ARE COGNATES AS EASY TO RECOGNIZE AS WE THINK?

CLARA BURGO

University of Illinois at Chicago

ABSTRACT: *Cognates are words that are very morphologically and phonologically similar to their translations into another language. Hence, it is expected that L2 students understand cognates better than noncognates. However, not all cognates are as easy to interpret by students as instructors think a priori. In this paper, we categorized a series of cognates (Spanish-English) according to their similarity with their equivalent counterparts in the L2 (Spanish) and we contrasted this categorization with some basic Spanish students' intuitions and those of their instructors. After all this, we proposed a new categorization that is adapted to our results in a better way.*

KEYWORDS: *cognates, transferable, intuitions, transparency.*

RESUMEN: *Los cognados son palabras que son muy parecidas morfológicamente y fonológicamente a sus traducciones en otra lengua. De ahí que se espere que los estudiantes de una segunda lengua comprendan mejor los cognados que los que no lo son. Sin embargo, no todos los cognados son tan fáciles de interpretar por los estudiantes como pensamos a priori los instructores. En este trabajo, hemos categorizado una serie de cognados (español-inglés) según su similitud con la palabra equivalente en la segunda lengua (español) y hemos contrastado esta categorización con las intuiciones de unos estudiantes de español básico y sus respectivos instructores. Posteriormente, hemos propuesto una nueva categorización que se adapte mejor a los resultados.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *cognados, transferible, intuiciones, transparencia.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Cognates are defined as words that are phonologically and/or morphologically similar to their translation equivalents in a target L2 (Lotto & de Groot 1998). An obvious expectation for cognates is that L2 learners' performance will be better for cognates than for noncognates. However, are all cognates as easy to recognize for our students as we instructors think? If this is not the case, can we establish a categorization of different degrees of cognates according to their difficulty? Do we have the same perceptions about the transparency of cognates as our students do?

In order to provide better instruction with more successful results, it would be helpful to be able to answer to these questions. In this study, I will try not only to address all this, but also to create a new categorization according to students' results, that might give us an idea of what cognates are easier and more difficult to recognize to improve their understanding.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

As Lightbown and Libben (1984) argue, the extent to which SLA learners transfer elements from their L1 to their L2 is a subject of controversy. Most research points to some role for transfer since there is evidence that L2 phonology and lexicon are affected by L1. Mackey (1971), Corder (1978) and others proposed that the amount of transfer is determined by the perceived distance between the source and the target language. Sjoeholm (1976) and Ringbom (1978) supported this argument with evidence of bilingual Finns of Swedish, who used to

transfer to English from their L2 (Swedish) rather than their L1 (Finnish) because they found the perceived distance between Swedish and English smaller than that between Finnish and English. That is, it is the perceived distance rather than their status as first or second languages which determines the likelihood of transfer. Kellerman (1978) went further with this point. He showed that "transferability" is based not only on the perceived distance between languages but on the perceived uniqueness of certain expressions in the L1: expressions perceived as being idiomatic in the L1 are less likely to be considered "transferable" to L2 than expressions in which words are used with their core meanings.

One case of the role of transfer in L2 lexicon is that of cognates. Cognates are considered to be easy to learn since the form shared between the two translation-equivalent terms becomes a strong retrieval cue when one of the two terms is presented. It seems more demanding to set up a new memory entry than inserting a new but similar element into one that already exists. In addition, learning a cognate is less effortful than learning a noncognate, due to the partial overlap between the two equivalents (Lotto & de Groot 1998). As they point out, the thing about cognates is that they are relatively easy to learn no matter what (frequency, method used for presenting them) and they are learned fast. However, I argue that this is not always true. There are some cognates that are not as easily recognized or learned as others. In other words, not all cognates are equal.

Based on Lotto & de Groot's (1998) theory, de Groot & Keijzer (2000) propose that, as cognates are easier to learn, they are also less likely to be forgotten and faster to retrieve than noncognates or abstract words since they left more permanent traces in memory; these words are stored in memory representations that are informationally more dense than those of abstract words.

Several studies have found evidence about the importance of the role of phonology rather than orthography in learning L2 vocabulary, not only auditorally presented words but also with visually presented ones (Baddeley, Papagno & Vallar 1988; Papagno et al 1991; Van Hell & Candia Mahn 1997; Lotto and de Groot 1998). In fact, Lightbown and Libben (1984) had previously shown, regarding ESL compositions, that where both a cognate and a noncognate word exist for a referent, nonnative speakers would more often choose the cognate word than native speakers due to the smaller amount of lexicon they have available in their repertoire.

