

## UNDERSTANDING NEW LANGUAGE: MUTUAL INTELLIGIBILITY IN ROMANCE LANGUAGE PAIR

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper concerns to the strategy applied by speakers of mutual intelligibility languages pairs in Europe, especially in Romance language pair, Portuguese and Spanish. Initial studies found a receptive multilingualism as a great strategy to break the gap of communication within these two languages. It is found that the speakers of both Portuguese and Spanish are able to communicate and understand each other even though they do not speak each other language. It happens because those two languages resemble each other and they have a large number of cognate words which makes them recognizable. However, it is also found that Portuguese speakers can understand Spanish easier than Spaniards understand Portuguese, because Portuguese is more complicated than Spanish.*

**Keywords:** *Mutual Intelligibility, receptive multilingualism, Romance language, Assymetric Mutual Intelligibility.*

## INTRODUCTION

As it is known, there are many variations of languages over the world. People from different countries speak different native languages, even within the same country, different regions or cities have different native languages. Based on Ethnologue (2019) there are 7.111 languages are spoken in the world. From those thousands languages, some of them are spoken in European countries. In Europe, there are 42 different languages spoken and 24 of them are official languages of the European Union (Lewis, Simons, & Fenning, 2015).

This language diversity sometimes causes problems for Europeans to talk to each other across national borders; it also leads to misunderstandings and misinterpreting for people who do not speak the other languages. This case attracts many researchers to conduct the studies to find the right solution. In 2007, The European Commission identified Receptive Multilingualism as one communication strategy that would be worth beside of studying the language. This receptive multilingualism strategy can be used by people from closely related languages. They are able to communicate each other using their own languages without having to speak each other language, for example an Indonesian speaks Bahasa Indonesia to a Malayan speaker and vice versa, they can understand each other when

each interactant continues to speak his/her own language.

The receptive multilingualism strategy mostly used by speakers from three mainland Scandinavian languages, Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian (Bo, 1978; Delsing & Lundin Akesson 2005; Maurud, 1976), because those languages can be mutually understood. They resemble each other and they have a large number of cognate words, which are not so different across languages, so that they become recognizable. Therefore, Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian can talk to each other in their own languages and they understand each other without knowing or speaking anyone's language.

Not only for the speakers in these three mainland Scandinavian languages, the receptive multilingualism strategy also used in some other European countries, such as in Slavic languages, language pairs Czech and Slovak which are categorized as mutual intelligibility as the Scandinavian languages. Moreover, a couple of language Portuguese and Spanish is a mutually intelligible Romance languages pair. The speakers of those languages are able to understand each other while speaking their own languages.

However, as some initial studies have shown, in some languages, mutual intelligibility between closely related languages is asymmetric. It can be seen in the language pairs of

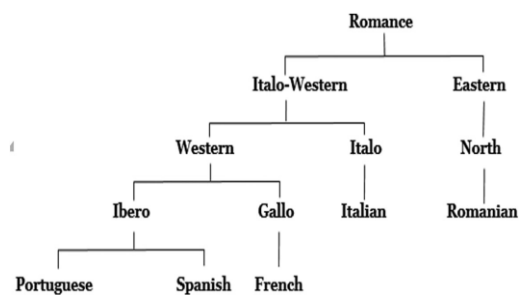
Spanish and Portuguese as Romance language pair and between Czech and Slovak in the Slavik language branch. The best-documented case of asymmetric is a pair of Scandinavian language, Danish and Swedish (e.g. Gooskens, Van Heuven, van Bezooijen, & Pacily, 2010). These two languages are understandable by each other speakers, but Danish speakers understand Swedish better than vice versa.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

It is assumed that the mutual intelligibility occurred based on the Geographical distance. In each group, Scandinavian, Germanic, and Romance group, the countries where located closed to each other will have higher possibility for the speakers to understand each other languages.

Gooskens & Van Heuven (2017) in their recent study measuring cross-linguistic intelligibility in the Germanic, Romance, and Slavic language groups by using word test, cloze test, and picture matching tasks, they found that the functional tests displayed similar patterns of intelligibility, where especially the cloze test and word translation were strongly correlated. The judged intelligibility scores and the results of the six functional tests are presented the intelligibility score per language family, 20 % (Germanic and Romance families) or 30% (Slavic) different language combinations. However, there

was bit different in Romance group, where the scores on the word test were lower than cloze test scores for some groups, especially in spoken words. It was identified that they have larger number of cognates in Romance word lists (85% cognates) than in Germanic (77%) and Slavic (64%) word lists.



(Gooskens, et al:2017)

Figure 1. Romance language tree shows that Portuguese and Spanish share a common language background. They are a pair of Western Romance language called Ibero. These two languages are understandable for the speaker each other language. In other words, they are mutual intelligibility pair language.

However, even though each member of this Romance language pair is understandable by speakers of the other language, the mutual intelligibility between these two languages is asymmetric. Portuguese speakers can understand Spanish more easily than Spanish speakers understand Portuguese. There are a lot of statements phrased by both linguists and non linguists about

this asymmetric mutual intelligibility; for example, in one Associated Press news article (Timberlake, 1989[2a]) was stated that Spanish and Portuguese are closely related, but they have different pronunciation. Portuguese has more complicated pronunciation system than Spanish. The Portuguese speakers can generally understand spoken Spanish, but most of the Spanish speakers cannot understand Portuguese.

