The empirical basis of Slavic intercomprehension

Tania Avgustinova, Andrea Fischer, Klara Jagrova, Dietrich Klakow, Roland Marti & Irina Stenger
Saarland University

The possibility of intercomprehension between related languages is a generally accepted fact suggesting that mutual intelligibility is systematic. Of particular interest are the Slavic languages, which are “sufficiently similar and sufficiently different to provide an attractive research laboratory” (Corbett 1998). They exhibit practically all typologically attested means of encoding grammatical information, ranging from extremely dense to highly redundant constructions, and their development is the result of various language contact scenarios (Balkansprachbund, German influence on West Slavic languages, Finno-Ugric substratum in East Slavic languages etc.).

Similarities, which are well-studied in Slavic linguistics and are observable at all levels of linguistic description, allow us to design tests with calibrated degrees of deviation. As the number of possible language pairs among the Slavic languages is large, we select a few representative pairs where a certain threshold level of mutual intelligibility can be expected. Czech and Polish (both West-Slavic) appear to be very close languages. Russian (East-Slavic) is generally perceived to be closer to Polish than to Czech, while each of them is quite distant from Bulgarian (South-Slavic).

The research questions we address in this contribution are: What linguistic distances can be established in the respective language pair at different linguistic levels (orthography, vocabulary, morphology, syntax)? To what extent are the linguistic distances predictors of mutual intelligibility? What explanations can be found for asymmetric intelligibility?

The rules of orthographic correlates are worked out and sound correspondences are established, taking into consideration historically conditioned cross-linguistic variation. The cognate vocabulary is approximated on the basis of available standardized word lists for the selected language pairs. To avoid negative cognates influencing intercomprehension in unpredictable ways, stop-lists of known “false friends” are compiled to be used in the processing of parallel corpora. To account for the intelligibility of morphological forms and syntactic constructions, the respective correspondences in the grammatical subsystems are formulated. Both the nature of the phenomena and the effect of frequency are relevant at these levels.

References

Chinese and English: errors in translating by beginner learners

Katarzyna Bańka
University of Silesia

The trends for learning languages in the world of today change rapidly. It turns out that nowadays, apart from Spanish, English and Chinese are the two most popular languages taken up by the students as their L2 and L3. Those two languages derive of two diverse language families thus there might occur certain errors in terms of translating from one to another.

The aim of the following article is to introduce the misunderstandings occurring in the translation from Chinese into English and vice versa. The research samples are students of the 1st year English-Chinese translation programme attending to University of Silesia in Poland. The methods used for the purposes of this article were class observation; vocabulary, short phrases, sentence, and text translation tests; various written and spoken exercises’ assessment and avista translation of the texts deriving from the textbook of Yang, Jizhou called: ‘Hanyu Jiaocheng’ volume 1 and 2, which provided the most spontaneous, yet interesting, result in terms of the translation accuracy.

At first, the author will briefly introduce the basic difference between the two languages in question, as far as their unrelated elements are concerned, pointing out rather simplistic grammar of Chinese and the consequences which it brings to later translation into English, creating numerous misunderstandings.

Further on, the author will examine mistakes occurring in the students’ translation performed in both written and spoken form from both Chinese into English and vice versa, examining how the differences affect understanding and translating of the given texts.

The article is meant to broaden horizons and further understanding of the diversities and complexity of Chinese and English, and to inspect the most transparent misunderstanding occurring in the students’ translations.

The main questions for the purposes of this article are as follows: Can various kinds of errors be explained by the differences in the respective languages? What to do to minimize the errors occurring in the translations and how to improve students’ translation?

