MUTUAL INTELLIGIBILITY: LANGUAGE, CULTURE, COGNITION
ONLINE EVENT
WORKSHOP PROGRAMME

24-25 June 2021
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 variety to efficiently communicate with a speaker of another language, and vice versa (e.g. Spanish and Portuguese). Whilst research in this area has typically been associated with the realm of linguistics, a cultural studies approach to mutual intelligibility demonstrates how it facilitates intercultural exchange between communities, challenging the misconception of languages as discrete units that has reinforced national and racial essentialism. From the point of view of cognition, meanwhile, empirical research methods can shed light on the biological underpinnings of mutual intelligibility, i.e. what neural correlates and cognitive processes underlie language comprehension and by extension enable speakers of different languages to successfully communicate with each other.

Our timely inter-disciplinary two-day workshop is the first of its kind to examine mutual intelligibility from cultural and cognitive as well as linguistic perspectives. By bringing together researchers from a range of fields, this workshop aims to provide a foundation for the development of multi-disciplinary research projects on mutual intelligibility. The goal is to gain a broader understanding of this significant and complex global phenomenon, and identify how various theoretical and empirical research methods can be combined in future research.

Workshop Chair: Dr Nadezda Christopher, University of Surrey
Organising committee: Dr Catherine Barbour, University of Surrey
Dr Katie Gilligan, University of Surrey
Administrative support: Ms Vicki Blamey and Ms Penny Everson (University of Surrey)
## PROGRAMME

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Charlotte Gooskens
University of Groningen

Charlotte (BA in Comparative Linguistics, University of Aarhus, Denmark; MA in General Linguistics, Leiden University, the Netherlands; PhD in Linguistics, University of Nijmegen, the Netherlands) is an associate professor of European Linguistics at the University of Groningen and an adjunct associate professor at the University of New England, Australia. Her research focuses on the perceptual and communicative effects of language variation, e.g. language attitudes, speaker identity and mutual intelligibility between closely related languages. She has authored more than 120 articles and book chapters, and served as a guest editor for several special issues of linguistic journals; she also co-organised a large number of international conferences and workshops. She is a consultant and co-investigator in various international projects examining mutual intelligibility between closely related languages (e.g. Scandinavian languages, Romance languages, Finnish-Estonian, Czech-Slovak, Kurdish dialects in the Middle East, Gurage dialects of Ethiopia, languages of the Pacific Islands of Vanuatu, dialects of Indonesia and Nigeria). She was a guest researcher at Firat University (Turkey), University of New England (Australia), and University of Copenhagen (Denmark), and currently is a fellow at the Polish Institute of Advanced Studies (PIAST) in Warsaw.

Bertam Opitz
University of Surrey

Bertram Opitz studied Biophysics at the Russian State University in Moscow, Russia. He was a PhD student at the Max-Planck-Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences, Leipzig and received his doctoral degree in 2000. Until autumn 2001 he continued working as a post-doc researcher and then moved to Saarland University as an Associate Professor for Cognitive Neuroscience. Bertram joined the Brain & Behaviour Group at the University of Surrey in August 2012 as a Professor for Neuroimaging. He has been leading the Brain and Behaviour Group since 2015. Bertram’s research focuses on the neural underpinnings of learning and memory, with his primary interest being in the neural mechanisms of language acquisition and what factors influence the learning process. Bertram is also interested in the functional architecture of different memory systems and the processes by which information is transferred between these memory systems. In current research projects he investigates the processes of creating new enduring memory traces and modulating existing ones. Other projects focus on how we can exert control over our memories, and how these control processes could be trained. The main focus of these projects lies on training induced changes in the neural network in healthy participants and patient samples. To achieve a comprehensive understanding of learning and memory systems Bertram examines the neural organization of these systems using well established neuroimaging techniques like event-related potentials and functional magnetic resonance tomography in combination with neural stimulation techniques like transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS) to investigate the neural correlates of learning and memory.

