

# Preface

When I was ten years old, I made my first trip away from Denmark, accompanied by my grandmother, to visit distant relatives in Norway. I vividly remember how overwhelmed I was when I began to play with my Norwegian cousins and their friends. Initially, I felt restricted by the differences between my Danish and their Norwegian, but before long, we overcame these language barriers. We discovered that we could each speak our own language and still understand each other well enough to communicate. I had a wonderful time with my new friends in this beautiful country for the rest of the summer.

This childhood memory has profoundly influenced my scientific career. At first, my curiosity revolved around the communication dynamics among Scandinavians (Danes, Norwegians, and Swedes) when using their native languages. Over time, I broadened my perspective to include communication between speakers of closely related languages outside Scandinavia. Unlike Chinese and English, which are vastly dissimilar, many languages worldwide share genetic roots and enough resemblance for speakers to understand each other to varying degrees, even upon first encounter. This is what is referred to as mutual intelligibility. Examples include the Scandinavian languages or Spanish and Portuguese.

Linguists have been interested in mutual intelligibility between closely related language varieties since the middle of the previous century, and recently, developments of methodologies have taken place in various fields of research that are valuable for research on mutual intelligibility. These developments include advancements in dialectology, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, applied linguistics, and neuro-linguistics. Additionally, the availability of personal computers, the internet, and advanced linguistic research tools have contributed to new developments in the field. The findings and ideas of the past and these recent developments make it possible to measure the level of mutual intelligibility between speakers of many language varieties and relate it to linguistic and extra-linguistic factors that may explain intelligibility levels.

For the past two decades I have used these methods to conduct intelligibility research at the University of Groningen as the principal investigator in two large projects supported by the Dutch Research Council (NWO). The first project, *Linguistic determinants of mutual intelligibility in Scandinavia*<sup>1</sup>, focused on the mutual intelligibility between Scandinavian and West-Germanic languages. The second project, *Mutual intelligibility of closely related languages in Europe*:

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<sup>1</sup> Project number 276-75-005, 2006-2011, PI Charlotte Gooskens, other project members Nanna Hilton, Sebastian Kürschner, Jens Moberg, Anja Schüppert, and Renée van Bezooijen.

*linguistic and non-linguistic determinants*<sup>2</sup>, the so-called MICReLa project, expanded my scope to include Romance and Slavic languages spoken in Europe. These projects resulted in three doctoral theses (Schüppert 2011; Golubović 2016; Swarte 2016).

Moreover, I have collaborated with research groups investigating intelligibility in other regions worldwide, such as between Finnish and Estonian, Kurdish dialects, languages in Vanuatu, Turkey, Iran, Ethiopia, and Indonesia. Through these collaborations and personal interactions with students and researchers from many different countries, it has become evident to me that there is a need to consolidate our current understanding of how to measure the intelligibility of closely related languages and quantify relevant factors for interpreting the results.

The aim of this book is to provide an overview of existing knowledge regarding mutual intelligibility between closely related languages. This field of research has a long tradition and has served various practical and theoretical purposes. For instance, intelligibility research may help resolve issues that concern language planning and policies. It can inform the development of language learning materials, which can be tailored to make use of our knowledge of factors that determine intelligibility across specific language pairs – for instance, to create better materials for Norwegians learning German or Czech individuals learning Polish. It can also contribute more generally to improving cross-cultural communication: when we understand our differences, we are better equipped to overcome them. Intelligibility research can, therefore, help improve mutual intelligibility. Researchers have also conducted intelligibility research to address fundamental questions such as: How different can two languages be before they cease to be mutually intelligible? Is there a threshold for intelligibility breakdown? How different should two language varieties be before they can be considered separate languages rather than dialects of the same language? What are the most significant linguistic and extra-linguistic factors influencing intelligibility?

The book illustrates the diversity of current research in the field and identifies gaps in our knowledge that future investigators may fill. It presents methods for investigating intelligibility as well as case studies, combining theoretical and applied approaches to the field. The focus is on quantitative measurements. It discusses how to measure intelligibility in experimental settings and how to quantify factors that are relevant for explaining the results of intelligibility testing. Most of the examples in the book involve spoken language, but there are also references

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<sup>2</sup> Project number 360-70-430, 2011-2016, PI Charlotte Gooskens, co-applicant Vincent van Heuven, other project members Jelena Golubović, Wilbert Heeringa, Anja Schüppert, Femke Swarte, Renée van Bezooijen, and Stefanie Voigt. This project is referred to as the MICReLa project throughout the book.

to research on written language. Closely related languages are defined very broadly, encompassing language varieties from the same language family as well as dialects of a single language. However, foreign accents are outside the scope of the book, even though some of the methods discussed have been developed for research on foreign accents.

The reader is assumed to have a basic knowledge of linguistics, but hopefully, a diverse audience of students and researchers will find valuable information in the book. Individuals working in the area of language policy and language planning may also benefit from more knowledge of the intelligibility research and results presented.

This book would not have come into existence without my scientific “parents”, Renée van Bezooijen and Vincent van Heuven. Their invaluable guidance and mentorship have shaped my intellectual journey, and I am profoundly grateful for the knowledge I have gained from them. Vincent supervised my Master’s thesis and has been a continuous source of academic support since then. His critical feedback on this book played a pivotal role in refining its content, correcting numerous mistakes and inconsistencies before publication. Any remaining imperfections are, of course, solely my responsibility. Renée was my PhD supervisor, and after that, we worked together for many years. Her profound knowledge and infectious enthusiasm were extremely inspiring, and I think back at our time of cooperation as the best period in my academic career. A special thanks goes to John Nerbonne, who has shown unwavering interest in my research right from the beginning, providing invaluable support and advice.

I am also indebted to all PhD students, postdocs, student assistants, and colleagues I have been working with for the past two decades. In particular, I would like to thank Jelena Golubović, Wilbert Heeringa, Nanna Hilton, Sebastian Kürschner, Jens Moberg, Anja Schüppert, Femke Swarte, and Stefanie Voigt, integral to the success of the two large projects mentioned earlier. I continue to enjoy fruitful collaborations with many of them. Jan D. Ten Thije deserves recognition for establishing the LaRa group, providing a platform for discussing receptive multilingualism at the Dutch national level. I am also indebted to researchers worldwide who expressed interest in my work and made me aware of the need for a synthesis of research on mutual intelligibility. I collaborated with several of them, including Ahmet Kesmez, Bilgit Sağlam, and Fatih Özek on Kurdish and Turkic languages, Hanna-Ilona Härmävaara on Finnish and Estonian, Gerard Doetjes and Karin Beijering on Scandinavian languages and dialects, Remco Knooihuizen on Faeroese and Icelandic, Tekabe Legesse Feleke on Ethiopian languages, Stefan Bulatović on Croatian, and Cindy Schneider on languages in Vanuatu. Cindy also generously devoted time to reading drafts of the book and provided extremely valuable feedback.

The initial draft of this book took shape during my stay at the Polish Institute for Advanced Studies (PIAST) in Warsaw, where I held a fellowship from 2020 to 2021 amidst The COVID-19 pandemic. This opportunity was fundamental for the realization of this project.

I also express my gratitude to my parents, who gave me the freedom to pursue my academic interests, and to my children – Marijn, who proofread the first draft, and Jeppe and Ida, who never stopped encouraging me. Finally, my deepest gratitude goes to my husband, Mark, whose enduring interest in this project and critical, constructive feedback on each chapter's first draft have been indispensable. He also meticulously checked all references in the book. Most importantly, he made my life easy and enjoyable in so many ways.