There is not much literature on cognates. Most of it is just focused on the role they play in vocabulary acquisition but not on how easily they are recognized, and then, comprehended by low-proficient L2 students, or if can make a distinction among cognates (not all cognates are so "obvious"). This is the point of my study. I will establish a categorization of cognates according to their similarity in spelling with students' L1 counterparts and I will check which ones are easier to comprehend by American students with a low proficiency in Spanish. These words have not yet been presented in class so they were supposed to just trust their intuition of similarity with L1 translations in order to decipher them. Finally, I will try to propose a new categorization of "transparency" of cognates according to the results. In addition, I will also test instructors of these courses about their perceptions on these cognates so that I can compare students' performance with instructors' perceptions. Therefore, my research question is the same than the title of this paper: Are cognates as easy to recognize as we instructors think?

This question can be divided into several sub-questions: Are all cognates as easy to recognize? Can we establish different degrees of cognates? Do these degrees actually follow a regular pattern? Do instructors' perceptions about the categorization of these cognates coincide with the actual performance of students?

I propose that not all cognates are equally easy to recognize for students and that Spanish basic language instructors' perceptions will coincide more or less with their students' performance on the recognition of cognates.

3. METHODOLOGY

The sample consists of 15 students of a basic course for students that studied Spanish for 2 or 3 years in high school or 1 semester college) and 7 instructors of basic Spanish courses. Students had to perform a multiple-choice-task with 20 sentences in Spanish that had an underlined word that they had to associate with its equivalent in their L1. I gave them 4 options in English that were similar in spelling to the word in Spanish. The cognates were selectively chosen (they had not seen those words in class) so that they would have to trust their instincts when selecting the appropriate translation. I gave the instructors the same sentences but without the multiple choices. They had to evaluate the degree of similarity of the cognate with its counterpart in L2 with a scale from 1 to 5, being 1 the easiest for L2 students to recognize and 5 the hardest one. Because of the small number of instructors of the courses for beginners, I chose some from a more intermediate course (still within the basic program), which is the following course, but I told them that the students had not already learned in class the words in the task.

The categorization[1] that I used for the different degrees of cognates followed these criteria:

- 1-5: The difference of spelling is one or two letters, usually at the end.

  Words: *optimista* (optimistic)*, responder* (respond)*, perspectiva* (perspective)*, objetivo* (objective)*, permisiva* (permissive)*.

- 6-10: The difference of spelling is two or more different letters, sometimes at the beginning what makes the word ortographically more different.

  Words: cuarto (quarter), apariencia (appearance), principio (principle), frase (phrase), sutil (subtile).

- 11-15: Even more obscure with around half of the letters or more either different or rearranged.

  Words: calidad (quality), reconocer (recognize), oscuridad (obscurity), ciencia (science), dudas (doubts).

- 16-20: The most obscure of all with most of the letters either different or rearranged.

  Words: propósito (purpose), punto (point), breve (brief), género (gender), estado (state).

Ard and Homburg (1994) list several reasons why these kinds of tasks (the multiple-choice ones) are very advantageous. Here, I will just mention the ones that apply to my study:

1. This task enables the researcher to compare a number of subjects performing the identical task; they are forced to make the same narrow judgement by choosing among the given answers.

2. There is no possibility of avoidance in this task; they are limited to make a choice.

4. RESULTS

Regarding my categorization of cognates according to their supposed difficulty or not to be recognized, it seems to be an agreement in my group of students towards the first group of cognates. Most of them were successfully guessed (*optimista*, *responder* and *perspectiva*), so

then, the easiest to recognize for them. The rest were easy to recognize to a high extent but not to 100 % (*objetivo* and *permisiva*).

Grupo 1	Right answers
Optimista	100%
Responder	100%
Perspectiva	100%
Objetivo	93%
Permisiva	93%

Table 1: Right answers of students for the first group of cognates.

In the second group, there is not much agreement. None of the words were recognized by all the students. Therefore, we can find a lot of variation: the easiest to recognize to the same degree were *apariencia* and *principio*. Then, *sutil, cuarto* and *frase*, respectively, contrary to what was expected due to the fact that the following words conform more to the criterion of the category.

Group 2	Right answers
Cuarto	73 %
Apariencia	87 %
Principio	87 %
Frase	67 %
Sutil	80 %

Table 2: Right answers of students for the second group of cognates.

