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Russian-English false cognate interferences in foreign language learners

The effect of the mother tongue on the acquisition of the foreign language is decidedly significant and has been the focus of the researchers for many decades. One of the aspects of the influence of L1 is known as language transfer or interference. Therefore, this study examines the influence of L1 lexis has on FL lexis when students carry out oral and written assignments in the FL, namely English. To respond this question, 19 students of the Foreign Languages Department at Suleyman Demirel University were requested to translate 25 sentences into English. The results of this study revealed that the influence of Russian as L1 or L2 in terms of false cognates can significantly hamper conveying meaning in the foreign language and cause misunderstanding. In addition, the research showed that the best speakers of Kazakh were the graduates of multilingual schools, who scored the highest in the study as well.
Keywords: interference, false cognates, multilingual.

А.Ж. Арғынбаев
Білімгерлердің қолданысында жүрген орыс-ағылшын аудармашының жалған достары

Шет тілін үйренудегі ана тілдің әсері әрқашан маңызды екені сөзсіз. Бұл феномен лингвистика саласында ондаған жылдар бойы зерттелуде. Осы тұрғыдан қарағанда, лексикалық интерференция ана тілінің әсерінің аспектілердің біреуі болып табылады. Бұл зерттеу білімгерлердің күнделікті қолданысындағы жүрген орыс-ағылшын аудармашының жалған достарын анықтауды көздейді. Зерттеуге Сулейман Демирел атындағы университеттің филология факультеті 19 білімгерлері қатысып, жиырма бес сөйлем аударды. Зерттеу нәтижелері орыс тілінің ағылшын тіліндегі қарым-қатынасқа кері әсерін тигізіп, түсінеспеушілікке әкеп соғуы әбден мүмкін екенін дәлелдеді. Сонымен қатар, қала білімгерлердің үлкен бөлігі ана тілін жетік меңгермегені анықталды. Қазақ тілінде ең жақсы сөйлейтін және ең жоғары көрсеткішке ие болған қаты-сушылар көптілді мектеп түлектері болып шықты.
Түйін сөздер: интерференция, аудармашының жалған достары, көптілділік.

А.Ж. Аргынбаев
Русско-английские ложные друзья переводчика в речи студентов

Роль родного языка при изучении иностранного безусловно велика и является предметом изучения ученых-лингвистов на протяжении многих десятилетий. Лексическая интерференция, в свою очередь, является одним из аспектов негативного воздействия родного языка на изучение иностранного. Целью данной работы является выявление русско-английских ложных друзей переводчика в письменной речи студентов. Для этого в эксперименте участвовали 19 студентов университета имени Сулеймана Демиреля с факультета филологии. Результаты эксперимента показали, что количество ошибок с ложными друзьями переводчика напрямую зависит от уровня владения русским языком студентами. Кроме того, исследование выявило, что выпускники многоязычных школ лучше всех справились с заданием, а также говорят на казахском лучше, чем их ровесники из казахских школ.
Ключевые слова: интерференция, ложные друзья переводчика, многоязычный.

While learning a foreign language (FL), in many cases students employ their first or second language (L2) to try to communicate in the foreign one. As a result, this kind of approach encourages learners to follow the grammatical and lexical patterns of their mother tongue (L1) in the foreign language. The significance of the influence of the mother tongue in learning a FL has been a central issue for a long time. It has led to many studies that attempt to explain this phenomenon. However, few have been done with regard to the influence of both L1 (Kazakh) and L2 (Russian) lexis have on the foreign language (English). The decision to do this study was made when I started to notice a common tendency among Kazakh students to use L1 and L2 lexis while communicating in English either orally or in written form. Students were unaware of the fact that they were using the direct

translation technique and false cognates in their speech and, therefore, could not properly convey the message they had in their mind.

This paper attempts to contribute knowledge in the field of lexicology and semaseology, focusing on the influence of L1 and L2 lexis on the FL one. Thus, students' speech in English is analyzed with two purposes. The first aim is to find common examples of language interference in English speech. The second one is to classify and analyze these mistakes.

This research project has the following research questions:

1. Does speaking several languages enable students to identify false friends in English and help them to avoid using false cognates?

2. What are the most frequent false cognates in students' speech?

The influence of L1 is an important aspect when teaching all four skills to EFL learners. It is common knowledge that when a student is learning a foreign language, he uses the first language as an effective instrument to make this procedure easier and faster. However, one may not know that the native language does not only have positive effect when learning a foreign language; it can also have negative influences.

