Practices and Potentials of Intercomprehension

Research into the efficiency of intercomprehension with regard to the workflow at the Directorate-General for Translation of the European Commission

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Summary

This investigation into the experiences and attitudes of employees (n=15) with regard to *intercomprehension* at the Directorate-General for Translation (DGT) of the European Commission can be summarised as follows:

- The vast majority of DGT employees are familiar with *intercomprehension* and use it, both in oral and written communication;
- All possible language combinations are used by applying *intercomprehension*;
- Factors such as personal relationships, linguistic background, linguistic competencies, location and subject determine the use of *intercomprehension;*
- *Intercomprehension* is mostly used in informal situations and with acquaintances;
- In formal situations and communication with strangers, a *lingua franca* (e.g. English) is more often used; the majority also thinks of this as more efficient communication;
- The respondents are positive about *intercomprehension* training, both language specific and general;
- The use of *intercomprehension* differs extensively between DGT departments;
- Employees think that *intercomprehension* can increase the efficiency of the translation process, but that risks relating to quality control, efficiency and political sensitivities go hand in hand with it;
- These risks can be neutralised by only using *intercomprehension* for internal documents;
- DGT turns out to be a specific communicative setting with highly language-proficient professionals, which might have influenced the results;
- Employees see a contrast between the efficiency of a *lingua franca* and the positive influence *intercomprehension* has on multilingualism goals;
- All respondents think that *intercomprehension* needs to be the subject of more research since they acknowledge it's potential.

On the basis of this research three recommendations are formulated:

- Develop awareness training on the application of *intercomprehension* for employees within DGT as well as language-specific training for *intercomprehension* specially aimed at translators within one language family (e.g. Germanic languages or Romance languages).
- Expand this research on a larger scale by executing a survey for all DGT employees, and in different DGs or different EU institutions by considering different language and institutional preconditions for applying *intercomprehension*.
- Use the term *lingua receptiva* instead of *intercomprehension* in order to account for the wider application of this mode of communication (e.g. between not typologically related languages).

Foreword

This report concerns research on the application of *intercomprehension* at the Directorate-General for Translation (DGT) at the European Commission in Brussels. This research was inspired by the study *Intercomprehension*[1]*,* carried out by *Unit S3 Multilingualism and Translation Studies.* The research on *intercomprehension* presented in this report was carried out as a result of concerns about efficiency on the one hand, and the democratic principle of language equality on the other. The focus of the interviews with employees at DGT was on researching whether *intercomprehension* could be of help in reducing translation costs, while maintaining a functional translation service respectful of quality and considerate of the European multilingualism policy. This report presents research broadening the scope of previous studies.

We would like to thank Mr. Rytis Martikonis, Directorate General for Translation, and Ms. Pinuccia Contino, Head of Unit, Multilingualism at DGT for allowing us to carry out this research at DGT. In our opinion, this provides a fruitful collaboration between DGT and Utrecht University. Mr Rytis Martikonis expressed this wish in his welcome speech at the Translation Studies Days in September 2012 in Brussels.

Moreover, we would like to thank Johan Häggman, Policy Officer–Team coordinator for multilingualism events at the European Commission, for his time and energy and for preparing and supporting this research at DGT in Brussels. This research was executed as a part of the Master in Intercultural Communication at Utrecht University.

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[1] European Commission (2012) Translation and Multilingualism: Intercomprehension. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union

1. Introduction

Europe is linguistically and culturally diverse. The European Union is characterised by 27 different member states and 23 official languages. This cultural and linguistic diversity provides many opportunities and possibilities, but it also entails complicated political and practical questions. In actual fact, the translators working for the European Union play an important role in promoting collaboration and maintaining diversity. The basic principle of the European Union declares that all member states and all languages of the EU are equal in worth: *'unity in diversity'*. All European citizens should be able to express themselves in their own language and it should also be possible to use their native language in contact with European institutions.

Furthermore, the EU has been hit by the economic recession. There is a constant search for balance between efficient work processes at EU organisations on the one hand, and attention to all democratic principles on the other. Another important factor here is the communication within and between EU organisations and its citizens. In order to investigate these issues, the European Commission has carried out several studies in the past. Economic recession urges efficiency in the field of translation.

The Directorate-General for Translation (DGT) of the European Commission has a central task regarding these issues. Research has therefore been carried out into different ways of dealing with translations. One of these studies concerns *Studies on Translation and Multilingualism: Intercomprehension* (European Commission, 2012), in which *intercomprehension* is discussed extensively. *Intercomprehension* is a communicative mode which could perhaps be used to develop a more efficient translation process. DGT uses the following definition:

> Intercomprehension refers to a relationship between languages in which speakers of different but related languages can readily understand each other without intentional study or extraordinary effort. It is a form of communication in which each person uses his/her own language and understands that of the other(s)[2].