References

The effect of cognates on lexical entrainment in receptive multilingual dialogue between speakers of German and Dutch

Gerda J. Blees
Utrecht Institute of Linguistics OTS, Utrecht University

In monolingual dialogue, speakers’ language use tends to converge, which is hypothesized to facilitate language production and comprehension. This process of linguistic entrainment (Costa, Pickering, & Sorace, 2008) might be impeded in receptive multilingual dialogue, where both participants use different languages and cannot literally repeat each other’s words or syntactic structures. However, in typologically related languages, similar syntactic and lexical structures are available to interlocutors. Indeed, psycholinguistic experiments show that exposure to specific syntactic and lexical structures in one language increases production of similar structures in another language (Monsell, Matthews, & Miller, 1992; Schoonbaert, Hartsuiker, & Pickering, 2007). Such cross-linguistic priming may result in cross-linguistic entrainment in receptive multilingual dialogue between speakers of related languages.

This paper presents a pilot study on the effect of cognates on lexical entrainment in receptive multilingual dialogue between German and Dutch speakers. 8 German speakers participated in a picture-matching dialogue with a Dutch confederate, taking turns explaining how to arrange a set of pictures on a grid. The confederate either used a cognate or a non-cognate to describe the target pictures. Cognate words were more easily understood than non-cognates, and German participants used an equivalent German word more often if the Dutch participant had used a cognate. For non-cognates, an alternative description was often proposed by either the confederate or the participant. Although the sample was too small to provide conclusive evidence for cross-linguistic entrainment, the confederate-scripted dialogue technique proves to be a promising method to investigate the effect of linguistic similarities on entrainment in receptive multilingualism.

References

Receptive multilingualism in Iran’s National Curriculum: The case of Kurdish dialects in Urmia

Seyed Reza Beh-Afarin & Seyed Najaf Paranchi
Islamic Azad University, North Tehran Branch

The Kurdish dialects spoken in Urmia, north-western Iran, are mostly mutually comprehensible. Migrants from diverse Kurd-inhabited cities like Sanandaj, Mahabad, Bukan, Kermanshah, Marivan, Saqqez, among others use their mother tongue dialects hoping and assuming to be understood by Kurds speaking variants of Sorani, Hewrami, Kalhuri and Kurmanji Kurdish spoken by about 12 to 15 million Kurds in Iran. This idea of effective communication motivated the authors to investigate the degree of mutual intelligibility between various Kurdish dialects as perceived and expressed by Kurdish students living in Urmia and to investigate their attitudes toward language development policies stipulated in the National Curriculum by educational paradigmers at Iran’s Ministry of Education. To do so, 112 fifth and sixth graders (with various Kurdish ethnic backgrounds) from two different schools (55 boys and 57 girls) in Urmia participated in this study. The participants were surveyed with semi-structured interviews and a motivational behaviour questionnaire. The questionnaire obtained data on learner’s preferences in and their orientation toward receptive multilingualism. The data obtained through the questionnaire were analysed through SPSS and the recorded interviews were qualitatively analysed by NVivo. The results show that the participants did not have any problem in familiarizing themselves with domestic Kurdish dialects and that all Kurdish dialects spoken in Urmia were well-appreciated and mutually intelligible in majority of context-dependent and informal settings. However, according to the participants, the empty spot of values such as constructive interaction among people of different social backgrounds is strongly felt in the national curriculum. And since multilingualism is taken for granted by fiat, the students fail to arrange cultural festivals and activities in which students of different ethnicities can enjoy the benefits of staging programs such as plays, stand-up shows, and chorus in their ethnic languages and dialects that are part of the national capacity. Were they asked to talk about Iran and Iranian culture, the students would have a whole load of materials to provide and pride on. It is interesting that Iran’s national curriculum has an independent section on learning foreign languages, but does not contain even a paragraph regarding its own local and regional languages and dialects. Had receptive multilingualism been considered in the curriculum, awareness of and acquaintance with local languages and as a result ethnic cultures would have been a dominant and striking characteristic of the next generation of students. National linguistic homogenization and linguistic standardization by fiat might hinder unmediated communication between closely related languages and dialects and might make multilingual communication far less developed, which overall is unsuitable for a Middle-Eastern, developing country endeavouring toward brighter horizons of internationalization.

