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Translating standard language into easier varieties in Italy: mapping needs and strategies for spoken easy language*

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Abstract

This paper discusses results from an Erasmus+ project called SELSI aimed to identify needs and strategies for linguistic support in Spoken Easy Language. It focuses on data collected in Italy among professionals who work with individuals needing linguistic simplification and on users who need simplified language themselves. More specifically, this study addresses both linguistic and non-linguistic aspects that are crucial for supporting the development of communication through Easy Language, e.g. textual and conversation-enhancing strategies, linguistic strategies, listener-engaging strategies and the use of multimodal materials.

The strategies discussed include the use of signpost language as a means to scaffold different textual parts and clarify the logical and semantic relations, the potential of metaphors for simplifying more abstract and potentially challenging concepts, the potential of interpersonal linguistic options and the use of multimodal resources for the creation of multisensory environments that support literacy development.

Overall, it will be argued, the data collected from professionals and from users exhibit a strong alignment: with very few exceptions, the strategies frequently em-

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ployed by professionals coincide with the ones users find highly beneficial or helpful. These findings suggest that professionals employing Easy Language are presently headed in a positive direction, although they do highlight areas for potential future enhancements.

Keywords

Spoken Easy Language, Accessibility, Conversation, Disability

1. Introduction

The present paper discusses the results of an Erasmus+ project called SELSI, which aims to identify needs and strategies for linguistic support in Spoken Easy Language (SEL henceforth). This support is intended to assist learners with additional needs ('users' henceforth) in acquiring skills in oral-based environments. Specifically, this study analyses data collected in Italy among professionals and users in different life contexts where two-way communication occurs, such as schools, day-centres, health care institutions, etc. The study also takes into account data collected with professionals who produce oral content for people with additional needs, such as broadcasters, media producers, audio narrators, etc.

Up to now, Easy Language has been researched and practiced almost exclusively as a writing methodology (Degener 2016; Inclusion Europe 2014; Maaß 2020; Matausch & Nietzio 2012; Piemontese 2012; Sciumbata 2017), whereas spoken communication has received very limited attention, with few notable exceptions (Leskelä 2022; Schulz *et al*. 2020). Specifically, the acknowledgment of the significance of simplified language variants is not new, and their integration has been observed across various nations over the course of time, with English-speaking countries assuming a crucial role (Perego 2020: 17). What is new, however, is the increasing need to employ simplified language variants across a broader spectrum of content, encompassing even multimodal forms of communication (Perego 2020: 17). In addition to domains such as audiovisual communication services, subtitling and audio description, it is crucial to also undertake research on the simplification of spoken language, considering its relevance in everyday activities. This paper aims at preliminarily addressing this need, and is organized as follows: section 2 will present the objectives of the SELSI project in the general context of Easy Language; section 3 will describe the methodology used for the collection of data among professionals and users; section 4 will discuss some notable results emerged from the study; finally, some concluding remarks will be drawn in section 5.

2. The SELSI project

Traditionally, simplifying language has been closely associated with simplifying *written* forms of communication. Labels like 'Easy to Read' (UK), 'Lectura Fàcil' (Spain), 'Leichte Sprache' (Germany), and 'Italiano facile da leggere' (Italy) are just a few examples showing that efforts to reduce complexity often focus on a specific, yet crucial, aspect of communication: reading. However, the recent adoption of the more general label 'Easy Language' alongside 'Easy to Read', marks a shift in emphasis. This shift extends beyond reading and written content and embraces a 'multimodal' perspective. In this perspective, a broader range of semiotic modes requires simplification to ensure accessibility for diverse individuals across various contexts.

Starting from these premises, the *Spoken Easy Language for Social Inclusion* Erasmus+ project (SELSI henceforth) aims at filling this crucial gap, starting from the assumption that the spoken variety of communication is one of the most effective and common types of communication channels in everyday life. With five Countries (Italy, Slovenia, Lithuania, Latvia, Sweden) and different academic and non-academic institutions involved, the project's ultimate goal is to outline the first-ever European guidelines for Spoken Easy Language in Europe: these guidelines will be primarily developed to support educators and learners from vulnerable groups in their everyday exchanges.

