School of Applied Linguistics
IUED Institute of Translation and Interpreting

Swiss Research Centre
Barrier-free Communication

Easy Language Research:
Proposal for a change of perspective

Susanne J. Jekat, Luisa Carrer, Alexa Lintner

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Motivation

"[…] it has become obvious that Easy Language texts in their current realisation are not readily accepted and even exhibit the **potential to stigmatise** the target groups"
(Hansen-Schirra/Maaß 2020: 18)

"[…] one could argue that non-acceptability of Easy Language could have a negative impact on its **reception**"
(Gutermuth 2020: 263, our translation)

"[…] there is a risk that the provision of information in 'Easy Language' may have a certain **alibi function**. […] the question remains […] whether [existing Easy Language practices] may ultimately contribute to '**exacerbating exclusion**'"
(Schuppener/Bock 2020: 241–42, our translation)

Theoretical framework (I)

Text Perspective

- Maaß (2020) proposes **Easy Language Plus** (EL+) as a solution to the comprehensibility vs. acceptability dilemma

- A more **flexible implementation** of Easy Language is urgently needed (Schuppener/Goldbach/Bock 2018: 366)

User Perspective

- The interaction between **production complexity** and **processing complexity** needs to be empirically tested (Hansen-Schirra et al. 2020: 206)

- Traditional assessment **methodologies** need to be adapted and further developed to meet the target groups' specific needs (Hansen-Schirra/Maaß 2020; Gutermuth 2020; Jekat et al. 2020; Marini 2008)

Theoretical framework (II)

- Jekat et al. (2020) recommend that the **written language production** by members of the target groups be systematically analysed

Atypical (?) language development

- There are **no comprehensive empirical studies** on literacy development of people across the whole spectrum of intellectual disabilities (ID) (Schuppener/Bock 2020; Sorianello 2012; Martin et al. 2009)

- Little is known about **effective interventions** that teach reading and writing to individuals with ID (Schuppener/Bock 2020; Allor et al. 2010; Abbeduto et al. 2007)

- **Receptive language** is typically stronger than **expressive language** (Ratz/Lenhard 2013; Martin et al. 2009; Vianello 2006)

