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Current state of development of Eurocomprehension research

1. 'Eurocomprehension' is the term used to describe European intercomprehension in Europe's three major language families, the Romance, the Slavic and the Germanic. The aim of eurocomprehension is to achieve multilingualism conforming to EU language policy[1] goals through the entry-point of receptive competence in a modular structure. Linguistic intercomprehension research forms the transfer bases for the cognitive use of relations between the language groups which didactics of multilingualism implement.

Since the 1998 workshop 'Ways to Multilingualism'[2] organised by the Fernuniversität Hagen the research group EuroCom has been established in cooperation with the Fernuniversität Hagen to synergetically further the research into euro-comprehension[3]. I am here today acting as their spokesman. The research group has already been commended for its work; it was awarded the European Language Seal for innovative language projects in Vienna 1999.

2. Amongst numerous works on European intercomprehension, those that currently dominate concentrate on the Romance language group. I am restricting myself here to the larger projects and will leave out valuable contributions such as the language tandem, the numerous smaller and often very commendable initiatives like the groundwork by Reinheimer & Tasmowski[4], the (predominantly) Slavic tradition of language conveying via bridge languages in the United States and also the area of research of multilingualism didactics which European multilingualism could not do without. In this context, I would like to refer you to the contributions of Meissner and Reinfried[5].

The different projects can be divided into five main groups:

- The Hagen Projects
    - Reading Courses
    - IGLO
    - Learning for Europe
- Intercommunicabilité romane
- Eurom4
- Galatea
- EuroCom

2.1. At the forefront of the more contemporary multilingualism projects stands an initiative by Hagen social scientists at the Fernuniversität.

2.1.1. The 1995-8 EU-supported pilot project "Hagener Interkulturelle Lesekurse"[6] (Hagen Intercultural Reading Courses) has worked on the basis of a German bridge language with only secondary linguis-

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tic-didactic intention. It utilises authentic texts from the intercultural social science terminology to put them at the disposal of people who are supposed to have intercultural competence. These could then be acquired through remote learning programme using intercomprehensive texts. The project, in which a Dutch and a Danish reading course were developed on CD[7], focuses on the subject area of intercultural educational science. This implies the restriction to one type of text and mainly serves to overcome the traditional, subject-specific, monolingual language barriers.

2.1.2. Encouraged through the experiences with the pilot project, the Fernuniversität Hagen initiated the international IGLO project, sponsored through Socrates and Lingua for initially three years. Building on the Scandinavian experiences with intercomprehension, the project aims to create intercomprehension concentrated on receptive competence in seven languages (Danish, Dutch, English, German, Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish) and make them available online, true to Hagen's distant teaching tradition: IGLO stands for Intercomprehension in Germanic Languages Online[8].

2.1.3. Building on the structure of the Hagen language courses, the EU-sponsored project "Learning for Europe" started in 2000, imparts receptive multilingualism for the scientific communication with middle- and east European countries. The project focuses on specific texts in the arts and social science areas and includes not only German and Dutch but also Polish and Czech[9].

2.2. In Europe, above all, the partially functioning intercomprehension in Scandinavia acted as a stimulus for all intercomprehension projects which were developed in recent years especially in the area of the romance languages. The romance languages in their diversity are a particular challenge for the research in European intercomprehension. This is due, above all, to the knowledge of the gradual divergence which is embedded in their historical development.

There can be found a rejection of strict monolingualism as early as the 1980s mainly in Germany, where Romance research has a particularly strong tradition, similar Scandinavia, which led to a deepened interlinguistic discussion about multilingualism in the 90s. Out of the manifold approaches (Raasch, Krüger, Preuss, Barrera-Vidal, etc.) I would like to highlight the numerous, particularly productive and influential works by Franz-Joseph Meißner, who first established the didactics of multilingualism[10] as an independent discipline.

