

Les faux-amis: Investigating lexico-semantic ambiguity across two languages

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A substantial part of second language (L2) acquisition involves learning a second set of lexical items. This task may be simplified, however, when a subset of L2 lexical items have significant orthographic/phonological overlap with their translation equivalents, as is the case for cognates. For example, knowing the English word “banana” makes it straightforward to learn its French translation “banane”. But words that overlap in orthographic/phonological form can be misleading, as they are not always semantically equivalent. For example, the French word “librairie” is not translated into English as “library”, but as “bookstore”. Such cross-language word pairs are known as “*les faux amis*”, or *false friends*.

Previous psycholinguistic studies have shown that all meanings of homonyms are initially accessed, not just within a language (ex. Swinney 1979), but also across a bilingual’s languages (Dijkstra, Timmermans, and Schriefers 2000). In the case of false friends, this would lead to the activation of semantically inappropriate words by virtue of their highly similar form. This suggests that even though L2 learners may be consciously aware of false friends as a result of explicit instruction, processing difficulties may persist even at higher levels of L2 proficiency.

The aim of the current study is thus to examine how false friends are processed, and more specifically, the impact of cross-language lexico-semantic ambiguity on how L2 speakers activate L1 word meanings. Four types of false friends were investigated: 1) *False cognates* (FCs), which have related but different meanings (e.g. English: *library*; French: *librairie* “bookstore”); 2) *Partial FCs* (PFCs), which share one meaning but have an additional related meaning in one language (e.g. English: *herb*; French: *herbe* “herb”, “grass”); 3) *Interlingual homographs* (ILHs), which have unrelated meanings (e.g. English: *bless*; French: *blesser* “hurt”); and 4) *Partial ILHs* (PILHs), which share one meaning but have an additional unrelated meaning in one language (e.g. English: *peach*; French: *pêche* “peach”, “fishing”).

Participants were 38 native speakers of English, divided into groups based on their French (L2) proficiency: High (n=10), Mid (n=12) and Monolingual/Low (n=16). They performed a speeded semantic relatedness task, entirely in their L1, where they rated the similarity of pairs of English words on a 6-point scale from “no similarity” to “synonymous”. Critical trials consisted of the English-language half of the four types of false friends (e.g. “peach”), paired with the English translation of their French-language counterpart (e.g. “fishing”). Participants also completed a French proficiency test (Tremblay’s (2011) cloze task), as well as a French-to-English translation task to evaluate their explicit knowledge of the false friends in question.

Repeated-measures ANOVAs revealed that three of the four false friends types were rated as significantly more similar by the High group than the Low group (ILH: $p < .016$; PILH: $p < .003$; FC: $p = .013$), and marginally so by the Mid group compared to the Low group. Crucially, linear regression analyses showed that participants’ ratings for all four types of false friend were significantly correlated with their L2 proficiency score, especially when their explicit translation knowledge was controlled for (ILH: $R^2 = .289$, $p = .001$; PILH: $R^2 = .494$, $p < .001$; FC: $R^2 = .239$, $p = .002$; PFC: $R^2 = .161$, $p = .013$). These results indicate that, when L2 learners know the translation for a false friend, the form-related L2 word is likely to interfere with lexico-semantic processing, even in a purely L1 task.

These findings contribute to a growing body of literature that has found evidence for L2 effects on L1 processing (e.g. Brien and Sabourin 2012). This study also sets the stage for future work using a methodology that targets more subconscious processing, which will allow more to be said regarding how false friends are accessed and organized in the bilingual mental lexicon.

References

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