Eve Eppler
University of Roehampton

Eva Eppler is Associate Professor of Linguistics at the University of Roehampton, London. She completed her MA in English and German Language and Literature at the University of Vienna where she later worked as teaching and research assistant to Prof Dieter Kastovsky. A post-graduate grant from the Austrian Ministry of Science enabled her to move to University College London for her PhD. In London she got involved with the Language Interaction in Plurilingual and Plurilectal Speakers group and set up a transcription and coding system for multilingual data (LIDES, 2000). Her PhD on structural aspects of German-English code-switching is conducted within one of the first cognitive theories of language as a system, Word Grammar (Hudson 1990, 2007). It generated the “Dependency Distance Hypothesis for bilingual code-switching” which has been tested on German-English and Chinese-English data which support it. Since then Eva Eppler has been working on various aspects of multilingualism, including testing predictions of theoretical frameworks on code-mixed data and multilingualism in audio-visual translation. Her recent interest in Kurdish has led her to pursue more impactful applied topics in collaborations with a geographer/GIS expert, such as a Perceptual Dialectological study of Kurdish. She has written and edited six books, published nine peer reviewed journal articles and twenty-six chapters in edited volumes. She is now working on establishing degrees of mutual intelligibility of Kurdish varieties and on dialect maps of Kurdish based on the Dialects of Kurdish web-resource (Matras et al. 2026). She is interested in developing materials for a functional mutual intelligibility application that can be adapted to different language combinations and families.

Andreea Birsanu

Andreea Birsanu, (born 1998, Bâcău, Romania) is an artist based in Galicia, north-west Spain, where she emigrated with her family in 2005. Her artistic project Silvatiica, an exploration of Galician nature in art, was developed during the pandemic in 2020. She believes in the power of artistic creation for social change, with particular commitment to the rural sphere, feminism, and motherhood. She commissions projects via her personal website and Etsy shop. Andreea is currently undertaking a literary translation project from Romanian to Galician, as well as creating the first illustrated Romanian-Galician dictionary. She is a keen writer and runs the project ‘Mulleres que escriben en galego’ (Women Who Write in Galician) to promote writing by women in the language. Andreea speaks Romanian, Galician and Spanish fluently.

Website: https://silvatiica.com/
Receptive multilingualism (RM) is a phenomenon in human communication where the parties involved do not share a language, but they are still able to communicate effectively by virtue of speaking varieties which are close enough in terms of linguistic distance so as to allow for mutual intelligibility (Gooskens 2019). Typical examples include the Nordic countries (i.e. RM between Danish, Norwegian and Swedish; Delsing and Lundin 2005) or Slavic languages (Golubović 2016). In these scenarios, the relationship between the linguistic communities – and thus the level of RM – is generally quite symmetrical, i.e. none of the languages in question is considered more prestigious and/or speakers of one variety are not more likely to have been exposed to the other variety or varieties. There exists, however, another type of RM, one where the converse is true. In this RM scenario (‘RM with one dominant variety’ or RMODV), one of the varieties in question is the dominant one (‘dominant variety’ or DV) and speakers of the other varieties are much more likely to have been exposed to it. Typically, the DV is the language of a politically dominant nation (as with Russian and the rest of the Slavic-speaking world pre-1989) or the variety used by a nation/community that is dominant in a soft way, e.g. quantitatively or culturally (as with Czech and Slovak until very recently). There are two typical and very similar examples of RMODV: the first one, a classic well-established case, involves the intelligibility of Egyptian Arabic (henceforth: EgAr) to speakers of other Arabic varieties. While the mutual intelligibility of Arabic varieties and thus the role of RM in the communication between their speakers is still very much an unexplored field, it is a truth generally acknowledged that the EgAr is the DV in this context. This is not so much due to the sheer number of speakers of EgAr, as it is the effect of Egypt’s cultural dominance as the major producer of TV shows, movies and popular music (Asante 2002: 117). The exposure to this cultural production results in greater familiarity with EgAr all over the Arabic-speaking world and thus asymmetric RM. The other scenario of RMODV is an emerging one and involves the West African varieties of Afro-Caribbean English-lexifier Creoles, i.e. Sierra Leone Krio, Ghanaian Pidgin, Cameroon Pidgin and Nigerian Pidgin/Naija2 (Yakpo 2021), but also Liberian Kolokwa (own research).

The DV in this case is Naija, once again largely due to the population figures and the socioeconomic status of Nigeria, as well as a result of the region being flooded with media production from Nollywood and Nigerian radio broadcasts. In this paper, I examine these two RMODV scenarios, their sociolinguistic background and their unique nature vis-à-vis other types of RM. In addition to this, I will also propose a method for the functional testing of RMODV that takes into account the context in which RMODV most often takes place, i.e. the passive reception of media. This testing method can be used not only to describe the level of RMODV in the community in question, but it can also serve to measure the influence of RMODV on the mutual intelligibility of the variety in question and DV, as well as account for some of the shortcomings of the standard battery of mutual intelligibility tests (i.e. the lack of consideration of the paralinguistic factors, cf. Gooskens and van der Heuven 2020: 376).

