, French, English and Spanish; 1 speaks Arab, French, English and Dutch; 1 speaks Arab, French, German and Dutch; 1 speaks Arab, French, English, Italian and Dutch; 1 speaks Arab, French, English, Berber and Spanish; 1 speaks Arab, French, English, German, Spanish and Dutch;
- one from Nigeria who speaks Yoruba, Hansa, French, English and Dutch;
- one from Central African Republic who speaks Sango, French, English and Dutch;
- four from Rwanda out of which: 1 speaks French; 1 speaks French and English; 1 speaks Kinyarwanda, French and English; 1 speaks Swahili, French, English and Dutch;
- one from Somalia who speaks Somali, French and English;
- two from Tunisia who speak Arab, French, English and Dutch.

There are also 2 people who did not mention either their country of origin or the languages they speak or know.

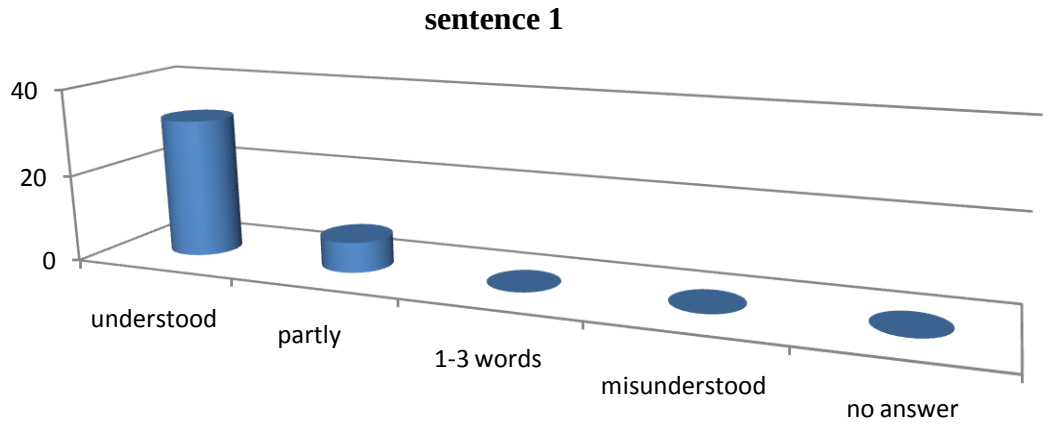
3. ANALYSIS OF ANSWERS

Sentence 1

The first question, "Cu ce mijloc de transport vii la școală?" (What means of transport do you use to come to school?), was understood by the great majority of those who participated in our study. 31 respondents understood the question very well and gave either correct answers or accurate translations. The other 8 partly understood the sentence, mainly due to the word "transport". The word "transport" was clearly understood by all the respondents, who underlined and translated it correctly. The 6 responds who did not underline or translate the word "transport", gave, however correct answers to the question, thus proving complete understanding of the term. Moreover, 9 people understood the collocation "mijloc de transport" (*means of transport*) and gave its French equivalent "moyen de transport". The word "școală" was translated correctly by 26 respondents, 9 could imply what the word meant, and only 4 respondents had no clue about the meaning of the word.

If we were to make a chart containing the degree of understanding for the first question this would show that 82% of the respondents understood the main idea, either by translating the question or by answering it, and 18% understood the sentence in part.

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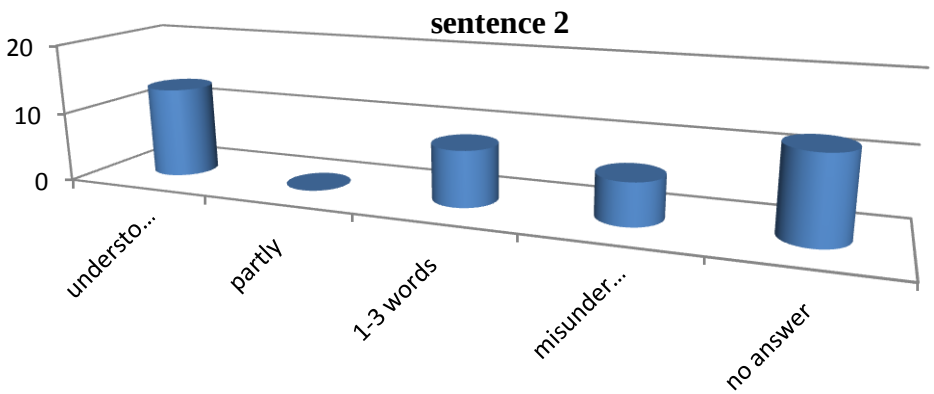


