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Cultural implications in Easy Language texts for migrants

Theoretical considerations and insights from practice in Germany and in Italy

Abstract

In this paper, we will discuss migrants with low second language skills as a target group of Easy Language. For this user group, the comprehension of texts normally used in the host society is made arduous not only due to the language barrier, but also because of the cultural barrier, which can heavily affect the interpretation of a text even in Easy Language. We will also propose the media barrier as a communication barrier that needs consideration when adapting a text to this target group. The aim of this article is to reflect on the effective intercultural communication through Easy Language and on the cultural biases that could arise during the evaluation phase. The latter should be advised by cultural mediators or interpreters.

1 Introduction

Easy Language is a variety of a language with maximally enhanced comprehensibility (Maaß 2020: 50). The practical Easy Language guidelines were originally established for people with cognitive impairments (Maaß 2020: 12), but Easy Language is often also aimed at other target groups, one of which being migrants with low second language skills (Maaß 2020: 185). Gutermuth (2020: 206) found that among the three varieties expert language (for terminology see Maaß 2020: 14), Plain Language and Easy Language, Easy Language was the most linkable variety (Maaß 2020: 27) for people with a migration background.

As Easy Language texts aimed at migrants are acts of intercultural communication (Maaß 2020: 174), we must also investigate the suitability of current Easy Language rules for cultural socialisation. In this contribution, we aim to define the elements that influence the cultural barrier (Schubert 2016; Rink 2020) and show how this barrier not only influences Easy Language practice, but also intercultural research on Easy Language.

This paper provides an initial framework for the identification of the target group (Section 2) and for the nature of Easy Language texts for migrants with low second language skills, highlighting their communicative objectives and the most common

current usage scenarios, also referencing real cases in the field of medical communication and administrative communication in Germany and Italy (Section 3). Section 4 will show the communication barriers faced by migrants with low second language skills and Section 5 will elaborate specifically on the cultural barrier defined in Schubert (2016) and Rink (2020). Section 6 will show the effects of the cultural barrier on the Easy Language rules on simple words and visualisations to show that current Easy Language rules need to be adapted to the target group to produce functional texts. The methods of conducting research on intercultural communication through Easy Language texts will be discussed in Section 7, also in terms of the importance of mediators and interpreters.

2 Who is the migrant target user?

Some Easy Language guidelines explicitly refer to the category of migrants (or “immigrants”, or “people with migration background”) (see IFLA 2010; W3C 2014; Bredel/Maaß 2016) as beneficiaries of Easy Language texts. Gutermuth (2020: 206) found out that Easy Language was the most linkable variety for her cohort of “people with a migration background”. In his guidelines on Spanish Easy Language, García Muñoz (2012: 46) sees only part of recent migrants as a target audience for Easy Language texts, such as those who speak little Spanish and those who have little education. In this paper we consider people who have migrated to a country with the prospect of spending their lives there, and who need to use the respective country’s language (second language) in their everyday lives, thus excluding foreign language learners¹ or exchange students. As second language learners, these migrants learn the language in the host country (Migration and Home Affairs 2018: 191) and without instruction (see Bredel/Maaß 2016: 169). Due to European legislation, most migrants with low second language skills in Europe are required to take a language course and therefore learn the second language with at least partial instruction.

Furthermore, they are people who have basic knowledge of the second language and are improving it by attending courses (for example those provided by governments within the integration agreement)² and interacting with natives, but who are not yet familiar with specialist language (even if it is commonly used vocabulary) of the various sectors they come into contact with daily.

The EMN Glossary (Migration and Home Affairs 2018: 252) defines “migrant” as “a person who is outside the territory of the State of which they are nationals or citizens and who has resided in a foreign country for more than one year irrespective of the causes, voluntary or involuntary, and the means, regular or irregular, used to migrate.” This

¹ Foreign language learners learn the respective language in their usual environment with instruction from teachers. They do not use the language in their everyday lives (Bredel/Maaß 2016: 169).

² For the Italian legal reference see the Decree of the President of the Republic D.P.R. 179/2011 on the regulation of the integration agreement between foreign nationals and the State (Decreto 2011), for Germany see esp. Section 44a of the Act on the Residence, Economic Activity and Integration of Foreigners in the Federal Territory (Federal Ministry 2008/2020).

definition, although very broad and partially suitable for the users we are considering, is not sufficient for our purposes.

To understand the specific target group for an Easy Language text better, a user analysis according to the human-centred design approach should be conducted (Sharp et al. 2019: 15–16). Creating Easy Language texts means not only translating from a source text, but also creating a new functional informative product. It is possible to start the process by analysing existing research data and conducting ad-hoc field research (Pontis 2018: 12ff; for an overview see Frascara 2015) for the respective text type.

Data at a national level, or even for more geographically limited areas, such as regions or cities, can be obtained from statistical reports produced by public bodies of the different countries (Italy: The Ministry of Interior, the National Statistical Institute (ISTAT), regional and municipal administrations; Germany: the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, and the respective regional and communal institutions). From these reports, general data on countries of origin, migration motivation, education, occupation and demographic characteristics can be derived.