- Spontaneous speech in adults with Down Syndrome follows **a principle of economy** (Sorianello 2012)
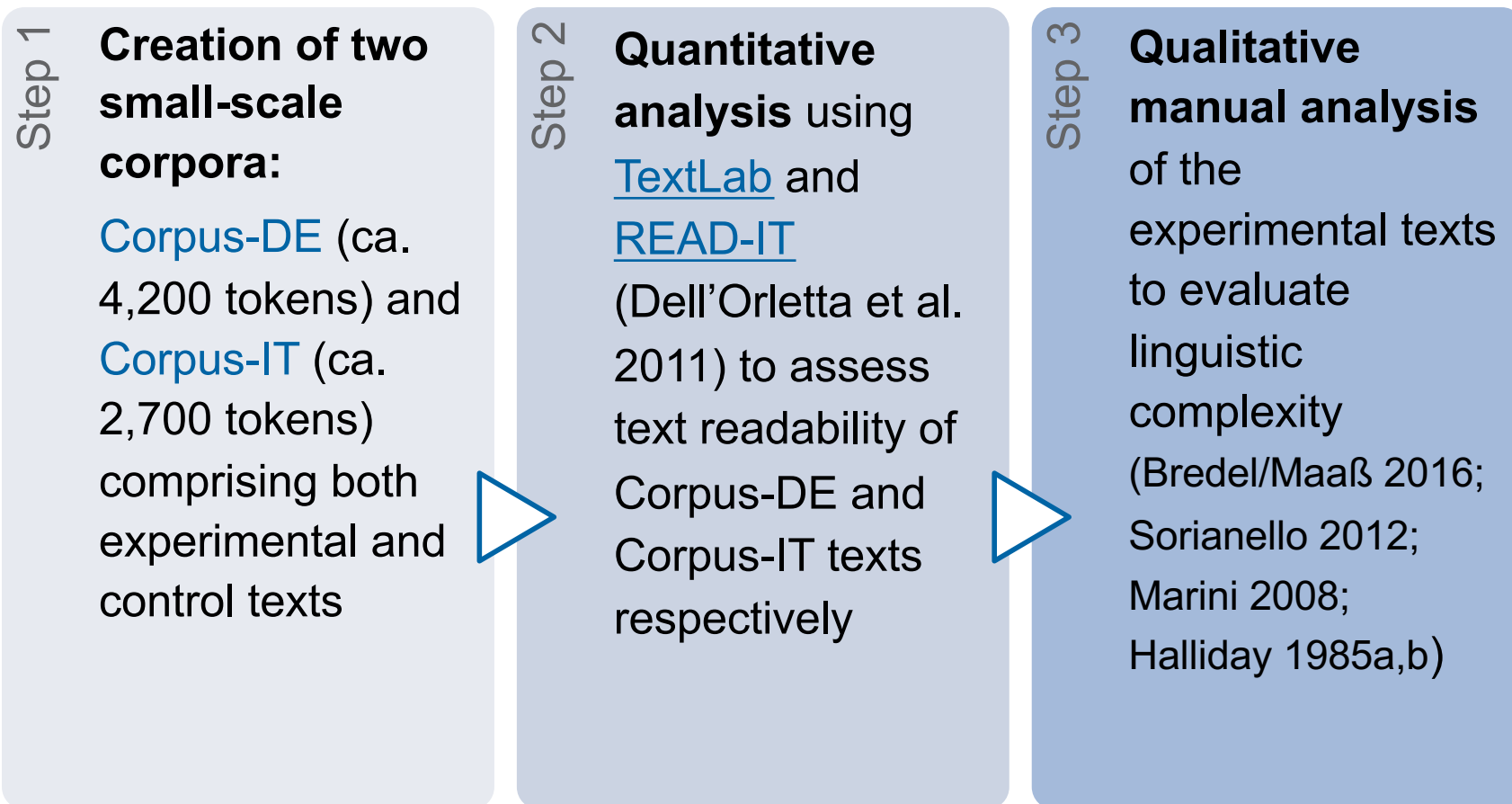
Research questions

Research gap: Very little information available on writing abilities of individuals with ID (Varuzza et al. 2015; Kay Raining Bird et al. 2008; Lavra-Pinto/Lamprecht 2010)

- **Ratz/Lenhard** (2013) investigated reading and writing stages of 1629 school-aged students with ID regardless of etiology in Bavaria and concluded that more than one third reached the alphabetic level

- **Varuzza et al.** (2015) identified "good abilities" in Italian individuals with ID in different aspects of writing, involving not only low-level transcription skills but also high-level composition skills

1. Are writing skills of adults with ID generally underestimated?
2. If so, what can Easy Language research learn from it?

Pilot study: Methods

Step 1

Creation of two small-scale corpora:

Corpus-DE (ca. 4,200 tokens) and Corpus-IT (ca. 2,700 tokens) comprising both experimental and control texts

Step 2

Quantitative analysis using TextLab and READ-IT (Dell'Orletta et al. 2011) to assess text readability of Corpus-DE and Corpus-IT texts respectively

Step 3

Qualitative manual analysis of the experimental texts to evaluate linguistic complexity (Bredel/Maaß 2016; Sorianello 2012; Marini 2008; Halliday 1985a,b)

Corpus-DE: Description

Subcorpus 1 (ca. 2,000 tokens)

- **3 experimental texts** (Janke 2009; Knaeblein n.d.; Krumnow n.d.) from "Die Wortfinder e.V.", Bielefeld (Germany)

- Genre: Narrative (fiction)

- Authors: Male; L1: German; persons with ID of various etiologies; may have received support in their writing process

Subcorpus 2 (ca. 2,200 tokens)

- **3 control texts**: 2 informative texts (889 tokens, BAG 2021a; BAG 2021b), 1 fictional/narrative text (1,356 tokens, NDR n.d.)

