

REVIEW OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS

Published by the Afdeling Toegepaste Linguïstiek at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Belgium), with the financial assistance from the Vlaamse Deelregering, the Universitaire Stichting and the Faculteit Letteren en Wijsbegeerte of the K.U. Leuven.

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Cognates: an aid or a barrier to successful L2 vocabulary development ? *

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After a long period of relative neglect, vocabulary is now enjoying a revival of interest. Most foreign language teaching specialists agree that the quantity of vocabulary to be taught is much larger than was previously believed. Today it is generally assumed that for adequate communication students have to learn not 1,500 to 2,000 words but rather 5,000 words. Within this framework of "massive vocabulary expansion", to use Peter Kelly's (1991:257) terminology, it seems justified to investigate the part that cognates could play in L2 vocabulary teaching, particularly in the case of languages such as English and French, which share such a great number of cognates.

In view of the fact that the term "cognate" has been diversely defined in the literature, it may be useful to point out that I use the term to refer to historically related words (including borrowings), whether they have the same meaning or not⁽¹⁾. Furthermore I make a distinction between "good cognates", which have the same meaning, and "deceptive cognates", which have partially or totally different

* This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the 9th World Congress of Applied Linguistics held at Thessaloniki (Greece) on 15-21 April 1990.

(1) This definition excludes incidental homonyms, such as (F) *pain*/(E) *pain*, or (F) *son*/(E) *son*, whose formal similarity is purely accidental.

meanings, as illustrated by the following French/English cognates:

GOOD COGNATES	(F) somptueux = (E) sumptuous (Lat. sumptuosus)
DECEPTIVE COGNATES	
Totally deceptive	(F) actuel ≠ (E) actual (Lat. actualis)
Partially deceptive	(F) expérience = (E) experience = (E) experiment (Lat. experientia)

Over the years the attitude towards cognates has changed from one of total mistrust to one of over-reliance. In the heyday of error analysis the stress was on the **negative effect** of cognates. Cognates were seen as sources of error because of the existence of deceptive cognates or "faux amis". Viewed from this angle, cognates are a danger against which learners must be warned. This attitude has recently been severely criticized. Suzanne Pons-Ridler (1984:89), for instance, calls this preoccupation with avoiding faux amis "stultifying and negative" and suggests ways of using cognates as a **positive tool** in acquiring vocabulary.

The **facilitating effect** of cross-linguistic similarity between L1 and L2 has been convincingly demonstrated by Hakan Ringbom's (1987) investigation of the respective proficiency in English of Swedes and Finns. If Swedes perform consistently better in English than Finns, it is, according to Ringbom, because Swedish and English are related languages while Finnish is totally unrelated to either, so that "whereas a Finn is often at a complete loss as to the meaning of a particular word he has not met before, a Swede can much more easily infer at least its approximate meaning from its similarity or partial similarity to a word in his L1, making use of his knowledge of prefixes, suffixes, cognates, etc." (p.153).

Recognizing the facilitating effect of cognates is one thing, advoca-

ting a **cognate approach** to L2 vocabulary acquisition is another. Such an approach is advocated in two books, namely Petra Hammer & Madeleine Monod's English-French Cognate Dictionary (1976), a bulky dictionary which contains 11,000 good cognates, and Petra Hammer & Gerald Giauque's English-French cognate textbook (1989), entitled *The Role of Cognates in the Teaching of French*, which aims to accelerate French vocabulary acquisition by Anglophones by exploiting in a systematic way the many vocabulary similarities between English and French. As Petra Hammer is co-author of the two books, I shall, for simplicity's sake, use her name when I refer to the basic ideas underlying the two books. Hammer (1976:16) gives a series of arguments in support of the cognate approach, the first two of which read as follows:

1. Since the **ratio of cognates to deceptive cognates is approximately 11,000 to 950**, the memory effort required by students to learn vocabularies could be greatly reduced by cognate study.
2. Incorrect use of deceptive cognates is probably the **least enduring type of interference** between two languages.

If this were true, then we would of course be entirely justified in disregarding deceptive cognates or at least relegating them to a position of secondary importance and concentrating on good cognates.

I contend that the two statements are, if not entirely wrong, at least extremely misleading because they rest on an **over-restrictive notion of deceptive cognate** or, to put it differently, on an over-inclusive notion of good cognate. It may be worth spending some time clarifying this terminological muddle, as the validity of Hammer's arguments crucially depends on the definition of the terms "good cognate" and "deceptive cognate". Let us examine Hammer's definitions (1989:44):

GOOD COGNATES are words that are similar or identical in form and meaning in two or more languages. The term similar is restricted here to include items that have the "same" meaning in both languages

in ordinary use.