In the third group, surprisingly, all the words were easier or as easy to recognize as the words in the second group. One of them was guessed by all but one student (*dudas)*; the rest to a

lesser degree being considered easier *calidad* and *ciencia* and a bit more difficult *reconocer* and

oscuridad.

Group 3	Right answers
Calidad	87 %
Reconocer	73 %
Oscuridad	73 %
Ciencia	87 %
Dudas	93 %

Table 3: Right answers of students for the third group of cognates.

Finally, in the last group we find the highest variation among groups: the word *punto* is

guessed by all students but one, then, to a lesser degree but still high, we have *estado*. The rest,

however, were guessed by less than half of the students (*género* and *breve). Propósito* was the

most difficult word to guess through all groups.

Group 4	Right answers
Propósito	27 %
Punto	93 %
Breve	40 %
Género	47 %
Estado	73 %

Table 4: Right answers of students for the fourth group.

These results support my hypothesis that not all cognates are equally easy to be

comprehended. Later in the article, I will propose a new categorization according to the students'

guesses.

Comparing these results with instructors', there was no doubt for instructors either that *optimista* was in the easiest group to comprehend. In the rest there is more variation like in the students'group. They placed the words in the first group as the easiest or very easy to guess though.

The following tables show instructors' evaluation of cognates:

Group 1	1	2	3	4	5
Optimista	100 %	0 %	0%	0 %	0 %
Responder	43 %	43 %	0 %	0 %	14 %
Perspectiva	71 %	29 %	0 %	0 %	0 %
Objetivo	29 %	57 %	14 %	0 %	0 %
Permisiva	14 %	43 %	29 %	14 %	0 %

Table 5: Evaluation of the first group of cognates by instructors.

In the second one, there is not agreement between students and instructors for some words: students placed *apariencia* and *principio* as the easiest words to guess from that group. Although instructors evaluated *apariencia* as not very hard, they did find *principio* as hard. Moreover, as 80 % of the students guessed the meaning of *sutil*, this was not predicted at all by instructors, who actually categorized this word in the upper scale of difficulty considering very hard to guess. Surprisingly, *frase* was taken as relatively easy for instructors but students had the lowest rate of guessing in this group. Regarding *cuarto*, it was considered hard by instructors and it had one of the lowest percentage of guesses in the group so this coincides.

Grupo 2	1	2	3	4	5
Cuarto	0 %	0 %	14 %	57 %	29 %
Apariencia	0 %	14 %	71 %	14 %	0 %
Principio	0 %	14 %	14 %	57 %	14 %
Frase	0 %	43 %	43 %	14 %	0 %
Sutil	0 %	0 %	29 %	14 %	57 %

Table 6: Evaluation of the second group of cognates by instructors.

There is not much coincidence in the third group either. Students guessed the meaning of the word *dudas* to a very high extent, as much as the words in the first group. Here again, instructors were wrong. They evaluated this word as a hard one to guess. *Ciencia*, however, was considered as very easy for most of the instructors and actually, this time they were right: most of the students guessed this word. On the other hand, *calidad* was rated as hard by instructors but as correctly interpreted as *ciencia* by students. I would say that more or less the predictions about *reconocer* and *oscuridad* coincide since they were the least guessed in the group and also evaluated among the upper three numbers in the scale.

Group 3	1	2	3	4	5
Calidad	0 %	14 %	14 %	43 %	29 %
Reconocer	14 %	0 %	43 %	14 %	29 %
Oscuridad	0 %	0 %	14 %	43 %	43 %
Ciencia	57 %	29 %	14 %	0 %	0 %
Dudas	0 %	14 %	14 %	43 %	29 %

Table 7: Evaluation of the third group of cognates by instructors.

Last, *punto* is recognized by all students but one. This agrees with instructors' perceptions since they rated it as easy to guess. On the other hand, with the other words they were not so

successful. *Estado* is guessed by more than the half as instructors predicted (they rated it "not hard"). *Breve* and *género* are also correctly predicted according to students' guesses since less than the half chose the right translation and instructors found these words hard. In the same way, most of the students failed to comprehend the meaning of *propósito* as instructors correctly suspected, either by rating it in the highest scale of difficulty or in the middle.

