SemDial 2011: Proceedings of the 15th Workshop on the Semantics and Pragmatics of Dialogue, pages 120–128.
Los Angeles, California, 21–23 September 2011.

# Lingua Receptiva:

# Explicit Alignment in Estonian-Russian Communication

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## Abstract

Lingua receptiva (LaRa) is a 'mode of multilingual communication in which interactants employ a language and/or a language variety different from their partner's and still understand each other without the help of any additional lingua franca' (Rehbein, ten Thije and Verschik, 2012). Understanding in that case is established based on 'passive' knowledge of the interlocutors' language. The current paper presents data on Estonian- and Russian-speaking interlocutors involved in the task-solving experiment via Skype who use their respective mother tongues.

In studies on dialogues, psycholinguistic alignment is claimed to be fundamental to overall communicative success and automatic in monolingual communication (e.g., Pickering and Garrod, 2004). This paper compares studies on multilingual constellations and argues that in LaRa alignment is actively monitored by interlocutors and is thus also a process of establishing understanding.

The study explores meta-linguistic devices that are considered as explicit alignment. These devices are especially important for achieving understanding in typologically distant languages as it is the case in Estonian-Russian interaction. The conclusion drawn from this pilot is that regardless of L2 proficiency, dyads of speakers and hearers in *lingua receptiva* are able to fulfill their task successfully, however, they differ in applying meta-linguistic devices.

## 1 *Lingua Receptiva*

Multilingual encounters list several options for reaching understanding ranging from global or regional *lingua francae* to switching to the language of interlocutor. Yet, individual linguistic backgrounds or institutional restrictions do not always allow for these choices. This paper focuses on another alternative for effective multilingual communication called *lingua receptiva* (henceforth, LaRa). LaRa is a mode of communication in which speakers of different languages use their own language and have enough competencies to understand each other.

Despite the fact that LaRa as a phenomenon has existed for many centuries, researchers have started to take this notion into consideration only in the 1960ies. Current theoretical visualization is derived from a collection of conceptually related terms such as *intelligibility of closely related languages* (Wolf, 1964), *semi-communication* (Haugen, 1981), *plurilingual communication* (Lüdi, 2007), *intercompréhension* (Grin, 2008), and *receptive multilingualism* (Braunmüller, 2007; ten Thije and Zeevaert, 2007; Beerkens, 2010). In that literature the focus has been gradually shifting from partial mutual understanding between typologically related languages towards effective interactive practices that emphasize both receptive and productive components that enable understanding.

Ten Thije, Rehbein and Verschik (2012) describe *lingua receptiva* as 'a vehicle for effective communication between members of diverse language communities' and mention the following competencies that enable interlocutors to reach congruent understanding in multilingual interactions: these are 'the ensemble of *linguistic*, *mental*, *interactional* as well as *intercultural repertoires* that are activated when listeners are receiving linguistic actions in their 'passive' language or variety' (ibid.).

This pilot study aims at exploring the importance of linguistic and interactional competencies for reaching understanding in LaRa mode and, therefore, investigates the processes that monitor production as well as comprehension via specific meta-linguistic devices that can be found within a dyad of one speaker and one hearer. The choice and distribution of these devices as well as success factors within the experiment (e.g., time, task completion) are expected to vary depending on L2 composition within a dyad. The hypothesis of this pilot states that monitoring via explicit alignment strategies is an effective method to secure understanding in multilingual settings and tends to benefit dyads with at least one lower L2 proficiency interlocutor.

## 2 Alignment

According to findings from experimental research on interactive alignment model (Pickering and Garrod, 2004), which is the multidimensional representation of a situation under discussion, alignment is fundamental to overall communicative success: dialogue is characterized by a process in which speakers develop similar mental states to each other and alignment is established once interlocutors have reached same understanding of relevant aspects of reality. This interpretation would suggest that alignment is a proof of established mutual understanding.