Sentence 2

The second question, "Eşti căsătorit(ă), necăsătorit(ă) sau divorţat(ă)?" (Are you married, single or divorced?), was understood by 13 people, of which 6 gave the appropriate translation, and 7 answered the question relevantly. 8 people only gave equivalents to some of the words. The most familiar word was "divorţat(ă)", which was recognized by 22 of those questioned. The term "căsătorit(ă)" was underlined and translated by 10 people, while "necăsătorit(ă)" was underlined and translated by 8 people. We may well say that the understanding of this question is based on the identification of one key-word, which is in this case the word "divorţat(ă)".

However, the degree of understanding diminished when compared to the first question as 12 of our respondents neither gave any answer to the question, nor managed to translate any words. One respondent misunderstood the question, while other 6 attempted to translate some of the words but gave incorrect equivalents. For instance, 5 people underlined the word "necăsătorit(ă)" (single), but translated it as "necessity". One person tied the word "căsătorit(ă) (married) to the concept of "casă" (home), which situates the sentence in the desired semantic area, although the whole meaning of the sentence could not be understood.

The chart below shows that 33% of the participants got the meaning of the sentence, 21% understood at least one clue word, 15% misunderstood the meaning, and as 31% were not able to answer anything at all.

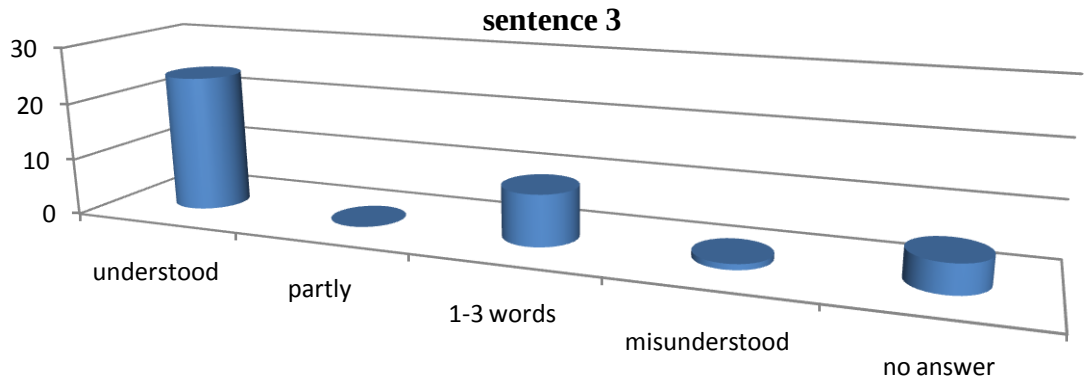


Sentence 3

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The third question is "Care este culoarea ta preferată?" (What is your favourite colour?). When answering this question, 24 people demonstrated good understanding of the question: 11 translated the whole sentence, 8 translated key-words and proved their comprehension by giving correct answers to the question, and 5 simply answered the question. 9 people partially understood the sentence, and could only grasp the meaning of the term "preferată" (preferred). The key-word "culoarea" (coulour) was highlighted by 27 respondents, while the term "preferată" (preferred) was familiar to 34 who translated it with the infinitive form of the verb "préférer" (prefer), the past participle "préféré(e)" (prefered) or the noun form "préférence" (preference). Only 5 people did not understand anything, and one person misunderstood the meaning.

The corresponding chart shows that 61% of the respondents comprehended the meaning of the question, 23% understood only one word ("preferată"), while one misunderstood the meaning, and 13% gave no answer.

