

You understand more than you think: Testing mutual Intelligibility within the Romance language family using the picture task

STEFANIE VOIGT
CHARLOTTE GOOSKENS
University of Groningen

In 2007, the High Level Group on Multilingualism pointed out that there is a lack of knowledge about mutual intelligibility of European languages. If languages are mutually intelligible, their speakers can talk in their native languages to each other and are able to understand each other to a certain extent. As many studies point out, the Scandinavian languages are mutually intelligible to a large extent (Gooskens 2006, Schüppert 2011), but there is not so much research investigating mutual intelligibility of other European languages.

This paper investigated the influence of a picture task on the mutual intelligibility within the Romance language family. Native speakers of Spanish, Portuguese, Romanian, French and Italian participated in three different tests, all of them in a written and spoken form. The first test was a simple word translation task where the participants were confronted with 50 words in the foreign language and had to translate them to their native language. We used this method to test intelligibility on the word level. The second test was a cloze test, which is a text where 12 words were deleted and put on top of the text. The participant's task was to fill the gaps. This test was chosen to test intelligibility on a text and sentence level. The last task was a picture test where the participants would read or hear a text in a related language and then had to pick the right picture out of four. This was designed to investigate the overall understanding of a closely related language.

The online experiment was conducted from October 2013 until April 2013 and anyone was able to participate. Age, level of education, background knowledge, language attitudes, language contact and other factors were later taken into account and the groups were matched to be comparable. The results vary depending on age and education, as well as depending on the factor whether the test was a written or spoken one. For this paper we chose a group of high educated 18-30 year old with academic background.

The overall results for both the written and the spoken picture task show that while for the other two tests we find both low scores and high asymmetries across several language pairs, for the picture task the results are overall over 80% correct which shows that when it comes to understanding the main content of a text, the tested Romance languages are close enough to be highly mutual intelligible.