In these scenarios, the relationship between the linguistic communities – and thus the level of RM – is generally quite symmetrical, i.e. none of the languages in question is considered more prestigious and/or speakers of one variety are not more likely to have been exposed to the other variety or varieties. There exists, however, another type of RM, one where the converse is true. In this RM scenario (‘RM with one dominant variety’ or RMODV), one of the varieties in question is the dominant one (‘dominant variety’ or DV) and speakers of the other varieties are much more likely to have been exposed to it.

References:


Gooskens, Charlotte; and Vincent J. van Heuven 2020. “How well can intelligibility of closely related languages in Europe be predicted by linguistic and non-linguistic variables?” Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism 10, 351–379.

Intelligibility in Natural Languages and Formal Languages
Harald Hammarström
Uppsala University

A common view holds that intelligibility in natural languages is a gradient property. In this view intelligibility can be anywhere in the continuum between none, partial or total, with no natural border that would divide it into a binary yes/no property. We argue that this view is premature. With some simple assumptions on what constitutes a language, we show that intelligibility can be defined as a yes/no property in a simple formal way, without imposing an arbitrary threshold. The indication from this result is that natural languages, can, at least in theory, be discretized and counted in a systematic manner.

Biography
Harald Hammarström studied Computer Science and Linguistics at the University of Uppsala (1997-2003). He then went on to do a PhD in Computational Linguistics at Chalmers University (2004-2009) developing computational models that cater to diverse kinds of languages. Postdoctoral research at Radboud University Nijmegen, Max Planck Institute of Evolutionary Anthropology, Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, and Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History focussed on empirical and computational approaches to linguistic diversity, genealogical/areal relationships and language universals.

Intelligibility across Romance languages: the role of inflexional morphology.
Chiara Cappellaro
University of Oxford

This study is concerned with inherent intelligibility (Gooskens 2013) between written Italian and Romanian. We focus in particular on the role of inflexional morphology in the process of interlingual inferencing in a cognate guessing experiment (cf. Berthele 2011, Vanhove & Berthele 2015) or the ability of native speakers of a language to recognize cognate words in isolation in a cognate language without previous knowledge of that language. We address the following questions: • Is identity at the level of the lexical root necessary and sufficient to correct cognate guessing? • To what extent are differences at the level of inflexional affix a barrier to recognition? • Are there ‘item-related’ variables that correlate with correct guessing? In particular: o Is a purely quantitative difference (e.g. Levenshtein’s distance) self-explanatory? o Does ‘phonological substance’ (e.g. number of syllables) play any role? o Is it the case that ‘consonants may contribute more to the subjective transparency of cognate relationships than do vowels’ (Vanhove & Berthele 2015: 99)?

To address these issues, two parallel experiments were carried out in Italy (MontecatiniTuscany) and Romania (Iași-Moldova). 113 Italian final-year students were asked to recognize (and if so, to translate) 159 Romanian words – 108 cognate words with the same etymon and same meaning in Italian and Romanian (es. lup ‘wolf’, mână ‘hand’, timp ‘time’) and 51 words of nonLatin origin that have no equivalent in Italian (abur ‘steam’, iad ‘hell’, pisică ‘cat’). 116 Romanian final-year students were presented with 143 Italian words in total – 94 cognates and 49 Italian words that have no equivalent in Romanian (bosco ‘woods’, gatta ‘cat’, gambero ‘shrimp’). The stimuli were selected according to four main criteria: (i) identity/non-identity of lexical root; (ii) identity/non-identity of inflexional affix; (iii) number of syllables; (iv) presence/absence of consonant clusters. Moreover, they were coded for frequency and Levenshtein distance. We propose that factors of morphological structure should be considered when looking at interlingual inferencing and intelligibility. Our analysis, in fact, will show that (i) Levenshtein distance cannot always account for the data; (ii) lexical root identity is sufficient (but not necessary) for the correct guessing of lexical meaning, provided correct segmentation between root and inflexional ending is achieved. And (iii) speakers of a language with extensive root allomorphy (within inflected lexemes but also variation in shape across derivationally-related lexemes) seem to be an advantage for the cognate guessing task.

