

# “What is the best language for Eastern Europe?” *Lingua receptiva* as a new approach in Slavic intercommunication research

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1.02 Pregledni znanstveni članek – 1.02 Review article

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Namen prispevka je obravnavati pojem *lingua receptiva* kot nov pristop v slovanskih študijah medsebojnega komuniciranja, ki omogoča analizo medjezikovnih stikov z drugačne perspektive in ki presega tradicionalne strukturalistične ali glottodidaktične pristope. Večina raziskav o *lingua receptivi* je bila doslej izvedena v povezavi s skandinavskimi in z romanskimi jeziki. Obstajajo pa tudi primeri prvih raziskav, vezanih na slovanske jezike – prispevek predstavlja pregled njihovih temeljnih rezultatov, ob tem pa tudi konceptov, ki so se v njih razvili.

The aim of the paper<sup>1</sup> is to consider the notion of *lingua receptiva* as a new approach in Slavic intercommunication studies which allows to analyze interlingual contacts from a different perspective, going beyond the traditional structuralist or glottodidactic approaches. So far, most research on *lingua receptiva* has been conducted in relation to Scandinavian and Romance languages. There are, however, examples of initial research done on Slavic languages. This paper will present an overview of the main results of these studies, along with concepts developed in them.

**Ključne besede:** *lingua receptiva*, vključujoča večjezičnost, slovanski jeziki, vzhodna Evropa

**Key words:** *lingua receptiva*, inclusive multilingualism, Slavic languages, Eastern Europe

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## Introduction

The quantity and quality of interlingual contacts in East-Central Europe are the subject of a number of complex phenomena and processes that largely determine the shape of social reality in the region and influence the dynamically changing identity of nations that traditionally belong to the Slavic world. In short, since 1989,

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or since the fall of Communism in some Slavic countries the sense of connection based on a shared Slavic identity has been gradually weakening. During the domination of the USSR, this connection was cherished. Afterwards, its place was taken by national identities based on such values as: ethnicity, territory, culture, history and religion as well as language. Raising the status of lesser Slavic languages to the rank of official languages (as in the case of Slovak, Serbian / Montenegrin, Croatian, Slovenian, Macedonian) is related to separatist tendencies and to the fact that new countries have appeared on the European map.

Given this situation, it would be difficult to imagine both the revival of the Pan-Slavism idea and the domination of one of the region's languages in transnational communication as Russian is no longer the *lingua franca* for Eastern European countries. It comes as no surprise then that travelling forums are full of tourists confused by the multitude of similar-sounding languages posing a question: "What language is the best for Eastern Europe?" referring to the political map of the continent divided by the Iron Curtain. It goes without saying that the answers they get are as different as their destinations.

Research on mutual intelligibility of related languages carried out by Charlotte Gooskens in an international research team may give us some insight into this matter. In their research, languages have been grouped on the basis of mutual intelligibility (Gooskens et al. 2017) using a large-scale web-based investigation with specially-designed test tools. The scope of the research has recently been widened to incorporate the Slavic languages family, although not all of them have been yet tested (see Table 1.). The results of the investigation are not surprising: the languages closest-related appear to be the most effective trigger for interlingual communication. In case of Western European Slavic languages one can even talk about 'the phenomenon of communicativeness' (Hofmański 2012). For tourists who posed the question on the internet forum, this research results mean that, for instance, if someone speaks Czech, he/she will be able to communicate with the Slovaks and (to a lesser extent) with Poles, whereas a Slovenian speaker will understand Croatian and Bulgarian to some extent. However, it seems that these connections are not symmetrical.

The situation of national languages in the region also overlaps with more general economic and political integration processes, such as globalization, migrations, as well as technological revolution. These conditions favor participation in a supranational communication community and change the cultural landscape of Eastern European countries in general and linguistic practices in particular. Important to note, Slavic languages "lean Westwards" and not towards each other. Among the reasons and indicators one can note the rapid growth of international words of English origin and an exponential growth of the number of Western languages students, in most cases English, which is prioritized in educational systems in the Slavic countries.