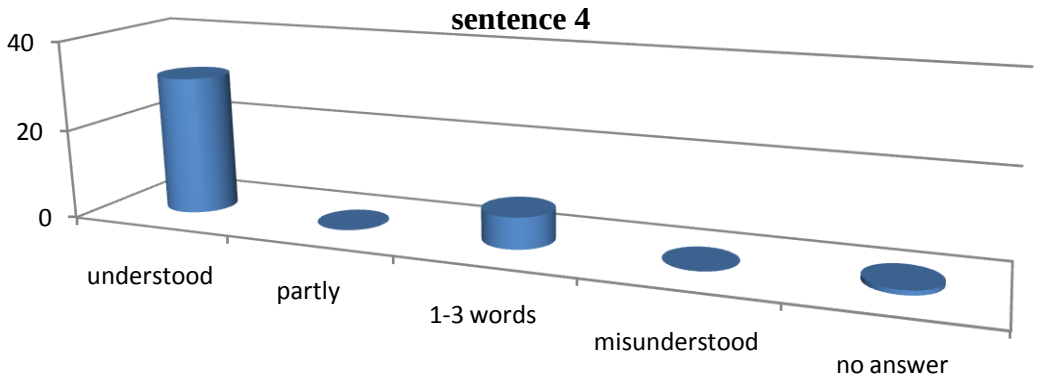


Sentence 4

The fourth question, "Preferi să mergi la teatru, la operă, la balet sau la cinematograf?" (Do you prefer going to the theatre, opera, ballet or cinema?), was translated by 10 respondents; 9 people offered correct answers to it, while 12 identified five words, which ultimately convey the whole meaning of the question: "mergi" (go), "teatru" (theatre), "operă" (opera), "balet" (ballet) "cinematograf" (cinema). Although slight changes in the form of some words were present, such as using the infinitive instead of the interrogative form of the verb, the overall meaning was not affected. On the contrary, 7 participants understood only two or three words and only one person did not write anything.

All in all, the degree of comprehension for this question is 80 %, with only 18 % of the participants understanding only two or three words, but not the whole meaning of the sentence. What is rather atypical of our study is the fact that only 2% of the respondents gave no answer to an otherwise very long sentence.

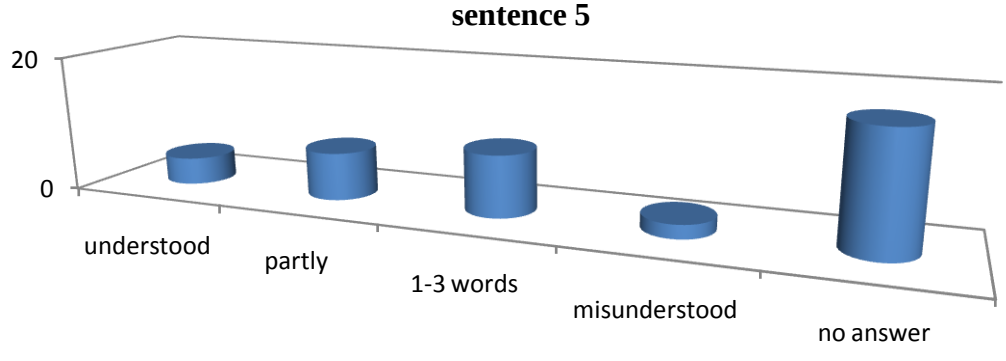
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Sentence 5

The fifth question is "Duminica stai acasă sau mergi la plimbare?" (Do you stay at home or go for a walk on Sunday?). In this case, most of the respondents got stuck at the second half of the sentence, as 7 respondents could only translate the first part: "Duminica stai acasă" (Sunday you stay at home), and other 9 people understood the words "duminica" and "acasă". The word "duminica" was correctly translated by 12 of those questioned, while two people thought it made reference to the word "demain" or the proper noun "Dominique". "Acasă" (home) was identified by 16 respondents, 10 of which could even identify the phrase "stai acasă" (stay home). This question seems to have been understood solely by 4 people, who answered it appropriately, whereas 17 participants gave no answer, and 2 misunderstood the words they indicated.