2.2.1. The Aarhus model[11] of the 'Intercommunicabilité romane' is seen as the first comprehensive attempt to acquire Romance language skills in Italian, Portuguese and Spanish through using the traditionally dominant French as a *langue dépôt*. Similar to the EuroComRom method, this model transfers phonetic-phonological as well as morphosyntactical bases of intercomprehension from the field of diachronic linguistics into purely synchronic representations. The skills which are taught are based on the experiences of Scandinavian intercomprehension and try to impart not only receptive but also productive competence – an aim that is hard to realise in a learning environment that is distant from the area where the target language is used. The shaping of the learners' language awareness, who "*ne savent pas encore qu'ils arriveraient si facilement à communiquer dans les autres langues*"[12] is in the fore.

2.3. The project EuRom4 (book and CD), was created in cooperation between the universities of Salamanca, Aix-en-Provence, Rome and Lisbon under the direction of Claire Blanche-Benveniste and André Valli. It pursues the goal in the four languages of all participating universities to enable the native speaker of one Romance language the reading and listening comprehension in the other three languages. Leading less to the mastery of the languages, this approach will rather promote "*redonner le goût de découvrir ces langues et l'assurance [de pouvoir] y parvernir [...].*"[13] Carried by the its contrasting methods of analysis, "from the point of view of teaching methodology, the work hardly achieves more than a schematic method for translating grammar (despite the use of computer soft-

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[7] http://www.fernuni-hagen.de/sprachen/cont/lesekurse.htm

[8] http://www.hum.uit.no/a/svenonius/lingua/. Contributions to this topic can be found in Section II of the Hagen Conference.

[9] http://www.FernUni-hagen.de/sprachen/cont/slawisch.htm

[10] The work of Franz-Joseph Meißner/Marcus Reinfried (Hrsg.) and its valuable bibliograohy are erpecially important in this context: *Mehrsprachigkeitsdidaktik: Konzepte, Analysen, Lehrerfahrungen mit romanischen Fremdsprachen*, Tübingen [Narr]1998.

[11] Jørgen Schmitt Jensen, *L'expérience danoise et les langues romanes*, in : Claire Blanche-Benveniste et André Valli (Hg.) : *L'intercompréhension : le cas des langues romanes.* (Le français dans le monde, numéro spécial) pp. 95-108. Vanves, janvier 1997.

[12] Schmitt Jensen 1977, p. 96.

[13] Sabine Stoye, *Eurocomprehension: Der romanistische Beitrag für eine europäische Mehrsprachigkeit.* Editiones EuroCom, Bd.2, Aachen: Shaker, 2000, p.176.

ware and texts for listening comprehension)"[14]. The book and CD manage to achieve a language awareness by its users for parts of the language groups.

2.4. The extensive European research programme Galatea was developed under the guidance of foreign language didactician Louise Dabène and Christian Degache (Grenoble) in cooperation with academics from Grenoble, Aveiro, Barcelona, Madrid and Rome. In many years of groundwork, decoding strategies in closely related languages (the so-called "Romanophony"), rules of transfer, false friends and hierarchies of inference between languages have been researched and formed valuable results for the study of intercomprehension in the Romance languages. The existing full-length version of the CD intends for Francophones the use of the *parenté des langues* for the target languages Spanish, Italian and Portuguese in order to "discover" them independently and to achieve an accelerated reading knowledge, i.e. in the current press vocabulary. I would like to refer you to Christian Degache's contribution in Section III of the Hagen Conference.

2.5. Frankfurt University's EuroComRom-Project[15] uses the bridge language French in order to achieve reading comprehension all other romance languages with the technique of optimised inference, employing the help of extensive linguistic transfer bases ("The Seven Sieves"). The first volume uses – in addition to French - Italian, Catalan, Portuguese, Spanish and Romanian as languages for intercomprehension. A supplement for the regional European languages ("Romania Minor") is currently being developed. In principle, a different bridge language could be used – as numerous tests have shown – however the target language French is subjected to the restrictions which have already been mentioned in the Aarhus project: the late step from reading competency to listening comprehension is only achievable with additional effort here. EuroComRom uses all linguistic contributions of the Romance disciplines[16] in order to achieve a reading competence in the entire Romania according to the EU requirements mentioned in the beginning. Through the introduction of inference strategies of lexical internationalisms, pan-Romance and pan-European lexis, interlingual sound correspondence, the relations between spelling and pronunciation, the pan-Romance syntactic structures and morpho-syntactical structural formulas, in succession a Romance language awareness is created, which also allows inference strategies to be used in the other languages of the group. Evidently, the treated texts are not sufficient yet: transfer strategies have to be specifically practiced and the teaching material needs to be adapted to the particular needs of the target group which takes the learners' language-learning history into consideration. The EuroCom research team which was founded in Hagen has already begun this task.

