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INTERCOMPREHENSION ANALYSIS: INNOVATIVE WORK IN THE AREA OF LANGUAGES

Introduction

Intercomprehension Analysis is a new field of study in the area of languages. It is changing the language education landscape right before our eyes. The reform is occurring at an opportune time because twenty-first-century issues, today's new ways of thinking, call for new orientations in language teaching methodology.

This paper explores innovative work done under three European projects – *Exchange to Change* (1998–2001), *EU&I* (2002–2005), and *Intercom* (2006–2009). Chronologically, they span over a decade, starting in 1997 and continuing to present. Together with other European projects, they share best practices in the thematic domain concerned as partners in the thematic network on Intercomprehension, Redinter (www.redinter.eu). The experience of the team of scholars, participating in the projects, is worth looking into because it represents the development of ideas in the study of Intercomprehension. The paper outlines this progress in three stages, starting with the state of «awareness» (Intercomprehension Awareness), passing through a stage of «analysis» (Intercomprehension Analysis) and ending with an attempt to «apply» the new knowledge and understanding in language teaching methodology (Applied Intercomprehension). Borrowing the famous terminology, I would describe them as the «sensorimotor period», «peroperational period» and «operational period». All these stages are of interest because they serve to identify achievement, to disseminate benefits and to launch the results into the mainstream.

The phrase «research and development» (R&D) needs defining. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, means «creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of (hu)man, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications» (www.oecd.org). In the context of language education, «research and development» refers to future-oriented, longer-term activities, using similar techniques to scientific research, with broadly predetermined outcomes.

Intercomprehension Awareness – the «Sensorimotor» Period

The *Exchange to Change* Project

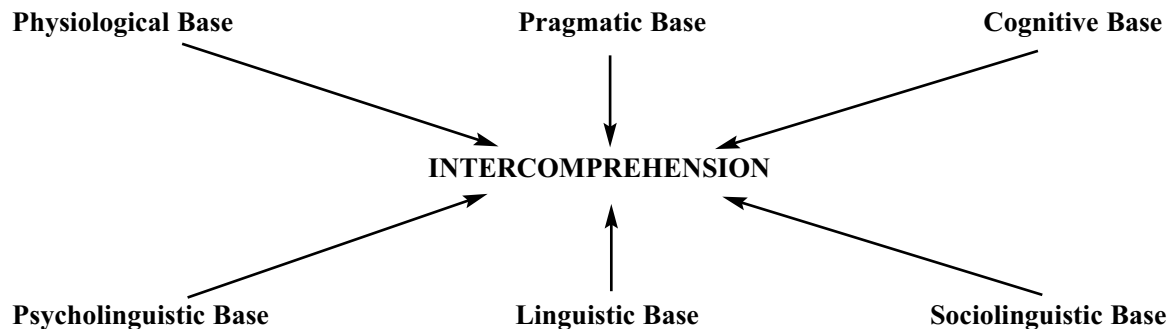
Results

The project represents an early phase in the evolution of the concept of Intercomprehension (for information on the emergence of the idea in the 1990s, please see e.g. www.galanet.eu and www.galapro.net > www.galapro.eu.sessions). It focuses on awareness-raising rather than systematic study. A set of self-training materials has been published – *the Exchange to Change instruction folder* (Capucho 2001). In it, Intercomprehension is defined as: «The capacity to understand and be understood by means of different types of communication strategies, verbal as well as non-verbal» (p. 75). The concept serves as the basis of a set of modules opening «new horizons» in the user's strategic and methodological skills. The learner is assured that «The discovery of motivations, the representation and the open attitude towards the language and the culture of the «Other» might contribute to a better understanding of the problems concerning Intercomprehension...» (p. 76).