Most studies on alignment focus on monolingual settings and those few that look at multilingual conversation present non-native competence and native speaker authority issues as most salient features that define processing costs and mechanisms. Study by Costa, Pickering and Sorace (2008) contains a number of hypotheses concerning L2 comprehension, such as the fact that production for an L2 addressee requires more monitoring than speech directed at a native speaker. They also report on numerous studies that show evidence for cross-linguistic priming of syntactic choices. Furthermore, the authors discuss dichotomical nature of alignment and entrainment: that of phenomenon and the mechanisms, or routes, which lead to it. In other words, Costa et al. (ibid.) suggest that alignment can be a result of as well as a mechanism for constructing congruent understanding. They also give an overview of automatic and non-automatic alignment, the latter phenomenon being synonymous to the notion of explicit alignment.

Yet, further assumptions need not apply to LaRa mode to a full extent. Costa et al. (ibid.) report on a study by Ivanova et al. (2007) that demonstrates accommodation strategies directed at L2 speaker, yet they seem to underestimate the impact of the hearer, which in the case of *lingua receptiva* is essential. Both Pickering and Garrod (2004) and Costa et al (2008) find little evidence for non-automatic alignment and treat it as a rather marginal mechanism in dialogues. These above mentioned studies describe alignment as less automatic in dyads with less proficient interlocutors, but immediately present an argument that alignment is hindered by the native speaker's truthfulness to the code. The examples given in the study demonstrate L1 speakers who diverge from L2 speaker's incorrect use of syntax or lexical items. Yet, as Hülmbauer (2010) noted, convergence to code can still be an effective accommodation strategy that signals understanding. To support that claim, Hülmbauer quotes Canagarajah (2007:94): 'Not uniformity, but alignment is more important for such communication. Each brings his or her own language resources to find a strategic fit with the participants and purpose of a context'. Thus, alignment could be interpreted as convergence on more global level of communicative purpose rather than mere repetition of exact structures.

The question remains what processes take place in dialogues that contain two typologically distant languages. One could argue that LaRa would not profit from alignment as a result of resources' incompatibility in these languages. On the other hand, interlocutors could adapt their behavior in response to each others' behavior independent of linguistic composition within the dyad. The author of this paper argues that in multilingual settings alignment would function not only as the end product of successful understanding, but primarily as interactive monitoring process. This is not to diminish the importance of automatic processing but to tease out deliberate communicative strategies that secure understanding and vary depending on L2 proficiency. Dyads with more proficient interlocutors are hypothesized to display both explicit and automatic alignment whereas dyads with limited linguistic resources would mostly rely on explicit meta-linguistic devices. To sum up, psycholinguistic alignment functions as a proof for congruent understanding whereas explicitly monitored alignment is an attempt to reach. Section 3 gives an overview of these monitored strategies.

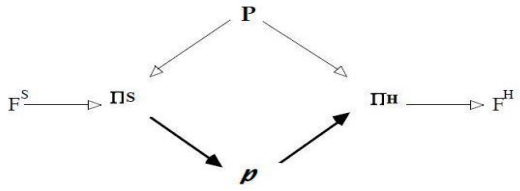
Recent studies on LaRa (e.g., Beerkens, 2010) suggest that this mode occurs in repeated comparable contexts where certain routines invoke automatic interpretations of what expressions 'inscribe' what actions. There has been little investigation into whether LaRa can be effective in novel situations when interlocutors do not have a common ground yet. This study investigates the processes of establishing common ground.

## 3 Meta-linguistic Devices

In order to determine meta-linguistic devices this study builds on the action theoretical model for discourse analysis (Ehlich & Rehbein, 1986). According to this functional pragmatic model, a distinction is made between the mental domain of the speaker, the mental domain of the hearer, and the interactional domain in which they act together. It should be emphasized that in LaRa steps on the side of the speaker are realized in L1 whereas the processes of the hearer are realized in L2. Yet, interaction space as well as the presupposed social knowledge is shared, therefore understanding is not secured by default, but can be reached in interaction.