Intercomprehension is a form of multilingual communication, in which people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds speak their own languages, while still understanding each other without the help of an additional language – i.e. a *lingua franca.* The idea behind this communicative mode is that people use their receptive language skills more easily, which simplifies understanding and learning a language. An idea might be to use these receptive competences with employees of the European Commission more intensively. To study this potential, this study has been carried out at DGT.

The European goals concerning language policy are aimed at maintaining language diversity and multiculturalism. In light of this, multilingualism is regarded as an ideal by the EU (European Commission, 2012). *Intercomprehension* could be a solution, as through the use of this communicative mode every speaker in the conversation can speak his/her own language while at the same time expressing his/her own cultural identity. The findings of a study on the potentials and limitations of *intercomprehension* in communication at DGT and how it could contribute to the aforementioned cutbacks are reported in this paper.

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[2] European Commission (2012) Translation and Multilingualism: Intercomprehension. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, p. 1.

1.1 Intercomprehension in oral and written communication

This research has made an inventory of the role *intercomprehension* can have, based on interviews with employees at the DGT. This inventory had dual focus, as on the one hand it focused on the role of *intercomprehension* in oral communication, while on the other hand it looked at *intercomprehension* in written communication, or, more specifically, how the translation processes at DGT could be organised more efficiently.

Here, oral communication refers to communication between DGT employees. Employees were asked questions with regard to the use of *intercomprehension*, whether they were familiar with this communicative mode, if they used it and how they used it. Do colleagues apply the communicative mode of *intercomprehension* with each other? What factors determine whether they use it or not? In addition, the employees' attitudes towards *intercomprehension* were taken into consideration.

Written communication refers to the DGT translation processes, thus only concerning in-house translation processes. DGT also works with external freelance translators, but the external handling of translation is not taken into consideration here. First, an inventory of the role of *intercomprehension* in the translation process is made. This includes making an inventory of whether translators are familiar with the concept of *intercomprehension*, whether they apply this communicative mode in translating and talking about translations, and what their view on this is. Secondly, employees were asked whether they are of the opinion that *intercomprehension* could improve the efficiency of the translation process at DGT.

2. Research method

During this qualitative research, a clear goal was kept in mind: to gather as much information as possible about the potential and limitations of *intercomprehension.* The structure of the interviews was therefore explorative in nature. As Boeije[3] describes: '*An interview can be considered a form of conversation, in which someone – the interviewer – is determined to ask questions regarding behaviours, notions, attitudes and experiences concerning certain social phenomena*' (translated from Dutch by Van Klaveren & De Vries, 2012). The social phenomenon that is researched here is *intercomprehension.* The aforementioned focal points provided guidelines for the content of the interview and a topic list was used. During the interviews, the list of questions below was not followed strictly, but an attempt was made to cover as many of the topics on the list as possible. The structure of the interview was thus not pre-determined and as a result, the interviews conducted were semi-structured, resulting in not all issues being addressed at all interviews. As a consequence the number of respondents, indicated by 'n = ..' in the tables below may vary. Two interviewers, Simone van Klaveren and Joanne de Vries, conducted the interviews. As discussed, there was a dual focus, and these two focal points have been separated in the analysis. There were also certain questions that overlapped; these are discussed in the final paragraph of the analysis.

1. What is your working Directorate? (E.g.: A / B / C / D / R / S)
2. In what department do you work? (E.g.: which language dept. / which unit)
3. Which languages do you speak?
   o And which other languages do you work with?
4. What is your position and function within DGT?
5. How would you describe your main tasks within your work field?
6. Are you familiar with the concept of *intercomprehension*?
7. Do you use *intercomprehension* inside DGT?
   o Can you describe in what situations?
   (E.g.: why and when/different locations?)
   o Which languages do you use when using *intercomprehension*?
8. What does using *intercomprehension* depend on?
   o Does it depend on the function or position of the person you're speaking with? (E.g.: a superior or direct colleague)
   o Does it depend on the language background of the person you're talking to? (E.g.: you are English, and he/she is French or German)
   o Does it depend on the subject you're talking about?
   o Does it depend on the location?
9. Do you use *intercomprehension* within your translation work?
   o Can you describe this?
   (E.g.: why and when/in the translation process)
   o Which languages do you use when using *intercomprehension?*
10. What does using *intercomprehension* in your work depend on?
    (E.g.: on a language from a certain language department or family/
    subject of your translation)
    o When you talk about your work (e.g.: If you need advice about your translation), do you talk to your colleagues using *intercomprehension*?
    o When you ask for advice about linguistic issues, do you use a lingua franca or *intercomprehension*?