The module on Intercomprehension includes the following sections: linguistic expectations (representations and images of the country, the usefulness of the language, the wish to learn the language, the necessity to communicate), linguistic preparation, strategies of Intercomprehension: to understand and be understood, the sociocultural dimension (cultural aspects, activities during the stay – Intercomprehension strategies used in situations – at the place of arrival, buying souvenirs, postcards and necessary items, finding your way, discussions with colleagues, at the hotel, if you are misunderstood, reading a newspaper), role of the intonation and the rhythm of the language, in order to be understood, observing social and traditional behaviour, discovering the language: posters and icons, words and phrases for food, entertainment, school, travel, sightseeing, shopping, linguistic impressions, personal approach to the language, the need to understand and to be understood during the visit to the country (including reception, production, interaction, mediation), listening comprehension, reading comprehension, speaking, writing and social strategies.

Related to the project work, Maya Pencheva and Todor Shopov have published a book with their ideas on the theoretical bases of Intercomprehension, «Understanding Babel. An Essay in Intercomprehension Analysis» (2003). The notion of Intercomprehension Analysis is put forward to mark the whole range of epistemological (learning for knowing), ontological (learning for identity), praxeological (learning for acting) issues of Intercomprehension. The authors claim that «... the Modular Intercomprehension Model (MIM) is based on the definition of receptive proficiency as an aspect of general communicative proficiency. We are not suggesting that Intercomprehension is just a matter of language. On the contrary, it exists in various modalities stemming from discrete mental faculties. It is based on the compositionality principle, which means that the MIM is interdisciplinary and multidimensional. Hence, six modules constitute it. We shall list them in alphabetical order below:

- Cognitive base,
- CLinguistic base,
- CPhysiological base,
- CPragmatic base,
- CPsycholinguistic base,
- CSociolinguistic base.



Components of the Modular Intercomprehension Model (MIM)

The MIM includes the necessary and sufficient modules for an adequate description of Intercomprehension. But the finite number of modules does not imply that the model is exhaustive. Quite the opposite, it is hardly possible to account for all aspects of this complex subject in an exhaustive and comprehensive way. We are sceptical about the possibility of constructing such a theory. However, the MIM enriches the theoretical study of Intercomprehension so as to contribute to the foundation of the discipline of Intercomprehension Analysis.»

This is, as expected, an early model. Since then, other models have been developed, e. g. Doyň (2005). The main implication of the ideas shaping this area of study is that Intercomprehension is a complex ability, made up of other complex abilities.

Intercomprehension Analysis – the «Preoperational» Period

The *EU&I* Project: European Awareness and Intercomprehension

EU&I starts with the assumption that receptive language behaviour in a language which has never been studied is not only the result of «linguistic transfer» and «optimised deduction» (for information on this, please see work of the EuroCom: www.eurocomresearch.net), but also the result of the application of receptive strategies which form the base of communication through inference, analogy and association. Through raising the awareness of the learner, Intercomprehension may become an element of the communicative proficiency of the citizens of Europe.

Outcomes

The theoretical concepts of the project have been outlined in a monograph, «Building bridges. EU&I» (Martins 2005), written in four languages – English, French, Italian and Portuguese. The authors explore fundamental issues of Intercomprehension Analysis, such as the nature of intercomprehension and communicative competence in the light of constructivist psychological and educational theory.

Capucho and Oliveira explore the notion of Intercomprehension. They present their model of «discursive competence» (or global communicative competence). The model includes three dimensions – textual (text formats and genres, sequence types, cohesion and coherence, prosody), linguistic (phonology, lexicon and semantics, morphology and syntax) and situational (socio-cultural uses, interactional uses, pragmatic uses). It shows that language reception depends on a number of factors, the linguistic element of communicative competence being only one of them. Therefore, Intercomprehension is possible on the basis of the other universal components. Even within the linguistic element, there is a body of contents scaffolding understanding, for example international vocabulary. So, at the theoretical level (abstract and general), we can claim that Intercomprehension Analysis includes all components of communicative competence. This may serve as a principle of language education. We can create a methodology for using communicative strategies in situations, requiring Intercomprehension. The authors conclude, «Therefore, the research undergoing in the EU&I context will try and develop further empirical and theoretical work on the Discursive Competence model, establishing links between Intercomprehension phenomena and the mental model» (p. 16).