1 Urmia is a cosmopolitan city, which is home to Azeris who live together with minorities of Armenians, Jews, and Assyrians and Kurds. Like everywhere else in Iran, Persian is the official language in Urmia and must be taught and used at schools.
2 Corresponding author, e-mail address: parpinchy@gmail.com
3 This survey has received a small travel grant (worth of 600 euros) from Islamic Azad University, North Tehran Branch.
Swedish comprehension of Danish as a problem-solving activity

Ulla Börestam
Uppsala University

In Scandinavia, three of the standard varieties – Danish, Norwegian and Swedish – are generally held to be mutually comprehensible. Still, according to tests, intercomprehension cannot be taken for granted, especially not between speakers of Danish and Swedish. This paper will focus on this problematic link, based on an experiment where Swedish students (in pairs) were asked to translate a short dictated Danish text into their common mother tongue and to motivate their choices. The material was collected some years ago (in 2004-2005), by me and FD Lise Horneman Hansen in Uppsala with TAP-protocols as the main inspirational source. We recorded 23 groups (both Danish-Swedish and Swedish-Danish). Thus, the material consists of 46 written individual dictations, 23 written translations and 23 recordings each about 45 minutes long. The material is very rich, but unfortunately we have not had the time to explore it as much as it deserves.

For inexperienced people, comprehension of a neighboring language can be described as a problem-solving activity. Through the recordings, completed by the written material, we were able to follow the paths and strategies during this activity. The work of translating, or rather reconstructing, the text can in most cases be described in three phases. The first phase was rather creative with brainstorming as a characteristic element. Each pair of students compared their notes and looked for analogies in their mother tongue, often based on auditory similarity or on associations of some other kind. General linguistic competence, in the form of a broad linguistic register and awareness of other languages, played an important role. In the second phase, the suggestions were critically evaluated. Each suggestion had to be relevant to the context. In the third phase, again, the solutions were re-evaluated, this time while reading the reconstructed text as a whole.

In this paper, I will give a glimpse of the strategies documented with special reference to cases when Norwegian, the third Scandinavian language mentioned above, is being used as a clue for problem-solving.
Receptive multilingualism (RM), a type of communication where interlocutors speak their native language and understand the other language, has proved to be successful to varying extents between different Scandinavian languages (Delsing and Lundin Åkesson, 2005), Czech and Slovak (Berger, 2003), Spanish and Portuguese (Jensen, 1989) etc. But is it possible to teach speakers of one language to understand another related language better?

We aim to answer this question using a pretest-posttest design with a teaching intervention in between. The participants are university students from Prague and Zagreb. Dyads consisting of one native speaker of Czech and one native speaker of Croatian communicate in writing via Skype. Each member of a dyad receives one version of a photo and they get 20 minutes to find as many differences as possible between their two photos. During the task, they may only use their respective native languages. The Czech native speakers then receive four and a half hours of instruction in understanding Croatian: they are instructed to recognize cognates, use common phoneme correspondences and syntactic similarities. In addition, they practice by translating short stories from Croatian into Czech. After the instruction, the same spot-the-difference task is performed with a different set of pictures.

The control group only does the the pretest and the posttest, with no instruction. The results of the experimental group are then compared to the results of the control group. In the experimental group, there was a statistically significant increase in the number of differences spotted between the pre-test and the post-test ($t = -4.72, p = 0.001$). The testing of the control group is currently underway and the full set of results is expected in early 2015.

The present study is relevant not only for receptive multilingualism research, but also for language teaching methodology and language acquisition in general.

References


Trouble sources in Finnish-Estonian RM interaction

Hanna-Ilona Härmävaara
Helsingin yliopisto

This contribution analyzes trouble sources and their management in receptively multilingual interaction between Finns and Estonians. Finnish and Estonian are relatively closely related languages. They are mutually intelligible to some degree, but the related language is not considered effortlessly comprehensible for a speaker of one of the languages (see Härmävaara 2014). Finnish and Estonian share basic morphology and syntax, but the biggest differences are found at the lexical level: the languages have a lot of cognate lexemes, but also many non-cognates and so called false friends.

