

## Language Transfer from Spanish to English Caused by False Cognates

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### Abstract

The aim of this research is to describe how the use of false cognates in English can act as a negative language transfer among Spanish native speakers. Cognates are words from two different languages that have similar meaning and spelling; however, false cognates are also two words with similar spelling but their meaning is different. The study demonstrates if it is common for Spanish native speakers to use false cognates and what are the possible factors that lead to their usage. The present research addresses positive and negative factors that the first language (L1) can have on the second language (L2). To prove this, a questionnaire has been prepared for the present research to explore how Spanish native speakers transfer to their second language (SLA), in this case English. The results of the questionnaire also show which false cognates are use the most.

**Keywords:** cross-linguistic influence, language transfer, negative language transfer, positive language transfer cognates, and false cognates

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout the years, the idea of language transfer was vague. Errors made in the course of producing a second language were seen as an evidence of the “creative constructions process” (Dulay, Heidi & Burt, Marina, 1974). Now, although there are still many opinions of what exactly language transfer means, many researchers have come to the conclusion that a learner’s native language plays an important role when learning a second language. That is why the first language is “available” to be used as a reference when approaching a new language. When both languages share similarities, it is helpful to use the first language to learn the meaning or the sound of the new words in a new language. Bearing this in mind, it could also serve as a disadvantage in cases where it is easily confused with false cognates.

The focus of the present research is the analysis of language transfer based on the use of false cognates between Spanish and English. A discourse produced in the second language of a person reveals the gap between the first language and the second language, which it can be seen in more detail by the lexical that it is being used. Due to phonetically similarities of English and Spanish words people tend to confuse them without noticing

that there exists difference in meaning. This research demonstrates how Spanish native speakers frequently have problems with false cognates and utilizes them instead of the correct English words.

### **Language transfer**

Humans tend to be careful when choosing words to express an idea, but when language transfer occurs it can make it complicated to express the same feeling in another language. Even though the idea of language transfer has existed for many years, yet an exact definition has not been found. According to Langfen Lu (2010), the term was used to refer to “cross linguistic influences”, but linguists realized that it should be deleted or at least limited in its use. This is precisely because the term is too wide and thus might lead to other ideas. Isurin (2005) defines transfer by saying that “it’s a traditional term from psychology of learning which means impositions of previously learned patterns onto a new learning situation”. In other words, language transfer is the utilization of prior linguistic knowledge in the practice of a second language. As mentioned before, not a single precise definition exists, but many linguists have agreed that the first language does have a major impact on the learning of a second language. According to Lu, some noticeable evidences of L1 influencing L2 can be seen specifically in discourse, lexicon, semantics, syntax, morphology, phonetics and phonology (2010).

In *Language Transfer: From Topic Prominence to Subject Prominence*, Lu mentions three ways in which language transfer has been viewed: the behaviorist view, the mentalist view, and the cognitive view. He explains that the behaviorist view is based on how repetition accelerates the learning of a new language, as well on bringing complex structures into small ones to let the learner acquire them slowly. Secondly, the mentalist view (early 1950s) has been started by Chomsky, who argues that language is innate. Other researchers however, believed that the native language could not be subject to transfer, instead supported by the ability of learning a language based on Universal Grammar. Lastly, there is also the cognitive view. This category is based on the belief that in the process of learning a language, the same cognitive systems are used as when realizing other activities. Later on, still according to Lu, researchers on Second Language Acquisition have put forward certain factors responsible for language transfer. These factors consisted of the different linguistic levels: the learning environment, word meaning and how the learner sees L2 from L1. In his article, Lu also mentions a new perspective on language transfer, which entails that a person’s second language is influenced by the first language, including resemblance in syntactic structures and word meaning. Even though there are more than one definition for the term, it is clear that many of the preliminary ideas on language transfer are still being adapted to what the whole term covers.

### **Negative transfer and positive transfer**

Another new perspective on language transfer resulted in the emergence of the two following categories. When speaking a second language, a negative or a positive transfer may occur. A positive transfer refers to the situation when both languages share the same grammar (L1 and L2). When this occurs, it is easier to learn the new language because

not only the grammar is the same, but also the structure of the language. On the other hand, negative transfer occurs when two language systems do not have the same structure or word meaning. For example, in English adjectives precede the noun and in Spanish, on the contrary they follow the noun. Negative transfer cannot only occur as in the situation presented above, but there also exist lexical reasons that lead to negative transfers, such as the use of false cognates.

