

DESCRIPTION FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC

When learning a foreign language, we get to realize that there are certain words which are orthographically very similar or identical to words in our native language, and that their meaning is also similar to our native words. These words are called cognates. However, we also get to realize that there are words whose orthographic similarity is deceptive because their meaning is different from what we expect based on their spelling. These words are called false friends or interlingual homographs. Since orthography makes cognates and false friends quite “special” across languages, these words have been in focus of both psycholinguistic experimental research and second language acquisition (SLA) research. Quite surprisingly, however, these two lines of study differ so much in the way they tackle cross-linguistically similar words, that they do not provide a unified account of the mechanism underlying the acquisition of cognates and false friends in the second language. This project aims to fill this gap.

In the project, we plan a series of tasks designed both for the language classroom and for the laboratory. We will try to answer whether artificial methods of learning vocabulary used in experiments and methods of learning used in real life (such as intentional learning from vocabulary exercises and incidental learning from reading texts) yield comparable results in measuring how cognates, false friends and other words are learned. Further, we ask whether the results obtained in the classroom can be predicted by the same factors as the results obtained in psycholinguistic experiments. In consequence, we want to find out whether they depend on similar cognitive mechanisms. Thus, this line of research will allow us to bridge the gap between psycholinguistic studies and SLA studies. Finally, in our project will try to answer whether the learner’s awareness of cross-linguistic similarity is necessary to increase his/her benefit when learning cross-linguistically similar words. We expect that our studies will help to better explain the mechanism of intentional and incidental vocabulary learning. Thus, we believe that our research may influence future language teaching, constructing vocabulary learning tasks and language learning syllabuses.