Same model depicts relationship between reality (**P**), our knowledge about it (**ΠS** and **ΠH**) and linguistic realization (***p***) (Figure 1). Individual knowledge reflects reality but is shaped by experience, perception, memory and other relevant structures present in the speaker; this knowledge is then verbalized into propositional content that is received by the hearer and consequently interpreted in the hearer's domain of knowledge.

Figure 1: Relationship between reality (**P**), individual knowledge (**Π**) and linguistic realization (***p***) (Ehlich & Rehbein 1986).



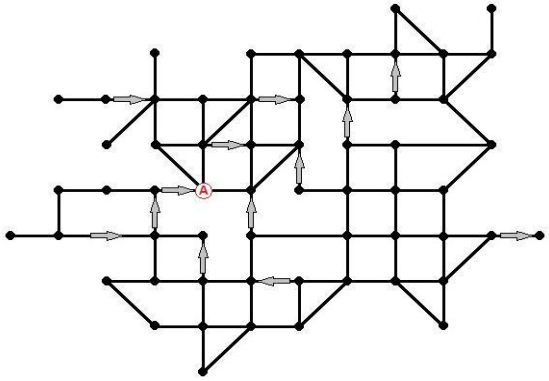

The author of this paper suggests that in multilingual interaction either of these levels can be a source of incongruent understanding. Similarly, each level can be explicitly aligned by application of the meta-linguistic devices classified as the following three strategies. First level device ensures common understanding in terms of action constellation and a presumed set of actions that are to be taken in order to reach social purposes. Device of the second level is aimed at securing common conceptual orientation system in the time and space given. Third type of device assures understanding of linguistic realizations within ongoing discourse. That third device is determined by (a) speaker's plurilingual background and experiences, (b) speaker's anticipation as to what would the hearer understand and (c) hearer's anticipation as to what would the speaker would aim at. These devices reconstruct various levels of understanding between speaker and hearer.

## 4 Focus and Methodology

Previous studies on *lingua receptiva* encompass linguistic constellations represented in Scandinavia, Switzerland, German / Dutch border areas, Switzerland, territories constituting former Czechoslovakia as well as Estonian / Finnish contacts (Bahtina and ten Thije, to appear). Most combinations represent typologically close languages which embody inherent *lingua receptiva*. Structural similarity and a high number of cognates may, resulting from close genetic relatedness between languages in such constellations, foster understanding techniques and communicative skills in a shorter period of time (Verschik, 2012). Acquired multilingualism, on the other hand, refers to constellations between non-related languages like Estonian and Russian where interlocutors have to discover links between the two languages. Automatic alignment is believed to be a prominent feature in Estonian-Russian, but will be skipped in the scope of this paper. Third type of meta-linguistic devices has been selected for this paper as the most salient feature in *lingua receptiva* with interlocutors imbalanced in terms of their L2 proficiency.

The experimental study consisted of three parts: a socio-linguistic questionnaire, C-Test (written L2 proficiency test) and a Skype conversation. The latter was based on the so called 'task oriented dialogue' (Brown et al., 1984), where interlocutors explicitly aim at finding common ground, more specifically – the Maze Game introduced by Garrod and Anderson (1987). Participants were grouped in dyads and had to discuss a visual display on their computer screens, an abstract map indicating only that specific participant's location (Figure 2). Subjects were instructed to (a) identify Point A (follower's location) and (b) find the route to Point B (guide's location and final destination of the experiment). Various modifications on the map, such as unidirectional roads (marked by grey arrows) or blocked streets (unconnected dots on the map) lead to the fact that all participants had to take a longer route to complete the task.

Figure 2: Example of the Follower's Maps




The dialogues were recorded with the free MP3 Skype recorder and transcribed with EXMARaLDA software tools[1]. Next, the transcripts were coded with relevant labels and analyzed. Results are presented in the next section.

