

Mutual Intelligibility: Language, Culture, Cognition
24th and 25th June 2021
University of Surrey

Workshop Report
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Introduction

Despite being perceived as unique, self-contained systems, most languages of the world are not isolated entities, and exist in linguistic continua with other related varieties. Related languages share many properties, giving rise to the global phenomenon of mutual intelligibility, where a speaker of one language can use their native variety to efficiently communicate with a speaker of another language, and vice versa.

This innovative and timely inter-disciplinary workshop was the first of its kind to examine mutual intelligibility from cultural and cognitive as well as linguistic perspectives. By bringing together researchers from a diverse range of fields, this workshop provided a foundation for initiating a multi-disciplinary conversation about mutual intelligibility and for identifying how various theoretical and empirical research methods could be combined and utilised in future research.

This workshop was originally planned as a two-day in-person event at the University of Surrey, Guildford in June 2020. Due to the pandemic-related travel and gathering restrictions the event was adapted into an online workshop over two afternoons on the 24th and 25th of June 2021. The workshop was co-organised by Dr Nadezda Christopher (Surrey Morphology Group, School of Literature and Languages), Dr Catherine Barbour (School of Literature and Languages), Dr Katie Gilligan-Lee (School of Psychology).

The event was attended by 18-25 delegates (the number varied from session to session on different days) from at least 8 different countries. The delegates were predominantly from linguistic, psycholinguistic, psychological, and language education backgrounds and included academic researchers, PhD students, language teachers, and cultural practitioners. The workshop comprised four keynote talks and two panel sessions which included three talks each.

Workshop Goals

The main goal of this workshop was to initiate a conversation about mutual intelligibility between researchers and practitioners from a range of fields with the view to develop multi-disciplinary research collaborations.

A sub-goal of the workshop was to share the most up-to-date research findings or the ongoing research plans and projects in the field of mutual intelligibility which is still relatively under-researched and requires much further attention from researchers of various specialisations.

The final sub-goal of the workshop was to highlight some of the gaps in the area of mutual intelligibility research, and potential paths for future inter-disciplinary research in this field.

Event Themes

Keynote Talks

Both days of the workshop were structured around two keynote talks each, one of which opened the afternoon, and the other one closed it. The first opening keynote talk was delivered by Dr Charlotte Gooskens (Associate Professor at the University of Groningen, Netherlands) under the title 'Mutual Intelligibility between Closely Related Languages in Europe'. Dr Gooskens outlined the latest developments in the mutual intelligibility research and shared some of the valuable insights gained from the large-scale mutual intelligibility research project she had conducted with a group of colleagues.

The second keynote of the day was delivered by Professor Bertram Opitz (Professor in Neuroimaging and Cognitive Neuroscience at the University of Surrey, UK). This talk was titled 'Miniature Artificial Languages: a promising approach to study SLA', and provided insights into the innovative neuroscientific research aimed at identifying mechanisms of second language acquisition and the interaction of the first and second language acquisition processes.

Dr Eve Eppler (Associate Professor/Reader at the University of Roehampton, UK) opened the second day of the workshop with her keynote talk 'Estimated Mutual Intelligibility in Kurdish', in which she introduced the ongoing research project aimed at exploring the phenomenon of mutual intelligibility amongst the varieties of Kurdish for the first time. Dr Eppler shared some of the methodological ideas and challenges as well as some initial observations and tentative research outcomes.

The final keynote event of the workshop was in an unusual form of an interview with an artist, poet and translator Andreea Birsanu (Galicia, Spain) who engages with the phenomenon of mutual intelligibility in her creative practices. Andreea shared her views on being an artist and a poet within a linguistic continuum of several mutually intelligible (to a higher or lower degree) Romance languages.

Presentations

As well as the four keynote talks, the workshop included six presentations from researchers and educators of diverse backgrounds. The main themes of these presentations focused on methods and methodology of mutual intelligibility research, mutual intelligibility and language learning, mutual intelligibility and education, mutual intelligibility within various language families, the relation between morphology, syntax, phonology (and other linguistic characteristics/features) and mutual intelligibility, mutual intelligibility types and variants.

Next Steps & Outcomes

The workshop stimulated several interesting conversations around various aspects of mutual intelligibility research which has already served as a foundation for future collaborative effort between some of the participants.

Several workshop participants completed a post-event feedback form and all those who did that indicated that they were either 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the networking opportunities within the workshop.

Some of the key future research directions which could be identified during the workshop were:

- Expansion of the areas of mutual intelligibility research (i.e., extending the research to previously unstudied linguistic families);
- Development of mutual intelligibility research methodology;
- Combining research methods and tools from various disciplines with the view to enrich the methodological repertoire of mutual intelligibility research and to gain deeper insights into the phenomenon;
- Mutual intelligibility as a unique phenomenon and an 'access point' for various interdisciplinary research developments;
- Possibilities of developing of interdisciplinary grant applications.

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We are extremely grateful to Mirela Dumic and Vicki Blamey from IAS for all the incredible support and guidance they offered to us throughout the organisational process, especially when we faced the inevitability of changing the format of our event due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

We are thankful to Penny Everson (SMG) for her administrative support, and to a knowledgeable and helpful PhD student Dávid Gyórfi (SMG) who provided technical support for our workshop throughout.

We give heartfelt thanks to all the participants of our workshop whose attendance and active interest in the topic of our event made it more special than we could ever have hoped. This has given us the motivation to think of continuing with MILCC events in the future.