The project, which started in October 2022, is structured into 4 work packages (WP henceforth), each of which is led by a different European country. The first of them, called *Needs & Resource Mapping*, was headed by the University of Trieste (Italy), with the following major achievements:

a. the creation of a shared online tool for bibliographical references which will prove crucial for researchers in the field both inside and outside the project;
b. the preparation and distribution across 15 European countries of an online multilingual survey aimed at mapping good practices, approaches and resources in the field of SEL in Europe;
c. the organization of a multiplier event during which all results were presented by the project participants and discussed with the general public.

The remaining WPs will have the following aims: a) drafting the recommendations and strategies for SEL; b) pilot testing them; c) creating a multi-lingual multimodal online tool for introducing an innovative inclusive methodology for Spoken Easy Language.

3. Data collection: methodology

Data were collected using an online multilingual questionnaire that included both open and closed-ended questions. Additionally, anonymous demographic informa-

tion such as age, gender, and type of occupation was gathered to facilitate data analysis. Respondents fell into two main categories:

1. Professionals who work with individuals requiring linguistic simplification to understand message content. These professionals engage in two-way communication in contexts such as education and healthcare (e.g., teachers, counselors, speech therapists, social workers), as well as those involved in producing oral content (e.g., broadcasters, media producers, voice actors, journalists);
2. Users, or individuals in need of linguistic simplification themselves. As far as this group is concerned, it included both students and people who are employed (for example volunteering in communities, etc.) as well as those who do not have a stable occupation. The survey for this group was formulated in Easy Language.

The questionnaire was designed to address five specific areas of interest in relation to the practices used in SEL: 1) Textual and conversation-enhancing strategies; 2) Linguistic strategies; 3) Listener-engaging strategies; 4) Non-linguistic strategies; 5) Use of supporting materials. These areas were investigated through closed-ended questions containing three options for the professionals ('often', 'sometimes', 'never') and three options for the end-users ('very helpful', 'helpful', 'not-helpful').

In addition to closed-ended questions, the questionnaire also included two open-ended questions for professionals and two open-ended questions for users. For the former group, the questions pertained to general difficulties encountered in producing spoken content and general strategies for adapting language. For the latter group, the questions focused on general challenges faced during oral exchanges and general remediation strategies that could enhance their understanding of messages.

Once completed, the survey was tested and then distributed to respondents across 15 European countries. The largest number of responses came from the partner countries, where the questionnaire was directly disseminated. In total, there were 446 completed responses, with Italy being the most represented country. The responses were collected from 266 professionals (84% female, 52% aged 31-50) and 180 users (57% female, 46% aged 31-50). Part 4 will present and discuss some notable points collected from Italian respondents.

4. Results and discussion

The overall number of completed questionnaire responses in Italy is 132, with 73% of them coming from females and 27% from males. As far as demographics is concerned, the most represented age range is between 31 and 50 years old, followed by the 51-70 age range. Most of the responses were collected from professionals (71%), but a significant number of individuals with disability ('users' henceforth) also opted to participate in the study (29%). The majority of professionals involved in the sur-

vey (69%) works with users in two-way communication contexts, while those we do not directly interact with users (28%) work in fields where adapting oral language is important (health and social care operators, museum educators, disability services, etc.). As far as users are concerned, only some of them have a stable occupation (22%), while all the others are either students or are currently engaged in activities such as going to day-centres (34%), attending local associations like *Anffas* (7.5%), proof-reading (4%) or looking for a job (2.5%).

Due to space constraints, the present section will present and discuss the results of few specific strategies from four of the areas investigated through the survey. While not purporting to provide an exhaustive account of the data collected, this will, hopefully at least, furnish an illustrative overview of specific needs and strategies for empowering communication with individuals who have cognitive impairments.

4.1 Textual and conversation-enhancing strategies

The part of the questionnaire that focused on textual and conversation-enhancing strategies aimed at investigating what professionals do to adapt their language when they talk to people who need linguistic support, or when they produce oral content for them. As regards users, this section surveyed what they find helpful/not helpful when others communicate with them.