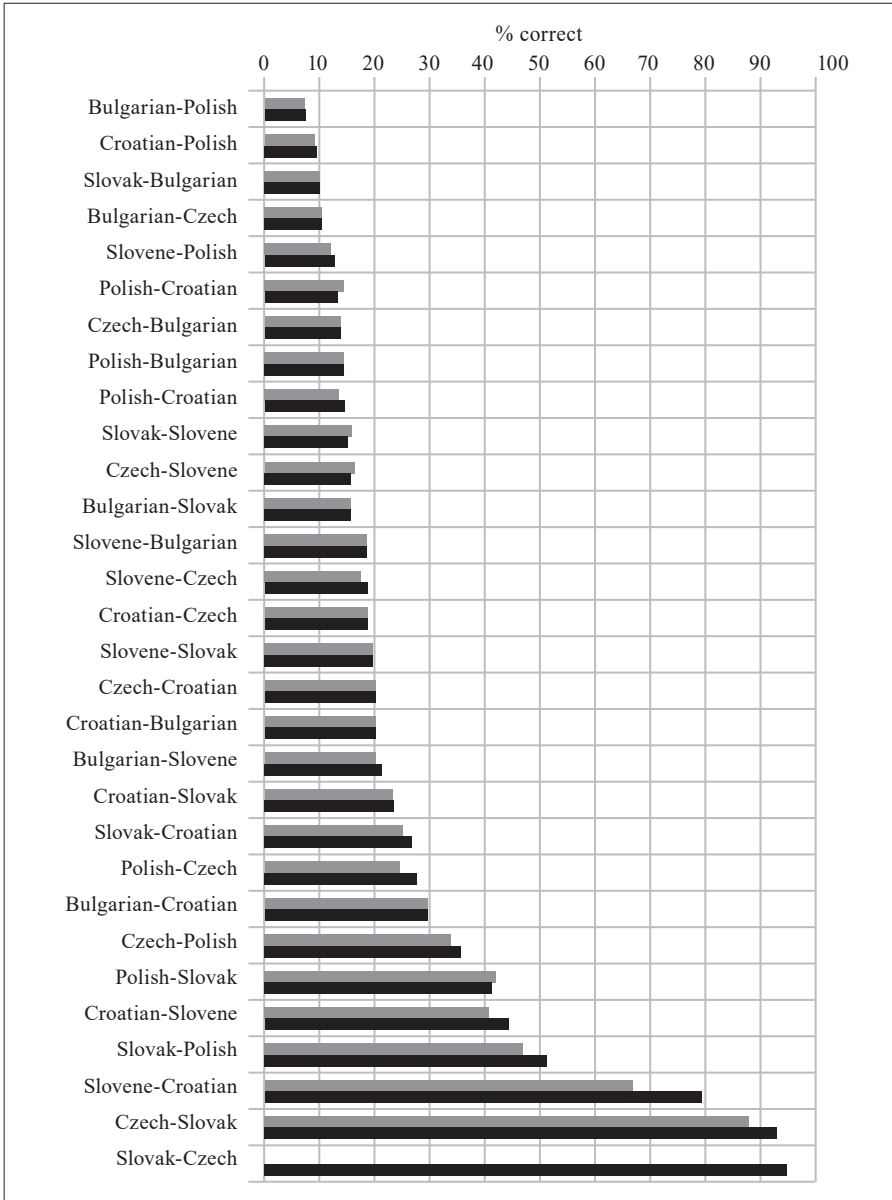


Table 1. Results of cloze tests in the Slavic language area (Source: Gooskens et al. 2017: 16).

In the context referred to in this article, an increase in the tourist traffic should be added to these conditions. There are millions of Western tourists visiting East-Central European countries every year (see Table 2.). Croatia is the unquestionable tourism power in the region (8th place among all EU countries), which – according to the Eurostat research – is the most visited tourist destination for Germans (21% of all tourists). The Czech Republic (11th place) and Poland (13th place) hold a quite

strong position as well. However, it is the short-term big-city tourism that prevails in these countries. Prague and Krakow are especially popular among visitors from the West, which affects the linguistic situation in the cities – English has never been as widely spoken there as in the recent decades. Visitors perceive English as a *lingua franca* (ELF), a language that can be used everywhere. In fact, research confirms that ELF is the language of mass global tourism (Jaworski, Thurlow 2010). Increasing globalization of tourism, in turn, strengthens ELF’s domination in transnational communication and leads to the modification of the hierarchy of languages not only in tourist centers, but also in the peripheries which aspire to participate in the global tourism market.