## 5 Results

The participants were coupled into Estonian-Russian speaking dyads and were instructed to use their respective mother tongue. A total of ten bilingual dialogues were recorded, comprising over 98 minutes of transcribed data. LaRa success was determined by looking at percentage of segments[2] in which subjects did not slip into L2. All segments where at least one non-L1 word was used by either interlocutor, the 'code-switched' segments, were considered. The segments where only L1 words were used, the 'pure' LaRa segments, comprised the majority of all transcribed data (M = 94.86%, SD=4.37). Eight out of ten dyads completed the task successfully and did not have to employ alternative modes, with only few segments containing non-native lexical items (M = 5.17%, SD = 4.55).

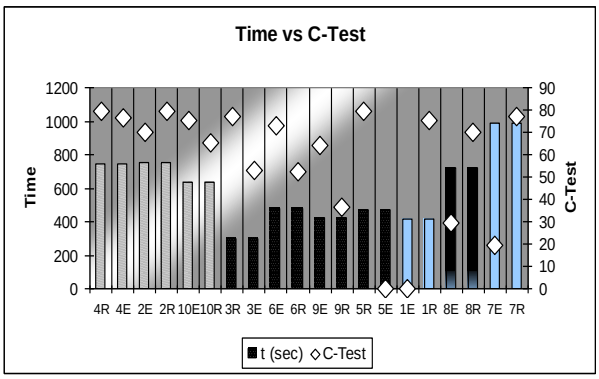
First, the data were examined for task completion. There were seven dyads that managed to find both Point A and Point B correctly. Subjects in dyad 8ER found only Point A, subjects in 1ER established only location of Point B and dyad 7ER failed both tasks. Differences between amounts of time, number of segments, and number of words required for task completion within each of the ten dyads were insignificant and the patterns across dyads were the same for all three types of data. The dyads who failed to complete the task in terms of finding Point B (thus, dyad 1ER is treated as successful here) demonstrated consistently higher number of seconds, segments and words (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Comparison of successful and failed dyads

| | Successful | Failed |
|---|---|---|
| Time (sec) | M = 526.25<br>SD = 165.48 | M = 852.5<br>SD = 188.8 |
| Segments | M = 207.375<br>SD = 74.95 | M = 365.5<br>SD = 30.40 |
| Words | M =1205.375<br>SD = 501.58 | M = 2090.5<br>SD = 211.42 |

Since one of the central variables in the design was L2 proficiency, the interplay of time and C-Test scores was examined (Figure 4). Subjects in 7ER and 8ER found only Point A and thus failed the experiment; they both spent a high number of seconds until they found what they thought to be Point B. Dyad 5RE completed the task in a short amount of time whereas 1ER failed the experiment to a certain extent (subjects found Point A incorrectly). Dyads 5RE and 1ER both had one near-native subject and one with zero-competence (according to C-Test score, but not to their self-reported proficiency), which makes them outliers in the following non-exclusive patterns indicated by the data.

Figure 4: Time required for task completion versus C-Test (striped bars indicate dyads with similar and high C-Test scores, black bars represent dyads with different scores who completed the task, blue represents dyads with different scores and (partial) failure in task completion.




[1] EXMARaLDA available at www.exmaralda.org

[2] Segments here are treated as utterances that are functionally independent and are based on steps necessary for realization of action constellation (e.g., instruction, acceptance, or query.

First, time was positively related to proficiency - subjects with higher summarized proficiencies within the dyad spent more time interacting. Secondly, time decreased in dyads where one interlocutor had somewhat lower L2 proficiency and increased drastically in dyads with higher difference in their individual L2 proficiencies (compare dyads 4R-4E, 3R-3E and 7E-7R). Results from the last subgroup suggest that too low L2 score in most cases is a hindrance for effective task completion.

In order to analyse how common ground is established in the ongoing interaction the negotiation of understanding in various phases inside the experiment has been investigated. Finding Point A supposedly requires congruent understanding and alignment at levels indicated above: subjects have to agree on the task, establish a system to address the map and establish vocabulary and other structures to successfully convey that data. Upon that alignment another phase – reaching Point B - can be accomplished. In the second phase interlocutors can rely on these shared resources and employ negotiations for overcoming misunderstandings. Based on these analytical assumptions, we will be looking first at the types of meta-linguistic devices that occur in the data and then focus on the distribution of the third meta-linguistic device in the two phases within seven dyads who found Point A and Point B correctly.