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[3] Boeije, H. (2005). Analyseren in kwalitatief onderzoek: denken en doen. Amsterdam: Boom Onderwijs, 254.

- When you ask for advice about terminology, do you use a lingua franca or *intercomprehension*?
11. Which language do you use when using a lingua franca?
    - Do you use a lingua franca more often than *intercomprehension*?
    - Do you think one or the other is more efficient for communication?
12. Do you think *intercomprehension* could facilitate a more efficient way of translating within DGT?
13. Do you feel comfortable using *intercomprehension*? (explain why/why not)
14. Have you heard of, or been involved in, *intercomprehension* training?
    - If yes: can you explain more about the training?
    - If no: do you think such training would be useful within DGT?
15. Within the European Union, *intercomprehension* is seen as an ideal to achieve multilingualism. Do you think DGT could set an example in this?

Table 1: Interview Questions

2.1 Respondents

After consulting with the Directorate-General for Translation (DGT), the decision was made to interview fifteen DGT employees with varied functions in different DGT departments. The interviews were executed over the course of two days. Every respondent had his/her own view on the concept of *intercomprehension,* due to different interests and positions.

Respondent	Function	Directorate	Unit
R1	Quality Manager	B – Translation	English department
R2	Translator	B – Translation	English department
R3	Quality Manager	A – Translation	Swedish department
R4	Head of Unit	D – Transversal Linguistic Services	Web Unit
R5	Head of Unit	B – Translation	French department
R6	Coordinator Juvenes Translatores	S – Translation Strategy and Multilingualism	Multilingualism and translation studies
R7	Head of Unit	S – Translation Strategy and Multilingualism	Outsourcing
R8	Coordinator External Communication	None	Communication and information
R9	Assistant-Directeur (Assistánt)	B – Translation	Front Office
R10	Terminologist	C – Translation	Spanish department
R11	Mainstreaming of Multilingualism	S – Translation Strategy and Multilingualism	Multilingualism and translation studies
R12	Translator	A – Translation	Finnish department
R13	Head of Unit	D – Transversal Linguistic Services	Field Offices and relations with representations
R14	Policy Officer	S – Translation Strategy and Multilingualism	Multilingualism and translation studies
R15	Team coordinator	S – Translation Strategy and Multilingualism	Multilingualism and translation studies

Table 2: Respondents

Even though fifteen respondents is rather small in relation to the total number of DGT employees, the selection and variation in functions does provide a representative image of DGT on the whole, due to their sophisticated selection. However, the question remains as to whether DGT employees are representative with regards to employees at other EU organisations. This question is addressed later.

In total, fourteen interviews took place; one interview was a conversation with two respondents at the same time. Eleven out of fourteen interviews were conducted in English and three took place in Dutch. Furthermore, only thirteen interviews were recorded, because one respondent requested that the interview not be recorded. The answers to the interview questions and the results are discussed in the next paragraph. 'R' means 'respondent', and this letter is followed by a number corresponding to the table above.

To retain anonymity, the names and functions of correspondents are not made explicit in this analysis. Hence, no examples from the interviews are provided, and only numbers are stated. For a more extensive version, which does contain examples from the interviews, we refer to two Intercultural Communication Master theses[4] in which this study is reported more extensively.

3. Results

In this report the results are discussed in correspondence with the stated questions in the text box above. The first paragraph discusses *intercomprehension* in oral communication, and in the second paragraph the focus shifts to how *intercomprehension* is reflected in the translation process. In the final paragraph, the overlapping questions are discussed. These are concerned with *intercomprehension* training and the political dimension of using *intercomprehension*.

3.1 Intercomprehension in Oral Communication

3.1.1 The use of intercomprehension in oral communication
Almost every respondent, except for one, was familiar with the concept of *intercomprehension.*

	Yes	No	Total
Familiarity with concept of intercomprehension	14	1	n = 15
	93%	7%	100%

Table 3: Familiarity with the concept of intercomprehension

In the English department, *intercomprehension* is used for a specific goal, as a communicative mode for training another language*.* Suitable candidates are selected from within DGT for training and have a linguistic background that corresponds to the language being taught in the training. In this training, the new language is taught by making use of *intercomprehension*, with the aim of supporting translators in finding similarities and differences between languages. It is

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[4] Simone van Klaveren, 2012 – *Onderzoek naar de mondelinge communicatie van het DGT in Europees perspectief. Masterthesis Interculturele Communicatie,* Universiteit Utrecht, Joanne de Vries, 2012 - *Onderzoek naar de schriftelijke communicatie van het DGT in Europees perspectief.* Masterthesis Interculturele Communicatie, Universiteit Utrecht.

assumed that a language is taught faster by making use of *intercomprehension*. It turns out that *intercomprehension* is used differently by different (language) departments, as they handle procedural languages differently.