More specific research can provide us with more detailed data in relation to the aspect we want to investigate (for example, studies on how migrants access information, migrant media usage, and migrant literacy on a specific topic). The main techniques for gathering data are interviews, questionnaires and observations (Sharp et al. 2019: 260). Pontis (2018: 82) identifies eight different methods to collect data on users in the specific context of use: non-participant observations, shadowing, participant observations, contextual interviews, contextual inquiries, diary studies, design probes and collaborative workshops.

This research phase is very important because the more the communication designers know about the background of the intended target group, the more effectively they can create a text that meets user expectations and needs (St. Amant 2015a: 15).

Finally, it is necessary to point out that in using data about a group of people, the researcher must not think of the group as homogeneous nor make the group appear homogeneous. The target user should be considered a prototypical construct (cf. Lakoff 1982: 15–16; Snell-Hornby 1988: 27ff) and the target group as consisting of individuals who may or may not fit this construct. A generalisation into this prototypical construct is necessary for research and text production purposes. We will refer to the broader target group as “migrants with low second language skills” (Maaß 2020: 185; for consideration about the terminology see Becker 2019: 8).

3 What is an Easy Language text for migrants?

We define Easy Language texts for migrants as written target texts created specifically for migrants with low second language skills through the translation of existing source texts. These texts display a high degree of perceptibility and comprehensibility (Maaß

2020: 132) and are designed to meet the information needs and expectations of the migrant target users (Pontis 2018: 7) at level A2 according to the CEFR (Council of Europe 2001; Ahrens 2022: 185).

The main function of Easy Language texts is to help recipients understand the source text with respect to their previous knowledge of the subject, familiarity with the text type and on the level of their linguistic and cultural knowledge (Maaß 2020). In general, the purpose of comprehensibility-enhanced texts is to create alternative layers of information that vary in depth or style (Oomen-Welke 2015: 28; Bredel/Maaß 2016: 526; Berger-Walliser et al. 2017; Heine 2017: 413; Bredel 2019: 212) and that can therefore be adapted to the specific recipient, in our case migrants with low second language skills. In this contribution, we will focus on Easy Language texts as the easiest layer (Hansen-Schirra/Maaß 2020: 18) with the least depth and very few stylistic features.

An Easy Language text does not replace a source text, but represents an additional tool for its understanding. It can, for example, provide a general illustration of the source text or indicate the action options required by a provision contained in the text (Maaß 2020). Through Easy Language, readers can comprehend the most important aspects of a text, as well as those that can most directly affect their lives, such as legal and health issues (García Muñoz 2012).

According to Werlich's (1976) classification of text types, comprehensibility-enhanced texts for migrants can be either instructive texts, which give instructions on how to do or achieve something, or expository texts that explain general or specific concepts. Rink (2020) distinguishes two main text types: information texts and interaction texts, referring to legal communication. Information texts create knowledge and understanding (Rink 2020: 125), while interaction texts utilise the user's knowledge and understanding by requiring action (Rink 2020: 125). Interaction texts can be initiated by the user (action texts) or by a legal body (reaction texts) (Rink 2020: 125). Easy Language texts can be both, but this contribution will focus on information texts.

Information texts are presented through different media such as web pages, brochures, and leaflets. Such media are provided interlingually only for the most frequent foreign languages. With Easy Language texts, audiences who speak less common languages can be served.

Easy Language texts can also be used where interlingual translation is infeasible, be it due to time or economical constraints. In ever changing contexts, such as the field of legal administration, translations need frequent updates. Updating only the standard and the Easy Language version would save time and money. As an additional effect, Easy Language texts of the second language contain the relevant second-language terms (see Maaß 2020: 97) and could thus be helpful in integrating migrants into the (linguistic) host society (see Bredel/Maaß 2016 for the bridge and the learning function of Easy Language). Reading the terms in the second language makes them more easily recognisable and facilitates communication about the respective topic (Maaß 2020: 97).

To provide an idea of the practical application of Easy Language for migrant users, two real-life examples are shown below where Easy Language has been used.

In Germany, translations into the most relevant languages are available where communication with migrants is frequent. The skilled-labour migration site “Make it in Germany” for example offers translations into English, Spanish, and French, with separate sites for Brazil and Mexico, and a reduced version of the website in other languages like Turkish and Polish (Make it in Germany n. d.). There is no comprehensive Easy Language translation for the site, but – as required by law – the site offers an Easy Language description of the website and its contents. This description is aimed at German native speakers, evident in examples such as the pronunciation used for “Make it in Germany”: “Meik it in Schörmänie” (Make it in Germany n. d.), which is based on the German grapheme-phoneme correspondence. The description offers no help to the website’s visitors, as it describes only contents and functionalities, but the website itself is aimed at highly skilled workers looking to migrate. It can be assumed that this target group knows how to use a website – if they understand the language. It would be more sensible to translate the website into Easy Language aimed at migrants with low German skills, to ensure a level of understanding for those who do not speak English, Spanish, or French.