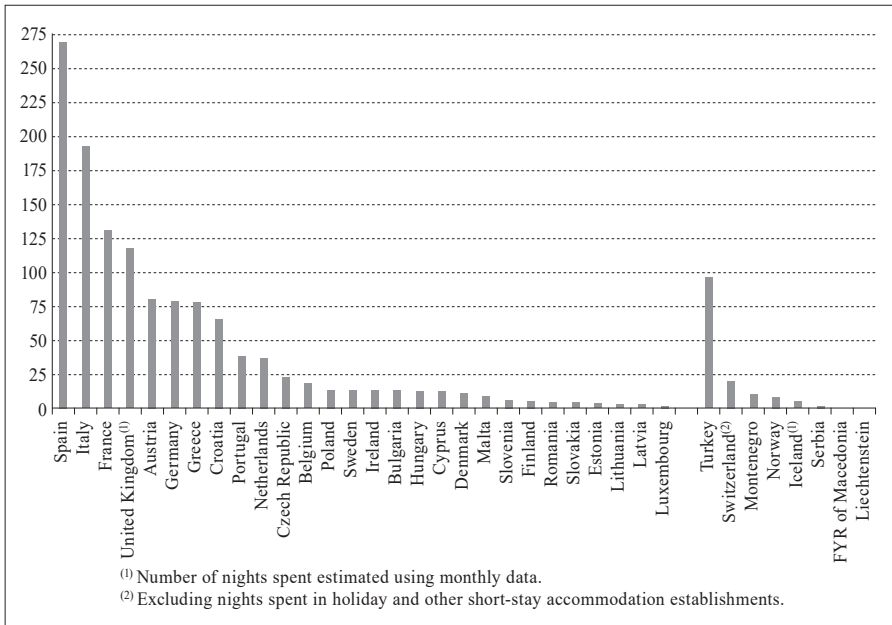


Table 2: Nights spent at tourist accommodation establishments (Source: [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Tourism\\_statistics\\_-\\_nights\\_spent\\_at\\_tourist\\_accommodation\\_establishments](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Tourism_statistics_-_nights_spent_at_tourist_accommodation_establishments))

### New solutions: inclusive multilingualism and *lingua receptiva*

Due to such conditions, Slavicists forecast that under the pressure of globalization in East-Central Europe, a two-level communication model will prevail: national languages at the local level, and a transnational language with a significant (and still growing) scope of functions (Walczak 2016), with a tendency to displace Slavic languages from a wide range of social communication, even from literature (Виденов 2013).

With regard to the previously mentioned Slavic ‘phenomenon of communicativeness’, this model should be completed with an intermediate level, that is to say, an interlingual communication in the region where apart from global language the use of native languages will be taken into account. However, it is worth noting that such a situation does not reduce the assessment of the English language pressure on lower levels of communication in the region. As the model shows, the influence goes in one direction only (top-down) and is not mediated by another supranational language (see Table 3).

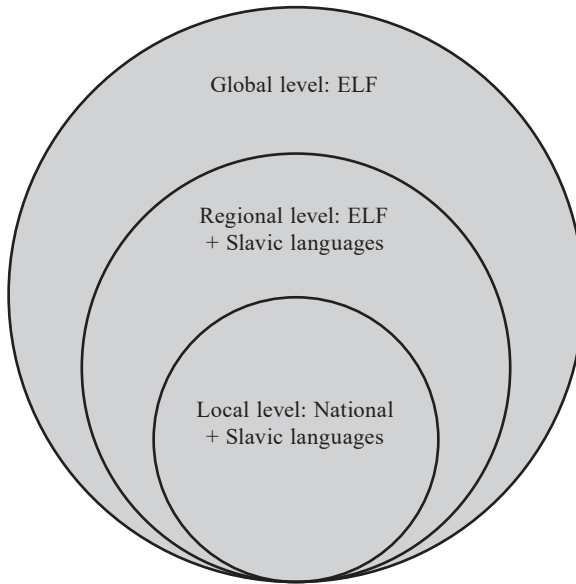


Table 3. Three-level communication model in Eastern Europe.

The model is obviously a simplification, as can be observed when referring back to the title question of this article. In fact, seeing the question from a different perspective may help us better understand the coexistence of different national languages and the global language in East-Central Europe. Thus, the traditional relationship between a country (nation) and a language needs redefinition in the direction of loosening their ties and recognition of possible multilingual arrangements. Such an approach could better reflect the dynamics of real changes in communication in the region.

In response to these challenges, more attention is paid to the observation of various models of multilingual communication (see: [www.dylan-project.org](http://www.dylan-project.org)). It shows that the communication practices of Europeans with varying ethnolinguistic backgrounds are based on strategies that can be compared in several dimensions (Bahtina-Jantsikene 2013: 23), namely:

- 1) mono versus multilingual strategies: from monolingual (‘one language only’, or OLON, and ‘one language at a time’, or OLAT) to multilingual (‘all the languages at some time’, or ALAST, and ‘all language at all times’, or ALAAT);

- 2) exolingual versus endolingual communication strategies: from completely asymmetrical multilingual repertoires to the common language repertoire of communication participants.