Other interviews showed that respondents recognise a difference. On the one hand they use *intercomprehension* with their native language and closely related languages, while on the other hand they use non-native languages and unrelated languages in what Rehbein, ten Thije and Verschik[5] call a *lingua receptiva. Lingua receptiva* can be regarded as having a broader definition, as it can also be used with a language the speaker is fluent in that is *not* his/her mother tongue, and it can be used with languages that are not closely related as well.

Moreover, yet another application of *intercomprehension* has been found. This is neither the written mode, as in the translation process, nor the one found in oral communication, such as contact with colleagues, but where one of the respondents also uses *intercomprehension* with external contacts. Knowledge of one language helps her in communicating with people using different languages from the same language group.

	Never	Sometimes	Often	Total
Use of intercomprehension	4	6	5	n = 15
	26.6%	40%	33.3%	100%

Table 4: Use of intercomprehension

Several reasons were mentioned for either using *intercomprehension* or not*.* One of these reasons is politeness. Another reason is that employees were simply not 'accustomed to' using *intercomprehension*. Some employees even felt that using *intercomprehension*, or using different languages in one conversation, is 'weird' or 'strange'.

	Positive	Negative	Total
Comfortable with the use of intercomprehension	9	6	n = 15
	60%	40%	100%

Table 5: Comfortable with the use of intercomprehension

In sum, nine out of fifteen respondents claimed to feel comfortable using *intercomprehension.*

3.1.2 Factors for using intercomprehension
In the interviews, several factors were addressed that influence the application of *intercomprehension.* The majority of respondents stated, without being prompted, that it is usually dependent on the 'person' you are interacting with, or the 'personal relation' you have with the other interlocutor. Other reasons to apply *intercomprehension* that were mentioned are the exposure to other languages, dependent on previous experience. Five out of fifteen respondents said that this communicative mode is mainly used in informal situations. Position, the linguistic competencies of the other interlocutor, and the subject and location of the conversation as factors in the use of *intercomprehension* were also discussed during the

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[5] Rehbein, J., J.D. ten Thije & A. Verschik (2012) Lingua Receptiva (LaRa) – The quintessence of Receptive Multilingualism. In: Thije, J.D. ten, J. Rehbein, A. Verschik (eds.) Receptive Multilingualism . Special issue of the International Journal for Bilingualism 16(3), p. 248-265

interviews. Five out of the six employees asked about these factors said 'position' didn't influence the use of *intercomprehension*. 'Linguistic competencies', on the other hand, was considered influential by all of them. On the factors of 'subject' and 'location', the employees did not agree: some said these factors determine the application of *intercomprehension*, others said they had no influence.

3.1.3 Lingua franca versus intercomprehension

The respondents were asked whether they more often use a *lingua franca* or *intercomprehension.* The majority answered that they use a *lingua franca* more frequently. Many also stated that they use *intercomprehension* sometimes, frequently or as often as a *lingua franca*, but when questioned more extensively, most said they used a *lingua franca* more often. In total, fourteen out of fifteen respondents stated that they use a *lingua franca* more often than *intercomprehension.*

	Lingua franca	Intercomprehension	Equal	Total
Is a lingua franca or intercomprehension used more often?	14	11	1	n = 15
	93.33%	73.33%	6.66%	100%

Table 6: Is a lingua franca or intercomprehension used more often?

The choice between *lingua franca* and *intercomprehension* appeared to be dependent on the interactional situation, as a *lingua franca* is most often employed in formal situations, whereas *intercomprehension* is most often used in informal situations. It became clear that for interaction with closer colleagues, *intercomprehension* was more often selected as the communicative mode. For interaction with unknown colleagues, a *lingua franca* was more frequently used. In the former case colleagues know whether someone is comfortable with the use of *intercomprehension.* When talking to strangers, employees are not aware of this fact and thus more often use a *lingua franca.*

As a *lingua franca,* English is by far the most common choice. Many respondents (nine out of fifteen) were of the opinion that a *lingua franca* is more efficient in oral communication than the use of *intercomprehension.* Most of these nine respondents stated that this is due to the fact that people are used to communicating with each other in this way, and moreover, that most of the work already takes place in English. One of the respondents even stated that although a *lingua franca* is more efficient in practice, in actuality this cannot be the case, because the EU wants to promote and express multilingualism.