In Italy, an example of Easy Language information texts for migrants is a glossary on Italian public administration terminology (PAeSI n. d.). This glossary is accessible on a dedicated Italian institutional website on immigration procedures. Easy Language word definitions also include an image for each word. The glossary is composed of specialist words believed to be essential for migrants to facilitate integration into the new society. For this reason, these words cannot be replaced with simpler synonyms (Maaß 2020: 97). At the same time, their explanations must be as simple as possible to reach everyone (Bredel/Maaß 2016: 352). Furthermore, given that many of these terms are specific to the Italian context, an interlingual translation of the words would not have had the same effectiveness.³

4 What are the main communication barriers for migrants?

Rink (2020) has listed the barriers with which people with German as a second language are faced. These barriers are applicable to all migrants with low second language skills. In this section, we summarise her considerations and propose the media barrier as an additional communication barrier for migrants with low second language skills.

According to Rink (2020: 143), the main communication barriers for people with German as a second language are the expert knowledge barrier, the expert language barrier, the cultural barrier, and the language barrier. The expert knowledge and the expert language barriers may affect all target groups (Rink 2020: 143). The expert knowledge barrier concerns the knowledge in a field of expertise such as medicine or

³ For more information on the process of creating the glossary, see Fioravanti et al. (2021a, 2022).

law. Experts have an in-depth knowledge of their field, and this knowledge is intricately structured (Rink 2020: 139). To non-experts, this knowledge is inaccessible. The expert language barrier concerns the jargon that experts of a field share (Rink 2020: 140). Expert knowledge structures expert language. The latter is thus only comprehensible with enough expert knowledge to at least decipher, for example, expert terminology, metaphors, or sentence structures. It is exacerbated by the language barrier. The language barrier concerns a lack of knowledge of a different sign-system (Rink 2020: 138). Elements of expert language such as complex syntax are less comprehensible with lacking knowledge of a language, i. e. with an existing language barrier.

As enculturation involves the enculturation into customary media usage, migrants with low second language skills are also faced with the media barrier. All media are theoretically available in all cultures. However, they may be used differently (St. Amant 2015a: 10) and thus the media preferences may differ. For example, most target groups in Germany are easily reached via TV, but not via radio: Simon/Neuwöhner (2011: 468) found that while 75 % of Polish study participants in Germany listened to German radio programmes, this was the case for only 32 % of all Turkish participants. Turkish participants were most likely to watch Turkish TV programmes (29 % of Turkish participants) while only 6 % of the Polish participants watched Polish programmes (Simon/Neuwöhner 2011: 468). For Turkish migrants in Germany, it has been shown that those over the age of 50 with low German language skills are more likely to watch Turkish TV than German TV (Simon/Neuwöhner 2011: 467). Hence, besides country of origin (Migration and Home Affairs 2018: 78), age and language level also need to be considered when targeting specific migrant groups through media (see Section 2).

Social Media use is also culturally dependent. It is necessary to consider whether the respective social media site is available in the country of origin, whether the relevant social network is active on the social media site, and how a social media site is usually used in the culture of origin (St. Amant 2015b: 16). An initiative adopted by the Municipality of Prato, a city in central Italy characterised by the presence of one of Italy's largest Chinese communities, is a good example of addressing this need. To reach all its citizens, the Municipality has also chosen to communicate through WeChat, the social network most used by Chinese citizens (Prato Municipality n. d.). Culture influences the media barrier, and the media barrier influences the retrieval of a text: Where do people search for information? In which media do they search for what kind of information? We consider the media barrier a barrier that can be easily overcome, both by the target group, once they find out how to access information in the host country; and by text producers, for example the Municipality using WeChat to reach the Chinese community in Prato. It should, however, not be overlooked when identifying the target group for an Easy Language text. Section 5 explains further the cultural barrier and the factors that influence it.

5 What does cultural barrier to text understanding mean?

Translation into Easy Language is usually intralingual and intracultural, if visualisations are added during the translation process it is intersemiotic (see Table 1; Bredel/Maaß 2016: 183; Maaß 2020: 174). In Easy Language translation for migrants, however, the translation process becomes intercultural, because the target text and source text addressees have been socialised in different cultures (Maaß 2020: 174).

sign system	language	culture
intersemiotic	interlingual	intercultural
intrasemiotic	intralingual	intracultural

Table 1: Dimensions of translation according to Siever (2010: 224)

Culture is all the norms, conventions and values of a society (see Vermeer 1990: 36; Nord 1997: 152), including the conventions (or “systems” according to St. Amant 2015a) for conveying information. All these norms, conventions, and values can be subsumed as “cultural knowledge”. Intercultural communication is “[t]he process of conveying ideas and information back and forth across cultures – and different systems for conveying and evaluating the presentation of ideas and information [...]” (St. Amant 2015a: 12). Information that is presented according to the host culture’s conventions will present a cultural barrier to people who are accustomed to other conventions, and who do not have enough cultural knowledge of the host culture (see Rink 2020: 139). In this section, we will identify factors that can play a role in increasing the cultural barrier to a text.