N. Chomsky states in his language acquisition theory that imitation what students hear in L1 develops habits in L2 [1]. However, one of the negative effects of L1 is that learners try to translate every single word into English, which results in improper conveying of the message in the foreign language.

The "language transfer theory", in other words, L1 interference, is the effect the learners' first language has on their production of the second or the foreign one. It is believed to have the effect on any aspect of language: speaking, grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary and listening. This theory claims that language transfer can be positive and negative. The positive transference, is witnessed when both languages are from the same family. In this case the structure of L1 and L2 are similar. Consequently, the interference of linguistic patterns can result in correct language production. Lexical patterns with matching meaning are called "true cognates." True cognates are used as a strategy for productive skills in a FL. As a result they are believed to be a part of the positive transfer theory. On the other hand, S.D. Krashen mentioned that "negative transference" is often argued as a source of errors, which means that learners transfer words or structures from their L1

into FL but their meanings are not the same in both languages [2]. These words are known as "false cognates." Therefore, some learners may translate words from L1 to FL, erroneously assuming that they have the same meaning in the target language. Words in Russian such as "аккуратный" and "интелегентный" are some of the false cognates an EFL learner may incorrectly use when translating from Russian into English. For example, "аккуратный" could be translated in English as "accurate" instead of "neat", and "интелегентный" could be interpreted as "intelligent" instead of "cultured, well-mannered".

A different view towards language transfer is suggested by L. Newmark who points out that "Interference is not the first language 'getting in the way' of second language skills. Rather, it is the result of the performer falling back on old knowledge when he or she has not yet acquired enough of the second language" [3, 7]. Krashen [2] agrees that L1 literacy and cognitive development in L1 can be beneficial for students who learn a new language. However, he also asserts that the learners can transfer concepts from L1 and apply them to L2. In other words, in his work Krashen discusses the negative effects the first language might have on the foreign one. As a result, Krashen argues that interference may well be an indicator of low level L1 acquisition. Another reason for interference may be the result of the speaker trying to convey a message in FL before having acquired enough of the target language.

Another theory on this issue is proposed by Jim Cummins [4], called the "Iceberg Theory". In his theory, J. Cummings mentioned that L1 literacy and learning can be a benefit to L2 acquisition. Language devices and concepts learned in L1 make learning the second language easier because learners do not have to re-learn, in the new language, what they already know in their native language. Comprehending a concept in L1 requires only a re-labelling of terms in the L2 and not a re-learning of the concept [5]. According to this theory, concepts and language skills are usually developed in the native language before they are transferred to the second. For this reason it is essential for students to continue to gain experience and exposure in their first language at home [4].

In her study with upper elementary school students who were literate in both Spanish and English, N. E. Williams attempted to find out how bilingual students' knowledge of Spanish lexis and awareness of Spanish-English cognates affect

understanding of English texts [6]. She discovered that the students were aware of cognates and made use of that knowledge when reading English. This means that students are well aware of the helpfulness of their native language and they use this knowledge to support their reading in the second language. Therefore, learners facilitate their reading practices and comprehension. N. E. Williams found that the involvement of Spanish vocabulary knowledge to English reading depends on the degree of awareness of the languages' cognate relationship [7]. In other words, if one knows about cognate relationships, he will be able to use cognates to help develop vocabulary in L2. When students gain more vocabulary and the feel in the language, they do not have to guess the words they do not know or translate them into the nearest word in their L1.

Another research conducted in Puerto Rico by W. Schweers shed light on the communication strategies learners utilize when facing lexical deficit predicament in L2 communication [8]. For instance, students resort to strategies such as using an invented form of a word of their L1 and combine it with the morphology/phonology rules of the L2. As a result, the student takes a word and adapts it in such a way that it looks like a word in L2. One example of this is when a Russian-speaking student says "receipt" instead of saying "recipe" because it looks as *'рецепт'* in Russian.

Owing to the fact that L1can affect the acquisition of L2 positively or negatively, the role of the L1 in the acquisition of the L2 is a significant factor to take into consideration. Taking into account the theories mentioned in this paper, the research will focus on the influence, either positive or negative, L1 lexis has on L2 lexis. Based on reliable studies made by prominent and esteemed scientists in the field of education such as S.D. Krashen [2] and J. Cummins [4], this research

study will present a broad perspective of how first language knowledge influences L2 production.