Some of the respondents consider *intercomprehension* to be more efficient, because it is easier at first to gain passive proficiency in a language than active proficiency. Additionally, it is efficient because both conversational partners communicate fluently in their mother tongue, as this is easiest way for them to express themselves. Three (out of fifteen) respondents claimed that they could not give a clear-cut answer. One of them said that it must first be further investigated, while another said it is dependent on the situation, and a third stated that in theory *intercomprehension* might be more efficient, but that in practice a *lingua franca* is more efficient.

	Lingua franca	Intercomprehension	Not sure	Total
Is a lingua franca or intercomprehension more efficient for oral communication?	9	3	3	n = 15
	60%	20%	20%	100%

Table 7: Is a lingua franca or intercomprehension more efficient for oral communication?

3.2 Intercomprehension in Written Communication (Translation Process)

3.2.1 Use of intercomprehension in translation work

	Yes	No	Total
Use of intercomprehension in translation work	9	1	N = 10

Table 8: Use of intercomprehension in translation work

Ten of our fifteen respondents are involved in the translation process. Out of these ten translators, nine claimed they use *intercomprehension* in their translation work, for checking their translations with translations into other languages. They use receptive skills to understand the translation in another language and to check whether it corresponds with their translation. Translators consult other translations in order to check two things:
- o Meaning and interpretation of the text. For this, translations in any other language can be consulted, as long as the translator has (at least) receptive knowledge of this language.
- o Grammatical structures in the text. For this, the translator can only look at translations in related languages because these have similarities with respect to grammatical characteristics.

One of these ten translators claimed not to use *intercomprehension* in the translation process. This employee stated that she only translated from languages that she was completely proficient in, because she does not consider her receptive skills good enough for a professional translation otherwise. The respondents that do use *intercomprehension* say that this is not a problem. The assumption is made that the translators have institutional expertise in the sort of texts that are translated at DGT. Because of this, they know how to handle possible difficulties, such as specific formulations and institutional terminologies, and they know how the final text should be organised. This institutional and professional knowledge facilitates the translation process and removes obstacles.

Finally, the interviews reveal that the English department has a central position within the translation process. All documents are first translated into 'key languages', namely German, English or French, of which English is most often used. In 2010, 77% of all translations were first translated into English, and subsequently into another language. The English translation department therefore incorporates various translators who are capable of translating into every possible language within the EU. Other language departments are much more specialised and equipped to translate English into one specific language. One respondent stated that

intercomprehension is most often applied in the English department, as translators have to be able to translate into and out of many different European languages.

3.2.2 Risks in using intercomprehension in the translation process

Out of thirteen respondents, seven expressed the view that *intercomprehension* could bear risks. They argued that the quality of translations could be at stake. At this point, it is necessary to state that the texts that are translated by DGT have a legal status and therefore should meet high standards, and that mistakes should be avoided completely.

Six out of thirteen respondents thought that the risks are not great enough to completely dispose of *intercomprehension* in the translation process. They emphasised that quality control is ever present, because all texts (legal ones in particular) are double-checked. Additionally, they stated that the DGT translators are professionals, who keep searching for the perfect translation until they have found it. Finally, it is worth raising again the aforementioned argument that translators are very experienced with the texts that are translated at DGT. This translation experience compensates for the difficulties of the foreign language. Furthermore, they felt that receptive skills are good enough to translate professionally, and you do not need to be fully proficient in a language to be a competent translator.

3.2.3 Can intercomprehension make the translation process more efficient?

Out of fourteen respondents, thirteen claimed that *intercomprehension* can facilitate the translation process. Thus, they thought that *intercomprehension* could save time and money – without the risks outweighing efficiency. Many translators did see, as aforementioned, risks when it comes to legal texts. *Intercomprehension* can only increase the efficiency of the translation process if the risks are minimised. Many respondents expressed the wish that more research be undertaken to find out whether *intercomprehension* really leads to greater efficiency.

Only one respondent stated that *intercomprehension* could not improve the efficiency of the translation process. This respondent argued that *intercomprehension* can only be used with languages that are really closely related, such as Slovak and Czech. With all other combinations (such as Dutch and German), this would require too much specific knowledge, which would entail less efficiency.

As mentioned before, thirteen out of fourteen respondents were positive regarding the use of *intercomprehension* in the translation process. *Intercomprehension* has great potential because speakers have more receptive than active knowledge of languages. Employees argued that it would be a shame not to address this knowledge in the workflow at DGT. Moreover, many respondents stated that the multilingual environment of DGT has special characteristics within the European Commission because of the talented language professionals. They claim that these potentials of multilingualism at DGT should be exploited more. This is also the reason why many of the respondents were of the opinion that *intercomprehension* in practice needs to be researched further.