The cultural barrier “schließt die Kenntnis um Diskurse und Textsorten sowie deren sprachliche, mediale und konzeptuelle Gestaltung ein” ‘include[s] knowledge of discourses and text types, including their linguistic, medial, and conceptual form’ (Rink 2020: 139, with reference to Schubert 2016: 18, translation SA). A discourse here entails all the texts that are written or otherwise uttered on a topic: What do people speak about and how do they speak about it? Included in the topic of discourses are taboos. They denote what people do not usually speak about. Discourse and taboos influence people’s knowledge: If salary is a taboo, it is difficult to find out what people earn in relation to others. Discourses and taboos differ between cultures (for a discussion of “discourse” see Bongo 2008).

Rhetoric plays an important role in discourse knowledge and in knowledge of text types as it influences how information is acceptably conveyed (cf. St. Amant 2015a: 8), and how action-oriented (para-)linguistic features are comprehensibly and acceptably conveyed (see below).

Text types are collections of conventionally used text features that can be defined according to their context or situation of use, their communicative function, their topics

and their linguistic features (cf. Brinker et al. 2014: 139). Text types facilitate the reception of texts because the recurring form gives hints on what information and what structure the text entails (Brinker et al. 2014: 139), and hence what actions the texts require during or after reading. Text types differ between cultures, too.

Related to text type, discourse, taboos and rhetoric are the cultural meanings of visual elements, which

are cultural reflections and research indicates that while the subject matter of an image may be recognizable across cultures, the particular meaning of an image is often bound to the cultural context in which it was designed, and its intended meaning may well be changed, diminished or lost when viewed within other cultures [...] (Knight et al. 2009: 18)

The symbolic use of an image may be lost in intercultural communication, and elements such as typical gestures or typical scenes may not be interpreted correctly or at all. Images may alienate or familiarise the recipient, for example by showing only looks, habits, and environments foreign to the recipient, or familiar to them respectively (see Lázaro 2017: 147).

Theories that connect the language barrier to the cultural barrier are the prototype theory (Snell-Hornby 1988; Taylor 2011: 650–651) and the scenes and frames theory (see Fillmore 1977; Vermeer 1992) which influence the semantics of words. Prototypes are culturally shaped core representations of a certain category. For example, in Western cultures, the robin is more representative for the category “bird” than an ostrich (Snell-Hornby 1988: 27, summarising Lakoff 1982: 16). As prototypes are based on experience, they are culturally specific (for an overview see Polzenhagen/Xia 2015): The birds that we see the most will represent the category best for us. Scenes and frames theory regards the dynamic or static mental representations that, too, are based on experience and are thus culture-specific (Vermeer 1992: 78). Hence, understanding texts is not only dependent on a comprehensible word, sentence and text structure (see Bredel/Maaß 2016), but also on the cultural knowledge of the reader, or respectively on the explanations for cultural implications that are given in a text.

Other aspects that are relevant to intercultural text reception are knowledge of the host culture’s systems (for example the administrative or health system), role expectations and medium. To correctly interpret discourses, text types and rhetoric, an understanding of the cultural system in which they are produced is required. Especially socially conditioned systems such as the legal or the health system differ immensely between countries, and thus between cultures. Influenced by the social systems of a culture are roles and role expectations, for example: In interacting with legal institutions, what can I expect from the institutions (see e. g. KotonaSuomessa 2020)?

Due to all these factors (and potentially more), the common ground between sender and recipient is reduced in comparison to intracultural communication (Clark 1996; Rink 2020: 176–177). Common ground in intercultural communication is made up of “conventions, common beliefs, norms, shared knowledge and the like” (Kecskes 2015: 175). On this common ground, “intention and cooperation-based pragmatics is built” (Kecskes 2015: 175). If cooperation-based pragmatics are established, action-oriented linguistic

constructions can be understood and followed adequately. This means: The less the reader knows about the host culture and the less cooperation is established, the more cultural knowledge needs to be made explicit in the text to permit comprehension and action-orientation.

To summarise, these factors play a role in the cultural barrier:

- Knowledge of discourse and taboos
- Knowledge of text types
- Rhetoric
- Visual elements
- Culturally specific semantics: prototypes, scenes, and frames
- Knowledge of the host culture's systems
- Knowledge of role expectations
- Pragmatics

The factors are closely related and are only separated here for theoretical purposes. Rhetoric, for example, is closely intertwined with discourse knowledge (How is a topic spoken about?), role expectations (Who uses this rhetoric?), and knowledge of the host culture's systems (Who is given what role?). For a more tangible explanation, we will list some of the influences on intercultural communication in the fields of administrative and health communication.