Reality (P) is depicted in the overall communicative goal of the interaction. Meta-linguistic devices used on that level (Technique 1) secure shared understanding of interactants' roles in the experiment (follower and guide). The interaction follows a certain pattern due to the fact that elements necessary for this action constellation are known to subjects as a general script. Thus the possibilities to go 'through the path' (here, also literally) are restricted by the purpose. Technique 1 in the first phase increased in dyads with summarized lower L2 proficiency and dropped in the second since role negotiation was less salient by then.

Next, individual knowledge is related to common orientation system. Once participants have established goals and roles, they have to make sure they know how to execute it in time and space given. Technique 2 is applied to align the ways they treat physical reality around them (e.g., system of counting rows on the experimental map). In the experiment Technique 2 often took form of a query and was used interchangeably with Technique 4 prior to instruction giving by guides in dyads with low L2 scores.

Knowledge can be explicitly tuned in on the linguistic level and this process is operationalized as Technique 3. Individuals can profit from modifying their speech in order to be understood by the interlocutor, translate difficult utterances or agree on specific shared vocabulary used within that experiment. Specific results of this meta-linguistic device are discussed later in this section.

The data indicate that there is also a fourth type of meta-linguistic device that checks understanding of already mentioned pieces of information (e.g., instruction that has just been given). It can be realized by repetition of an utterance that is unclear or requesting a confirmation to it. That mechanism can occur at any level and is coded as Technique 4. As it has been mentioned above, Technique 4 has been used interchangeably with Technique 2 in both phases.

In scope of this paper, only the third meta-linguistic device will be discussed at greater length. Interlocutors in the recorded data used these language-oriented devices strategically. Participants would check understanding by overt translation of unknown words that were necessary for that conversation (Figure 5) or by monitoring whether their language choices were understood (Figure 6). Once understanding was achieved, interlocutors continued to communicate each in their mother tongue.

Figure 5: EXMARaLDA transcript excerpt from dialogue 5RE (aligning by overt translation). Tier 1 is the original utterance by Russian speaking follower, tier 2 is English glossing, and tier 3 refers to the type of meta-linguistic device.

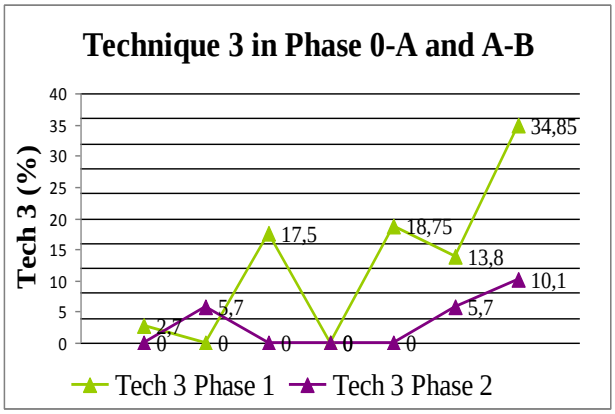
| | 81 [02:46.5] |
|---|---|
| **RusFollower** | noh • • 'наверх' see on 'ülesse' ja 'вниз' see on 'alla' • • • |
| **RusFollower [Eng]** | well (Est) • • 'up' (Rus) means 'up' (Est) and 'down' (Rus) means 'down' (Est)• • • |
| **[Meta]** | Tech 3 |

Figure 6: EXMARaLDA transcript excerpt from dialogue 9ER (aligning by monitoring understanding). Tier 1 is the original utterance by Estonian speaking follower, tier 3 is the original utterance by Russian speaking guide, tiers 2 and 4 English glossing, and tier 5 refers to the type of meta-linguistic device.

| | 15[14:06*] | 16 [17.2] |
|---|---|---|
| **EstFollower** | Sa tead mis on ‘rida’? ((1.04s)) | |
| **EstFollower [Eng]** | Do you know what 'row' is? ((1.04s)) | |
| **RusGuide** | | А г а • • |
| **RusGuide** | | Mgm • • |
| **[FP]** | Checking | Acceptance |
| **[Meta]** | Tech 3 | Tech 3 |

Next, we look at the distribution of Technique 3 in the two phases of the experiment demonstrated in Figure 7. First phase is coded as Phase 0-A, second phase is coded as Phase A-B. Dyads are presented according to decreasing summarized L2 competence per dyad (most proficient dyads are on the left, least proficient dyads are on the right).