3. Recent research activities in the field of Eurocomprehension

Subsequent to the Romance reference work, the research group EuroCom has developed several research projects which can be divided into different groups: 1. projects concerning the implementation of the original Romance project EuroComRom and the adaptations to other departing languages, 2. projects concerning the didactic component, the extension of receptive competence to listening comprehension (EuroComDidact), 3. projects concerning the development of transfer bases for the Slavic languages (EuroComSlav) and 4. the development of intercomprehension for Germanic languages (EuroComGerm).

3.1. Developments in EuroComRom

3.1.1. In cooperation with the EuroCom research group, information & computer scientists from Hagen Fernuniversität have developed a language software application which implements the "Seven Sieves" approach for receptive reading skills in six Romance languages as developed by Klein/ Stegmann. In a two-year project financed by North-Rhine-Westphalia, the group developed a multi-media CD-Rom which will be introduced during this conference by the media-didactical project leader, Eberhard Heuel, in the plenary on Saturday[17]. The CD has to be seen as the base module which introduces the receptive Romance language acquisition on the basis of the "Seven Sieves".

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[14] Marcus Reinfried, *Innerromanischer Sprachtransfer*, in: Grenzgänge. Beiträge zu einer modernen Romanistik, Bd. 12, 6. Jg. 1999, p. 123.

[15] Horst G. Klein & Tilbert D. Stegmann, EuroCom*Rom* – Die sieben Siebe: Romanische Sprachen sofort lesen können, Editiones EuroCom, Bd.1, Aachen: Shaker, 2000.

[16] Presented in detail in: Sabine Stoye (2000).

[17] Eberhard Heuel, Neue Medien und Fremdsprachenlernen. Mediendidaktische Aspekte von Sprachanwendungen am Beispiel des Programms „Sieben Siebe", Hagener Kongreßakten zu EuroCom (to be published 2002).

3.1.2. In order to make the EuroCom method internationally available, the first adaptations of the Seven Sieves, those in Romanian and Italian[18], have been completed. The English, French, Catalan, Portuguese and Polish adaptations are almost realised (to be published in 2002). Further adaptations for Spanish, Occitan, Dutch and Greek are currently being developed (2003)[19]. The works of EuroCom are published in a special edition, the *Editiones EuroCom*.

3.1.3. Apart from the Hagen CD base module, which is still to be enlarged through further "exercise rooms", on-line projects for the receptive acquisition of individual romance languages (initially Romanian, Italian and Spanish) on the basis of EuroCom are being developed by Klein/Rutke in cooperation with Hessen Media. These will be realised in the period between 2002-2005. These projects mainly differ from the Hagen CD project in five areas. 1. the receptive language acquisition is focused on one target language without compromising the entire Romance comparison framework (EuroComRom). 2. multimedia tools should help to take the users' different language biographies into consideration. 3. transfer processes shall be made comprehensible (and therefore measurable) according to respective needs (in collaboration with F.-J. Meißner, EuroComDidact). Finally, these modules will be supplemented by relevant commentaries about culture and language history. The development of these projects is documented on the Internet under www.eurocomprehension.de.

3.1.4. The different departing languages in the EuroCom network and the research results from EuroComSlav and EuroComGerm require a range of further modules, which need international cooperation. Here, more than the cooperation between the financial supporters of NRW and Hessen is required. In response to this, the research group has initiated the foundation of an international EuroComCentre, which should initially coordinate the research and publish demo versions online for discussion. In the completion phase, the centre aims to make the results available throughout Europe using an Internet portal solution in collaboration with a remote learning institution[20].

3.2. Research concerning EuroComDidact

The didactic component of EuroCom[21] is under the supervision of Franz-Joseph Meißner (Gießen University). The Gießen contributions to foreign language didactics[22] inform about the research activities of the didactician of multilingualism, F.-J. Meißner. Especially the bibliography in Meißner/Reinfried should be highlighted in this context[23].

