

Intercomprehension between Cognate Languages

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Intercomprehension between cognate languages is an age-old communication method between people who speak different languages. It is at the same an innovative language learning method, very different from traditional ones.

When learning languages through intercomprehension, it is of key importance to separate two linguistic competences: the comprehension (reading, listening) from the production (speaking, writing). It is the comprehension which is trained: to learn to understand a language, written or spoken, or several cognate languages (since they have more in common than what separates them). Not only the words, but also the syntax and many cultural references are common. This way several languages trained at the same time may explain each other and render a kind of “global competence” of approaching new languages.

This is a quick method – a couple of dozens of hours is enough to pick it up – and transferable as well: Once having learnt to estimate somewhat accurately the meaning of samples of cognate languages, then the method can be applied on more distant languages, allowing at least partial understanding of them.

Which is the pedagogy of intercomprehension? It is to try to understand texts in languages that are unknown or little known but related to one’s own language/s, by means of the similarities between the languages and the context from which the text is taken (and one’s own experience from similar situations and other cultural knowledge one has acquired). Through these texts that will get longer and more complicated step by step, the students progress by developing more and more sophisticated and efficient decoding strategies. In addition experience shows that one quickly will lose the kind of inhibitions that sterilise one’s access to languages, so that the students will end up wanting to express themselves in the new language, which initially was not the objective of the training. To *want* to speak instead of *being expected* to do so – that is a difference that explains much of the success of the method.

It should be stressed that intercomprehension is based on a special ethic of communication which is interesting for two reasons. When all parties communicate with the other in their own language, a special mutual listening is developed; linguistically most certainly, but also in a wider sense, through a more respectful attitude towards the other’s points of view. None of the parties is limited in their repertoire because they have to use the language of the others, or to run the discussion in a third language. This is another advantage of intercomprehension, not to have to go through a global language – alien to both parties – which by being used will marginalise the other languages. Intercomprehension mobilises multilingualism and gives it efficiency and dignity in that it advocates certain equality among languages. And the mother tongue is mankind’s most sophisticated means of expressing one’s inner world, one’s identity.

But despite the fact that intercomprehension is interesting and that the method is almost miraculously efficient, it is hard to sell it. It meets with two major obstacles: It fits in badly with traditional language learning (concentrating on one language at a time) and there is a lack of trainers, capable of adapting the method to various groups and institutions that are willing to take it up. There is today, however, a solid base for the method in the global network REDINTER whose objective it is to propagate Intercomprehension as a language training method. Most European researchers in the field are members. Other objectives of

REDINTER are to produce deeper knowledge about the method and how it can be taught, to gather information on all activities that are being conducted in the field, and finally to train trainers, which is a necessary starting point in order to diffuse the method.

In the era of globalisation, many ask themselves if there is a real need to go over to a global language, which will marginalise all other languages, hence erasing the multiplicity of perspectives on our reality. Isn't it better to provide an instrument that allows learning several languages step by step? To *learn how to learn* languages, that is the objective of intercomprehension: It is for tomorrow's citizens of the world to witness the method's usefulness, but no doubt also its necessity.

Some training methods in intercomprehension

- *EuRom4, learning method in Romance languages*, 1997, Florence: La Nuova Italia Editrice; responsible: Claire BLANCHE-BENVENISTE (coord.). No longer in stock; will come out in an updated form as *EuRom5*; Catalan will be added to the originally four Romance languages: Spanish, French, Italian, and Portuguese (expected to be issued in 2010).
- *Galatea-Galanet*; responsible: Christian DEGACHE (coord.); Collaboration platform (European project under Socrates Lingua, 2001-2004); contact : galanet@u-grenoble3.fr; website: <http://www.galanet.be/>
- *Itinéraires romans*; responsible: Latin Union, direction, promotion and teaching of languages ; website: <http://dpe1.unilat.org/DPEL/Creation/IR/index.fr.asp>
- *Intercompréhension européenne (ICE)*; responsible: Éric CASTAGNE; website : <http://logatome.eu>
- *Programme Euromania* (European project under Socrates Lingua 2, 2005-2008), conceived and piloted by l'IUFM Midi-Pyrénées; responsible: Pierre ESCUDE, (coord.); website <http://www.euro-mania.eu/index.php>.