Among the strategies identified by professionals, the use of *signpost language* seems to play a key-role for enhancing users' global comprehension of the message. Notably, a significant number of their answers pointed to the use of adverbs such as 'First', 'Second', 'Next', in addition to verb or prepositional phrases like 'To begin with', 'In other words', etc. Linguistic constructions that function as signpost markers are indeed very important in exchanges with any type of audience for their potential to facilitate the discussion flow, the organisation of ideas, and contextual understanding, but they seem to become crucial when communication entails exchanges with people who have cognitive disabilities.

Identifying the specific type of disability went beyond the scope of the SELSI project, however we believe that using signpost markers in discourse may benefit subjects regardless of the cognitive obstacles that they may experience, e.g. Down syndrome, autism spectrum disorder, traumatic brain injury, etc. Indeed, since signpost language explicitly states connections and transitions within different conversation phases by means of words, phrases and clauses, the relationships between topics can be made clearer and more evident, especially since listeners with impaired processing abilities may otherwise find them disconnected.

More generally, there may be several reasons why signpost language is critical for this specific demographic. Some of them may include:

– Signpost language provides verbal cues that seem to mimic a visual, outlined structure. In fact, using expressions such as "First we will talk about X, then

we will discuss Y" offers listeners a 'roadmap' to follow which is likely to be beneficial for cognitive processing and retention;
- Since it acts as a 'scaffolding' or 'support structure' between different parts of discourse, signpost language may also compensate for deficits like working memory or meaning extraction, thus helping the subjects by using fewer cognitive resources. The use of many cognitive resources may indeed 'overload' them;
- By using verb phrases like "To summarise" or prepositional phrases like "In other words", professionals may enhance the comprehension of otherwise complex speech parts which require the ability to use inference and/or deduction abilities. Moreover, by rephrasing conclusions and recapping key points, the central ideas of longer linguistic exchanges are likely to be reinforced and to help listeners with diverse needs recall the most salient details.

Additional examples of signpost language that could be highly valuable for simplifying a standard message into one that is easier to understand in spoken communication may certainly include the following:"

- 'Transition' words and phrases, such as:
  - "To begin with", "Afterwards", "Subsequently"
  - "In addition", "Furthermore", "Moreover"
  - "However", "On the other hand"
  - "Therefore", "Consequently", "As a result"

- 'Summarizing' phrases or clauses, such as:
  - "In summary"
  - "To recap the main points"
  - "As I said earlier"

- 'Clarifying' phrases or clauses, such as:
  - "In other words"
  - "To put it another way"
  - "What I mean by this is"

- 'Sequencing' clauses and adverbs, such as:
  - "The steps are as follows: First, Next, Last"
  - "The timeline is: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow"

- 'Cause' and 'Effect' clarifiers, such as:
  - "X led to Y"
  - "Because of X, Y happened"
  - "The reason for X is Y"

– ‘Feedback-oriented’ clauses, such as:
- “Does this make sense so far?”
- “What are your thoughts on what I just said?”
- “Would you like me to go over that again?”

Notably, the strategies that users have identified as contributing to a better understanding of a message appear to align with those discussed so far. For example, a significant number of users emphasized the usefulness of ‘providing a final summary’ as an effective conversational strategy. Final summaries serve as a means of ‘scaffolding’ the various parts of discourse, which is particularly important for individuals with cognitive impairments who may also experience short-term memory issues. Summaries may not prove crucial only for retaining essential information, but they may also be very useful for illustrating the logical and semantic relationships and connections between different sections of the discourse.

4.2 Linguistic strategies

In terms of linguistic strategies, professionals were asked to evaluate the frequency of their usage of eight specific strategies, while end-users were asked to assess the effectiveness of two strategies. Specifically, the strategies examined for professionals encompassed the use of nouns vs. pronouns, repetition, explanation of difficult words, employment of literal language/metaphoric language, use of similes, reference to the interlocutor by name, use of active constructions, and the use of positive formulations. As for end-users, they were asked to evaluate the degree of helpfulness associated with the explanation of difficult words and the use of their own name during the interaction.”