The percentages show that 10% understood the essence of the question by answering it accordingly, 18% could only grasp the significance of the first half of the sentence, 23% understood the words "duminica" and "acasă, while 44% gave no answer, and 5% misunderstood the sentence.



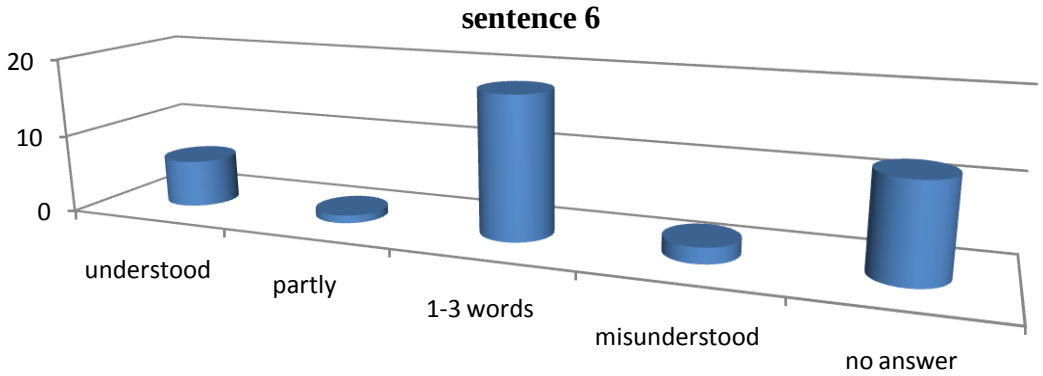
Sentence 6

The sixth question is "Bei ceai, cafea sau lapte dimineata?" (Do you drink tea, coffee or milk in the morning?). The respondents had difficulties in understanding the overall significance of this question. Only 6 of them could answer appropriately. They found it more challenging than before to give translations to the sentence, although the sentence contained the key-word "cafea" (coffee) which was identified by 25 participants. The words "ceai" (tea) and "lapte" (milk) were only recognized by 3 and 4 people respectively. The words "dimineața" (in the morning) and "bei" (drink) were not identified by any of respondents. However, two of those interviewed thought "dimineața" was related to "diminution" (reduction) or "diminuer" (to reduce), while "bei" was translated as "veux", or "bierre". There were two attempts at translating the sentence: "Pour la santé, je dois diminuer le café" and "Veux-tu cafe avec ou sans lait?", which demonstrate exactly how important the key-word

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"coffee" was for the respondents, who conveyed a whole different meaning having this word as reference point. Additionally, 12 participants gave no answer to the question.

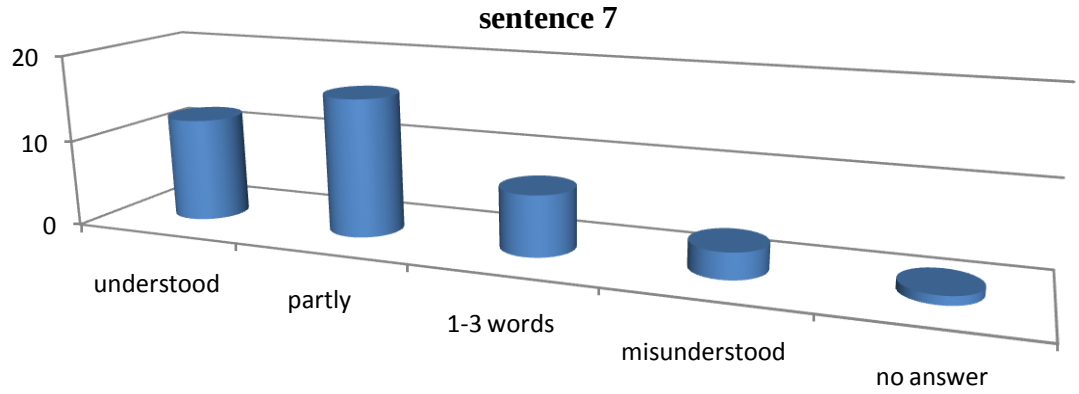
The chart corresponding to this question shows that 15% understood the sentence, 3% partly understood the message, 46% of those who tackled it could only understand some key words, mainly the word "coffee", while 5% misunderstood the meaning, and 31% could not understand a word.



