

Now you see it, now you don't? Factors in benefitting from cognate vocabulary

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Cognates are words that are formally and semantically very similar, or even identical across different languages. We tend to spot them mostly in languages which are typologically similar, and it is traditionally assumed that cognate words had a common ancestor word that they originated from (Lat. *cognatus* = blood relative). However, cognates can also exist in typologically unrelated languages, such as Polish and English. This is due to the historical processes of language contact and borrowing which affected languages over the centuries.

Because of their somewhat 'special' formal and semantic similarity across languages, cognates become a common object of study for psycholinguists and applied linguists. Psycholinguistic experiments demonstrate the subconscious cognate facilitation effect: cognates are processed faster than other words. On the other hand, language acquisition studies underlie the importance of consciously noticing the correspondence of the cognate in the foreign language and other languages known to the learner: Cognates are supposed to help in language acquisition, if learners can notice them and strategically use them to their benefit. Strangely enough, teaching about cognates is largely missing from foreign language syllabuses, and not all learners seem to acknowledge the fact that cognateness may help in learning. What is more, it is not always clear why some learners do not seem to notice cognates, while others use them as a language learning strategy.

Thus, in my research I investigate which factors, both word-related and learner-related, have an impact on benefitting from cognateness in language acquisition, and how they influence noticing and using cognates. The word-related factors include word category (e.g. noun, adjective), orthographic similarity of the cognate to its first language equivalent, and whether the word is presented in isolation or in context. The learner-related factors include proficiency in the target language and other languages known, learner's age, and their metalinguistic knowledge and awareness. Evidence shows that benefitting from cognateness increases with proficiency in the target language, and that higher proficiency in more than one language (multilingualism) affects learners' awareness of cross-linguistic similarity. So, my next question is whether this sensitivity to cross-linguistic similarity, present in multilinguals, can be trained in the case of language learners of varied age and varied target language proficiency. Classroom research, including case studies and large-scale experiments on adults and teenagers alike, shows that the cognate strategy training works even in beginners, and that training increases learners' ability to notice such words in texts and use them as a communication strategy.

The talk will predominantly deal with Polish-English cognates and their use by bilingual and multilingual Polish learners/users of English. However, since it discusses the universal processes of cross-linguistic influences in the mind of an individual, the evidence presented should be generalizable to other languages. Hopefully, it can also serve as an example for other language pairs and groups.