Among the strategies singled out by professionals, an interesting insight comes from the results regarding the use of *literal* versus *metaphorical* language. More than 46% of them reported never using metaphors, which may apparently seem slightly counterintuitive. As a matter of fact, a large body of research in linguistics and neuroscience has shown that metaphors are a powerful tool used by speakers to help their interlocutors better make sense of complex areas (Gibbs 1992). As clearly outlined at the outset of metaphor studies by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), speakers use metaphors pervasively in their everyday life to reduce the complexity of some domains of knowledge, thus making them more ‘approachable’. More specifically, metaphorical constructions are very often used by speakers to simplify abstract *target* domains by means of language selections made within more concrete *source* domains. In health communication, for example, it is not rare for doctors to target very sensitive and subject topics like illnesses, emotions and death by using linguistic elements belonging to more tangible and concrete source domains like JOURNEYS, WAR, NATURE, etc. (Semino et al, 2018): Two examples may help clarifying this point:

1. “Cancer is a journey, some people have similar experiences to others on that journey, but by and large the journey has many twists and turns that means no two people go the exact same route”. (Quoted in Semino et al, 2018: 139)
2. “I have not hunkered down in my trench to just merely defend myself against the demon but have picked up my sword and taken the fight to the demon” (quoted in Semino et al, 2018: 107)

In both examples, lexical choices selected from the source domain of JOURNEY and of WAR are used to create metaphors targeting the long treatment of cancer (by a doctor in the first example) and of reaction to the disease (by a patient, in the second example). By doing so, the two speakers are able to talk about otherwise complex areas by using images that are quite common in everyday life: instead of singling out technical terms that may sound unfamiliar to the layperson, the doctor refers to the obstacles in cancer treatment as “twists” and as “turns”, and to the different therapies people may need as “routes”. Similarly, in example 2 the patient opts to use terminology associated with the WAR source domain instead of attempting to describe highly personal emotional and physical reactions that may be challenging to clearly articulate. This choice serves to render the patient’s experience more concrete and comprehensible.

In the light of what has been said so far regarding metaphors, we may expect that such a powerful tool could find extensive use in the process of language simplification. Perhaps against our expectations, almost half of the professionals in our cohort never use metaphors when they communicate with people who suffer from cognitive impairments, *literal* language being their favorite strategy instead. A figure of speech they use slightly more frequently is the *simile* (53%), in which the target and the source are linked by the preposition ‘like’.

A possible reason why figurative language is so rarely used despite its power for simplification may be ascribed to the professionals’ awareness that people with some types of impairment can at times find it hard to process *non-literal* language: for example, individuals with Asperger Syndrome (AS henceforth) are often described as failing to understand figures of speech and non-literal language more generally, despite possessing intact language abilities (Martin & McDonald, 2004). Impairments in non-literal language processing have acquired a lot of recognition in recent years, to the point that the characterisation of some very well-known literary figures has heavily revolved around this issue. In *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (Haddon, 2003), for example, the main character Christopher suffers from AS: at one point in the novel, he first makes a list of metaphors and then comments on them by saying they should not be used.

> “I laughed my socks off”.
> “He was the apple of her eye”.
> “They had a skeleton in the cupboard”.
> “We had a real pig of a day”.
> “The dog was stone dead”.

> "I think it [metaphor] should be called a lie because a pig is not like a day and people do not have skeletons in their cupboards" (19–20; emphasis in original).

Something similar happens in the novel *Flowers for Algernon* (Keyes, 1959), when the protagonist Charlie, who suffers from a mental disease called 'phenylketonuria', is the only one who cannot make sense of the metaphors produced by his colleagues

> Sometimes somebody will say hey look at Joe or Frank or George he really pulled a Charlie Gordon. I dont know why they say that but they always laff. This morning Amos Borg who is the 4 man at Donnegans used my name when he shouted at Ernie the office boy. Ernie lost a package. He said Ernie for godsake what are you trying to be Charlie Gordon. I dont understand why he said that. I never lost any packiges (p. 289 mispellings in the original).