Sentence 7

In the case of the seventh question: "Te uiţi la reclame la televizor?" (Do you watch advertisements on TV?), there were 5 reasonably correct translations and 7 appropriate answers containing all or some of the key-words ("reclame", "televizor", "te uiţi"). Apart from this, there were 34 participants who identified the word "televizor" (television"), 26 who recognized the word "reclame" (commercials), and 8 who could decipher the verb "a se uita" (watch). 15 of those who participated in our study managed to underline both key-words "reclame" and "televizor" as being familiar, although they could not grasp the gist of the sentence. With this sentence there were only two failed attempts at translating it, and only one lack of response.

Altogether, 31% of the respondents understood the meaning of the question by either translating or answering it satisfactorily, 41% vaguely understood that it made reference to TV commercials, 17% recognized the meaning of one word, either "televizor" or "reclame", 8% misunderstood the question, and 3% did not answer anything.



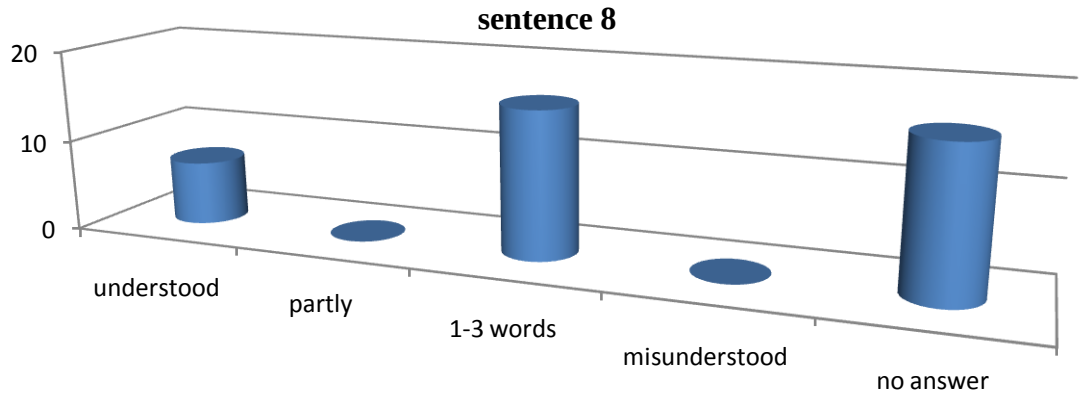
Sentence 8

For the eighth question, "Unde mergi în concediu, la munte sau la mare?" (Where do you go on holiday in the mountains or at the seaside?), eight people identified both nouns "munte" (mountain) and "mare" (sea). Nonetheless, 18 people recognized the word "mare", of which 8 were also able to recognize the word "munte", which leads to the conclusion that the key-word in this sentence was "mare", which generated the comprehension of the second key-word "munte". 16 people gave no feedback to the question, and there were no complete translations with this sentence. However, we

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recorded 7 appropriate answers which confirmed the participants' comprehension of the written sentence.

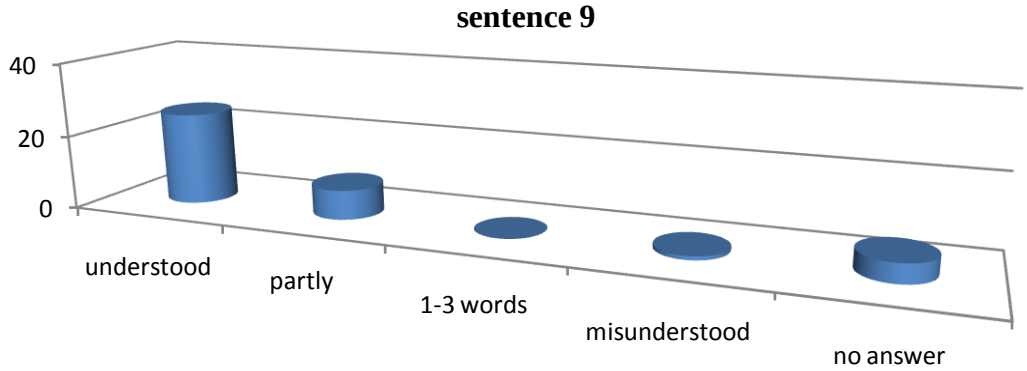
The chart for this sentence shows that 18% people proved fairly good understanding, 41% recognized and translated 1-3 key-words and 41% did not get the meaning of the written question.