Group 4	1	2	3	4	5
Propósito	0 %	0 %	43 %	14 %	43 %
Punto	29 %	43 %	29 %	0 %	0 %
Breve	0 %	0 %	29 %	71 %	0 %
Género	14 %	14 %	14 %	43 %	14 %
Estado	14 %	14 %	57 %	0 %	14 %

Table 8: Evaluation of the fourth group of cognates by instructors.

5. DISCUSSION

In general, the results do not suggest a very clear pattern. They lead to mixed conclusions. I would say that many, if not most of the instructors' predictions, coincided with students' performance, supporting so my hypothesis but there are also some students' data, which do not seem to follow instructors' intuition. This is why, future research would be convenient with more data from more students and probably more instructors in order to find significant results. In any case, I would like to finish this paper by proposing a new categorization of the different levels of cognates according to students' success by comprehending them in this study:

Group 1	Right answers
Optimista	100 %
Responder	100 %
Perspectiva	100 %
Objetivo	93 %
Permisiva	93 %
Dudas	93 %
Punto	93 %

Table 9: First group of cognates depending on the recognition by students participating in this study.

As it can be seen in this chart, I did not make any changes in the first group. I did include some of the second group though; those that had the same percentage of right answers than the last two in my previously proposed first group. This is the largest group that I found according to my results. All the examples except for *dudas* are very similar in phonology and orthography to the first category. *Dudas*, however, is a suprising result that cannot be explained by these criteria.

Group 2	Right answers
Apariencia	87 %
Principio	87 %
Calidad	87 %
Ciencia	87 %
Sutil	80 %

Table 10: Second group of cognates depending on the recognition by students participating in this study.

More than half of these words (3) are categorized in the same group that I previously did. However, the rest (*calidad* and *ciencia*) are in a lower group than what I thought (easier for students than my expectations taking into account orthographical factors).

Group 3	Right answers
Cuarto	73 %
Reconocer	73 %
Estado	73 %
Frase	67 %

Table 11: Third group of cognates depending on the recognition by students participating in this study.

In this group and the last one, we find smaller groups. Only one word coincided with my original categorization. Half of the words that are in this chart, were previously in a lower category, meaning that they were not as easy to recognize for students as I predicted. Nonetheless, *estado* was easier for them than in my categorization.

Group 4	Right answers
Género	47 %
Breve	40 %
Propósito	27 %

Table 12: Fourth group of cognates depending on the recognition by students participating in this study.

Finally, even though all these words were classified in the last group in my categorization too, due to their bigger distance orthographically among themselves and their L1 counterparts, there is a huge difference between the first and the last one. *Propósito* is the most difficult cognate to decipher for these students and *género* the easiest one, although not far from *breve*.

Throughout all these categories, we do not find a big discrepancy with the one that I proposed at the beginning of this paper. We can conclude then, that in broad terms, orthographic distance might play a role for recognition of cognates. However, "one cannot assume that the existence of cognates between languages will ensure that L2 learners will, without instruction, use or even recognize all the potential relationships between the two languages". (Lightbown and Libben 1984 :407)

6. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I tested the ability of 15 students of basic Spanish to recognize certain cognates (new to them) that I had previously categorized into 4 groups regarding their similarity or not in spelling with their English counterparts. I also tested their instructors' intuitions to see if they coincided with the actual performance of students. In general, they coincided but there were some mixed results too. Finally, as my categorization did not work out in some cases, I proposed a new one following students' results that suggested that maybe phonology plays a more important role than spelling in the students' recognition of cognates as previous research suggested.

NOTES

1. This is a general categorization that might not cover 100% all my examples; in the case of these examples, I placed them among these categories according to my intuitions about where they could fit better.

REFERENCES

Ard, J. and T. Homburg .1983. "Verification of language transfer". *Language transfer in language learning*. Eds. S. Gass and L. Selinker. M.A.: Newbury House 157–176.

Baddeley, A. D., Papagno, C. and G. Vallar .1988. "When long-term learning depends on short-term storage". *Journal of Memory and Language* 27: 586-596.

Corder, S. 1978. "Language-learner language". Understanding second and foreign language learning. Eds. J. C. Richards. M.A.: Newbury House 71-93.

DeGroot, A. and R. Keijzer. 2000. "What is hard to learn is easy to forget: The role of word concreteness, cognate status, and word-frequency in foreign language vocabulary learning and forgetting". *Language Learning* 50 (1): 1-56.

Kellerman, E. 1978. "Giving learners a break". *Working Papers on Bilingualism* 15: 59-92.