DECEPTIVE COGNATES are words which have the same spelling in the two languages but different meanings.

While at first sight very close to my own, Hammer's definitions are far from covering the same range of phenomena, mainly because of the very liberal interpretation given to the concepts of "same meaning" and "ordinary use"⁽²⁾. If words have just one common meaning, they are considered by Hammer as having the "same" meaning and hence classified as good cognates, e.g.

FRENCH	ENGLISH
costume	(theatre...) costume (man's outfit) suit
chauffeur	(private) chauffeur (general) driver
expérience	(practice) experience (test) experiment

These pairs of words are considered as deceptive cognates by practically all linguists. I call them partially deceptive cognates. Ringbom (1987) refers to them as false friends which display formal similarity but partial semantic identity. Contrary to general practice, Hammer

(2) Petra Hammer's formal criterion also runs counter to general practice: similar in form refers either to a change of *one* letter in the spelling of the English and the French word, for example, *oncle/uncle*, *avantage/advantage*, or to some regularities, such as French *-té*/ English *-ty* (*qualité/quality*), French *-eux*, *-euse*/English *-ous* (*curieux/curious*). This overrestrictive criterion, which has no theoretical or pedagogical justification, leads to completely arbitrary exclusions. For instance, while the pairs *appréciation/appreciation*, *avantage/advantage*, *flotille/flotilla* are included in the cognate dictionary, *apprécier/appreciate*, *avantageux/advantageous*, and *flotter/float* are left out.

includes these words in the list of good cognates, which is very misleading. Not only is the number of partially deceptive cognates much higher than that of totally deceptive cognates⁽³⁾, but they are also much more treacherous for the learner than totally deceptive cognates. Counting them as good cognates has the effect of both unduly inflating the number of good cognates, hence the ratio of 11 to 1, and minimizing the importance of deceptive cognates.

Now, to understand Hammer's point of view, it is important to realise that the primary aim of the cognate approach is to improve reading comprehension. And while it is true that Anglophones could misunderstand the French word *costume* in some contexts and think it means 'costume' when in fact it means 'suit', it is also true that in other contexts the semantic identity exists and helps the learner to interpret the sentence. If pairs of words are partially deceptive, they are also partially good and it is this positive side of partial cognates that Hammer emphasises. She views vocabulary acquisition as a process of gradual differentiation: "The broad meaning may be grasped first; a realisation of the finer shades and differences of the cognate meaning may follow" (1989:37).

This attitude is entirely justified if the cognates do share a **broad common meaning in ordinary use**, but the problem is that Hammer does not restrict herself to such cases: she also includes a great many cases where the only shared meaning is a highly specialised or heavily restricted one. The following entries from the cognate dictionary illustrate this phenomenon:

Actuel, elle adj.	Philos., Theol. Actual. Present, real
Slip m.	Slips (vêtement) Sports slip
Hasard m.	Risk, danger, as well as hazard
The fact that <i>actuel</i> and <i>actual</i> can have the same meaning in the	

(3) Only a quarter of the pairs of deceptive cognates contained in the French/English Dictionary of Faux Amis (1988) are totally deceptive cognates (251 pairs out of 924). All the other pairs are partially deceptive, the French cognate being in the majority of cases more polysemous than the English cognate.

specialised fields of philosophy and theology certainly does not justify their inclusion in the cognate dictionary, since this use can in no way be considered as ordinary use. The same holds true for the word *slip* which may well have a common meaning in the specialised field of sports but has totally different meanings in English and French in ordinary use: while in English *slip* is a woman's undergarment, a petticoat, in French the word refers to men's underpants or ladies' panties. As for the word *hasard*, it can only be used in the meaning of the English word *hazard* in one idiomatic phrase, namely *les hasards de la guerre*: the hazards of war, not really what one would call a broad common meaning.

In fact, a very large proportion of the 11,000 words of the cognate dictionary are technical terms. Here are a few examples, all starting with the letter a.

asdic	Naut. asdic
asepsie	Med. asepsis
aseptique	Med. aseptic
aspic	Zool. aspic
aspic	Culin. aspic
aspidistra	Bot. aspidistra
aspirine	Med. aspirin
astatique	Phys. astatic
astéroïde	Astron. asteroid
asthénie	Med. asthenia
asthme	Med. asthma

An analysis of the English-French cognates contained in the dictionary carried out by the authors themselves reveals that more than 5,000 of them are technical terms, from the fields of medicine, chemistry, zoology, etc. This accounts for nearly half of the good cognates contained in the dictionary. Now, these words do not pose great problems to learners, since they are 'international words', i.e. generally monosemous words whose meaning is transparent not only to speakers of English and French but also to speakers of many other

languages.