This study focuses on repair in dyadic RM conversations. The conversation situations were arranged for the purpose of this study, and the researcher asked the participants to use their respective mother tongues. Also, possibly occurring problems in interaction were asked to be solved preferably by using RM. However, the conversations are not task-oriented by their nature, and they try to simulate naturally occurring interaction. The data consists of conversations between 6 dyads, each conversation lasting 20 to 30 minutes.

The data is analyzed by using the tools of conversation analysis. The special focus of the analysis is on repair sequences in which a lexical item is being brought up as a source of problem. The paper aims to shed light on what kind of linguistic items can be problematic for understanding in interaction. The results are compared with findings by Muikku-Werner & Heinonen (2012) and Paajanen & Muikku-Werner (2012) who have focused on how transparency of similarity affects understanding.

References

Learners of second or foreign languages often end up making comparisons between the languages they know. Similarly, language teachers often find themselves reflecting upon learners’ earlier language repertoire. In this presentation we examine how form- or construction-specific typological (dis)similarities between first (L1) and second (L2) languages affect the frequencies of linguistic features in L2. We are interested to see, whether (dis)similarities between source (L1) and target (L2) languages can be detected by comparing the feature frequency data of written Finnish as L2.

Our data are part of the International Corpus of Learner Finnish, of which we have selected 7 L1-specific subcorpora (Chinese, Estonian, German, Hungarian, Polish, Russian, and Swedish) to represent L1 backgrounds with varying morphological typology. Our reference data are part of the newspaper material of the Finnish Language Text Collection. As a point of departure, we collect hundred most frequent morphological forms of each L1-specific subcorpus and analyze quantitatively, how these frequencies and ranks of the features correlate with different language backgrounds. Then, we go on to analyze in greater detail features that show strongest correlation.

We believe that frequencies of unmarked forms, such as nominatives or singular third person verbs, may differentiate the L1 groups based on the declensional and conjugational similarity. Our approach is, however, detection-based, and results can reveal form- or construction-specific similarities, which are often disregarded in approaches that rely on historical relationships of languages. Approaching typological distance from the perspective of second language production can open new avenues for future research. The results have also pedagogical relevance, as they may reveal systematic dissimilarities or unidentified similarities.

References

Measuring distances between written languages using a language identifier

Tommi Jauhiainen
Department of Modern Languages, University of Helsinki

As a part of The Finno-Ugric Languages and The Internet project, we are researching methods for written language identification and have developed our own method. It has been evaluated against most promising existing language identifiers and our method outperforms them in accuracy (or F1-score), when classifying text over 30 characters long between 285 languages (Jauhiainen & Lindén 2015). The 285 languages known to the language identifier include 34 languages from the Uralic family and the complete list of languages can be seen at http://suki.ling.helsinki.fi/LILanguages.html.

Language identifiers have been used before for measuring distances between languages (Zulu, Botha & Barnard 2008). (Goldhahn & Quasthoff 2014) use words and character trigrams (separately) to relate languages. Our language identifier uses a token-based method with a backoff to n-grams of characters (from 6-grams to unigrams). We have calculated the distances between 285 languages using character n-grams + tokens, and just character n-grams from 1-6, 1-5, 1-4, 1-3 and 1-2 characters, as well as character unigrams.

The score given to each language by the language identifier varies between 1 and 7. From the results it can be seen that the scores are higher for languages where the tokens are more complex and thus the actual distance has to be calculated as relative to the score the language gets for itself. For example Finnish gets a score of 4.1 from Finnish, 5.1 from Meänkieli, 5.9 from Karelian and 6.6 from Swedish. The tokens in Swedish are not as varied as in Finnish and Swedish gets 3.6 from Swedish, 5.4 from Norwegian (both) and 6.1 from Meänkieli.

References

Quantifying perceived cross-linguistic similarity across closely related languages

Annekatrin Kaivapalu
University of Tallinn

Perceived similarity refers to the familiarity of target language items, processes or systems, as perceived by the language learner or user, and it is based on the first or any formerly learned language. It is the basis of positive transfer, which in turn can, but does not always, lead to understanding and learning. Perceived similarity is not the only underlying factor of target language comprehension, since much of understanding is based on shared knowledge of the world, personal experience, general linguistic ability, the interactional context, the situation, etc. All these factors are present in the understanding of any language, while similarity is the factor that makes understanding closely related languages easier than understanding remotely or non-related languages.