### **Cognates and False Cognates**

Cognates and false cognates are two categories that demonstrate how the native language interferes with the second language. According to Arrufat, cognates are words from two different languages that have a common origin and will have similar meaning and similar spelling. False cognates on the other hand, show the interference of the first language in the second one. This means that two words from different languages that do not have the same meaning but their pronunciation is very similar, get confused with one another. This error belongs to the negative language transfer and results from lexical reasons.

### **Previous research**

Spanish and English have many words that are spelled the same and have the same meaning, and thus there is a higher probability that English learners will use false cognates. Arrufat argues that the use of cognates is acting like a base for the learner to learn a second language, this is because the learner can “realize that they already know ‘something’ about the [...]” other language (Arrufat, p. 2). In her article, Arrufat includes an exercise that she recommends to teachers in order to teach students how to differentiate false cognates, she calls it “What is Actually Happening”. She explains the procedure of the activity by mentioning that the teacher should present some situations to the students who in turn need to match an image with a word (they will have two options to choose from) that represents the situation. The false cognates that Arrufat uses as pairs are folder-carpet and exit-success. It is also suggested that the teachers ask the students to make sentences with each word so they can notice the differences themselves.

The objective of the activity mentioned above, suggested by Arrufat in *How to Deal with Language Transfer in the English Classroom*, is to “Learn[...] false cognates and eliminate negative transfer”. This is why pictures are a good idea to make the students match the word with the image. In this way, students will identify the word with the image and will remember its actual meaning. The only factor that could be changed in this activity is to use “binder” instead of “folder”. This is because the word “folder” in English also exists in Spanish *folder*, and it has the same meaning. In the aforementioned activity “carpet” is shown as a false cognate of “folder” because in Spanish the word would be *carpeta* which its official English translation is “binder”. The University of the State of New York has also pointed out on its list that “carpet” has been mistakenly used for “binder”.

Referring to how this activity has been conducted, it can be said it is connected to some language transfer theories. This activity proves right one of the first ideas given by the behaviorist view: the help of repetition makes the learner understand complex ideas in the second language. In this particular case, looking at the image and writing sentences using the word equivalent to the image can count as repetition. The student sees the

image, processes what it is and then tries to put it into a sentence. This example also connects to the idea of LeBlanc (1989) cited by Frunzã (2006), which agreed that using cognates will expand the vocabulary of the learner.

## **PRESENT STUDY**

Having Arrufat's activity in mind, a similar trial has been conducted for the sake of this research to show if Spanish speakers who are learning English actually use false cognates or not. To point out some important ideas that are going to be analysed in the questionnaire, it is necessary to remember that language transfer is divided into two categories: positive transfer and negative transfer. Also, that a certain type of negative transfer can be caused by lexical reasons, more specifically, false cognates. In contrast to the activity suggested by Arrufat, the activity for this research was conducted to estimate whether native Spanish speakers use false cognates in English, instead of trying to teach students the differences between cognates and false cognates.

## **METHOD**

A questionnaire (Appendix A), designed specifically for this study, was sent through email to ten different participants. This questionnaire contained ten sentences and each sentence had a word missing. Two words were written under each sentence, one was the word that goes into the blank and the other one was its false cognate. The participants had to choose the correct word that would complete the sentence and that would fit in the blank. These sentences included some of the most commonly used cognates. The words used for this questionnaire were carefully extracted from the list of cognates given by The University of the State of New York. The reason for that is that it had to be words that people use in an everyday basis and not specialized terms.

## **Participants**

This questionnaire was given to adults between the ages of 18 and 31 years old. For this reason, instead of using pictures, simple sentences were given to the participants. All of the participants who took part in the questionnaire speak Spanish as their native language and live in Tijuana, Mexico, which lies at the border with the United States. Choosing all the participants from the same region was a prerequisite, as Spanish is spoken in many countries and some words change depending on each region.

Six of the participants are studying a Bachelor's degree and the other four participants have finished their Bachelors and are currently working in their area of study. The ten of them have a beginning level of English and started learning it since they were young. Their field of study varies, not all participants studied or study the same career, but most of them focus on health areas. Due to the fact that their area of focus differed, general words were selected to be part of the questionnaire. This had to be taken in consideration so that all participants had an equal opportunity of knowing all the words.