Shopov describes his model of attainment levels of language proficiency. The continuum of language proficiency is defined by two extreme points or states – the native-speaker's skill (L1) and the Intercomprehension skill in situations of communication through a language which the interlocutors have not studied (Lx). Between them, many different levels fall, e. g. the CEF levels ranging from C2 to A1. The continuum includes the level of «partial competence», defined in CEF. The model of attainment levels can be applied for the creation of a «hypertext syllabus» seen as a Knowledge Strategy. It will allow the learner to «discover» the necessary and sufficient information and to «invent» his or her knowledge-skill to fulfill personal purposes. That methodology differs from classical communicative language teaching. It is a new stage in its progress. The author asks, «School language learning should maintain equilibrium between externally imposed necessity and internal pedagogical orientation. So if we, language teachers, cannot do much about the former, can we not monitor the latter?» (p. 19).

The practical applications of the project have been developed in instructional software – *the EU&I interactive DVD* (Capucho 2005). It has 7 modules – «Room Booking» (online hotel reservation), «TV» (watching television programmes), «Stories» (storytelling), «Your Turn» (telephone conversations), «Songs» (popular songs sung in different languages), «Boots or Sandals» (newspaper weather reports in newspapers in the Latin, Greek and Cyrillic scripts), «Hell or Heaven» (travelling in Europe and dealing with stereotypes). The modules are adapted for 11 «practice» languages (Bulgarian, Dutch, English, French, German, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Swedish, and Turkish). Five of them are the «working» languages (English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish) of the instructional software.

The project has adopted the following working definition: «Intercomprehension is the process of developing the ability to co-construct meaning in the context of the encounter of different languages and to make pragmatic use of this in a concrete communicative situation.» It has been criticised by the external project evaluator (Peter Doyй 2005). Doyй maintains: «I think that this definition has two decisive disadvantages: Firstly, it is not in accordance with the work of other projects on Intercomprehension and secondly, it is unnecessarily restrictive. Up to now, Intercomprehension has nowhere been conceived as a learning process, but in most cases as a communication process or simply as a form of communication. If we define Intercomprehension as «the process of developing the ability to...» we clearly see it as «the learning process to...» (Both these expressions are synonyms in psychological terminology). Such a modification of the original idea does not seem appropriate to me and I would advise the group to address in their definition the mental activity itself rather than its development or acquisition or learning. This would have the additional advantage to make the concept more congruent with the concepts used in other projects. Irrespective of the specificity of the *EU&I* project, we [the researchers] do have predecessors and should try to communicate or even cooperate with them, which would be impeded, if we used essentially different concepts. Scientific communication in the social, behavioural and educational disciplines often suffers from misunderstandings resulting from a lack of agreement on the meaning of basic terms. Therefore it would be a great advantage, if the representatives of the *EU&I* Project could use a definition that is in accordance with the ones that are widely used already.»

Doyй concludes, «If all participants adhere to the idea formulated by Maya Pencheva and Todor Shopov that projects like the present one should try to answer the central question, *under which conditions is Intercomprehension successful?*, then it seems to be a logical consequence that each group should attempt to make their specific contribution to answering this question» (unpublished project evaluation report, 2005).

Here are some examples of definitions of Intercomprehension, existing at that moment: «Un tipo de comunicaciyn en la que cada interlocutor habla su lengua y entiende la del otro» (Vega Llorente Pinto, *ILTE*, 2002); and also in: Jean-Claude Beacco & Michael Byram, *Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe*, 2004; Louise Dabigne, *Comprendre les langues voisines*, 2002; Umberto Eco, *La ricerca della lingua perfetta nella cultura europea*, 2002; Franz-Josef Meißner, *Interkomprehension in romanischen Sprachen*, 2003; Karl Rieder, *Intercomprehension – Fremdsprachige Texte entschlüsseln*, 2001.

EU&I is included in the study «50 Ways to Motivate Language Learners» (online version at <http://europa.eu.int/>) as one of the best practices in Europe. The authors of the Lingo survey have selected it, together with other projects, methods and events «not only for their originality, but also because they are capable of being transferred to other countries or contexts»; in addition, «they reach out to potential learners, engage them in a way that is both appealing and unthreatening and, in some cases, challenge traditional notions of how and where languages should be taught.»