Corpus-DE: Readability assessment

	Control texts	**Experimental texts**
LIX [Lenhard/Lenhard 2014-2017]	**33** [B1] *[Mean value/Informative texts]* **16** [A2] *[Narrative text]*	**26** [B1] *[Mean value/All texts]*
Syntax *[Mean values/All texts]*	Avg. sentence length in tokens: **7.7** Dependent clauses: **15.29%**	Avg. sentence length in tokens: **9.0** Dependent clauses: **15.53%**
Lexis *[Mean values/All texts]*	Words > 6 characters: **19.33%** Type/token ratio: **0.312**	Words > 6 characters: **16.66%** Type/token ratio: **0.505**

Corpus-DE: Qualitative analysis
Experimental texts

Syntax	Vocabulary
[T1] beim versuch, sein Heimatland Iran zu verlasen, (EN: *while trying to leave his home country Iran*)	[T1] Es war einmal … (EN: *Once upon a time …)*
[T1] hing fest, blieben [T2] wird er uns […] einsperren, (EN: *was stuck, stayed, he will lock us up* […])	[T2] Portemonnaie, Blüte, Geldbestände, Gehilfe, Schabernack, rupfen, veräppeln, Schlitzohr, demolieren, schellen (EN: *purse, fake banknote, money holdings, helpmate, practical joke, to pluck, to kid, sly fox, to wreck, to ring/tinkle*)
[T1,2,3] kein(e), nicht/ned, nie, nix (EN: *not a/no, not, never, nothing*)	
[T3] dass in dieser Stadt Falschgeld hergestellt wird (EN: *that counterfeit money is produced in this city*)	
[T1] Wie wer es denn damit, wenn (EN: *What would you say if …*)	[T2] Ich sehe ja aus wie Pippi Langstrumpf …, Ich bin doch nicht Pinocchio … (EN: *I look like Pippi Longstocking …, I am not Pinocchio after all*)
[T2] einen Besuch abstatten, [T1] ums Leben kommen (EN: *to pay a visit, to lose one's life*)	
[T2] Heimlich holt er …, Sorgfältig überprüft er … (EN: *He secretly takes …, He thoroughly checks …*)	[T3] Habbich meine Mudder mitgebracht Habbich meiner Mudder gesacht (EN: *I have brought my mother I have said to my mother*)
[T2] mit vor Angst zitternder Stimme (EN: *in a voice trembling with fear*)	

Corpus-IT: Description

Subcorpus 1 (1,380 tokens)

- **6 experimental texts** from the newly founded *Archivio Diversità Cognitiva*, Lugano (Switzerland)

- Genre: Narrative (autobiography, nonfiction)

- Author: Male, 48; born in Ticino (L1: Italian); Down Syndrome (moderate ID); completed compulsory schooling in special needs schools; highly educated family context. Texts handwritten fully independently (2016–2021)

Subcorpus 2 (ca. 1,350 tokens)

- **3 control texts**: 2 informative texts (916 tokens, FOPH 2021a,b), 1 fictional/narrative text (441 tokens, Fredduselli 2014)

Corpus-IT: Readability assessment (I)
[Dell'Orletta et al. 2011]

	Control texts	**Experimental texts**
READ-IT Basic Index	**2.1%** [*Mean value/Informative texts*] **0.9%** [*Narrative text*]	**31.5%** [*Mean value/All texts*]

Avg. sentence length in tokens: **8.9** [*Mean value/All texts*]	Avg. sentence length in tokens: **20.8** [*Mean value/All texts*]

Corpus-IT: Readability assessment (II)

[Dell'Orletta et al. 2011]

	Control texts	Experimental texts
READ-IT Syntactic Index	12.5% [*Mean values/Informative texts*] 3.8% [*Narrative text*]	56.6% [*Mean values/All texts*]
READ-IT Lexical Index	0.1% [*Mean values/Informative texts*] 0.1% [*Narrative text*]	13.2% [*Mean values/All texts*]
Syntactic profile [*Mean values/All texts*]	Avg. no. of clauses/sentence: 1.3 Dependent clauses: 21.2% Adjectives: 3.8%	Avg. no. of clauses/sentence: 2.5 Dependent clauses: 31.8% Adjectives: 8.9%
Lexical profile [*Mean values/All texts*]	Type/token ratio: 0.553 Lexical density: 0.591	Type/token ratio: 0.625 Lexical density: 0.581