3.3 Applications of Intercomprehension in different situations

3.3.1 Intercomprehension training

With regard to the possibility to train *intercomprehension*, the respondents were asked three questions: First, whether they were familiar with the language specific *intercomprehension* training that had taken place in the English department. Second, if they considered such language-specific training valuable. Third, general *intercomprehension* training was discussed, which is presented in the final part of this section.

In the English department, language-specific *intercomprehension* training was given in which translators were educated in translating from Italian by making use of *intercomprehension* skills. These translators did not know Italian, but only related languages (French and Spanish). After six months, these employees could professionally translate from Italian on the basis of their acquired receptive skills.

All employees interviewed shared the opinion that language specific *intercomprehension* training could be valuable for their own language departments. Here, they refer to the aforementioned argument that DGT often works with similar text genres. Because of this institutional context, translators have professional experience with the specific translation techniques and they know the characteristics of the text genres under consideration. This knowledge compensates for the difficulties of a foreign language. Still, the opinions on *intercomprehension* training were not all positive, as many employees stated that such training is more applicable to the English department than to other departments. As mentioned before, many different language combinations are used in the English department, and the translators are able to use many different related languages because of this. Accordingly, many translators are suited to participating in such training. Furthermore, many respondents stated that the value of such training is dependent on the language choice. Italian, for instance, has many related languages within Europe. This not only makes it easier for many people to learn Italian, but it is also better used for receptive purposes as knowledge of Italian facilitates the learning of many other Romance languages.

Additionally, the respondents were asked whether they believed that a general *intercomprehension* course could be valuable for their own departments. This training would be focused on developing receptive skills and recognising similarities and differences between closely related languages, in order to learn new languages faster. The reactions to this general *intercomprehension* training were diverse. Six out of twelve respondents thought that this training would not be of value, as they were of the opinion that the skilled and talented language employees of DGT automatically developed these kind of *intercomprehension* skills. Still, the other six respondents considered general *intercomprehension* training to be valuable, as it would optimally employ the multilingual talents of DGT employees.

3.3.2 DGT as a symbolic setting for multilingualism

Whether DGT could function as an example in light of realising multilingual goals surrounding multilingualism and cultural diversity is doubtful, according to the respondents. The majority of the respondents (five out of nine) did not consider DGT to be a symbol for the EU's ideal of multilingualism. Several respondents stated that DGT is a Directorate with specific characteristics that cannot be considered to be representative for other EU institutions.

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However, it can be considered a laboratory in which to practice and investigate the potential of intercomprehension.

3.3.3 Political dimensions

Finally, the employees mention that the practice of *intercomprehension* is related to politically complex considerations. According to the Commission's language policy, national languages in Europe have equal status and as consequence all (legal) texts have to be available in all national languages. For communication within the European Commission there is a language policy according to which English, French and sometimes German are the working languages for internal communication. The growing practice of using English alone is, however, the subject of general discussion in society and also between employees at DGT. Not all employees approve of this development. Nevertheless, they all agree that these politically ideological issues determine the attitudes towards and potential of *intercomprehension*.

Another political dimension that employees mention concerns the – sometimes hostile – historical relationships between nations within Europe. Employees state that these political ideologies and the related attitudes are a reason for not applying *intercomprehension.* Regarding certain languages as related, through *intercomprehension,* and having them handled by one translator, may provoke negative reactions. Strictly linguistically it may be correct to treat certain languages in this way; however, social cultural relationships influence the potential for doing so.

In sum, employees in general endorse the European Union's language policy aimed at two goals: encouraging multilingualism and cultural diversity. The communicative mode *intercomprehension* could help in realising these multilingual goals, as it promotes language diversity, but everyday practice appears to be complex.

4. Conclusions

A large majority of DGT employees are familiar with the concept of *intercomprehension,* and most of them actually use *intercomprehension* in oral communication with their colleagues. For this purpose, they could use all kinds of different language combinations, both related and unrelated languages, and with or without the use of their native languages. Among the employees that did not use *intercomprehension,* some felt rude or weird using two languages in one conversation. Additionally, the following factors influence the use of *intercomprehension* to some extent: personal relations, linguistic background and linguistic competencies, location and subject. Striking was the fact that none of the respondents considered the institutional position of the interlocutor as a factor determining the application of *intercomprehension*. Several people indicated that *intercomprehension* is more easily used in informal situations than in formal ones. It was also concluded from the interviews that every language combination was a possibility for *intercomprehension.* The vast majority of the employees claims to use a *lingua franca* more often than *intercomprehension.* On top of that, the majority feels that a *lingua franca* is more efficient in oral communication then in written communication.

Another conclusion that can be drawn from this investigation is that the use of *inter-comprehension* differs extensively among the DGT departments, being very dependent on how the department is organised. At the English department, for instance, all language combinations are used, whereas the French department only works with the three procedural languages (French, English, German).