Research work of 14 authors from 7 European countries has been published in book form at St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia: «Intercomprehension Analysis: a Textbook» (Shopov 2005). The contents range from theoretical studies related to language teaching methodology and language planning, e. g. «Developing strong receptive competence in order to perceive cultural and linguistic diversity. A new approach to intercomprehension and its didactics» (Christian Ollivier) and «The need for intercomprehension and semiocomprehension to supplement the traditional role of language» (Dinzay Küksal) to concrete experimental work, e. g. «An intercomprehension experiment in Athens» (Rea Deveroudi and Argyro Moustaki) and «Verbal and non-verbal strategies for oral production» (Eva Brandauer and Margareta Strasser. In her preface, Filomena Capucho recapitulates, «The notion of Intercomprehension, as researchers and experts on languages have taken it during the last 15 years, is one of the most innovative and powerful concepts that have appeared in the context of language methodology since the early 1900s. It may thus seem surprising that it has not been largely applied and developed in the concrete field of language learning.» The book is an attempt to incorporate Intercomprehension Analysis in modern mainstream language education.

Applied Intercomprehension – the «Operational» Period

The *Intercom* Project

Applied Intercomprehension or the didactics of Intercomprehension is the design of a teaching method for the teaching of this type of language competence. The project aims to produce interactive learning materials. It builds on the work and achievements of the research and development carried out in the first decade of the twentieth century. The website is still under construction; nevertheless it contains essential information:

<http://www.intercomprehension.eu/modules/intercom/template.php?module=0> . The main premise is that context provides infinite prospects for Intercomprehension. The user can make out the meaning of messages in oral or written communication on the basis of various clues – linguistic and extra-linguistic.

Objectives and expected outcomes

Intercom is developing a number of modules involving the exchange of information (instructions, strategies, feedback, etc.) between the user and the computer: Shopping for clothing and accessories; Buying food; Travelling abroad; Looking for accommodation; Looking for directions in a strange city; Alphabets: the Greek alphabet and the Cyrillic alphabet. The objective is to use authentic contexts in all teaching/learning tasks. The project has two working languages (English and French); the languages of the consortium partners (Austria, Bulgaria, Greece and Portugal) are the target languages of the instructional modules.

Here are some typical interactive activities, for each module, providing guided Intercomprehension experience and raising the Intercomprehension awareness of the user.

1. Shopping for clothing and accessories

You are abroad for an Exchange semester. Before you go back home you want to buy some clothes for yourself and for a friend. You decide to buy them online at INTERSHOP in order to avoid extra expenses. You will prepare a list of items you want to purchase: 1 men's belt, black leather, 90 cm; 1 men's shirt, blue, size – neck (in) 16-16.5, chest (in) 42/44; 1 red skirt, medium; 1 pair of tights, transparent, size 38/40. Your task is: (a) to choose different garments from a list in an online catalogue; (b) to select the correct colour/size/type of each item; (c) to fill in an online payment form.

2. Buying food

Your task is: (a) to find out which ingredients you need for a specific recipe; (b) to find out what you have to get from the shop; (c) to find out how to prepare the dish.

3. Travelling abroad

You can choose among these tasks: (a) to look for information on different travel destinations; (b) to choose among travelling activities according to the destination chosen; (c) to book your accommodation; (d) to book your travel tickets.

4. Looking for accommodation

You have decided to stay at a hotel for one week while you are trying to find a suitable apartment. Where can you find information about accommodation? Click on the images of the places where you would go to.

5. Looking for directions in a strange city

Votre tâche est de trouver votre chemin de A à B grâce à des instructions, documents et informations différentes. Vous pouvez apprendre comment faire pour tirer des informations d'un texte dans une langue inconnue ou peu connue. Lire et comprendre des horaires et des affiches à la gare. Comprendre et apprendre, grâce à un plan, quelques structures utilisées pour des indications de chemin.