20.8.2020 Giovedì

l'Angolo della mia memoria ~~memoria~~ Anima

ho trascorso una vita intera in questo Angolo della mia memoria
sono Anni volati come se fosse stato ieri Portoli con tanto Amore e gioia
ho PASSAto tutta la mia infanzia con Brava gente Noi miei nonni e dai miei
cugini che mi hanno voluto molto Bene fino Ai nostri giorni ho trovato
la voglia l'Amore la forza di o salire trovare questo Angolo Portoli ha
Buon fine il mio monte e la mia SPeranza di una vita che mi hanno
regalato quelli che Anno lavorato Per renderlo Bello il mio PAPÀ i miei nonni
Sua soprattutto i miei cugini la famiglia quadri è un Angolo davvero prezioso
fino Agli Al Bron ogni Anno Avro Ancora la forza di continuare ha
Salire vedere quanta fatica che Anno fatto Per renderlo Attivo devo raccontare
gli Anni che ho fatto ha monte e un grande regalo che ricordero Per sempre
fino ha quanto vivrò Salire Per ricordare gli Anni vissuti B Per ricordare
i mommenti mi gecovi della mia storia vissuta è sempre una grande
gioia salire ogni Anno trovare i miei ricordi della mia Anima
solo gli occhi all cielo Possono guardare fino Al Aurora dove la mattina
nasce ma gli occhi che Anno visto il regalo Più importe della storo
vita i loro nipote

Corpus-IT: Qualitative analysis
Experimental texts [T1-T6]

Low-frequency vocabulary (cf. NVdb, De Mauro 2019)	Figurative language
[agli] albori (EN: *very early on*)	viaggiare con la mente (EN: *travelling with one's mind*)
aurora, rugiada (EN: *dawn, dew*)	gli occhi del cielo (EN: *the eyes of the sky*)
[provare l'] ebbrezza (EN: *[to feel the] thrill*)	come una scatola piena di ... (EN: *like a box full of …*)
incanto (EN: *magic*)	[occhi] come due gemelli (EN: *[eyes] like twins*)
soprano, aria [d'opera] (EN: *soprano, aria*)	Ti chiami il bel Danubio blu (EN: *Your name is Blue Danube*)
[a] squarciagola (EN: *at the top of one's voice*)	Tu sei la prima margherita in un prato (EN: *You are the first daisy in a field*)
svelare, velato (EN: *to unveil, veiled*)	essere una fotografia [che scatti] (EN: *to be the picture [you take]*)

Preliminary conclusions

- **Study limitations**: small-scale corpora; reduced text type variability; hardly any information on authors of experimental texts in German; experimental texts in Italian by one single author

- **Quantitative data** clearly indicated lower readability rates for the experimental texts in Italian

- **Qualitative data** identified constructions not recommended in Bredel/Maaß (2016), use of functional categories (cf. Sorianello 2012) and awareness of style and function (cf. Bock 2019; Fix 2017)

1. Writing skills of adults with ID might be underestimated
2. Less focus should be given to problem constructions and more to sentence-to-sentence cohesion (Balling 2018: 117; cf. also Schuppener/Bock 2020)

Outlook

A greater research focus on writing abilities in ID could

help reverse the assumption that individuals with ID are vulnerable for school failure (Varuzza et al. 2015) and cannot acquire basic literacy skills (Abbeduto et al. 2007; cf. also Allor et al. 2010)

contribute to developing diagnostic test batteries that address all aspects of language processing, incl. micro and macro language skills (e.g. discourse, function, style, cohesion) (Marini 2008)

help us gain a better understanding of the target groups and thus contribute to developing and validating multimodal methods for Easy Language reception research (Gutermuth 2020; Hansen-Schirra/Maaß 2020)

support the shift from a maker-centred to a user-centred approach to text accessibility (Greco 2018) and foster participatory approaches to both research and translation practices (→ increased acceptability, cf. Hansen-Schirra/Maaß 2020)

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