Interestingly, at one point in the story the character is able to heal from this disease and this coincides with his ability to create new and powerful metaphors like "To cram a lifetime of research" (301), "My contribution must rest upon the ashes" (301), etc.

Whether professionals rarely use figures of speech because of their awareness of potential decoding barriers should be investigated more deeply, especially in the light of the fact that a specific type of figurative language is, conversely, largely used by them: irony. As pointed out by Martin and MacDonald (2004), irony is indeed an example of non-literal language that individuals with cognitive impairments may find very hard to make sense of. Despite that, professionals repeatedly noted that they regularly use it in their daily interactions with users, thus raising questions about the hypothesis that they deliberately choose not to use other types of figurative language (e.g. metaphors) for the barriers they may imply.

Notably, in their open comments, users themselves pointed out the benefits they experience when interacting with professionals who use irony. Perhaps surprisingly, despite usually deploying a significant amount of figurative language, irony does not appear to pose an obstacle, at least in our sample. A more in-depth investigation may be necessary to fully understand this aspect, however it is plausible that the use of irony may be associated with empathy, which plays a crucial role in the process of simplifying spoken language (see Perego this issue).

4.3 Listener-engaging strategies

The aim of this part of the questionnaire was to investigate if/which listener-engaging strategies are used by professionals when they produce spoken content for people who need linguistic support. These strategies are crucial in communication, as successful exchanges are highly dependent on the capacity to keep the attention of the listeners as alive and stimulated as possible. Intuitively, this is even more important with people who may have difficulties understanding spoken communication, since their need for engagement is even bigger.

As widely discussed within functional approaches to grammar (Eggins 2004; Halliday and Matthiessen 2004; Martin and White 2003), speakers constantly produce at least three types of meaning during their utterances: one of them is called *ideational*, and deals with the representation of processes, entities and circumstances on the semantic plane. This type of meaning is perhaps the most 'traditional' one, through which some specific content is conveyed. In addition to *ideational* meanings, however, speakers concurrently produce so called *interpersonal* meanings and *textual* ones: the first enable the participation in communicative acts with other people by taking on roles and expressing/understand feelings, attitudes and judgements (Bloor and Bloor, 2004: 11); the second ones involve the use of language to organise the text itself. Language, in other words, is a social phenomenon that is used by speakers with different purposes at the same time.

The data collected show that professionals are very aware of the importance of activating the so called "interpersonal metafunction" of language (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004: 106), i.e. that area of language use which is related to interactive and social purposes of the speakers. Generally speaking, the resources language offers for the activation of this specific metafunction are to be found mainly in the systems of *mood* (where selections are to be made between 'statements' and 'questions'), *modality* (where modal operators like 'may', 'maybe', 'could' and 'might' can be used to express levels of probability and obligation or for expressing the speaker's level of commitment to what is being expressed), *tense* (which gives speakers the possibility to situate events in time in relation to the speech situation) and *clause type* (which distinguishes among 'simple' and 'complex' clauses and between 'clausal units' and 'non-clausal' units).

Notably, 80% of the professionals resort to the system of *mood* to engage listeners while they talk to them. Specifically, they tend to use questions for either asking direct feedback regarding what was just said, or for asking to repeat it. Professionals often use questions as attention-getters, especially when they realize that they may be losing their audience's attention. However, among the resources offered by language to realise interpersonal meanings, the ones that are more used for enhancing the conversation flow regard the selection of *clause type*: specifically, professionals engage people with disabilities mainly by using 'non-clausal' units, namely language items that do not carry specific ideational contents but have high interpersonal potential. The most notable examples include the use of items like "oh", "ok", "yes", "alright", etc. The system of *modality*, on the other hand, does not seem to play a significant role. This is probably because in this type of communication the clarification of the 'commitment level' to what is being expressed by the professionals themselves is not of primary importance. Instead, it is crucial to demonstrate undivided attention and active engagement with the other speakers. Therefore, the selection of language items that convey interest and maintain continuous contact with them takes precedence. Regarding tense, professionals did not mention it as a linguistic strategy they pay particular attention to. Nevertheless, given the practical nature of the topics discussed in these types of interactions, simpler tenses such as the present or progressive ones are likely more common than their perfect counterparts.