Lightbown, P. and G. Libben. 1984. "The recognition and use of cognates by L2 learners." *A Crosslinguistic Perspective for Second Language Research.* Eds. R. Alderson. Rowley: Newbury House.

Lotto, L. and A. DeGroot. 1998. "Effects of learning method and word type on acquiring vocabulary in an unfamiliar language." *Language Learning* 48 (1): 31-69.

Mackey, W. F. 1971. *La Distance Interlinguistique.* Québec: Les Presses de l´Université Laval.

Papagno, C., Valentine, T., and A. Baddeley. 1991. "Phonological short-term memory and foreign-language vocabulary learning." *Journal of Memory and Language,* 30: 331-347.

Ringbom, H. 1978. "On learning related and unrelated languages." *Modern Sprak* 72: 21-25.

Sjoeholm, K. 1976. "A comparison of the test results in grammar and vocabulary between Finnish and Swedish-speaking applicants for English." Errors made by Finns and Swedish-

speaking Finns in the Learning of English. Eds.H. Ringbom and R. Palmberg, Finland:

Abo Akademi.*Working Papers in Applied Linguistics*, 5: 54-138.

Van Hell, J.G., & Candia Mahn, A. 1997. "Keyword mnemonics versus rote rehearsal:

Learning concrete and abstract foreign words by experienced and inexperienced learners."

Language Learning, 47: 507-546.

APPENDIX.

Task for students

CHOOSE THE OPTION WITH THE MOST ACCURATE TRANSLATION IN YOUR OPINION.

1. Tiene que tener un buen principio:
a) princess
b) principle
c) principality
d) prince

2. Hay que ser siempre muy objetivo:
a) obsessive
b) objective
c) objectionable
d) obstinate

3. Tiene una buena apariencia:
a) experience
b) appearance
c) inspiration
d) apparition

4. La calidad es más importante que cualquier otra cosa:
a) quantity
b) charity
c) quality
d) quandary

5. Tienes que responder inmediatamente:
a) be responsible
b) repeat
c) respond
d) respire

6. Es difícil reconocerlos:
a) know
b) reckon
c) recoil
d) recognize

7. Sólo creo en la ciencia:
a) science
b) century
c) sense
d) synthesis

8. Comió un cuarto de pastel:

a) quart
b) quartet
c) quarter
d) quota

9. Ese profesor tiene una <u>perspectiva</u> diferente:
a) perspicacity
b) perspective
c) personality
d) presentation

10. Todas las cosas tienen un <u>propósito</u>:
a) preposition
b) propulsion
c) proposal
d) purpose

11. Es una persona <u>sutil:</u>
a) subtle
b) subtitled
c) sufficient
d) sultry

12. Llegamos a un <u>punto</u> importante:
a) pointer
b) puncture
c) point
d) punt

13. Se murió en la <u>oscuridad</u>:
a) obscenity
b) obstruction
c) obscurity
d) security

14. Este trabajo es muy <u>breve</u>:
a) bright
b) brave
c) broad
d) brief

15. El estudiante es muy <u>optimista</u> :
a) optimistic
b) optimal
c) optional
d) optical

16. Esta clase es sobre género:
a) geriatric
b) genera
c) genetics
d) gender

17. Esta persona es muy permisiva:
a) permissible
b) permeable
c) permitted
d) permissive

18. Esa es una buena frase:
a) phase
b) freezer
c) fragrance
d) phrase

19. No hay duda de nada:
a) dud
b) dude
c) deed
d) doubt

20. La guerra es un asunto de estado:
a) status
b) estate
c) stadium
d) state

Task for instructors

Choose a number from 1 to 5 for evaluating the following underlined cognates according to the

following criterion (this task is for students of 110: three or four years of Spanish in high school

or 1 semester in college:

1. Very easy to guess

2. Easy to guess

3. Not hard to guess

4. Hard to guess

5. Very hard to guess

1. El estudiante es muy optimista.

2. Tienes que responder inmediatamente.

3. Ese profesor tiene una perspectiva diferente.

4. Hay que ser siempre muy objetivo.

5. Esta persona es muy permisiva.

6. Comió un cuarto de pastel.

7. Tiene una buena apariencia.

8. Tiene que tener un buen principio.

9. Esa es una buena frase.

10. Es una persona sutil.

11. La calidad es más importante que cualquier otra cosa.

12. Es difícil reconocerlos.

13. Se murió en la oscuridad.

14. Sólo creo en la ciencia.

15. No hay duda de nada.