EuroComDidact acts as EuroCom's didactical component. It analyses the possibilities of optimised inference in relation to the EuroCom projects in the Romance, Slavic and Germanic languages. EuroComDidact is closely connected to the didactics of multilingualism. It is a transversal didactic which interlinks the individual didactics (of German, English, French, Russian, etc.) in the sense of interdisciplinary and interlingual learning. Amongst the numerous EuroComDidact projects, some of the most essential ones shall be highlighted:

3.2.1. In the area of ground work, EuroComDidact researches the transfer from reading to listening comprehension. An article that gives an overview of the current state of research in Germany will be published this year in the ZFF[24].

3.2.2. EuroComDidact has made it their task to develop the application of EuroComRom in different learning contexts and to create methods of testing and evaluation.

3.2.3. As a result of the Hessen-Media-Project, EuroComDidact is currently developing different modules for subject-specific EuroCom implementations. The demand for language skills evidently plays an important role in the academic job market. The EuroCom method lends itself to the development of subject-specific language courses. Modules in the subject languages of Geography and History are

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[18] Sanda Reinheimer/Horst G. Klein/Tilbert D.Stegmann, *EuroComRom* – Şapte Site, Bucureşti 2001; and Gian Paolo Giudicetti/Costantino Maeder/Horst G. Klein/Tilbert D. Stegmann, EuroCom Italia, Aachen: Shaker 2001.

[19] http://www.eurocomresearch.net/forsch.htm#Adaptationen

[20] The web address of the EuroComCentre Info-Homepage is: http://www.eurocomcenter.com

[21] There is a link to EuroCom*Didact* on the EuroCom Info-Homepage:
www.eurocomresearch.net under ~/pubdid.htm und ~/linkdidact.htm.

[22] http://www.uni-giessen.de/~gb1041/institut/personen/Meißner/msdd.htm

[23] http://www.uni-giessen.de/~gb1041/institut/personen/Meißner/msd-info.htm

[24] F.-J. Meißner & Heike Burk, *Hörverstehen in einer unbekannten romanischen Fremdsprache: Methodische Implikationen für den Tertiärsprachenerwerb*, in: ZFF Zeitschrift für Fremdsprachenforschung Nr. 12 (I), 2001, pp. 63-102.

proposed. Also, modules for Economy, Administration and Administrative Science and Code Civil/ Código civil/BGB are planned.

3.3. EuroComSlav

The work of EuroComSlav was initially occupied with ground research concerning the transferability of the EuroCom model into the Slavic language group and analysed the possibilities of using Russian as a base[25]. This was offered for discussion in the context of the overall EuroCom work during the 35th Linguistic Colloquium in Innsbruck[26].

Meantime, the linguistic ground research concerning the acquirement of pan-Slavic elements in lexis and morphology have been furthered under the guidance of Lew Zybatow. Section IV of the Hagen Conference will inform about the recent work.

3.4. EuroComGerm

The youngest EuroCom branch, which is led by Britta Hufeisen (TU Darmstadt), is still in development. Here, the main goal is to take the Scandinavian experiences as well as those of the IGLO project into account and create a team that can further the Germanic intercomprehension research.

4. Relevant findings from previous work

During the numerous test trials of EuroComRom in universities in Germany, France, Austria, Belgium and Catalonia a number of insights have been made that supplement current research results. These, especially the insights from projects adapting the method to different departing languages, will have to be considered in future research.

4.1. Interlexemes and syntactic structures

It has become evident that interlexemes are of central significance for text comprehension in Romance intercomprehension. The extraordinary solidarity of pan-Romance structures (the identity of the nine basic sentence types and most of the hypotaxes) helps the learner to naturally transfer the syntactic structures of one Romance language into another using their spontaneous grammar thus having an operative basis for the cognitive transfer process. The actual cognitive process happens through the motivational recognition of the interlexemes which is quickly and extensively broadened through additional information that leads to the decoding of graphic and sound-based profiles. The morphosyntactic inferences are mostly done contextually, however they need a pan-Romance supplementation and differentiation (systematisation).