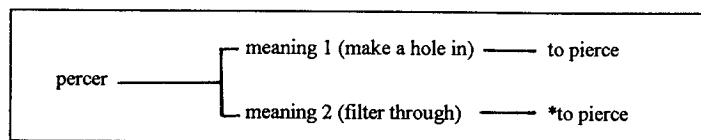
I think this suffices to demonstrate that the ratio of 11 to 1 should be taken with a pinch of salt. The second argument in favour of a cognate approach, namely that incorrect use of deceptive cognates is probably the least enduring type of interference, is equally questionable. In this connection, it is essential to make a distinction between totally deceptive and partially deceptive cognates. Words like

FRENCH	ENGLISH
éventuel (=E. possible, potential)	eventual (=F. final)
large (=E. wide, broad)	large (=F. grand)
déception (=E. disappointment)	deception (=F. tromperie)

which have totally different meanings, frequently give rise to errors in the initial stages, but are usually well mastered in the more advanced learning stages, at least if teachers have taken care to point out the difference between the cognates and to practise the difference in a series of consolidating exercises.

However, things are very different in the case of partially deceptive cognates. They are, in the experience of many language teachers including myself, one of the most enduring types of interference, giving rise to errors even in the most advanced learning stages. The French learner of English, who translates *Très peu de nouvelles ont percé* by *Very little information has pierced* is obviously falling into the trap of partially deceptive cognates. Basing himself on the equivalence between *to pierce* and *percer* in the meaning 'to make a hole in', he has drawn a mistaken analogy and extended this similarity to another meaning of *percer*, which cannot be

expressed by the English cognate. This can be represented as follows:



Such errors are extremely frequent in advanced learners' productions, whether spoken or written.

The fact that deceptive cognates are both more numerous and more treacherous than Hammer suggests limits the possible utility of a cognate approach to vocabulary acquisition. However, it is not because the danger of false friends is a real one that one should develop a deep mistrust of cognates.

Good cognates **do** exist and they have an undeniable facilitating effect on reading comprehension in the initial stages. Systematic regularities between cognate languages should be pointed out to learners. Several studies have shown that the recognition of cognates cannot be taken for granted. Frank Banta (1981) expresses his astonishment at the students' inability to recognise the most obvious cognates. He suggests that making English learners aware of sound correspondences between German and English could help them recognise hundreds of German words from their already familiar English cognates. Suzanne Pons-Ridler (1984) puts forward a similar approach aimed at improving the oral recognition and production of French cognates by Anglophone students.

Although it is certainly useful to incorporate a cognate component in the initial stages of vocabulary teaching, one should not go as far as centring a whole textbook on cognates. Generally speaking, cognate approaches all seem to suffer from the same weakness: they tend to over-emphasise form to the detriment of meaning. More often than not, the data that is used could lead learners to establish wrong equivalences. The following two excerpts illustrate this danger: the first (A) is an exercise devised by Frederick Howlett (1979:652) and

the second (B) illustrates the kind of etymological data Frank Banta (1981:132) suggests using as a mnemonic aid:

A. Le mot entre parenthèses est anglais. Trouvez un mot français de la même famille et employez-le pour compléter la phrase.

1. (mount) Elle ----- l'escalier quatre à quatre.
2. (stage) Le premier ----- de la fusée est tombé dans l'océan.
3. (Argentina) Combien avez-vous d'----- dans votre poche?
4. (brace) J'ai mal au -----.
5. (cutlass) Il y a un ----- et une fourchette à côté de l'assiette.
6. (feat) Il va ----- ses devoirs.
7. (frigid) Est-ce qu'il fait ----- ou chaud aujourd'hui?
8. (hostel) Tu as une chambre dans cet ----- là?
9. (March) ----- est le jour qui suit lundi.
10. (pleasure) Ça me fait un grand ----- de vous revoir.

B. Laufen: leap/lope; Zaun: town; Acker: acre; Baum: beam; Bein: bone; sterben: starve; Knabe: knave; Stube: stove; Vieh: fee; Knecht: knight; Dach: thatch, etc.

Such material can lead learners to form incorrect hypotheses, such as *brace* = *bras*, *Baum* = *beam* or *sterben* = *starve*.

In determining whether and to what extent cognates can be used in vocabulary teaching, the following factors should be taken into account:

- (1) **degree of distance between L1 and L2:** overall number of cognates and relative proportion of good cognates and deceptive cognates
- (2) **nature of the cognates:** core, non-core or subject-core items
- (3) **ultimate goal of teaching:** receptive and/or productive control
- (4) **learning stage:** beginners' or advanced
- (5) **targeted L2 vocabulary:** general or specialised.

