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Machteld Meulleman, Alice Fiorentino

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55 What is intercomprehension and what is it good for?

Machteld Meulleman
Alice Fiorentino

Université de Reims
Champagne-Ardenne



Intercomprehension (also known as *receptive multilingualism* or *lingua receptiva*) occurs when people communicate with each other, each speaking his or her own language, while understanding the language of the other. This is possible when the speakers have learned the other language to some extent or when the languages are mutually intelligible, i.e. when they are similar enough to allow for a certain degree of spontaneous mutual understanding (Gooskens & van Heuven 2017). Generally, intercomprehension works best when the speakers' respective native languages are close to each other in vocabulary, morphology and syntax, such as Italian and French or Czech and Slovak. Intercomprehension is widespread and well-studied in stable bilingual or multilingual settings such as immigrant families or border regions (e.g. Scandinavia). However, when it comes to interactions with or between mobile citizens, its potential is still far from being realised.

What does research tell us?

According to Braunmüller and Ferraresi (2003), the rise of the monolingual nation state has led to intercomprehension being used less frequently and becoming largely unknown by the wider public. But then, intercomprehension might be expected to become more frequent in the multilingual settings of European society, and one suspects that its spontaneous use is much more frequent than is generally assumed.

Intercomprehension has been found to be one of the *fairest* modes of multilingual communication because it allows each person to speak his or her own language.

Given that it takes less time to acquire receptive rather than productive skills (particularly in a language from the same language family), intercomprehension is also a *rational* mediation choice for people who travel often or move from one country to another; the development of reading skills often comes first, encouraging progress in other skills. Furthermore, intercomprehension allows for truly *intercultural* interactions, as both speakers adapt to the other.

Illustration and evidence

Over the past twenty years, several research projects, including some funded by the European Commission (e.g. EuRom4, EuroCom) have examined numerous facets of intercomprehension and resulted in the development of specialised teaching materials for language teachers or language learners. However, several questions require closer examination, such as the conditions of the spontaneous use of intercomprehension by highly mobile citizens without any particular language training. For this reason, the MIME project has focused its empirical studies about intercomprehension in two very specific multilingual settings.

Our main study has focused on Italian families who had adopted a non-Italian-speaking child. Observation of two Italian families adopting a child from Chile showed that intercomprehension was used spontaneously by all family members. When asked about this, the parents declared that they preferred intercomprehension to other strategies because it allowed them to express themselves accurately.

Father: I am this kind of person who prefers to express himself I mean to speak my language let's say [...] because it gives me the impression that I am making myself understood.

Of course, accuracy can only be communicated if the languages allow a sufficient degree of mutual intelligibility, as in the case of Spanish and Italian. In addition, a good deal of cooperation is necessary for oral intercomprehension to work. Parents mentioned that they initially adapted their speech in order to facilitate mutual understanding, adopting an inclusive attitude. In the context of child adoption, intercomprehension allows equal participation of all family members, which enhances bonding in the family.

Another study on the languages used by international football professionals in France indicated that the use of intercomprehension is often regarded with suspicion. The Argentine football trainer Marcelo Bielsa, for instance, who uses consecutive interpretation at press conferences, was asked about his intercomprehensive skills by a journalist, suggesting that his partial language skills manifest the lack of desire to speak French.

Journalist (in French): How do you sometimes manage to understand questions in French without speaking our language? (Translation in Spanish)

Marcelo Bielsa (in Spanish): Because I fear the ridicule and I'd make a fool of myself. (Translation in French)

Journalist (in French): Next season, you will speak better French. (Translation in Spanish)

Marcelo Bielsa (in Spanish): We will see. (Translation in French)

Although intercomprehension is widely used and highly valued in informal contexts, it remains less accepted in professional contexts. Fortunately, studies of professional contexts show that the more intercomprehension is used, the better it is accepted (Berthele & Wittlin 2013).

Policy implications

Strong policy support is essential in order to move from potential mutual intelligibility to actual intercomprehension between speakers. The following initiatives can be suggested.

1. Make people aware that the many formal similarities between cognate languages provide direct access to information.
2. Make people confident about their spontaneous intercomprehensive skills and encourage them to boost those skills through practice or training.
3. Encourage speakers engaged in face-to-face interactions to express themselves in the languages they know best, whenever they are capable of understanding each other to a sufficient extent (whether because they are proficient in a closely related language or because they have some passive knowledge of the other's language or a combination of the two).

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