Specific influences on administrative communication are for example:

- Role expectations, here knowledge of the organisation of the public administration: What can people expect of the different institutions (for an example of explaining role expectations in administration see KotonaSuomessa 2020)?
- Host culture systems: Knowledge of services that do not exist in the country of origin.
- Knowledge of administrative text types, for example decisions, notices, forms, brochures etc.
- Rhetoric: Knowledge of the tone of communication and being able to interpret the tone correctly.
- Visual elements: Knowledge of icons, symbols, images, and colour coding used in the institutional communication of the host country that are not international.

Specific influences on health communication are for example:

- Knowledge of discourses and taboos: What can I expect my doctor to accept? For example, it is not likely for European health systems to accept healers (see Jawid et al. 2021).
- Role expectations, for example: In Europe, the patient is expected to play an active role in their treatment, and the doctor is not expected to utter commands.
- Culturally specific semantics: It can differ between countries what is classified as "healthy" and what is classified as "ill", and in what dimensions (Kleinman 1989).

In Section 5, we showed that the cultural barrier influences the text reception process (see Hansen-Schirra/Maaß 2020; Maaß/Rink *forthc.*) at different levels. Due to little common ground, the cultural barrier influences the comprehension of a text. Little common ground, including too little previous knowledge concerning cultural information on the reader's side, influences the recall of the information within a text. Cultural elements like taboos, rhetoric and role expectations, influence acceptability (Maaß 2020: 44). If a text is not acceptable, it cannot be action-oriented.

6 Easy Language guidelines and cultural aspects

As introduced, the initial target group of Easy Language were and are people with cognitive impairments, but Easy Language guidelines also reference people who do not speak the language well as a target group (Inclusion Europe/Anffas 2013: 6; Netzwerk Leichte Sprache 2014: 16). This leads to a mismatch in suitability: The rules were and are still developed for intracultural communication with people who face, among others, the cognitive barrier (Rink 2020). Hence, cultural implications have not been taken into account in the development of these rules. It is necessary to adapt the rules to achieve a good (i. e. functional) text (Bock 2015: 87).

This section will show the cultural implications for two rules: use of easy words and use of images. As described above, shared knowledge is one of the elements of culture, and it is one of the elements of (intercultural) common ground. Inclusion Europe (n. d.: 10, 2013: 10) recommends “easy to understand” words that are well-known, not difficult and native (for a scientific definition of an easy word see Maaß 2020: 96). As shown in Section 5, the mental representation of words may not match between cultures. Hence, even well-known and easy words such as bird (see Section 5) can be understood differently in intercultural communication (Ahrens 2022: 178). Well-known words of the second language (e. g. basic vocabulary of Italian, De Mauro 2003; Chiari/De Mauro 2014)⁴ may not be as well-known in the language-learning community. Here, the core vocabulary that is taught in language courses may be a better solution (e. g. Goethe Institut 2004, 2016a, 2016b). Native words may hinder comprehension for migrants. Internationalisms, Anglicisms, and Latinisms, for example, may be better recognisable (Heine 2017: 407; Ahrens 2022: 178). This depends on the target group: Most of the migrants in Italy speak first languages that are very distant from the Romance languages (Perego 2021: 12). Learning Italian, and understanding Latinisms, therefore is much more difficult. Hence, the “easiness” of a word can only be determined intraculturally, but needs careful consideration in intercultural communication.

Easy Language guidelines, both practical (Inclusion Europe; IFLA; etc.) and scientific (Maaß 2015; Bredel/Maaß 2016: 505–506) recommend using imagery to support

⁴ The basic vocabulary of Italian created by the linguist De Mauro is a reference linguistic resource for contemporary Italian describing the most used and understood words of the language. The latest version of this vocabulary dates back to 2014 (see Chiari/De Mauro 2014).

perception of the text by underlining the information structure and text cohesion as well as comprehension by facilitating the memorisation of information (Bredel/Maaß 2016: 505). The Inclusion Europe guidelines refer, for example, to photographs, drawings, or symbols as different possible typologies of images to be used (Inclusion Europe 2013: 12). Bredel and Maaß (2016: 505–506) differentiate between different typologies according to image function, for example photographs and pictograms to introduce foreign concepts, and organisation or flow charts to underline the information structure. Agnetta (2021) considers relations between text and image in Easy Language texts. He considers compensation from a translational point of view, concluding that textual information from the source text can be conveyed via images in the Easy Language text. Agnetta also considers redundancy, in which the same information is conveyed both by text and by an image. However, in intercultural communication in addition to the image type and the relation between text and image, it must be considered whether a certain image might not be understood correctly. Here, visual conventions must be considered, as well as for example the level of education of the target audience. The latter influences the spatial understanding necessary for visualisations like diagrams (Zabal et al. 2013: 50).