So far, there is little agreement about how to measure similarity across languages. The few models that exist for quantifying cross-linguistic similarity (e.g. Levenshtein Distance, the model of seven sieves) address actual similarity. This paper introduces an attempt to measure perceived similarity by using a perceived similarity index (Kaivapalu & Martin 2014) and presents the quantitative results of a test measuring conscious perceptions of similarity between Estonian and Finnish inflectional morphology. Four test groups were set up with about one hundred participants in each: two groups of L1 speakers, one of Finnish and one of Estonian, and two groups of L2 speakers of these languages, their L1s Swedish and Russian respectively. The groups were asked to rate 48 pairs of inflected words as similar, somewhat similar, or not similar, and then the perceived similarity index was applied. In this study all the participants were at the true beginner level in the target language. The discussion focuses on the differences between the L1 and L2 groups’ perceptions. According to the quantitative results, the L1 Finns perceived more similarity than the L1 Estonians, and both the L1 groups perceived more than the L2 groups.

References

Awareness of linguistic variation in perceiving similarity across closely related languages

Maisa Martin
University of Jyväskylä

To test perceptions of similarity between Estonian and Finnish, a list of inflected noun pairs was presented to L1 speakers of Finnish and Estonian and to L2 speakers of these languages (proficiency level B2 or higher) with respectively Swedish and Russian as their L1s (about a hundred participants in each of the four groups). They were asked to rate each pair as similar, somewhat similar or different. The test itself and some quantitative results have been presented elsewhere (see e.g. Kaivapalu & Martin 2014). The participants were also invited to comment on the reasons for their choices. In this presentation the references in these comments to linguistic variation, and to some extent also to other languages, are discussed.

The quantitative results across the groups differ to some extent, with the L1 Finns perceiving more similarity than the L1 Estonians and both the L1 groups more than the L2 groups, and the reasoning behind the comments also varies between the groups. All refer to other languages or regional and social variation within Finnish/Estonian, but Finns do this clearly more often than the other groups. Awareness of variability in L1 is thus connected to perceiving similarity. This connection is explored in the presentation.

The ability to perceive similarity between linguistic items relies on linguistic awareness. In some way it is present in all the comments (e.g. references to the same/different letters or parts of words); such awareness is item-based, comparing only the surface forms. It can go deeper, bringing in paradigm-level considerations, not visible in the word forms themselves. Referring to regional or social aspects of one of the languages brings in yet another level of awareness, the one explored in more detail here, with the practical aim of providing tools for receptive multilingualism. All three levels combined provide the maximal ability to perceive similarity, and consequently the ability to utilize one’s L1 for the comprehension of a related language.

References

When we aim to understand a closely related language, any kind of linguistic knowledge can be significant. Recognition of common lexical and morphological elements facilitates reading comprehension. Semantic relationships in phraseological units are useful: collocative regularities can be utilised to improve mutual intelligibility. Priming may also help in creating meaningful connections. In coherent contexts, certain words can function as primes and activate other members of the shared semantic field through association. If the prime is cognate with the linked item, the meaning of the target can be inferred.

In this paper, I will present some results of a test in which 25 Finns who did not know Estonian translated a short Estonian text. The focus is on reasoning: how did the informants end up with their solutions when trying to find the meaning of certain connected words? The semantic relations that helped them in their decisions include hyponymy, antonymy, and schematic implication. If the informants recognize the cognate prime, for example, Est hüatsint (Fi ‘hysintti’), they are able to conclude that Est lill is its hypernym, ‘flower’ (Fi ‘kukka’). Some informants are able to describe their inference process in a very accurate way. I will also discuss some distractors, such as ‘false friends’, that may distort this process.