As anticipated earlier, humor seems to work very well for enhancing conversation, according to users. This may initially seem slightly unexpected since irony and humour tend to greatly deploy figurative uses of language which, similarly to metaphors, may be hard to process for people with intellectual disabilities. Clearly, this is highly dependent on the type of disability and on the strategies deployed for creating humour. Since they went beyond the objectives of the project, however, this type of data was not captured by the questionnaires.

Generally speaking, however, it is highly likely that when humor arises from situational factors, e.g. from the subversion of expectations, or from jokes that do not involve figurative language, it becomes an invaluable tool for engaging individuals with intellectual disabilities, as emerged from their answers: notably, 89% of them responded that jokes and words that make them laugh are either useful or very useful to get their attention and keep it alive. A possible explanation for this is that humor contributes to the reduction of anxiety and to the promotion of relaxation: this is likely to create a positive emotional atmosphere, possibly conducive to a higher degree of engagement. Moreover, as anticipated above, the use of humor may probably contribute to the development of empathy, which is a real promoter of engagement in people with intellectual disabilities (See Perego, this issue). The users' open comments emphasize again how important it is for them to feel engaged in order for communication to be successful. Some examples include:

- "Giving me a handshake, making me feel important, can be helpful".
- "Being close to the person who is speaking"
- "They should look at me"

Gestures, body language, physical proximity, eye contact, and other non-verbal forms of communication are all ways to convey interpersonal meanings. While their in-depth analysis is beyond the scope of this study, it is essential to recognise that these non-verbal strategies should be employed by professionals to enhance engagement when using Easy Language.

4.4 Supporting materials

The questionnaire contained three questions aimed at assessing the role played by supporting materials in the communication with people who need linguistic support. Specifically, questions regarded the use of pictures, of drawings and of sound effects, i.e. of multimodal materials. The term "multimodal" refers to texts that deploy more than one semiotic mode for meaning-making: still or dynamic images, movies, songs, hypermedia texts are all examples of multimodal texts widely present in today's societies.

These text types have been at the centre of several studies in the last twenty years, both in the Linguistics field and in the Literacy one (Kress 2003; Unsworth

2004, 2006; Zhao 2008, 2010, 2011; Curwood 2011, 2012, 2013), especially due to their great potential to immerse children within multisensory environments which are capable of highly stimulating and training their attention, both the focus and the distributed one (Pagliano 2017). For these reasons, multimodal texts are highly correlated to the notion of *accessibility*, namely to the importance of enabling the persons with disabilities "to fully enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms" (The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities). Incidentally, multimodal texts have also been studied for their capacity to develop analytical and critical thinking skills (O'Halloran et al. 2015), since there is a general consensus among the followers of the New Literacy movement (e.g., Freebody and Luke 1990; Jewitt 2008; Kress 2003) that the competencies needed to participate in emergent forms of new media require *multiliteracies* – that is, a set of multiple literacies which extend beyond language.

The figure below summarizes the data collected from professionals and viewers regarding the use of multimodal materials:

Question	very helpful	often	helpful	sometimes	not helpful	never	Total
15.1 (P) Pictures/photos		60		32		1	93
15.1 (U) Pictures/photos	20		16		1		37
15.2 (P) Drawings		32		45		16	93
15.2 (U) Drawings	16		14		8		38
15.3 (P) Music/sound effects		10		43		40	93
15.3 (U) Music/sound effects	8		16		13		37
Total	44	102	46	120	22	57	391

Figure 1: Professionals' and users' stance on the role of supporting materials

As can be observed, users consistently indicate that these types of materials are either 'very helpful' or 'helpful' for them. However, the use of these materials is somewhat limited among professionals, especially in the case of drawings and music/sound effects. Considering that the vast majority of users find pictures/books to be either very helpful or helpful, we might expect a higher number of professionals to use them more frequently. Surprisingly, one-third of them use this resource only sometimes, potentially not fully realising its potential for enhancing communication. When it comes to drawing and music, it's worth speculating that users may appreciate them less because they are not regularly exposed to these types of materials; hence, they may not be fully aware of their communicative potential.

