In Europe a large number of languages are spoken. Respect for linguistic diversity is a core EU value but the linguistic diversity can lead to communication problems that might only be reconciled with sufficient knowledge about the language situation at hand. However, the knowledge about the degree of mutual intelligibility and its linguistic and non-linguistic bases is rather limited. In my talk I will present the results of a large-scale web-based investigation of the mutual intelligibility of closely related languages within the Germanic, Slavic and Romance language families.

An overview will be given of the intelligibility structure of a large number of languages established by means of language tests that make it possible to compare intelligibility of various language pairs in their written and spoken form. To be able to explain the intelligibility results, we collected information about extra-linguistic factors such as language attitudes and language exposure by means of online questionnaires. Also, we measured distances at different linguistic levels between the included languages. The intelligibility results were correlated with the linguistic distances and extra-linguistic factors.

The results of the experiments indicate that intelligibility of spoken language as well as comprehension of written text in a related language is largely determined by the extent of the respondent’s past experience with the target language: more exposure to the target language yield better intelligibility. However, even if we trim the data such that all remaining respondents have roughly the same amount of earlier exposure to the target language, intelligibility can be predicted with great accuracy from combinations of intralinguistic and extralinguistic predictors (using multiple regressions models). The predictive power of attitude variables, however, turned out to be negligible.

The results will help us to determine under what conditions receptive multilingualism works and what its preconditions and its limits are. In a more general sense the results will provide a greater understanding of the robustness of the human language processing system. How deviant can a language be before it is no longer intelligible to the listener?
Reading comprehension in a related foreign language. How to help learners start

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One of the crucial aspects in research on multilingualism is the assumption that multilingual learners achieve the receptive competence in related foreign languages faster if they actively and deliberately use their prior linguistic knowledge (from all languages they have learned) and foreign language learning experience. But are learners always aware of their prior knowledge and experience? Do they know how to use them?

This plenary lecture will introduce two different attempts helping learners to develop their reading comprehension ability in one or more Germanic languages. An accelerated development of the ability to handle texts in a related new language is the main aim of both approaches presented here: EuroComGerm is a method which has been developed and in use in various educational settings over the last ten years. Based on the learning concept of the Seven Sieves of the European Intercomprehension learners are introduced to filter any of the Germanic languages through the Seven Sieves, comparing and contrasting them with the so-called bridge languages German and English. Experience with this method, the course feedback and empirical research allowed authors to review and to revise the method. The second edition of the publication – method and materials will be presented accordingly.

The second concept presented in the lecture refers to 11-12 years old beginners of German as a second or a third foreign language in a formal educational context, in which English is the first foreign language. A concept for reading comprehension lessons with an emphasis on strategy training was developed and implemented. Analysis of learners' reviews of this approach based on their subjective theories enabled a genesis of detailed assumptions about handling texts in beginner lessons with young foreign language learners.

References


This talk focuses on felicity conditions that need to be fulfilled for receptive multilingualism. There are at least four research strands that can be distinguished. (1) Form-oriented research focuses on specific linguistic characteristics (phonology, lexicon, grammar, etc.) and their influence on the intelligibility of linguistic stimuli in a receptive multilingualism context. (2) Comprehender-oriented research investigates the role linguistic repertoires and other individual cognitive resources play in receptive multilingualism. (3) Task-oriented approaches investigate the achievement of communicative goals in dyads or groups of speakers of different languages. (4) Studies of receptive multilingualism as a language regime investigate the contextual conditions necessary for its implementation, e.g. attitudes, pedagogical and legal dispositions.

In a first part of the talk, I will present a series of studies pertaining to the first category. In these studies, we investigated the impact of item characteristics in Germanic and Romance target languages on intelligibility. In all cases, the participants had not learnt the target languages beforehand. We were interested in observing whether and which lexical and grammatical contrasts between the target languages and languages mastered by the participants have an impact on comprehension. Converging evidence suggests that linguistic distance is a robust predictor in ‘untrained’ receptive multilingualism.

In a second part of the talk, I present results on the second strand of research. Which participant characteristics predict receptive skills in unknown languages (e.g. age, intelligence, linguistic repertoire)? Knowing languages and dialects that are closely related to the target language turns out to be helpful, as well as other resources such as crystallized intelligence. Combining strands one and two, we also investigated interactions of individual characteristics with features of the linguistic stimuli.

In the final part of this talk, I will focus on contextual and institutional aspects that are relevant for the successful implementation of receptive multilingualism as a “regime of language” (the fourth strand of research listed above). A case study of the Swiss Armed forces is presented. The evidence from survey data shows attitudinal, legal and practical problems that need to be overcome in a successful implementation of receptive multilingualism.

In a final discussion, I tie together the insights from strands 1, 2, and 4 and consider their relevance for individual’s capabilities to accomplish tasks (strand 3) in a receptive multilingualism setting.