Chapter 9

Translanguaging in Multilingual Chat Interaction: Opportunities for Intercomprehension between Romance Languages

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ABSTRACT

In this contribution, intercomprehension between Romance Languages (RL) will be analyzed as a particular setting of multilingual interaction in the globalized and digital world. Intercomprehension is a multilingual practice where interlocutors collaboratively achieve meaning through the use of typologically related languages and other semiotic resources, exploiting the similarities existing across languages and the opportunities of transfer they offer. The communicative contract underlying this particular typology of multilingual interaction stresses that each interlocutor should master at least one RL and use it productively and, at the same time, try to understand the RL of the other speakers. Through the analysis of multilingual exchanges in chat-rooms of the platform Galanet, the need to take a more open stance towards the communicative contract will be evinced. Particularly, three behaviors related to the breakdown of the communicative contract – and respective consequences – will be critically analyzed: the use of a taboo language (English), the use of other linguistic resources not included in the contract and the production of utterances in target languages. These communicative behaviors will justify the need to enrich the understanding of intercomprehension by adopting a translingual lens and, thus, by abandoning a still prevalent monoglossic orientation in research dealing with this multilingual communicative context.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language education in the digital era is being confronted with the idea that linguistic borders are liquid and inadequate to explain linguistic phenomena or communication in super-diverse contexts (Canagarajah, 2013; Makony & Pennycook, 2007; Pennycook, 2010). From this perspective, language education should not be bound to a particular (foreign) language, but should engage with diversity and plurality in order
to achieve a holistic comprehension of the world’s linguistic organization, management, manipulation, and dispensation:

Assumptions about the existence of languages and, ipso facto, multilingualism, are so deeply embedded in predominant paradigms of language studies that they are rarely questioned. Multilingualism, furthermore, viewed from this perspective, is an indomitably good thing; the task of linguists, sociolinguists, applied linguists and educational linguists is to enhance our understanding of multilingualism, to overcome the monolingual blinkers of Anglo- or Eurocentric thought, to encourage both understanding of and the practice of multilingualism. (Makoni & Pennycook, 2011, p. 439)

Furthermore, real linguistic practices are becoming semiotically more complex in the digital era. This is due to the multiplication of communicative resources, which introduces new sense-containers, i.e., new features able to create meaning (Jewitt, 2009), and creates new possibilities of meaning construction. Such complexity can be grasped through concepts such as translanguaging (Garcia & Wei, 2014), which refer to transemiotic communicative practices that crisscross several linguistic resources (or “bits of languages”, according to Blommaert, 2010) and other semiotic codes, such as symbols or images.

In this contribution one specific context where translanguaging is particularly visible will be presented and analyzed: the chat conversations produced within the Galanet project (platform presently moved to http://miriadi.net/elgg/miriadi/home). This European project (developed between 2001 and 2004, but still producing new on-line sessions) aimed at creating multilingual contact situations across speakers from different Romance Languages (Catalan, French, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian, and Spanish). The Galanet platform includes several communicative tools (e-mail, discussion forum, and chat rooms) in order to provide opportunities for engaging with the project’s philosophy: speaking a Romance Language (RL) and trying to understand the language(s) of the other RL speakers. This communicative philosophy is known as intercomprehension between RL. Intercomprehension, from this interactional perspective, is a multilingual communicative practice between speakers who do not make use of a common language during conversation, resorting instead to the use of their Mother Tongues to the use of their Mother Tongues (or other reference/known languages) in trying to understand each other. Intercomprehension between RL is based on the assumption that they are part of a linguistic continuum, and that a positive and systematic exploitation of similarities and differences between these languages can support language acquisition on the one hand, and be an alternative to monolingual communication on the other hand (Araújo e Sá, De Carlo & Melo-Pfeifer, 2010). Galanet multilingual chats thus foster intercomprehension through the simultaneous practice of several RL, both productive and receptive: productive, because participants may use and adapt the already known RL to communicate; and receptive, because those languages are used to access meaning in new, unknown languages, by means of cross-linguistic transfer. Seen dialogically, both productive and receptive orientations to intercomprehension foster co-construction of meaning and collaborative achievement in multilingual interaction in RL.

The research questions in this contribution are:

- How does using a translanguaging lens enrich the concept of intercomprehension between RL (from an interactional perspective)?
- Which dynamics and accomplishments characterize multilingual interaction in chat-rooms?
- How do interlocutors in multilingual RL chat sequences challenge linguistic contracts and language policing?
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