Many of the respondents felt that *intercomprehension* could possibly facilitate oral communication, but that more research is needed in order to verify this. They were positive about *intercomprehension* training, either language specific or general. Some translators thought that general *intercomprehension* training would not be valuable to them, as these *inter-comprehension* skills are already used on a daily basis. It could however be used to make people more aware, and it would be valuable to utilise the multilingual talents of DGT employees.

Almost all translators claimed to use *intercomprehension* to optimise the translation process. They consult related languages to check grammatical constructions in their translations, and they also consult unrelated languages to verify textual meanings. This is not only applied to the native language, but also to languages acquired later on.

Most of the employees regarded the practice of *intercomprehension* as an ideal for the multilingual goals of the EU. Still, the majority of the respondents thought that DGT could not function as the symbolic setting for this ideal. Additionally, this ideal is challenged by risks of quality control, efficiency of the translation process and political sensitivities. As previously mentioned, political ideologies and sensitivity surrounding languages are reasons for unwillingness to apply *intercomprehension.* To sidestep these sensitivities, it has been suggested that *intercomprehension* be used on a large scale for internal documents. External documents and official legal texts should continue to be translated into *all* official EU languages. This way, the risks to quality and political upset are minimised, while at the same time a lot of time and money is saved. When all this is considered, almost all respondents thought that *intercomprehension* could increase the efficiency of the translation process and be a solution in

many cases. However, they also stated that this still needs to be proven, and thus, this concept needs to be researched more thoroughly. The potential of *intercomprehension* is acknowledged.

Finally, an interesting contrast can be found within DGT: the efficiency of the communication process as opposed to the multilingual goals of the EU. Some respondents regarded DGT as a 'normal' multilingual organisation. Accordingly, as a multilingual organisation, it should have effective language policies. From the interviews it became evident that such a language policy often means that a *lingua franca* is introduced. It was also felt that the equality of all 23 European Union languages negatively affects the efficiency of the translation processes at DGT. Here, the contrast becomes clear. On the one hand it is about the efficiency of written external communication and the translation processes, for which English as a *lingua franca* would be most efficient. On the other hand, the multilingual goals of the EU are more important and here, *intercomprehension* could be a solution. Most of the respondents shared the opinion that the multilingualism goals should be the main focus, but that in practice efficiency is more important. As a result, both internal and external communication increasingly takes place in English. The image and appeal of DGT would then no longer be in line with their policy. *Intercomprehension* could be a suitable solution.

5. Recommendations

On account of this pilot study, we formulate three recommendations. We will discuss them here briefly.

Recommendation 1: Develop awareness training on the application of inter-comprehension for employees within DGT as a whole, as well as language-specific training for intercomprehension specially directed at translators within one language family (e.g. Germanic languages or Romance languages).

All respondents agreed on the usefulness of awareness training on the application of *intercomprehension*. This training should address the potentials of *intercomprehension* for internal DGT communication and make employees sensitive to limitations with regard to formality, relationships between the interlocutors, location and topics to be addressed. Moreover, the existing practice in the English department to use *intercomprehension* as a communicative mode for training translators in a specific language could be extended. Other languages could be the subject of training. In fact, this training could consistently increase efficiency within DGT and reduce translation costs. Respondents were in favor of the outcomes of this kind of language-specific training for translators.

Recommendation 2: Carry out this research on a larger scale by executing a survey for all employees of DGT, or of different DGs or different EU institutions by considering different language and institutional preconditions for applying intercomprehension.

First off, this pilot study is based on interviews with fifteen respondents, and thus, this research has been carried out on a rather small scale. The suggestion would be to carry out this research on a larger scale, in order to gain more representative findings. For this purpose, a survey could be used to send out questionnaires to all DGT employees, in which the main question would focus on the use of *intercomprehension.* In addition, this research should be extended to other Directorates-General (other DGs than the DGT) of the Commission. It would also be an option to look at different EU organisations to determine the role of *intercomprehension* there. Because, as it turns out, the Directorate-General for Translation of the European Commission is a very unique setting: no other European Commission department is as multilingual as this translation agency. Even though it is very interesting to look at this topic in a situation where multilingual and very highly skilled language professionals work, this has in fact influenced the results presented in this paper. Different results may have been found in another department, another Directorate-General or even a different European organisation. If other institutions were to be involved in this research, a survey would be a valid option. Not only would more respondents be ensured, but such respondents would also be more diverse with different backgrounds and different interests within the EU.