References

Pace-Sigge, Michael 2013. Lexical priming in spoken English usage. UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
In research on the mutual understanding of closely related languages, previous results have shown that, in addition to the similarity of lexical items, many other variables influence their intelligibility. If there are enough familiar elements in a context, even words that do not share a similar meaning and spelling (i.e. cognates) in the mother tongue and in the target language can be recognizable on the basis of lexical priming: a certain word can be linked to another based on semantic associations such as collocation, antonomy, hyponymy – in general, through a common semantic field.

However, it has been noted that some factors can confuse access to semantic memory or misdirect the combination of the items. The distractors can be false friends, in which case the reader or listener trusts in the external similarity and chooses the L1 meaning, which then becomes the starting point of interference. Secondly, the prime can be so distant that interposing text prevents the linkage. Thirdly, if the word most frequently collocates with a certain word, this priming can restrict the freedom of choice.

With different tests of multifold options – modifying the distance and co(n)text of the prime – we attempt to confirm that the above-mentioned distractors cause difficulties in accessing semantic memory. The relevance of collocational frequency (retrieved from corpus analyses) is also discussed. We hypothesize that, through the increased awareness of lexical priming and concrete collocational strings, the intelligibility of a lexicon can be promoted and that the retrieval of L1 semantic information can be utilized for L2 text comprehension.

References


The possibility of multilingual interaction between Estonian and Finnish is researched through testing how well the cognate language can be understood without intentional learning. This presentation contemplates how Finnish-speaking students translate Estonian sentences into their first language. Main issues are what kind of strategies the students apply to this process, as well as how important the role of the so called false friends is.

A translation test was carried out in the University of Eastern Finland. 25 students majoring in Finnish language took part in the test. The objective was to translate 20 disjointed sentences from Estonian into Finnish. The participants had no previous knowledge of Estonian. Comparison material was collected in the University of Jyväskylä from 19 Finnish students who had recently taken 8 lessons in Estonian.

In addition to the similarity of vocabulary and the structural proximity of the two languages, general knowledge (e.g. familiarity of historical events) appears to avail the learner in the translation process. Moreover, the context within a sentence usually promotes a correct interpretation of an unknown word. False friends between Estonian and Finnish, however, are problematic. Should the immediate context give no clue for interpretation, a false friend is likely to mislead.

The informants appear to be somewhat aware of the significance of the context. Making the most of the adjoining context is the strategy most often mentioned by the learners, alongside searching for parallels between the two closely related languages.

References

Applying Lexical Priming to disambiguate polysemantic words for German-English translations

Michael Pace-Sigge
University of Eastern Finland

This paper starts from the premise that awareness of fixed phrases and metaphorical use are necessary for mutual intelligibility. It uses Hoey’s (2005) Theory of Lexical Priming (LP) to disambiguate Steuer and Hut (Helbig and Buscha, 1984: 275), which appear both with two different genus formations.

This expands the LP theory beyond Pace-Sigge (2013), who, with reference to Quillian (1962), focused on spoken English; and Jantunen and Brunni (2013), who looked at Finnish morphology.

Steuer and Hut differ: das Steuer refers to the “steering wheel” of a vehicle; die Steuer, on the other hand, means “tax”. These two words are only orthographically the same. In order to interpret these, a translator will have to show awareness of the word’s “nestings” (Hoey). On a basic level, der Hut is “the hat”; die Hut refers to “care” or “guard”. Yet the surrounding items show an interpreter that usage is clearly differentiated, and can be metaphorical. Thus, as in English, German employs “that is an old hat” (das ist ein alter Hut) or “wearing my other hat” (meinen anderen Hut tragend).

This paper shows that there are clear differences in colligation and semantic association that go beyond the surface of genus differentiation. The Lexical Priming Theory can provide an anchor for key-words so that metaphorical use can be identified by a translator, who may then see in how far the target language provides equivalents.

References


Border Karelia, situated on the border of Finland and Russia, is a region where the Karelian language and the eastern Finnish dialects share a long, common history. Karelian is the closest cognate of Finnish and the eastern Finnish dialects in particular resemble Karelian to a great extent. However, Karelian language is seldom heard (or seen in a written format) in present-day Finland, and the awareness of lay people about the existence and characteristics of Karelian is often vague.