Sentence 9

The ninth question, "Care este hobby-ul tău?" (What is your hobby?), received 13 translations and 12 appropriate answers. The key-word for this sentence is "hobby", which was identified by 32 respondents, who gave different French equivalents, such as "hobby", "loisir", "passe-temps", and "passion". Thus, we may well conclude that this word led to the understanding of the sentence, and of words which otherwise would have been quite difficult to understand, such as the relative pronoun "care" (which). Five people ignored the question and one misinterpreted it as "Quelle est sa profession?" (What is your occupation?)

The chart corresponding to this question shows that 64% of the participants understood the meaning very well, 21% partly understood the message, and 12% gave no answer, 3% misunderstood.

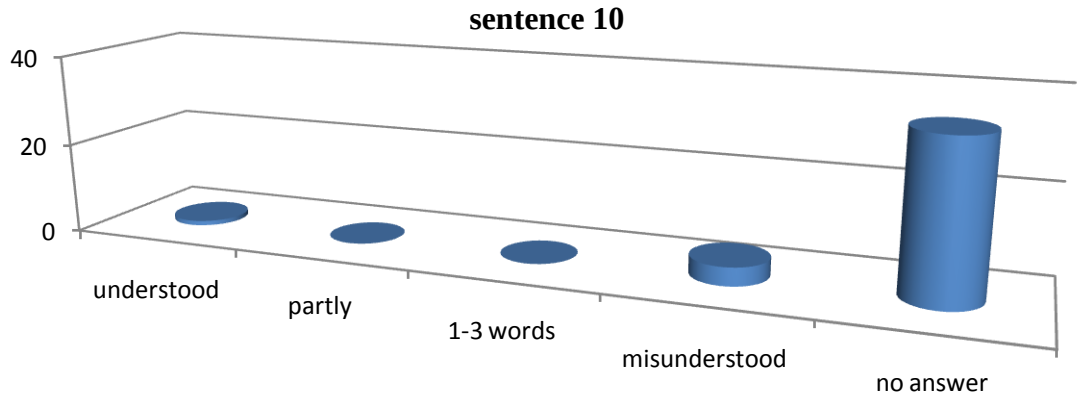


Sentence 10

With the tenth sentence, "Ce crezi că e mai uşor să înveţi într-o limbă străină, să scrii sau să vorbeşti?" (What do you think is easier to do in a foreign language, to write or to speak?), our respondents encountered great difficulties as only one person answered it, and no less than 34 people did not answer in any way. Of the four people who made an attempt at translating some of the words, one person was able to guess the meaning of the verb "scrii" (write), the rest misunderstood "mai" (more) for May, the calendar month; "limbă străină" (language) was translated "membres abimés" (injured limbs); "vorbeşti" (speak) was translated by "interdit" (forbidden).

The chart below illustrates that 87% of the respondents had no clue about the meaning of the sentence, 10% misinterpreted it, and only 3% answered it.

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4. DISCUSSION

If we were to compare the results obtained after the analysis of the questionnaires, we can notice the importance of key-words for the comprehension of the global meaning of a sentence.

The first sentence is also the one with the greatest comprehension level (82%). We believe that this is the case mainly due to the word "transport", which is an international word, well understood by all the respondents, and besides, the Romanian word has French origin. The other key-word, "şcoală", although slightly different in form from the French correspondent "école" was also indicated as being familiar by 34 people. The Romanian word comes from bg., sb., rus. škola, pol. skola, while the French word has Latin etymology (schola), both forms quite similar and easily recognizable.