Figure 7: Distribution of Technique 3 in phases (dyads with summarized L2 proficiency decreased from left to right)




The results in Figure 7 indicate that dyads with high summarized L2 proficiency use Technique 3 sparingly and demonstrate no increase in either of the phases. Dyads with at least one interlocutor with lower L2 test score have much higher numbers in the first phase and drop this pattern in the second phase. The results suggest common ground has been established to a greater extent in the first phase and therefore numbers of applied meta-linguistic devices in the next phase decrease.

## 6 Discussions

The main question addressed in this pilot study concerned effective alignment in LaRa between typologically distant languages. The results suggest that the majority of subjects (16 out of 20) were able to communicate in this mode and fulfill the task. Segments that contained any non-native items comprised approximately 5 per cent of the transcribed data which means that acquired LaRa is sufficient enough not to cause interlocutors employ other communicative modes. The results are in line with discussion of ‘common ground’ where alignment on all levels is not obligatory for successful communication (Pickering and Garrod, 2004: 178). Participants in the experiment demonstrated various levels of L2 proficiency but managed to profit from their receptive skills even when linguistic background was problematic. Furthermore, explanation could be derived form the nature of the tasks: the comparison of results from recorded interaction and from the language proficiency test support the idea that ‘our cognitive machinery could be better designed for dialogue than for processing language in an isolated context (Costa, et al. 2008).

A sub-question was to determine whether alignment can occur in novel situations, such as the task offered to participants in the experiment since they had to negotiate multiple issues before they could complete it. It has been concluded that LaRa can occur with interlocutors who have not been exposed to this specific situation repeatedly and therefore had no inscription mechanisms to back up the potential lack of linguistic knowledge. These routines could be derived from (a) previous interaction in the same context or (b) from personal acquaintance within a dyad. Participants in this experiment were presented with a sophisticated spontaneous task that required lengthy negotiations even in the monolingual control group. Next, the participants in the main group (Estonian – Russian) claimed to have never applied LaRa before. Finally, there was no disadvantage in dyads with completely unfamiliar interlocutors or those who knew each other superficially.

The more specific question tackled in this pilot study investigates the ways in which multilingual communication extends functions of alignment. It

has been hypothesized that in LaRa alignment need not be an automatic but a monitored process. There has been little evidence for non-automatic alignment in the pertinent literature or its occurrences were delimited. Costa et al. (2008), for instance, claim that decisions following feedback are more likely to be automatic since they do not include judgments about the addressee. Yet, functional pragmatics approach disallows completely hearer-free processing. Any interaction contains processing steps in which the speaker compares received input not only to what can be expected in the given context, but what would be understood by the specific hearer. The data support that line of thinking since it can be traced how feedback was used by speakers as a device to model hearers' understanding: speakers' adapted reformulations often occurred after repetitions, queries, silence or other back-channel signals from the hearer.

Next, a list of meta-linguistic devices has been proposed based on theory and verified with the experimental data. A choice has been made to concentrate on Technique 3. It has been found that dyads comprised of at least one interlocutor with lower L2 score had a tendency to use this device, especially in the first phase of the experiment. Yet, some dyads in which both interlocutors were highly proficient in L2 also had switches to non-native lexical items. It is proposed that switching to another language had various functions. First, Russian speakers with various L2 proficiencies tend to use Estonian lexical items in their speech since it is the language they are exposed to daily (e.g., Verschik, 2008). Next, both language groups can make insertions in the language of the interlocutor to express solidarity, creatively use the language or make jokes, which in its turn contributes to the process of establishing common ground. Next, all non-native utterances along with other explicit negotiations used to secure linguistic understanding - the strategies comprising Technique 3 - have to be discussed in the light of psycholinguistic and functional pragmatic theory.