An aspect to consider first is that images can be classified into two broad groups: pictograms whose main characteristic is denoting information, namely in that they represent an object via graphic-visual similarity, and ideograms that due to their intrinsic capacity of connotation, provide information with a greater use of cultural meanings (Diadori 2001: 235; Floch 2002). In Easy Language texts for migrants, it therefore seems advisable to use pictograms instead of ideograms whenever possible. However, this is not always feasible. In some cases, a concept may be so abstract that only images with a metaphorical or symbolic meaning can be used (Pridik forthc.). Visualisation of abstract concepts is based on conventions, and visual conventions are socially constructed (Kostelnick 2017: 260). To become familiar with conventions, it is therefore necessary to “undergo a process of visual enculturation, either through formal training or immersion” (Kostelnick 2017: 257). Second language learners will be subject to this process by living in the host society, but it will take some time. Thus, when selecting an image that represents an abstract concept, being aware that the same image can have different metaphorical connotations in relation to different cultures is essential (St. Amant 2015a).

Pridik (forthc.) makes considerations about more complex image types like flow charts that are needed to represent concepts in law as a field of expertise. She suggests visualisations that are kept simple, are easily recognizable (familiar), close to the textual information that they relate to, could be suitable for Easy Language texts, too. When writing for migrants with low second language skills, more complex diagrams and flow charts are possible. Depending on the target audience, reading direction (Pridik forthc.) or other linguistic and cultural considerations on the visual elements (like pictograms) within the diagrams must be made. For an example of easily recognizable diagrams on legal information, while not in Easy Language, see PAeSI (2022) for Italy and Pridik (forthc.) for Germany.

It must also be considered that, in order to increase the comprehensibility of symbols, international standards have been created which also include rules to produce them uniformly, for example the ISO (International Organisation for Standardisation) standard.⁵ For this reason, an internationally standardised symbol, even if abstract, could be easily identifiable (see Kostelnick 2017: 261). Familiarity (the frequency with which symbols are encountered) in fact is thought to be an important determinant of image usability (McDougall et al. 1999). That is why abstract icons can easily be understood when familiar, because familiarity affects their learning and recall (Kostelnick 2017: 318). Another strategy that helps learning and recall is redundancy (Agnetta 2021). Thus, it might be helpful to repeat a concept from written text in an image, for example visualise causal relationships as an arrow (Agnetta 2021: 271; Pridik forthc.).

When using illustrations in an intercultural context, moreover, it is important to represent the diversity of the population (García Muñoz 2012: 37; Lázaro 2017). The NNgroup (Joyce 2022) also confirms that, to help readers feel included, it is necessary to not use neutral and generic illustrations that might be interpreted as representing the native population, but diverse illustrations that align with the user population's characteristics.

As we have seen, images denote culturally specific concepts that second language learners must be exposed to. Therefore, in Easy Language texts, either pictograms and ideograms used in the host culture or internationally recognisable ones should be utilised. Consequently, it is advisable not to use images of the culture of origin of the target audience to avoid confusion. In this case, the Easy Language text would mix the sign system of the host culture and that of the culture of origin. Also, it would narrow the readership of the text down to this specific target audience. Using host culture pictograms and ideograms helps to familiarise the target group with the host country's sign system (see Bredel/Maaß 2016: 57).

In this section we gave general considerations on the culturally sensitive use of visualisations. For more homogeneous target groups, the choice of visual elements can be customised.

7 Cultural issues in conducting qualitative empirical research on Easy Language texts for migrants

A text in Easy Language is a user-oriented text: It is optimised to be comprehended by its addressees (Hansen-Schirra/Gutermuth forthc.). To understand whether a text has an actual helpful effect on the user's reception, however, it is necessary to investigate the user perspective (Bredel/Maaß 2016: 117; Hansen-Schirra/Maaß 2020). To assess the text's expected performance, we can analyse three general dimensions (Pontis 2018: 113ff) for written texts: satisfaction (what people feel and think about the text), usability (how usable the text is), behavioural changes (if the text enables the user to achieve

⁵ The ISO 7001 Public information symbols, for instance, is a standard published by the International Organisation for Standardisation that defines a set of pictograms and symbols for public information.

their informative goal). More specifically, to verify whether a text is accessible, it should have the six characteristics indicated by the Hildesheim model (Maaß/Rink forthc.) according to which information must be retrievable, perceptible, comprehensible, linkable to previous knowledge, acceptable and action-oriented (Maaß 2020: 27).

The evaluation of the effectiveness of a text in a user perspective can be conducted through different methods. However, in an intercultural context, it is necessary to be aware that participants from different cultures might respond differently to the same methods and techniques (Pontis 2018: 40). Cultural differences can influence, for example, the timing for completing tasks, the types of responses and the level of engagement (to give an example, individuals from extremely introverted cultures may not feel comfortable with face-to-face interviews; Pontis 2018: 40). It is also important to consider the anxiety that migrants may experience when involved in a field study (Pontis 2018: 41). In studies undertaken in which the second language, participants have only basic knowledge of the test language (and consequently also of the cultural aspects conveyed by the language), communication issues could arise and should be taken into consideration (Pontis 2018: 41).