In our presentation, we will approach the perceptions of the Karelian language by first-year university students of the Finnish language with varying dialectal backgrounds. The study will shed light on awareness or perceptions of linguistic differences between very closely related language varieties (Finnish and Karelian). The aim is to examine what kinds of features of Karelian the informants pay attention to and which features they consider different from the eastern Finnish dialects. The students attended the test as a group during a lecture at their university. In the recognition task they listened to a sample of the speech of a Border Karelian speaker, recorded in the 1970s, and they were asked to point out linguistic features they considered different from Finnish. The sample was played twice and the students were given a chance to make notes during the listening. Then they answered the following questions: 1) Where is the speaker from? 2) What variety (language/dialect) is she speaking? 3) How does her speech differ from the variety of Finnish you are familiar with?

The results show which details are salient to rookie linguists for whom the Karelian language was mostly unfamiliar. The test was conducted for folk-linguistic purposes but its results are relevant to the research on receptive multilingualism as well.
This study investigates whether receptive multilingualism can offer new approaches to communication across languages borders. More specifically, we investigate how well speakers of Portuguese can understand Spanish, and how well speakers of Slovene can understand Croatian, compared to non-native English produced by speakers of Spanish resp. Croatian.

Native speakers of Croatian and Spanish were recorded while retelling two short films in their respective native language and in English: one film in the native language and the other film in English. A total of 85 Portuguese- and 142 Slovenian-speaking listeners participated in the experiment, in which they were presented to one of the recorded speakers telling a story in their native language (Spanish or Croatian) and in English. The intelligibility of the two modes of communication was measured using multiple choice questions. The two films/retellings were counterbalanced so that both films were presented in one of the two language modes to avoid a bias in the intelligibility results due to differences in the film material.

The results show that the intelligibility of both language modes in both groups is relatively high, although Slovenian participants scored higher when confronted with a Croatian speaker telling a story in English than when listening to a recording in Croatian.
Many factors that play a role for mutual intelligibility between closely related languages have been uncovered in intelligibility research during the past few decades. These include extra-linguistic factors, such as familiarity with a language (cf. Bø 1978) and language attitudes (cf. Delsing and Lundin Åkesson 2005), and linguistic factors, such as phonetic (cf. Gooskens 2006) and lexical (Gooskens and Van Bezooijen 2006) differences between languages. In most studies, the influencing factors are simply correlated with intelligibility scores and the focus lies mostly on only one group of influencing factors: either linguistic or extra-linguistic factors.

This paper investigates the mutual intelligibility between Danish, Dutch, English, German and Swedish and relates the results to a wide range of linguistic and extra-linguistic factors in one and the same regression analysis. We tested 426 participants in a spoken cloze test where they had to listen to text fragments. In each fragment one word was replaced by a beep. The participants had to select a word which fitted into the place of the beep from a set of words.

Familiarity with the test language and language attitudes were included as extra-linguistic factors. Lexical, phonetic, orthographic and morpho-syntactic distances between the languages were included as linguistic factors. The results of this analysis provide a model which includes the linguistic and extra-linguistic factors that influence the mutual intelligibility between the five largest Germanic languages as measured by a spoken cloze test.

References


Teaching cognate languages and assessing linguistic distance at the US Foreign Service Institute

Will Travers
Georgetown University

By far the most common example of instructed third language (L3) acquisition in the United States today is a class called Portuguese for Spanish Speakers, designed to capitalize on perceived mutual intelligibility between Spanish and Portuguese. Instrumental in the development of this class was a publication by the US Foreign Service Institute (FSI) in which the word ‘conversion’ was first used to describe what happens when a speaker of one language achieves fluency in another closely related language (Ulsh, 1971). In recent years, language departments at FSI have expanded on this idea, offering what they call ‘conversion courses’ with the intent of decreasing the amount of time it takes for students to gain proficiency in L3.