## **Data analysis**

A brief analysis of each cognate in the questionnaire will be helpful for all non-Spanish speakers to comprehend why exactly these words were chosen. The first sentence that

appears on the questionnaire includes the words “binder” and “carpet”, where the word “carpet” can be a false cognate of *carpeta* (binder). As it can be seen, only an “a” is added at the end of the Spanish real translation. This questionnaire also includes the words “actually” and “lately”. In Spanish the words *actual* or *actualmente* means “at the present moment” or “nowadays”, but its spelling is similar to the word “actually” in English. That is why many second language English speakers use “actually” to refer to a certain period of time. In sentence three, the words “choked” and “collided” are also false cognates. The word *chocar* means “to crash”, but its spelling is close to “choked”, and it gets easily confused. This questionnaire also includes the words “pregnant” and “embarrassed”. The word “embarrassed” is a false cognate of “pregnant” because its translation in Spanish is *embarazada*. Although these false cognates have a similar spelling, these words rarely get confused. The fifth sentence shows the words “succeed” and “exit”. The translation of “succeed” in Spanish is *éxito*, which sounds similar to “exit” and English learners confuse them. The word *idioma* in Spanish is the translation of “language”, but sometimes mistakenly translated as “idiom”. It is important to mention that there is another word in Spanish for “language” which is *lengua*, this could have hinted the participants to choose “language” instead of “idiom”.

Although in Spanish there are different words to refer to a place that sells books and for a place that lets people borrow books, it is often confused in English: “library” and “bookstore”. Also, since body parts and numbers are the first things taught in English courses, a part of the body was also included. *Codo* is “elbow” in Spanish, but its spelling is similar to “code” even though there’s no relation between them. In sentence nine “contest” is a false cognate of “answer” because if an “a” is placed at the end of the word it will form *contesta*, which it means “to answer” in Spanish. For the last sentence given in the questionnaire, the words “complete” and “realize” were put together. As the rest of the words mentioned, “realize” has a similar spelling to *realizar* in Spanish, which means to “get something done”. Its definition is similar to what the word “complete” encompasses.

In many of these examples there is no relevance between one word and another, but their spelling and pronunciation are similar. This is why English learners constantly confuse them and a negative transfer occurs. People who do not know Spanish would think that two words just got confused, without noticing the real meaning of the Spanish word that is being used incorrectly. The definition of the word in Spanish can lead to the answer of why the learner had confused the real translation with another word.

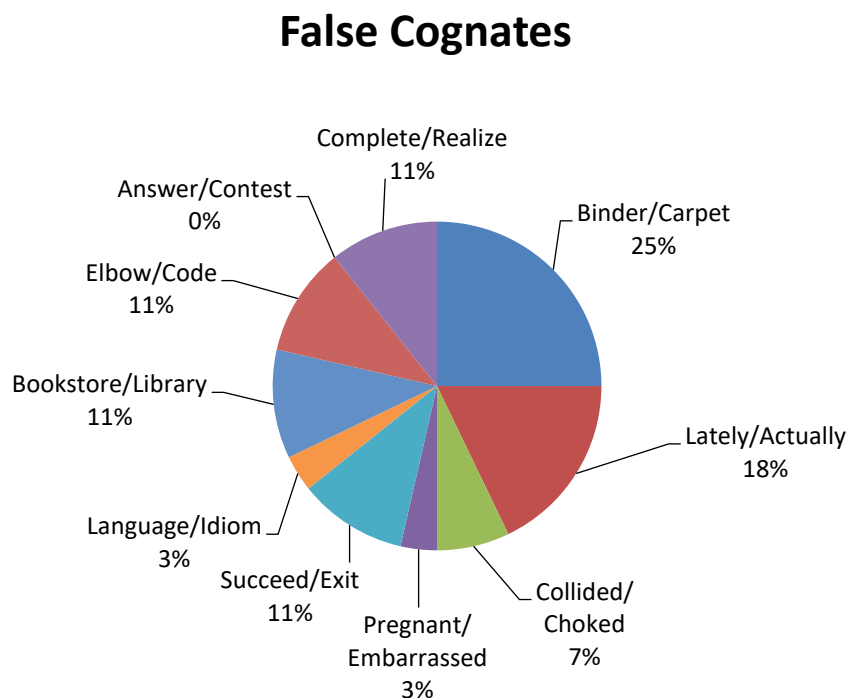
### Summary of results

The questionnaires were received through email and the results were counted manually. Out of ten questionnaires, only one participant did not demonstrate a negative transfer in any of the questions given. The words that made participants have the most negative transfers were “binder” and “lately”. These two words were the only ones who had five or more errors in the ten questionnaires. Also, the only word that did not cause negative transfer was “answer”. Noticing that only one word out of the ten sentences did not cause any negative transfer, it explicitly show that the use of negative cognates is a

phenomenon, and that it can be observed even recently among the inhabitants of a city on a border with the United States.