Studies often find that – especially in migrant populations – most study participants have a higher educational level (e. g. Berens et al. 2022). Bredel et al. (2016: 103) suggest that statistical findings for Easy Language rules are difficult to generate due to the small number of target group individuals. This is true for migrants with low second language skills too: This “group” is very heterogenous, comprising various nationalities, languages, second language and acculturation levels, ages etc. In Section 2, we suggested to define the target group more closely. Information about a such defined target group cannot be generalised to other target groups or the whole “group” of migrants with low second language skills.

7.1 The role of linguistic and cultural mediators

In this varied context, the involvement of linguistic and cultural mediators can play a crucial role in planning empirical research and in interpreting its results. This professional figure, whose role, depending on the country, is not always homogeneous, often provides assistance to migrants. This role might be considered similar to or coinciding with public service interpreting or community interpreting (Estévez Grossi 2020) and has the aim of making languages and cultures mutually accessible (Archibald/Garzone 2014: 7, 14).

The linguistic and cultural mediator today is seen as a bridge that allows people from different cultures to overcome communication barriers and fosters mutual understanding. Furthermore, mediators help to avoid an “ethnocentric” attitude of one culture (“us”) prevailing over the other (“them”), allowing dialogue in a condition of parity (Baraldi 2009; Diadori 2018: 89ff). In their daily work activity, mediators facilitate the relationship between

local community and migrants, helping their social, cultural and working integration.⁶ Their formal skills are therefore enriched by experience in the field.

In Germany, mediators are usually more concerned with settling disputes (BMEV n. d.). Instead, professional interpreters are concerned with bridging languages, but not with negotiating cultural elements. They are, however, trained in the cultures of their working languages (Archibald/Garzone 2014: 12), and thus able to understand the cultural nuances and to navigate them in the process of interpreting. Researchers can benefit from the support of linguistic and cultural mediators as well as interpreters in order to understand the target group feedback and how effective the text is. This will become apparent in Section 7.2.

7.2 Methods to evaluate comprehension and recall

There are several methods to verify whether a text has been understood by a group of users and its contents retained. In the following, we will evaluate their suitability for migrant target users. In their role as cultural experts, mediators and interpreters could pre-test the Easy Language text. This would make it possible to better adapt the text to the recipients before carrying out the testing phase with the target group (Fioravanti/Romano 2021b). At the lexical level, cultural mediators and interpreters are able to identify concepts unfamiliar to the users that require further explanations to render cultural implications explicit. They might also report to the text editor if certain terms are too complex for the reference user or, on the contrary, if technical terms can be utilised in that domain because they are thought to be known by the migrants. In the case of images, cultural mediators and interpreters understand which ones may be misinterpreted by migrants with low second language skills due to cultural reasons, and suggest more effective visual elements.

Some of these methods, according to Krings' categorisation (Krings 2005; Hansen-Schirra/Gutermuth forthc.) can be defined as "verbal data methods". These are methods that require the users to express thoughts and feelings about the text in a spontaneous way. They can be introspective methods such as Think-Aloud Protocols (TAP) in which the test subjects express their thoughts during the reading process or retrospective methods (such as the Retrospective Think-Aloud Protocol, RTAP), carried out after completion of the text.

Reproductive methods also allow the acquisition of verbal data and are divided into "free recall" and "cued recall". Participants in "free recall" must report what they have read whereas in "cued recall" they are asked to recall where a given word was previously used (Rickheit/Strohner 1993: 103; Hansen-Schirra/Gutermuth forthc.).

Still in keeping with Krings' categorisation (Krings 2005; Hansen-Schirra/Gutermuth forthc.), other types of tests, however, aim to evaluate previous knowledge and knowledge acquired after interacting with the text. To evaluate this, a cloze or multiple-

⁶ See for example the description of the Intercultural mediator professional profile of the Tuscan Region administration in Italy Regione Toscana (n. d.).

choice test is usually used. Open questionnaires and interviews can also be employed to assess text efficacy (Stahl-Timmis 2017; Ahrens et al. 2021: 34).

As we have seen, some of the evaluation methods require participants to interact with the experimenter orally (verbal data methods and interviews) while in others (cloze tests and questionnaires), the participants must read and interact in writing. It is therefore necessary to consider which modality is the most suitable for the group of users to be tested, both in terms of the linguistic aspects (reading, writing, listening and speaking skill level (Council of Europe 2001)) and the cultural aspects, since the preference for oral or written interaction can also be influenced by the culture of origin (for an overview see Ong 1982).

Furthermore, in an accessible communication context these evaluation methods must be adapted to the target user group (Bredel et al. 2016; Hansen-Schirra/Gutermuth forthc.). In the case of the migrant target group, therefore, particular attention must be paid to the language barrier and cultural barrier that may be encountered during test participation.

A standard questionnaire, for example, can be complex for a percentage of the population who have difficulty reading and writing (for Germany see Grotlüschen et al. 2020: 21). This type of test will be even more complex and intimidating for those learning a second language (Dörnyei/Taguchi 2010: 7).