The second question based its meaning on the three key-words "căsătorit(ă)", "necăsătorit(ă)", divorţat(ă). "Divorţat(ă)" functions here as a clue-word, being easily recognizable when compared to the French "divorcé(e)", mainly because of its French origin in Romanian and the form similarity if we do not take into consideration the specific diacritics. Therefore, we may very well conclude that the understanding of the words that followed was based on this particular word.

The third question contains the noun "culoare"from the lat. color, -oris, fr. couleur, recognized by 69% people, and the adjective "preferată" formed according to the French préféré, recognized by 87%. In this case, we considered the phrase "culoare preferată" enough for the understanding of the written sentence. Given the fact that both words share a French origin, it is understandable that this sentence appeared quite familiar to 61% of our respondents.

The fourth question, although a long one, was well understood by 80% of the participants. The meaning of the sentence is based on the comprehension of four key-nouns: "teatru", "operă", "balet" "cinematograf", all of which are, once again, words of French and Latin origin.

The fifth question is situated among the sentences with the lowest degree of comprehension (10%) due to the fact that it contains only words of Latin origin that do not exist in French ("duminica", "a sta", "a merge") or native Romanian words ("acasă", "plimbare").

The sixth question was also problematic in terms of global meaning, although the word "cafea" can be recognized by 25 respondents. The other nouns "ceai", "lapte", "dimineaţa" were barely understood probably due to the fact that they were considered as not being important in comparison to the key-word or just because they seemed unfamiliar. Except for the word of Russian origin, "ceai", the other two words, "lapte", "dimineaţa", have Latin origins although they developed differently in French and Romanian.

The meaning of the seventh question revolves around the words "reclame", "televizor" which were clearly understood by most of the respondents given the resemblance to the French words "réclame" and "téléviseur". The recognition of these nouns led to the identification of the verb "a se

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uita" which would have been impossible to understand but for the context. We are dealing here with a short sentence containing two easily recognizable words, which convey the whole meaning.

The eighth sentence based its meaning on the key-words: "concediu", "munte", "mare". Even though "mare" and "munte" are words of Latin origin, both in French and Romanian, the word "munte" was not identified as easily as the word "mare". Only 18% could actually understand the whole meaning of the question. On the other hand, the word of French origin, "concediu" (Fr. congé) was understood solely by 18% of the participants. We believe that the lack of understanding in this case is caused by the differences in form between the two words (gé vs. ce, and the ending "–diu" from Romanian).

The ninth question constructed meaning around the international word "hobby" recognized by 32 participants. However, contrary to our expectations, the identification of the key-word did not necessarily lead to the complete understanding of the sentence, as 7 people of those who identified the key-word weren't able to give answers to the question.

The tenth question is by far the least accessible of all the questions, given the fact that it is a very long sentence with a complex grammar structure (the comparative, the subjunctive) containing many Romanian words with diacritics. Even though there may be words that could have been understood based on their common Latin origin and similar form ("limbă", "a scrie", "a crede", "a învăţa"), we believe that the length of the sentence discouraged the people involved in the project. Also, the vocabulary of the sentence contains several words created in Romanian ("a vorbi", "uşor"), of Slavic origin ("a citi") or unknown etymology ("străin").

5. CONCLUSIONS – CHARACTERISTICS

As illustrated below, the rate of comprehension is higher than the rate of incomprehension. Except for the 5th, the 6th and the 10th questions, the other ones got average to high scores in degree of understanding. The partially understood and the misunderstood types of sentences are less present, which means that sentences were either completely understood or contained some words that could be identified.

The short sentences apparently had a higher rate of comprehension, however questions number 1 and 4 prove that regardless of its length, a sentence is understood mainly because of its key-words and their accessibility. If we were to compare questions 1 and 4 to question 9, which is much shorter, we can see that the levels of understanding recorded are similar.