This paper examines these conversion courses with special consideration for linguistic distance, thereby raising various questions regarding the future of foreign language teaching. Do these courses, for instance, only offer insight into the teaching of cognate languages, or are there overarching lessons applicable to languages that are perhaps not as mutually intelligible? The possibility of using FSI data to measure distance between languages is also discussed. One innovative approach focused on the amount of time it took students at FSI to achieve fluency in various languages, which it was argued corresponded to these languages’ typological distance from English (Chiswick & Miller, 2004). It is proposed that this study be updated to include modern data on conversion courses, as well as on students’ prior linguistic knowledge.

Thanks to the high degree of standardization with respect to both structure and assessment, FSI offers a unique and underutilized setting in which to study foreign language teaching methodologies. As this paper intends to show, it also offers ways to measure the distances between foreign languages themselves.

References


Re-thinking compromise varieties of closely related languages: Ukrainian, Russian and Surzhik

Anna Verschik
Tallinn University

Surzhik (literally, bread from a mixture of different grains) is a cluster of in-between varieties on the continuum between Russian and Ukrainian; due to its hybrid nature it has been stigmatized as impure, neither one nor the other and as a sign of “assimilation” to Russian. Research conducted by Laada Bilaniuk (2005) demonstrates that there are several types of Surzhik with different characteristics and that directionality (Ukrainian to Russian or vice versa) is also relevant. The recent events in Ukraine have affected discourses about languages and, to some extent, general attitudes towards Surzhik and various types of compromise, such as code-switching between Russian and Ukrainian/Surzhik and Ukrainian etc.

The paper argues that it is not so much about material and structural similarity but about sociocultural factors that can contribute to understanding (Rehbein, ten Thije and Verschik 2012). The data comes from several talk-shows and interviews on Hromadske TV, independent internet TV channel in Ukraine; blogs written in Russian and/or Ukrainian and the internet portal repka.club. If earlier mainstream discourse on Ukrainian distanced itself from Surzhik because the latter undermined the Ukrainian strive for autonomy, dissimilarity from Russian and “purity”, then now Surzhik and compromise strategies such as code-switching are more acceptable. This happens because speakers of different varieties are likely to have a similar understanding of the current political events. Surzhik is viewed as juicy, expressive and dynamic and used in some discourses as a metaphorical weapon against anti-Ukrainian propaganda (the portal repka.club is called “portal of militant Surzhik”). On the other hand, there are claims to standardize regional varieties of Russian in order to increase differences from Russian of Russia.

References

How co-speech gestures influence the understanding of Spanish for Italian listeners

Stefanie Voigt & Charlotte Gooskens
University of Groningen

Italian and Spanish are mutually intelligible to some extent. Since the intelligibility of spoken language might be increased by visual aids (Jensen, 1989), this study aimed to investigate the influence of co-speech gestures on the intelligibility of spoken Spanish for Italian listeners. We hypothesized that co-speech gestures enhance the intelligibility of Spanish for Italian listeners.

The participants were 51 Italian students at the university of Rome (mean age = 22) who had not learned Spanish before.

The stimuli used were based on the retelling of five parts of a cartoon (“Canary Row”, Tweety and Sylvester) by a Spanish native speaker who had watched the cartoon right before the recordings were made.

The experiment consisted of a total of 4 conditions. In all four conditions the participants heard the same audio stimulus, but condition one was complemented with the video of the Spanish speaker’s full upper body. In condition 2 the participants could only see the head of the speaker. In condition 3, the head of the Spanish speaker was invisible, thus the participants could only hear the stimuli and see the gestures. Condition 4 consisted of the audio file and a blank screen only.

After watching a set of 5 video clips the participants were asked to answer a set of 3 multiple choice questions per clip.

The mean percentages of correct answers were 66.8% for condition 1 (full body and audio), 50.3% for condition 2 (head and audio), 52.7% for condition 3 (gestures and audio) and 47.2% for condition 4 (audio only). The differences between condition 1 and 2 as well as 1 and 3 are statistically significant at the 5% level. These results confirm our hypothesis that gestures aid to the intelligibility of an unknown but related language.

Reference