In both oral and written tests, it is necessary to make sure that test instructions and content (such as interview or questionnaire questions) are provided in a language that is accessible and cannot be misunderstood for cultural reasons (Diadori 2001: 309; Dörnyei/Taguchi 2010: 7–8). Here, a pre-test might be particularly useful before submitting the test to the target user group. This allows for adaptation of incomprehensible or ill-worded items (Dörnyei/Taguchi 2010: 55), and may prove or disprove a questionnaire or another type of test as interculturally unsuitable.

Bredel et al. (2016: 108) offer a test adaptation for prelingually deaf children, for whom written German is a second language. They looked at the comprehensibility of negations in written German by letting the children fill out a multiple-choice test. They used pictures instead of written answers to focus on the comprehensibility of the items. Below the pictures, children could tick if picture A or B was correct, or both pictures, or “?” to indicate incomprehension.

The questions that are asked to test the comprehension can be referential or inferential. In the first case, the answer is explicitly expressed in the text while in the second case, the reader is asked to interpret the text. Even if inferential questions are more reliable in verifying a real understanding of the text, they are too complex if the linguistic knowledge level is very low. In this case, the use of referential questions is recommended (Diadori 2001: 311–312).

There are also methods for empirical research that do not require linguistic interactions and therefore do not need adaptation, even if the stress level of the test subject must be taken into consideration, which could also vary according to the culture of origin

(see above). These can be methods that concern the observation of behaviour. To this end, tools allowing data recording of user-text interaction are used. These include software for recording text displays on a screen or mouse and cursor movements (screen recording software and keylogging) or eye tracking systems that allow users' eye movements to be recorded (Hansen-Schirra/Gutermuth forthc.).

Of the same typology are psychological and neurological methods. These methods investigate reactions and changes in the peripheral nervous system, such as heartbeat or pupil size change when viewing text (Rickheit/Strohner 1993: 120; Hansen-Schirra/Gutermuth forthc.).

To understand which parts of a text are too complex for readers one method used is the "Plus-Minus Method". In this test, participants are asked to read a document and put pluses and minuses in the margin where information was understood or not, and underline unfamiliar words in the text (De Jong/Schellens 2000). This method also does not require any verbal interaction, but relies on the use of symbols.

All evaluation methods share a common difficulty: Questionnaires and other methods that are solely based on testing of comprehension cannot make visible why a text is incomprehensible (Bredel et al. 2016: 112). This might also be the case for elements that are incomprehensible or easily misunderstood due to the cultural barrier. (Additional) interviews, however, in which the interviewees are asked what was difficult about a text, why they gave certain answers, or in which the interviewees are able to ask questions themselves, could give more insight. Alternative methods, for example artistic ones in which participants draw how they imagine information (for methods in language biography see e. g. Busch 2011), could give even more insight into how second language learners understand the text.

All the illustrated methods are characterised by strengths and weaknesses and for this reason are often used in a mixed methods approach (Alves 2003; Döring/Bortz 2016; Hansen-Schirra/Gutermuth forthc.). The mixed approach seems even more essential in a context as varied as that of a migrant target group.

8 Conclusion

In this paper, we have characterised Easy Language as intercultural communication (Bredel/Maaß 2016: 183). Intercultural communication means little cultural common ground, i. e. a cultural barrier. There are several factors that influence this barrier, namely knowledge of discourse and taboos, text types and cultural systems, preferred rhetoric and visual elements, culturally specific semantics, role expectations and finally pragmatics. Easy Language texts must make these factors explicit. They must give explanations for unfamiliar cultural elements and adapt the rhetoric and visual elements to be acceptable to the target audience. Intercultural communication is a field of expertise that should be taken into account when researching migrants with low second language skills as a target group of Easy Language (Kecskes 2015).

Besides the cultural barrier, migrants with low second language skills are faced with the language, expert language and expert knowledge barrier, but also with the media barrier to a lesser extent. The latter arises when the host culture does not use media in the same way as the culture of origin.

Mediators and interpreters should advise in the process of writing Easy Language texts for migrants with low second language skills and in testing these texts, too. The target group can be very heterogeneous, but can be defined to be more uniform through the human-centred design approach. Despite a closer definition of a target group, a text can never work equally well for each individual, but respecting the considerations in this paper should make Easy Language texts more suitable for many people within the heterogeneous “group” of migrants with low second language skills.

Either way, target group testing is relevant to make sure that a text fulfils the intended function for its audience. Here, mixed methods approaches are particularly relevant, for example to not only check *where* an Easy Language text is still incomprehensible, but also *why*, or to give participants the opportunity to communicate non-verbally. In future research, the considerations in this paper will need empirical verification.

Easy Language for migrants with low second language skills is one way to facilitate access to comprehensible information, a democratic right that all people should have in order to participate in their society (IFLA 2010: 3). Consequently, Easy Language texts help their inclusion, namely their full economic, social, cultural, and political participation in the host community (IOM 2017).

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