Secondly, from the interviews conducted, it became clear that the various DGT departments differ greatly. As a result, *intercomprehension* has a different role for each department. This

would benefit from more detailed research. Because of this, we propose research that delves deeper into the role of different communicative modes (including *lingua receptiva*) in DGT. Different activities and tasks could be looked at in more detail, in both oral and written communication. In conclusion, for a deepening of the role of *intercomprehension*, we refer to the large-scale 'TIME' project and the FP7-application that brings this question under discussion in a pan-European context.

Recommendation 3: The report suggests using the term *lingua receptiva* instead of *intercomprehension* to account for the wider application of its use (also in further research).

The third recommendation has to do with definitions. During the interviews, it became evident that the definition of the term *intercomprehension* in the study *Intercomprehension*[6] is too limited for DGT. According to this definition, *intercomprehension* is about the native language and closely related languages. However, from the interviews it became clear that many more language combinations are possible. Respondents stated using both related and unrelated languages. Furthermore, not everyone used their native language as the basis for *intercomprehension.* The examples below clarify the different options of language use, and actually, only the first possibility is a true example of *intercomprehension.*

Possibilities language combinations	Example native language	Example of a language combination
1. native language + closely related language	Dutch	Dutch / German
2. native language + more distanced language	Dutch	Dutch / Spanish
3. non-native language + closely related language	Dutch	Spanish / Italian
4. non-native language + more distanced language	Dutch	Spanish / Maltese

All the examples of language possibilities above are found in practice at DGT, especially in communication between the employees. By using the term *intercomprehension,* options 2 through 4 are excluded. In order to be able to use all the different options in multilingual situations, we suggest that the umbrella term *lingua receptiva*[7] be used. From the interviews, it seems that *lingua receptiva,* rather than *intercomprehension*, can be found in communication at

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[6] European Commission (2012) Translation and Multilingualism: Intercomprehension. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union

[7] Backus, A., Marácz, L. & Thije, J.D. ten (2011). A toolkit for multilingual communication in Europe: dealing with linguistic diversity. In J.N. Jørgensen (red.). (2011). A Toolkit for Transnational Communication in Europe. In Copenhagen Studies in Bilingualism, 64, 5-24. Rehbein, J., Thije, J.D. ten & Anna Verschik, A. (2012). Lingua Receptiva (LaRa) - Introductory remarks on the quintessence of Receptive Multilingualism. In: Thije, J.D. ten, Rehbein, J. & Verschik, A. (eds.) Special Issue on "Receptive Multilingualism". *The International Journal of Bilingualism* 16, 3, 2012, 248-264.

DGT. For a more elaborate discussion of this terminology, we refer to Van Klaveren (2012), De Vries (2012), and ten Thije and Zeevaert (2007).

Lingua Receptiva	Intercomprehension
A form of multilingual communication, in which people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds both speak their own language but still understand each other, without the help of an additional language (such as a *lingua franca*)[8]	'A relationship between languages in which speakers of different but related languages can readily understand each other without intentional study or extraordinary effort. It is a form of communication in which each person uses his/her own language and understands that of the other(s)'[9]
native language + closely related language native language + more distanced language non-native language + closely related language non-native language + more distanced language	native language + related language

We suggest adopting the term *lingua receptiva* instead of *intercomprehension* in more elaborate research. This should be done in order to enable every language combination and as many different situations as possible to be used for questioning and finding results.

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[8] Ibid.

[9] European Commission (2012) Translation and Multilingualism: Intercomprehension. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, p. 1

6. References

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- Boeije, H. (2005). Analyseren in kwalitatief onderzoek: denken en doen. Amsterdam: Boom Onderwijs.
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- Ten Thije, J.D. & L. Zeevaert (2007). *Receptive multilingualism: Linguistic analyses, language policies and didactic concepts. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.*

For a complete description of this pilot study, we refer to the following Master theses.

- Van Klaveren, 2012 – *Onderzoek naar de mondelinge communicatie van het DGT in Europees perspectief.* Masterthesis Interculturele Communicatie, Universiteit Utrecht. (http://igitur-archive.library.uu.nl/student-theses/2013-0402-200534/Scriptie%20Lingua%20Receptiva%2c%20S.E.%20van%20Klaveren.pdf)
- De Vries, 2012 - Onderzoek naar de schriftelijke communicatie van het DGT in Europees perspectief. Masterthesis Interculturele Communicatie, Universiteit Utrecht. (http://igitur-archive.library.uu.nl/student-theses/2013-0228-200802/Scriptie%20Joanne.pdf.)

As an extension of these Master theses, two web pages have been set up to raise awareness of the concept *lingua receptiva.* For more information about the concept *lingua receptiva* and the Dutch equivalent 'luistertaal' we refer you to the following links:

- www.luistertaal.nl
- http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lingua_Receptiva_(Luistertaal)