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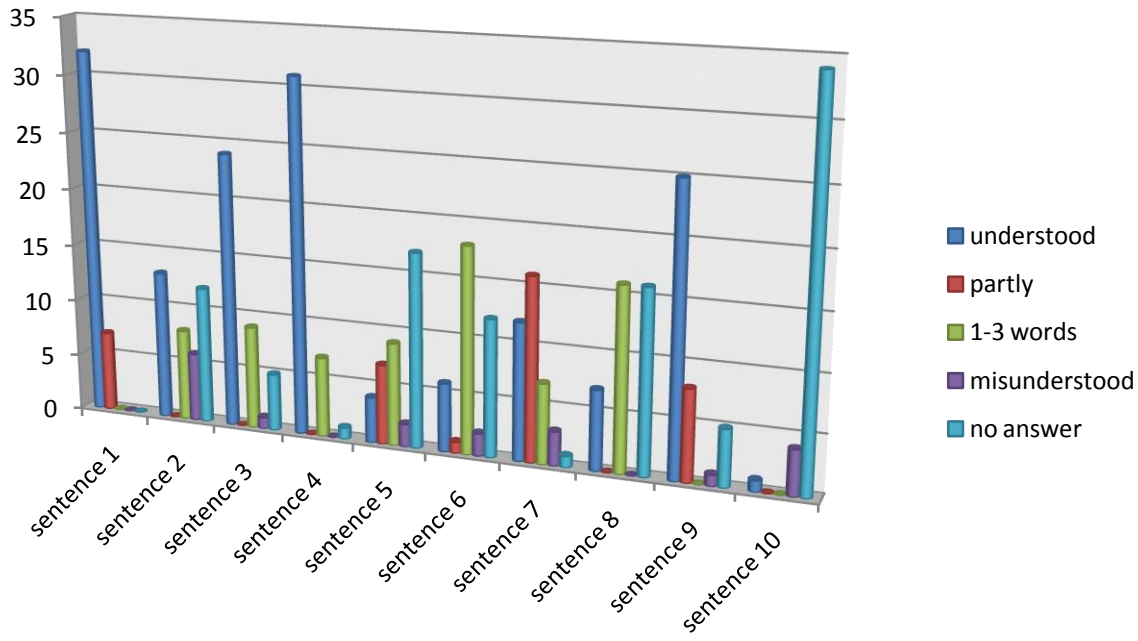


Chart comparing the data resulting from our study

1. As expected, the Romanian words of Latin or French origin similar in form to their French equivalents were quite easily understood: "divorţat", "preferat", "culoare", "teatru", "balet", "reclame", "mare". Therefore, it is clear that the common origin of French and Romanian helped respondents recognize meaning. Moreover, if the sentence contained an international word, the degree of comprehension augmented considerably.

2. Words such as "hobby", "cafea", "transport", "televizor", "cinematograf" represent common linguistic elements which can imply meaning irrespective of the complexity of the sentence. Meaning is inferred and often times guessed correctly by means of such a key-word.

3. On the other hand, the genuinely Romanian words ("acasă", "plimbare", "a vorbi") and even the words of common origin but distinct in form from the French ones ("lapte", "munte", "concediu", "limbă", "a scrie", "a crede") posed difficulties in comprehension. For instance, the tenth question, which contained the greatest number of native Romanian words, was almost generally perceived as opaque.

4. The words that resemble the French ones at times gave rise to misunderstanding, as in the case of "necăsătorit", "duminica", "dimineaţa", "mai".

5. Mainly the nouns and the adjectives were recognized, which implies the understanding of the sentence four even though it is one of the longest sentences of all.

6. The verbs and especially the tenses were hardly recognized. The respondents recognized two verbs "a se uita" and "a scrie", the last one recognized by only one person. However, verb recognition was due to guessing, which is a characteristic of intercomprehension.

7. The Romanian words containing diacritical marks had a high rate of recognition if they resemble in form with the French equivalents, although we started from the supposition that the typographical symbols could alter the comprehension.

On the whole, the similarities between the two languages, Romanian and French, as well as having the same socio-cultural background seem to have helped our respondents to understand written language. They have exploited their linguistic heritage and proved to be multilingual.

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