These considerations lead to propositions of new practical solutions at an institutional level, also in the field of glottodidactics. First of all, the principle of ‘mother tongue + 2 foreign languages’ promoted in the language policy of the European Union is widely criticized by scholars and experts. It is recognized that due to the traditional teaching of standard languages, this principle may be unrealistic. Even though implemented at a large financial cost and a great effort of the learners, such an approach separates them from their communicational needs and using the language in real-life situations. The focus on achieving competences and fluency in all language skills close to those of a native speaker seems to be an aim unnecessarily overstated. An ‘English only’ formula, a belief that English should be the ultimate communicative tool at the supranational level in the European Union, is also widely contested.

More realistic, feasible and more cost effective solutions are being proposed, both justified theoretically and occurred practically in the multilingual practices of Europeans. These solutions propose integrating different interaction strategies and communication modes. The use of English as a *lingua franca* (ELF), regional *linguae francae* (RLF), *lingua receptiva* (LaRa), code switching (CS) and translation with interpretation (TI) are then described as well-researched constituents of inclusive multilingualism (Backus et al. 2013). The idea of inclusive multilingualism (IM) developed by an international group of researchers assumes that in order to break the communication barrier resulting from limited knowledge of foreign languages these kinds of ‘imperfect’ but efficient modes of plurilingual communication should be promoted.

The most profitable element of all of those ways of multilingual communication is that they encourage participants to cooperate and provide mutual help. ELF brings along indulgence to derogation from standard norms of English, RLF in turn makes use of those language skills which are most useful and natural at a given time and in a given location, LaRa enables the participants to use their native languages to communicate, and CS matches the choice of an optimal language to meet the needs of speech. All of these options are of inclusive nature because they foster the extension of a common communication space. What is more, they improve multicultural understanding on fair terms: equality of interlocutors and respect towards their language diversity, as these are the core values of the European Union’s foreign language policy.

The IM component, which should be given special attention in the context of the title question of this article, is the notion of *lingua receptiva* (LaRa), which allows to analyze the interlingual contacts from a new perspective, going beyond the traditional structuralist or glottodidactic approaches. The practical applicability of the concept has been proved in the context of language contacts in different borderland areas of Europe. As mentioned before, such research is more extensive in relation to Scandinavian and Romance languages. There are, however, examples of initial research on Slavic languages, especially in the context of communication between

Czechs and Slovaks (Sloboda, Nábělková 2013) and also among Poles, Belarusians and Ukrainians (cf. the innovative PILaD concept in: Rehbein, Romaniuk 2014).

This notion arises from the idea of semicommunication introduced by Einar Haugen in the 1960s in the context of communication among Danes, Norwegians and Swedes in a situation where all interlocutors spoke just their mother tongue. The notion pointed to the shortages of such contacts which were metaphorically described as “the trickle of messages through a rather high level of ‘code noise’” (Haugen 1962: 87). However, in the 1990s a change in the evaluation of this phenomenon could be observed: a shift from describing it as semicommunication to instead framing it as an efficient communication model. This shift, in turn, exposed some terminological problems. The term semicommunication was therefore replaced with a number of others, e. g.: receptive multilingualism, polyglot dialogue, intercomprehension, or *lingua receptiva*, abbreviated LaRa (Beerkens 2010).

Currently, LaRa is defined as “the ensemble of those linguistic, mental, interactional, as well as intercultural competences which are creatively activated when listeners are receiving linguistic actions in their ‘passive’ language or variety” (Rehbein, ten Thije, Verschik 2012: 249), and it is considered to be an effective means of communication between the members of diversified language communities in the context of using similar (yet different) languages in order to achieve mutual understanding. According to Kurt Braunmüller (2008) it is a mode used mainly in verbal communication, in a non-official setting, during face to face contacts, in which mutual understanding is important, and the emphasis is mainly on efficiency of the information exchange, content retrieval, without the intention to actually learn the other language. In the context of such communication ‘at any price’, the grammar rules and correctness play a secondary role, giving priority to pragmatics, situation and context conditions.