4.2. Animated formulas as an aid for the mental grammar

The book is only moderately suitable as a medium for the presentation of the morphosyntactic structures and the sound correspondences in the reference work. Only a multimedia presentation with the according Flash-animations can make the essence of these formulas optimally available for the creation of a mental grammar. This can be seen as an important task for future media didactical use of the Seven Sieves. This media didactical adaptation should enable us to create formulas that document graphic or morphological deviations, similarly transparent as - for example - the radicals as pictographic bridges which fulfil this function in Chinese writing for the inference of complex signs.

In the area of sound correspondences, we can learn from the Arabic language. The portrayal of script without vowels in the Arabic tradition overcomes variety borders and encourages transfer achievements from variety L1 to variety L2. Sound correspondences, which portray a part of the European identity of script systems document the profiles of the respective national or regional traditions of writing systems. Therefore, an animated media-didactic presentation has to be found, a presentation that makes it possible to provide the learner with an easy to remember overview of graphematic similarities and deviations.

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[25] Lew Zybatow, *Die Interkomprehension am Beispiel der slawischen Sprachen. Zur Übertragbarkeit des Euro-Com-Konzepts romanischer Mehrsprachigkeit auf die slawischen Sprachen*, in: Gerhard Kischel/Eva Gothsch (Hg.), Wege zur Mehrsprachigkeit im Fernstudium, Hagen [FernUniversität] 1999, pp. 67-88.

[26] Klein, Horst G.& Meißner, Franz-Joseph,&Zybatow, Lew: The EuroCom-Strategy – The Way to European Multilingualism, in: Lew Zybatow (Hg.): *Sprachkompetenz – Mehrsprachigkeit - Translation. Akten des 35. Linguistischen Kolloquiums*, Innsbruck, 20.-22. September 2000 (in the press).

4.3. The central role of profile words as European cultural heritage

The numerous inference exercises have shown that profile words in the target language play an essential role in the inference process. It is of the highest importance for the continuity of the inference motivation that profile words are explained as early as possible, since they are normally not inferable on first attempt: the pan-Romance *mit* (it.,sp. *con*, pg. *com*, rum. *cu*) can be found as a prefix in the French and Catalan languages, it is however the respective profile word (fr. *avec*; cat. *amb*), which proves difficult to infer and which is therefore often crucial for cognition. In the future, profile words will therefore achieve another status in the inference process. Profile words are the true lexic-grammatical differentiating features in a closely related group. In order to minimise the learning time, while at the same time anchor the learned material in multiple ways, easy to remember commentaries about language history can be used; a cultural supplement which documents the diversity of the common Romance-European cultural heritage.

4.4. Internationalisms

The work on the adaptation has shown that the notion of internationalisms, which is based on the German version of the international vocabulary, is not transferable in other departing languages. A range of existing definitions of so-called "internationalisms" exist[27], however none of them is satisfying due to their ethnocentric fundamental basis. Even in the Romance language group, extreme cases like the French and the Romanian can be found: the language policy in France has reduced the number of more recent internationalisms, at least officially, while the end of Romania's isolation during the Ceauşescu dictatorship resulted in an explosive growth of internationalisms in the decade of their newly-found freedom. It seems necessary, that the notion of internationalisms has to be defined separately for every language and cultural community.

4.5. Pan-Romance Vocabulary

It is evident that the pan-Romance vocabulary does not play the same role for a Romance audience than it does for a non-Romance audience who have a bridge language, mostly French, at their disposal. For Romanophones, the existence of pan-Romance vocabulary is natural and doesn't have to be realised first. Also, the border between (historical) pan-Romance features (i.e. the hereditary vocabulary and the derivates from scholar's Latin) and the internationalisms, which found pan-Romance access, becomes indistinct. The didactical distinction between the pan-Romance vocabulary and the internationalisms is not as important for Romanophones as the transfer bases of sound correspondence.

4.6. New evaluation of false friends from a receptive point of view

An ever-recurring argument against interlingual methods is the production of mistakes due to inaccurate use of *false friends*. In that respect, receptive interlingual learning needs a completely new evaluation; the existence of *false friends* is indisputable, however neither their definition nor their evaluation is satisfactory. When adding the specific cultural connotations, almost every interlexeme can actually be counted as a *false friend*. When viewing interlexemes in their context – i.e. as words that should enable transfer - they usually allow a positive transfer or at least culture-specific insights. Tanja Stahlhofen showed in her research into internationalisms, that concerns about *false friends* as inference mistakes are relatively unfounded[28]. On the receptive level, the use for the learner is five times larger than the alleged "damage" caused, a damage that is minimised anyway through contextualisation and can often be avoided.