In the questionnaire section where both professionals and users could comment on any elements they found very helpful for enhancing communication, some in fact focused precisely on these resources:

- User: "Images. It is helpful if the speaker writes down the most important information"
- Professional: "Synthesis, use of images"
- Professional: "I simplify words, add gestures, symbols, songs, and anything that can help"

Although the questionnaire did not explore the design and structure of the multimodal resources used, it is plausible that at least the following features may facilitate the creation of successful multisensory environments:

- If pictures include both the visual and the written mode, the reading order should be very clear: lay-out can greatly help to guide both the direction and the way of reading (Hansen 2010: 3). The written mode should of course use the principles of Easy-to-Read language;
- The multimodal resources used should adhere to the principle of 'repetition', meaning they should depict topics familiar to the users, effectively 'visually reinforcing' the content conveyed through Easy Language (Løvlan, 2010: 4). In other words, 'intermodal coherence' should be guaranteed;
- If professionals opt to use hypermedia environments to support spoken communication rather than more traditional pictures or photos, they should aim to incorporate the concept of 'scaffolding' whenever possible This involves the flexibility of the text content, so that it may constantly be adapted to the development of the subject (Hansen 2010). Digitisation can greatly facilitate the processing of content and differentiation in relation to the individual user's needs for support.

In conclusion, multimodal materials can greatly benefit communication with people who need linguistic support, provided that factors like *readability, organisation, scaffolding* and *personalisation* are taken into account and incorporated into their design. Overall, professionals appear to have a general awareness of the potential benefits these resources can offer, but they may still have some reservations about using them consistently. It is likely that they could benefit from encouragement to make use of these resources, especially through the ongoing development of guidelines.

5. Concluding remarks

This paper has discussed some results from an ongoing Erasmus+ project called SELSI aimed at identifying needs and strategies for linguistic support in Spoken Easy Language. More specifically, it has reflected upon data collected in Italy among professionals and users in different life contexts where two-way communication occurs, such as schools, day-centres, health care institutions, etc.

The different sections of the study have addressed both linguistic and non-linguistic aspects that are crucial for supporting the development of communication through Easy Language. In particular, Section 4.1 discussed the use of signpost language as a means to scaffold different textual parts and clarify the logical and semantic relations among them. This strategy is highly valued by both professionals and users. On the other hand, Section 4.2 explored the potential of metaphors for simplifying more abstract and potentially challenging concepts. Research in neuroscience and linguistics

has highlighted the crucial role of metaphors in everyday simplification. However, professionals tend to use them sparingly, perhaps because they are aware that individuals with certain cognitive disabilities may struggle with non-literal language. Moving to Section 4.3, it delved into linguistic options for enhancing conversation. Specifically, it examined aspects of the linguistic system of *mood* and the use of non-clausal units, which are essential for activating interpersonal meanings in communication. These meanings are not about conveying specific content but are instead used to 'keep the communicative channel open' between speakers, making them vital in communication with individuals who find it challenging to communicate. Finally, Section 4.4 concentrated on the use of multimodal resources and explored their potential to create multisensory environments that support literacy development. It was argued that the consistent and increased use of these resources is necessary, as a certain number of professionals appear to be somewhat reluctant to exploit them.

Overall, the data collected from professionals and from users exhibit a strong alignment: the strategies frequently employed by professionals coincide with the ones users find highly beneficial or helpful, with only a minimal number of exceptions. These findings indicate significant positive outcomes, indicating that professionals utilising Easy Language are currently moving in the right direction. Future research avenues could consider the exploration of different disability types, potentially leading to more targeted and, hopefully, more successful use of the resources presented in this study.

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