6. Alphabets: the Greek alphabet and the Cyrillic alphabet

Athens Metro Map: Using authentic document such as the Athens Metro map... On a metro map, you will have, most of the times, all stations noted in local alphabet along with their transcriptions in Latin characters. It is a good opportunity to learn the local alphabet, in this case the Greek one. Try it. It's easy.

Here is a version of the introduction to the subsection on the Cyrillic alphabet in this module: «The Cyrillic alphabet substituted the Glagolitic script invented by two eminent scholars, St. Cyril and St. Methodius, in the 9th century. St. Clement, a disciple of the two great men who lived in Bulgaria, made the Cyrillic alphabet at the great school of learning in the Old Bulgarian town of Ohrid. For eleven centuries now, the Bulgarians have been spelling his name, St. Clement of Ohrid, using the Cyrillic letters: СВ. КЛИМЕНТ ОХРИДСКИ (click to hear).

Chapter One: Authentic Experiences

There are many ways to discover the Cyrillic alphabet. (a) If you are a football fan, click here: (go to section IV); (b) If you are a «famous people» fan, click here: (go to section I); (c) If you are an etymology fan, click here: (go to section III); (d) If you prefer maps, click here: (go to section V); (e) If you like the metro, click here: (go to section II).»

Conclusion

Intercomprehension Analysis is the study of receptive language behaviour in communicative situations engaging an unfamiliar language. It deals with how people use communicative strategies to compensate for deficient linguistic repertoire under such circumstances.

The last decade has been a period of developing the «partial competence» model set up in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Research, development and implementation at European level have focused on the phenomenon of Intercomprehension as a facet of partial competence. The three R&D projects, put forward in this paper, represent three steps towards extending the theory and practice of Intercomprehension Analysis.

¹ Capucho, Filomena (Coord.) 2005, *EU&I. Interactive DVD. An Informal Approach to the Comprehension of Languages*, Media-promo, ISBN 978-972-99772-1-3.

² Capucho, Filomena (General Coordination) 2001, *Exchange to Change. In-Service Training Course*, Gráfica Universidade Catylica Portuguesa, ISBN 972-96437-5-X.

³ Doyé, Peter, 2005, *EU&I. Project Evaluation Report*, (unpublished). Doyé, Peter, 2005, *L'intercomprehension*, Strasbourg: Conceil de l'Europe (publishing@coe.int).

⁴ Martins, Adriana (Ed.) 2005, *Building Bridges: EU & I*, Gráfica Universidade Catylica Portuguesa, ISBN 972-99772-0-8.

⁵ Pencheva, Maya And Todor Shopov, 2003, *Understanding Babel. An Essay in Intercomprehension Analysis*, Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University Press.

⁶ Shopov, Todor (Ed.) 2005, *Intercomprehension Analysis. A textbook*, Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University Press and Zachary Stojanov Press, ISBN 954-739-688-9.

⁷ Note: This paper will be published in the book *Promoting Learner Autonomy through intercomprehension: projects and perspectives*, edited by P. Doye and F-J. Meissner, 2009.

Резюме

У статті розглядаються три стадії розвитку такого поняття і галузі досліджень, як аналіз міжрозуміння. Міжрозуміння розглядається як фундаментальне поняття, яке забезпечує нові напрямки у галузі мовної політики.

Ключові слова: аналіз міжрозуміння, науково-дослідницькі проекти, викладання мов, мовна політика.

Резюме

Данная статья рассматривает три стадии развития такого понятия в области исследований, как анализ межпонимания. Межпонимание рассматривается как фундаментальное понятие, которое обеспечивает новые направления в области языковой политики.

Ключевые слова: анализ межпонимания, научно-исследовательские проекты, преподавание языков, языковая политика.

Summary

The paper explores the three stages of development of the study area known as Intercomprehension Analysis. Intercomprehension is seen as a fundamental concept, providing new orientations for the construction of modern language policy.

Key words: Intercomprehension Analysis, research and development projects, language teaching, language policy.

Отримано 19.07.2010