4.7. Inclusion of listening comprehension

The acquisition of listening competence has to go hand in hand with that of reading competence from an early stage. Often, it is the right pronunciation of a written word that leads to its cognitive inference. The Romanian word "*meci*" for instance – i.e. in the context of sports reports - can only be recognised as the internationalism "*match*" through pronunciation (which is similar to the English original). The

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[27] Recently presented in: Tanja Stahlhofen, *Die Transferleistung der Internationalismen im Rahmen der Eurocomprehension*, Frankfurt am Main (Magisterarbeit) 2001.

[28] Tanja Stahlhofen (2001) p. 86.

modular imparting of reading competence therefore has to include basic elements of orthoepy in order to support the interlingual transfer and to prepare for the listening comprehension.

While receptive reading comprehension differentiates between significant elements, creates referential relationships and grasps the meaning via transfer performance, infers complex structures and therefore enables the corrective access through any number of cognitive processes, there is only a limited amount of time available for cognitive reception processing during listening comprehension. For listening comprehension, the technique of inference includes text-analytical processes and also phonetic and prosodic paradigm comparison, which is subject to considerable capacity restrictions due to the short period of time available. The auditive intercomprehension therefore requires an accelerated segmentation of the mentioned signals and their paradigms in the sequence of the spoken chain, which makes cognitive inference possible. It is at this point that it becomes evident, why strongly dialectical structured languages (Chinese, Arabic) can not manage without the compelling function of an intercomprehensible script. There is still extensive need for research in this area.

4.8. Problematic of the bridge languages

The inclusion of listening comprehension in the Romance languages also illustrates why the French language is predestined as a bridge language for the Romance languages. Our script systems document the historic attempts to transfer the spoken word into sound-depicting writing conventions. This process makes a number of historical conventions visible, conventions which are more than orthographical ballast but actually give culture-differentiating clues about the spoken language. In the extreme case, a language operates in two distinct systems: within the framework of Romance script tradition, the written French can be recognised as a language-historical product of the Latin language like any other idiom of the language family and can therefore be inferred in the pan-Romance context. The spoken language however, is much further away from pan-Romance common ground and also exhibits other typological features. Languages which participate in two typological systems are particularly predestined to be bridge languages for a closely related group.

Speakers of the bridge language French have therefore the best prerequisites for acquiring reading competence in the other Romance languages since they actually master two language types: the Romance *code écrit* and the typological distant *code oral*. In the case of French as the target language, the development of a supplementary module which includes the basis of listening comprehension, is therefore strongly necessary for speakers of other bridge languages.

5. Tests and Evaluation

A desideratum of Eurocomprehension is still the analysis of tests and the evaluation of transfer performances. The few approaches like the research about the EurComRom test group by Klein[29] und Müller-Lancé[30] have not been appropriately differentiated. Therefore, tests series have been prepared in a joint seminar by Klein and Meißner that is currently being held (winter semester 2001/2). These series are made comprehensible and measurable for everyone through publication on the internet[31]. The words from the Romance texts which are used for inference have been programmed for the internet version can be activated. Through clicking with the mouse, the programme provides help for inference strategy and refers users to the Seven Sieves. If using Microsoft Explorer 4.0 or a more advanced version, the learners can count the number of activated words (which will turn blue) in order to find out how many and which inference aids they required. After working with several texts, the progress in receptive inference can be comprehended quantitatively.

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[29] See the statistics at the end of Klein's contribution in: Klein&Meißner&Zybatow (2001)

[30] Johannes Müller-Lancé, *Zur Nutzung vorhandener Fremdsprachenkompetenzen als Transferbasis für romanische Mehrsprachigkeit – ein empirischer Versuch und seine psycholinguistische Relevanz*, in: Grenzgänge 6 (1999), No. 12, pp. 85-95.

[31] http://www.eurocomprehension.de : Work on the first Portuguese text has already begun.