References
FRI DAY 25TH JUNE

Mutual intelligibility in Philippine Austronesian languages: The case of Tagalog and Bikol

Orlyn Joyce D. Esquivel
University of the Philippines Diliman

An archipelago of 7,100 islands located in Southeast Asia, the Philippines is marked by significant linguistic diversity with 181 living languages being used (Bravante & Holden, 2019). Most of the languages are dialectally diverse, having several originating extensive dialect strings. Moreover, the Philippine languages belong to the Western Malayo-Polynesian group of the Malayo-Polynesian branch of the Austronesian languages family. The archeological record implies that the earliest Austronesian speakers arrived in the northern Philippines about 5,500 years ago prior to the Austronesian expansion. According to Grimes (2000), with 167 Philippine ethnolinguistic groups, at least ten are presently spoken by more than a million population, and account for what have been noted to as the ‘major’ Philippine languages. These are Tagalog, Cebuano, Ilokano, Hiligaynon, Bikol, Samar-Leyte, Kapampangan, Pangasinan, Maranao, and Maguindanao. With this context, the researcher established the degree of mutual intelligibility of closely related languages within the Tagalog and Bikol language groups in the Philippines in a large-scale webbased investigation, specifically through the use of Leipzig corpus collections.

In this study, cognates candidates were extracted using the 100 most frequent language words from both of the corpora. In addition, the researcher used Tagalog and Bikol PALI dictionaries for manually establishing the cognates or language pairs of both languages based on the frequency listings. The results of the data sets were compared, and the language distance was calculated through crosslanguage distributions (Ciobanu & Dinu, 2014) of the similar cognates. Finally, the results suggest that mutual intelligibility can be established between these language pairs over the use of online corpora and dictionaries. This study also provides evidence that linguistic similarities promote mutual intelligibility between Austronesian languages.

Biography

Orlyn Joyce D. Esquivel is a licensed professional teacher and a postgraduate student in the linguistics program at the University of the Philippines Diliman. She is affiliated with the Linguistic Society of the Philippines, British Association for Applied Linguistics, and AsiaTEFL.

L3 word recognition based on non-native competence in an L2

Jacopo Saturno
University of Bergamo

Against the background of intercomprehension (IC) studies, the present paper describes L3 word recognition based on existing knowledge of a genetically related L2. This configuration implies that the bridge language (i.e., the language used to make inferences about the unknown target language) is not the speaker’s native language. Traditionally, IC primarily targets native speakers of the bridge language — as opposed to language learners — because of their greater access to its grammar and vocabulary. However, compared to the untrained native speaker, language learners also feature skills that may facilitate IC, such as a larger multilingual repertoire (Berthele & Lambelet 2009; Vanhove & Berthele 2015; 2017), conceptual knowledge and strategic know-how (Berthele 2011), and greater tolerance to deviations of various type from the norm of their known languages (Berthele 2008). They also possess greater language awareness and meta-linguistic reflection skills (Jessner 1999). The research question of the study is whether or not spontaneous L3 word recognition skills may benefit from explicit instruction on the systematic sound correspondences between L2 and L3. Such positive effects are effectively postulated by the majority of IC resources (Klein & Stegmann 2000; Hufeisen & Marx 2007), but were rarely tested empirically. To pursue the research question, 26 L1 Italian university students of L2 Russian were asked to translate the Russian 30 Polish words, presented in their written form.

Target words were etymologically related to their Russian equivalent; however, some pairs diverged in a phonologically systematic and predictable manner (e.g. /dʲ/ vs. /dʒ/ in Rus. /ixoˈdʲitʲ/ vs. Pol. /ixoˈdʒitʲ/ ‘to play’), while others presented unpredictable differences (e.g. /i/ in Rus. /iˈgratʲ/ vs. Pol. /iˈgratʲ/ ‘to play’). The participants then took a 20-hour, meta-linguistically explicit course in comparative Slavic grammar focussing on the systematic sound correspondences between the two languages. The word recognition task was then administered a second time. The results show that indeed, the effect of explicit instruction was most noticeable on those targets whose difference from their Russian equivalent can be described in terms of systematic sound correspondences.

References


Continued ➤
Jurassic Park

Jurassic Park is a 1993 American science fiction adventure film directed by Steven Spielberg and written by Michael Crichton. It is based on Crichton's 1990 novel of the same name. The film tells the story of aUUIVERSITY OF SURREY