There is experimental evidence that alignment mechanisms are affected not only by the speaker and their linguistic repertoires, but also by the intended receiver(s) of the message. It has been reported that speakers adapt towards the hearer in the linguistic choices they make, be it a level of vocabulary difficulty, primed syntactic structure or presupposed shared knowledge (e.g., Bortfield and Brennan, 1997; Branigan et al., 2000). Brennan and Clark (1996) also note that speakers are willing to negotiate and attach new, non-canonical meanings to referring expressions and drop these interpretations with other interlocutors. In all these cases, speaker plans and monitors utterances in accordance with what is likely to be understood by the hearer.

Functional pragmatics, similarly, discusses a so called speaker and hearer steering apparatus in which the difference is drawn between action and mental plans (e.g., Ehlich and Rehbein, 1986; Kameyama, 2004). Beerkens (2010: 266) proposed an updated speaker-hearer plan with consideration of the receptive component of LaRa which includes assessment of the interlocutor's L2 skills both by speaker and hearer.

These claims support the choice to analyze all actions uttered by individual interlocutors along with the addressee. Similarly, it has also been argued that third meta-linguistic device is determined by (a) speaker's plurilingual background and experiences, (b) speaker's anticipation as to what would the hearer understand and (c) hearer's anticipation as to what would the speaker would aim at.

Another example concerns language proficiency that has been hypothesized as one of success predictor in *lingua receptiva*. Results demonstrate that Technique 3 was used equally effective by individuals with lower L2 proficiency to secure understandings in comprehension as well as by participants with higher L2 scores who monitored production aimed at the hearer with another L1. Moreover, time required for completion of the task did not have direct correlation with L2 proficiency, which in its turn proves that subjects with low proficiency in L2 are not constrained to failure; quite on the contrary, some dyads completed the task in less time than dyads in which both participants were fluent in L2.

It was observed that subjects applied explicit alignment strategies when there was more potential for misunderstanding. Technique 3 was used differently in the two phases by dyads with at least one interlocutor with lower L2: it reached 40 percentage points in the first phase and dropped to

the maximum of 20 in the second while dyads where both interlocutors had high L2 test scores remained close to 0 percentage points in both phases. These results reflect the nature of this meta-linguistic device as one of the powerful mechanisms for constructing shared understanding in dyads with limited linguistic resources. In that it verifies the hypothesis that alignment in LaRa functions as a process to reach understanding rather than a result of congruent understanding.

To conclude, the pilot has provided answers to the posed questions and set directions for further research. Briefly, explicit alignment strategies proved to be effective interactive means of securing understanding. In acquired LaRa L2 proficiency affects the distribution of devices, but is derived from the composition of the dyad rather than individual L2 test result. Further research should investigate interaction of meta-linguistic devices and dyads where both interlocutors have low L2 scores in order to determine the minimal proficiency that allows effective interaction. Another suggestion would be to conduct a similar experiment with a task that is less abstract in nature and therefore enables participants to rely on the context as part of the situational model (e.g., office building plan instead of the abstract map). All in all, this pilot study showed how receptive and productive competencies in lingua receptiva have enabled interlocutors from typologically distant languages without previously established common ground to reach social purposes in the scope of this experiment

## Acknowledgements

This paper is part of the project that is supported by the grant offered by the Utrecht Institute of Linguistics. Many thanks go to my project supervisors Frank Wijnen, Jan D. ten Thije and Anna Verschik who gave their valuable comments on earlier drafts. I have profited greatly from the feedback of the audiences of the ELiTU, Toolkit Colloquia and LaRaNL workshop series. Last but not least, I would like to thank all the participants who submitted to being guinea-pigs in this pilot phase of the experiment.

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