The **first factor** has already been discussed. The **second factor** rests on the general assumption that "teaching vocabulary in early language learning requires constant reference to the notion of certain

words being more core than others" (Carter, 1987:188). Now, core words and cognate words do not necessarily coincide. In some cases, they are even diametrically opposed. Laying emphasis on cognate words may then come down to attaching undue importance to non-core or subject-core items. These terms are borrowed from Ronald Carter & Michael McCarthy (1988:172), who draw the following diagram:

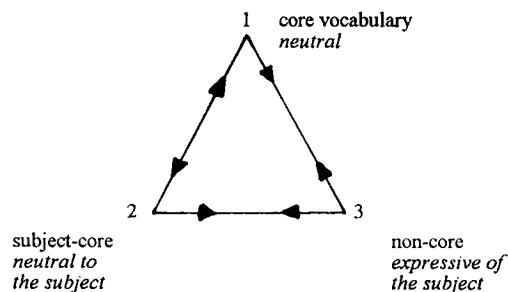


FIGURE 1

Core vocabulary is neutral: it does not indicate degrees of intensity or formality and it is not restricted to a particular field of discourse, e.g. *thin*, *skin*, *drunk*. **Subject-core** items are restricted to a particular field of discourse, e.g. *epidermis* vs. *skin*. **Non-core** items are non-neutral, in that they either carry emotional or evaluative connotations or are restricted to formal or casual usage, e.g. *intoxicated/inebriated* vs. *drunk*, or *svelte* vs. *thin*.

When analysing English-French cognates from this point of view, one soon realises that many cognates which are core words in French are subject-core or non-core in English. Here are a few examples:

FRENCH CORE	ENGLISH SUBJECT-CORE or NON-CORE	ENGLISH CORE
abandonner	abandon	give up
aider	aid	help
avare	avaricious	mean
courageux	courageous	brave
descendre	descend	go/come down
fatigue	fatigue	tiredness
liberté	liberty	freedom
monter	mount	go/come up
obtenir	obtain	get
profond	profound	deep

It is a well-known fact that English words of Romance origin are as a rule less core than their Germanic synonyms. Francophones have a tendency to overuse these words when they speak English. They produce sentences such as *I'll descend in five minutes* or *It's such an old model I couldn't obtain the part*. Overemphasising cognates in vocabulary teaching would reinforce this natural tendency and learners of English would produce even more errors due to what Sylviane Granger & Helen Swallow (1988) call "stylistic false friends". Note that the directionality of teaching is crucial here:

(a)	L1 ENGLISH	L2 FRENCH
	aid	aider
		CORE
(b)	L1 FRENCH	L2 ENGLISH
	aider	aid
		NON-CORE

The problem is less acute in situation (a), which is the teaching situa-

tion Petra Hammer describes, because the L2 word *aider* is a core word. In situation (b), which is the situation EFL teachers are confronted with, the L2 word *aid* is non-core: the link between the two cognates is thus potentially much more dangerous.

The **third factor** concerns the ultimate goal of teaching: receptive and/or productive use. As John Crow rightly points out (1986:246) "a careful distinction must be made in vocabulary activities so as to facilitate receptive acquisition for a large number of words while working on productive acquisition of a much smaller number". As far as cognates are concerned, it is important to make a distinction between cognates meant for receptive control only and cognates meant for both receptive and productive control. It is quite obvious that one should at all costs avoid using non-core cognate words in activities aimed at productive vocabulary development.

The **fourth factor** is the learning stage. The more advanced the learner, the more emphasis is placed on production and hence on precision. While the information on cognates can be relatively vague at first, in the more advanced learning stages much more precise information is needed, particularly on the semantic, syntactic, stylistic and collocational constraints of cognates. It is with these more advanced learners, as well as their teachers, in mind that Jacques Van Roey, Sylviane Granger and Helen Swallow (1988) have written a dictionary of English-French Faux Amis, which gives an exhaustive account of the similarities and differences between more than 900 English/French deceptive cognates.

The **fifth factor** is the targeted L2 vocabulary: general or specialised. It goes without saying that specialised cognates are crucial to the ESP student. To give just one example: while *fatigue* is generally speaking a non-core item, it is a core item in the specialised field of metallurgy, where one commonly speaks of *metal fatigue*.

The arguments developed in this article suggest that cognates are both an aid and a barrier to successful L2 vocabulary development. Teachers should therefore seek to find a happy medium

between over-reliance on cognates and near-pathological mistrust of them, two attitudes which are equally detrimental to learners' vocabulary development.

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ISSN 0019-0810