The research so far indicates that the very fact that closely related languages have so much in common and that their structures are similar, does not fully explain the success or failure of receptive communication between their users. What has been emphasized from the beginning is that the experience in multilingual practices and participants’ awareness of communication are vital. In such a context, participants have to ‘learn’ the understanding of the interlocutor’s language when communication is in progress. It is as important for an individual as for society which through long-time multilingual contacts has developed conventional discursive practices based on the common history of communicative events. Creating the common social reality in such a multilingual discourse opens the door for LaRa to be used in order to grasp understanding or comprehension, as Roos Beerkens (2010: 34) argues. In such a situation it is no longer only an imperfect ‘tool’ of communication. Rather, it should be seen as a building block of interculturality.

On the other hand, the possibility of utilizing this communication mode also depends on an explicit agreement between interlocutors or a foreign language policy in a given territory. Foregoing studies show that ideological factors play a significant role as they may strengthen, weaken or even block mutual understanding in language constellations burdened with a negative attitude (Bahtina-Jantsikene 2013: 21).

Nowadays, LaRa in Europe is considered an “endangered language”. Despite being in use in various borderland areas (where languages are similar and the national stereotypes and antagonisms reduced), it is being overshadowed by ELF which displaces a more difficult multilingual communication in interlingual contacts. However, in the light of IM these variants of transnational communication are not treated as competition since they both involve a similar communication goal: to achieve understanding in the multicultural setting. The assumptions, however, vary in both cases: whereas ELF assumes a general knowledge of common linguistic resource as a starting point leading to the differences in understanding and using different linguistic forms, LaRa assumes a diversified set of linguistic resources and a resulting effort is aimed at recognizing common forms and meanings in order to achieve understanding. As it is emphasized by Cornelia Hülmbauer (2014: 284):

Using the slogan of the European Union, one could distinguish between diversity in unity for ELF – i. e. a diversity component of negotiable forms within a framework of ‘all speaking the same language’, and unity in diversity for LaRa – i. e. a unity component of familiar forms within a framework of different languages.

The difference between the ELF and the glottodidactic EFL (English as foreign language) is also emphasized in this perspective. The first one is of inclusive nature as it is not based on the domination of ‘native speakers’ of English and does not seek reaching their level. However, in turn, it is a mode developed by participants of an interaction who commonly regard English as a foreign language.

The co-occurrence of LaRa and ELF in transnational communication in East-Central Europe seems to be no longer a likely scenario but rather an existing language reality, although insufficiently examined. The first diagnostic studies show that even in the case of closely-related languages the interlingual communication is undergoing a significant transformation due to the influence of the omnipresent English. An example of such closely-related languages could be Polish and Czech, even in border areas where the semi-communicative practices are present and deeply socially rooted in a ‘discourse of interculturality’. National languages, which until recently have been sufficient in everyday contacts, are now accompanied by a global language (Steciąg 2017). However, there is no doubt that the growing ELF role in transnational communication in Eastern Europe, both in different areas and situations of interaction, does not mean the exclusion of other Slavic languages-based modes of communication, which are still worth developing. However, they do not need to be mutually-exclusive options. The IM perspective allows one to follow different interaction strategies taken in varying communication arrangements and language constellations.

## Conclusions

Looking back at the title question of this paper, a negative answer can be given first: the ‘English only’ option is neither realistic nor beneficial. Current opinions of Slavists who state that ELF is and will continue displacing national languages in different functions and communication areas on transnational level, are worth contrasting with completely different forecasts taken seriously in the English-speaking



world. Nicholas Ostler (2010) believes that the status of ELF will diminish in the next decades due to the influence of three worldwide tendencies:

- 1) an equality tendency contributing to lowering the status of social elites which involves removing the language of their communication (ELF) to the natural native territories;
- 2) the increasing wealth and influence of world economies and demographic powers other than the USA (i. e. Russia, India, China) which will undermine the supremacy of the English-speaking nations and in turn will result in limiting the choice of ELF for international communication;
- 3) the advancements in translation technology, allowing immediate translation from language to language, strengthening the significance of national languages and reducing the need of any lingua franca in the future.

ELF will surely not disappear suddenly as Ostler emphasizes. However, the indications of its twilight are apparent in a symbolic, as well as practical sense. In turn, the inclusive perspective, proposed by the multilingualism researchers, brings the European intercommunication closer to the ideal outlined years ago by Umberto Eco (1995: 283) in the following way:

Polyglot Europe will not be a continent where individuals converse fluently in all the others language; in the best cases it would be a continent where differences of languages are no longer barriers to communication, where people can meet each other and speak together, each in his or her own tongue, understanding, as best as they can, the speech of others.