It is assessed that Portuguese is more complicated than the Spanish. Even, it was explained in one of the popular tourist guidebooks (Qebesen & Biel: 1986) that most of Portuguese have a tremendously good and natural ability in comprehending the spoken Spanish, they know Spanish without exposing the language. Meanwhile, the Spanish are able to ask questions in Portuguese, but they are unable to understand the response.

Furthermore, one of linguists, Jensen (1989) in his experiment found mutual intelligibility of Spanish and Portuguese in his study involving Brazilian-Portuguese group and Spanish (Latin-American) group. In this study, the results also showed that the Brazilian-Portuguese speakers could understand and comprehend Spanish rather well; in contrast, it was more difficult for (Latin-American) Spanish speakers to comprehend Portuguese. Based on the tasks that he conducted,

he found that overall the difference score between two groups was not overwhelming. Brazilian group got the score 58% then followed by the Latin-American group which got 50%. Brazilian performed better than Spanish in most of the tasks. From the four texts, Brazilian group got higher score in the three texts, Urbanization text which is originally written in Spanish and translated into Portuguese, Christmas letter originally written in Portuguese and translated into Spanish, and also in the TV newscasts reading task, While in another task, Spanish group got higher score in reading on Ecuador originally Spanish with Portuguese translation.

Moreover, even though Spanish and Portuguese are two closely related languages, they are quite different in pronunciation. Mateus and d'Andrade (2000) stated that Portuguese has similar phonetic to French or Catalan. The pronunciation of Spanish is recognized more closely related to Italian pronunciation (Eddington, 2004). Besides that, Mateus and d'Andrade (2000) explain that Portuguese has rather complicated vowel system with nasalized vowels and a high prevalence of assimilations. In contrast, there are only five vowels in the Spanish vowel system (e.g. Cressey 1987). The same case with Scandinavian language pair, Danish and Swedish which is found have difference pronunciation, because

they have different consonant and vowel in words cognate (Gooskens & Bezooijen, 2013). Besides that, in spontaneous speech, Portuguese speakers reduce more syllables and utter fewer but more complex syllables than Spanish speakers do. These vowel and syllable systems lead Spanish speaker face difficulty in listening and comprehending the Portuguese speakers in running speech, they cause some differences in the pronunciation.

Furthermore, Spanish and Portuguese also have difference in timedness in speech. There are two categories of timedness in language, stress-timed of syllable-timed (Pike, 1945). Generally, Spanish is categorized as a syllable-timed language, where the time used in pronouncing each syllable is approximately same (Pike 1945). For Portuguese it has been claimed that it rather more stressed-timed (Frota & Vigario, 2001). This language uses approximately the same amount time between stressed syllables in speech (Pike:1945).

More recently, Gooskens, et al (2017) used a cloze test to investigate the mutual intelligibility between closely related languages in Europe, and found a number of cases of asymmetric intelligibility in the Romance language group. Based on the data from 5 Romance languages, the Spanish is the easiest language to others, the result showed that 57.2 % of answers were correct. Romanian is the most difficult to be

understood for the speaker other languages, only 12,5% task were answered correctly.

The Portuguese speakers perform better than other speakers in understanding other languages, the mean score of this group was 47,2%. Moreover, they explained that both Italian and Portuguese listeners understand the Spanish better than Spanish listeners understand Italian and Portuguese. They showed the asymmetry mutual intelligibility in Romance languages that Portuguese is more difficult by speakers other languages from Romance group. The characteristic of the Portuguese language system that it reduces syllables and has a richer vowel inventory, which makes it more difficult to be understood for listeners of other Romance languages, including Spanish.

Beside of the linguistics factors, there are some non-linguistics factors affect this asymmetric mutual intelligibility between closely related languages. Attitude toward the language is one of important factors effects the asymmetric mutual intelligibility (e.g. Borestam 1987, Maurud 1976, Wolff 1959). If the attitude of language A speakers is more positive toward the language B than the way round, it is assumed that speakers of language A will understand language B better than B speakers in understanding language A. This positive attitude encourages people to try and understand the language. Some cases of this attitude are shown

in the pair of Danish and Swedish, Portuguese and Spanish. According to Gooskens & Bezooijen (2013), the attitude of Danish speakers toward Swedish is more positive than vice versa. Jensen (1989) in his result also found that the Portuguese speakers have more positive attitude toward Spanish than Spanish speakers to Portuguese. Besides that, he also found that the experience with other language held a responsibility of this asymmetric, for example use in the family, study, travel, etc.

### CONCLUSION

Mutual intelligibility is a great strategy to break down the gap of communication between closely related languages. Speakers from closely related language tend to communicate by using their own native languages, but they can understand each others' language. They have the ability to understand each other language without having to learn the other languages.

However, some related languages have asymmetric mutual intelligibility. As a Romance language pair, Portuguese and Spanish are understandable for each others' speakers, but the Spanish speakers find it more difficult to understand Portuguese than vice versa, Portuguese speakers are able to understand Spanish easier.

There are some factors leads to this phenomenon. These factors come from both linguistic

and non-linguistic factors. One of these linguistics factors that Portuguese is more complicated than Spanish. It has a quite complicated vowel system and a high prevalence of assimilations which lead the Portuguese and Spanish have different pronunciation and also different timedness in speech. The attitude toward language becomes the most important non linguistics factor causes the asymmetric.

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