The results obtained from this questionnaire did not only prove that a native language can cause negative transfer in the second language due to lexical reasons, but they also show that it is a common mistake for Spanish speakers to make. For the first sentence, seven participants chose the negative cognate and for the second sentence five people chose “actually” instead of “lately”. These were the most commonly chosen false cognates from the questionnaire. This means that almost all of the candidates demonstrated a negative transfer with these two words, even though these false cognates also have similar pronunciation and spelling (only one letter changes at the end), just as the rest of the false cognates from the questionnaire. This raised the following question: if these words consisted of the same characteristics as the other words in the questionnaire, then why did these words bring up the most trouble for the participants? Now, the words that had the same amount of participants who chose the false cognates were “exit” instead of “succeed”, “library” instead of “bookstore”, “code” instead of “elbow”, and “realize” instead of “complete”. For each of these four categories only three people chose the false cognate instead of the real translation. On the other hand, the words “choked” and “collided” caused negative transfer only to two people. Finally, regarding to the words “pregnant-embarrassed” and “idiom-language”, each of these categories caused a negative transfer only once.

The chart below shows the results obtained from the questionnaire more clearly and it highlights the percentage of each category. This illustrates the results of “binder-carpet” and “lately-actually” in comparison to “answer-contest”, which produced no negative transfer.



**Figure 1.** The false cognates chosen from the questionnaire.

## RESULTS

This questionnaire does not only prove that Spanish native speakers cannot distinguish between false cognates and cognates, but it also shows that they rely on their first language to learn a second language. According to Wang (2015), one of the language transfer groups is the borrowing transfer, which it can be clearly observed in the results. The participants related some English words with the ones in Spanish. Also, this could be a result of different factors that raised during their language learning process. This is because during the first years of learning a second language, the learner will identify differences between its native language and the new language (Mitchell, Myles and Marsden, 2013). Errors can still be improved by repetition strategies. As mentioned, the behaviorist view is based on how repetition accelerates the learning of a new language. Unfortunately, the only drawback of the present study is that it did not prove if the participants had previously done any types of exercises of repetition of these words. On the other hand, this study lies in compliance with the idea that the learner's environment influences in language transfer. This is because the words in the questionnaire that had the least amount of errors, were words that people use frequently at the border. Also, most of the participants work in health area related jobs and the words "pregnant" and "elbow" did not have a high amount of errors.

## CONCLUSION

The present research set to find out if Spanish native speakers use false cognates in English and whether this could be identified as a negative language transfer. To conclude, the following findings were discovered:

1. Although the questionnaire only tested ten participants, it can be said that it is common for Spanish native speakers to use false cognates, especially if only one letter changes in one of the two words. This could be said because out of the ten questionnaires only one did not contain any negative language transfer.
2. There could be many reasons why a second language learner goes through negative transfer. In terms of language transfer caused by lexical reason, it could depend on the first stages of learning English or how much the learners connect Spanish spelling with English.
3. Based on the questionnaire, the most common false cognates were "binder/carpet" and "lately-actually". It was surprisingly found that the word "contest" was not chosen by any of the participants.

The present research clearly demonstrates that a native language may cause both negative and positive language transfer. Also, this study supports Isurin (2005) by proving that language transfer is the utilization of prior linguistic knowledge in the practice of a second language. As shown, Spanish native speakers do rely on their first language to associate words in the new acquired English language.

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**APPENDIX: QUESTIONNAIRE**

Instructions: Chose the word that best completes the sentence.

1. Before I go to school, I will put my homework in my \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) binder            b) carpet
2. I haven't been reading \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) actually            b) lately
3. Before coming, I saw that two cars \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) choked            b) collided
4. The girl has just realized that she was \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) pregnant            b) embarrassed
5. In order to \_\_\_\_\_, you need to keep studying.  
a) succeed            b) exit
6. I want to learn a new \_\_\_\_\_ before the year ends.  
a) idiom            b) language
7. I need to go to the \_\_\_\_\_ to buy a French book.  
a) library            b) bookstore
8. I couldn't go through because her \_\_\_\_\_ was in my way.  
a) code            b) elbow
9. Please \_\_\_\_\_ the phone.  
a) contest            b) answer
10. Before I go to the movie theater, I have to \_\_\_\_\_ my tasks.  
a) complete            b) realize