The ‘zeitgeist’ is also important for the shape of contemporary interlingual communication practices, or – to be more exact in relation to the challenges of the 21st Century linguistics – ‘intellectual aura’, understood as a more or less consistent and dynamic set of epistemological and ontological-axiological, as well as praxeological attitudes, which in reality affects the beliefs and behavior of people to a more or less conscious extent (Gajda 2013: 6). In the ‘fluid reality’ of postmodernism, characterized by multiple points of view and blurring of once sharp binary opposites (such as: nature – culture, objectivism – subjectivism, reductionism – holism, essentialism – relationism, universalism – contextualism, etc.), directing the attention of linguists to borderline, transient and non-standard forms of multilingualism seems to be necessary.

The general conclusion is that the language of understanding for East-Central Europe remains an imperfect mode requiring pragmatic effort and intercultural competence. Created through real-life contacts and communication situations, it resembles a kind of glocalised *multilingua franca* (Pennycook, Otsuji 2015: 177) integrating various interaction strategies in order to expand the common platform of understanding.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- ALAAT – ‘all language at all times’  
ALAST – ‘all the languages at some time’  
CS – code switching  
EFL – English as foreign language  
ELF – English as a lingua franca  
IM – inclusive multilingualism  
LaRa – lingua receptiva  
OLAT – ‘one language at a time’  
OLON – ‘one language only’  
RLF – regional lingua franca  
TI – translation with interpretation

## KATERI JEZIK JE NAJBOLJŠI ZA VZHODNO EVROPO? *LINGUA RECEPTIVA* KOT NOV PRISTOP V SLOVANSKIH RAZISKAVAH MEDSEBOJNIH KOMUNIKACIJ

Količina in kakovost medjezikovnih stikov v vzhodni in srednji Evropi sta povezana s številnimi zapletenimi pojavi in procesi, ki v veliki meri določajo obliko družbene realnosti v regiji in vplivajo na dinamično spreminjanje jezikovnih pogojev narodov, ki tradicionalno pripadajo slovanskemu svetu. V takih razmerah si je težko predstavljati oživitve panslavistične ideje in prevlado enega od jezikov regije v transnacionalni komunikaciji. Slovani napovedujejo, da bo pod pritiskom globalizacije v vzhodni in srednji Evropi naraščala težnja po izginjanju slovanskih jezikov iz širokega spektra družbene komunikacije. Po drugi strani pa raziskave, ki že potekajo, kažejo, da prepričanje, da bi morala biti angleščina končno komunikacijsko orodje na nadnacionalni ravni (t. i. formula *English only*), ni niti realistično niti koristno. Kot odgovor na te izzive se vse več pozornosti posveča opazovanju različnih modelov večjezične komunikacije, ki se izvaja v regijah s prebivalci z različnimi etničnimi jeziki. Zamisel o vključujoči večjezičnosti (IM), ki jo je razvila mednarodna skupina raziskovalcev, je predstavljena kot nova rešitev za odpravo komunikacijskih ovir, ki izhajajo iz omejenega znanja tujih jezikov.

Komponenta IM, ki posebno pozornost posveča vprašanju o najprimernejšem jeziku za vzhodno Evropo, je izraz *lingua receptiva* (LaRa). Ta je opredeljen kot »sklop tistih jezikovnih, mentalnih, interaktivnih in medkulturnih kompetenc, ki se kreativno aktivirajo, ko poslušalci sprejemajo jezikovna dejanja v svojem ‘pasivnem’ jeziku ali različici« (Rehbein, Ten Thi, Verschik). LaRa kot komunikacijski fenomen temelji na načelu enakosti sogovornikov in ocenjuje njihovo etnično jezikovno ozadje, kar je tudi ključni vidik jezikovnih politik Evropske unije za spodbujanje ideje večkulturne Evrope s podpiranjem razvoja jezikovne identitete državljanov, zato ga štejemo za najpomembnejši element IM.

Sočasno pojavljanje LaRa in ELF (angleščina kot *lingua franca*) v transnacionalni komunikaciji v vzhodni in srednji Evropi se ne zdi več verjeten scenarij, ampak obstoječa – čeprav premalo raziskana – jezikovna realnost. Iz zaključkov, ki temeljijo na predhodnih ugotovitvah, je razvidno, da je komunikacijski model, ki se trenutno oblikuje na nadnacionalni ravni, podoben nekakšni glocalizirani *multilingua franci* (Pennycook, Otsuji), ki združuje različne strategije interakcije z namenom razširiti skupni temelj razumevanja.