To conduct the research qualitative data techniques were used. Data was collected from students' writing assignments, quizzes and tests throughout the whole semester and their speech in public presentations. All errors were noted down for the future use and analysis. Selection of the items was done according to the frequency of their appearance. In other words, only the most common mistakes were carefully handpicked and double-checked.

The present study was carried out with a population of 19 upper-intermediate students at Foreign Languages Department in Suleyman Demirel University. A group of junior students was selected to find out how effectively they gained knowledge of false friends over the years of study at university. Another aspect that was a focus of interest was if the students were able to identify and avoid false cognates. The students in the research were taking an advanced course in Practical English but most of them were at a lower level.

Demographics for the participants were classified as 16 female and 3 male between ages of 20 and 21. Ethnicity proportion was 13 Kazakhs, 2 Ukrainians, 2 Uyghur, 1 Russian and 1 Korean.

To accomplish the research the participants did a test in which they had to translate 25 sentences from Russian/Kazakh into English. Both Kazakh and Russian equivalents were given so that students were totally aware of what they had to translate. Another purpose of such a technique was to find out if students used several languages while translating or employed Russian only. In addition, the test consisted of both true and false cognates so that students would not figure out the purpose of the research and, thus, affect the results negatively. A sample of the test looks as the one in Table1 below.

Table 1. Test on false friends.

	Russian	Kazakh	English
1	Она получила компенсацию за сломанную руку.	Ол сынған қолы үшін өтемақы алды.	
2	Марат - очень аккуратный студент.	Марат өте жинақы студент.	
3	В этом году семестр закончился рано.	Осы жылы семестр ерте бітті.	
4	Назгуль - студентка 3-го курса.	Назгуль үшінші курс студенті.	
5	Я никогда не забуду этот фрагмент фильма.	Мен фильмдегі мына үзіндіні ешқашан ұмытпаймын.	

This study showed that most of the participants are proficient both in Kazakh and Russian. However, the study revealed that the vast majority of sample speaks Russian better than Kazakh. Table 2 below gives detailed information about the language proficiency of the participants.

Table 2. Language proficiency in Russian

Degree of competence	Kazakh schools	Russian Schools	Multilingual Schools
Excellent	66%	87.5%	40%
Good	17%	12.5%	40%
Satisfactory	17%		20%
Poor			

Surprisingly, half of students from Kazakh schools did not evaluate their proficiency in Kazakh on a high level. This may be due to the fact that all of the students are residing in a city, and the prevailing majority of the participants 83% are from Almaty, where Russian is more popular, whereas Kazakh is mostly spoken in small towns and southern regions.

Another unexpected finding was the language proficiency level among graduates of multilingual schools. Their proficiency in Kazakh turned out to be the highest among all participants, including the graduates from Kazakh schools (Table 3). However, the proficiency level in Russian among the representatives of multilingual schools is the lowest, which might be the result of the growing importance of the state language and language policy of the government. It should be noted here that multilingual schools in our research are Kazakh-Turkish high schools. These schools are non-profit educational organizations and have a good reputation in the country. The vast majority of graduates are talented and win scholarships at universities.

Table 3. Language proficiency in Kazakh.

Degree of competence	Kazakh schools	Russian Schools	Multilingual Schools
Excellent	50%	12.5%	60%
Good	33%	25%	40%
Satisfactory	17%		
Poor		50%	

Likewise, the test results of graduates from multilingual schools were the highest, as it is shown in Table 4 below. This might be due to several facts. On the one hand, graduates of multilingual schools are one of the most successful students in their group. On the other hand, students' proficiency in Russian was the lowest. As a result, Russian did not confuse learners to a great extent and they scored best. However, graduates of Kazakh schools did almost as well as their peers from multilingual schools. The difference as we see in the table is marginal, only 2.5%, while graduates from Russian schools received significantly lower points.

Table 4. Test results on false cognates.

Answers	Kazakh Schools	Russian Schools	Multilingual Schools
Correct	67%	57%	69.5%
Incorrect	33%	45%	30.5%

As a result, the current research shows that language interference among the participants is directly related to their proficiency in Russian. The higher the proficiency of the learners in the Russian language, the more they are prone to make mistakes with false friends. This phenomenon is

universal among the all three groups in the study. Speaking several languages did not stop multilingual speakers from making mistakes with false cognates, contrary to the belief, in the beginning of the research, that multilinguals could avoid these mistakes. As well as their peers multilingual speakers also committed mistakes, though fewer than the other two groups of participants.

The most common mistakes that all subjects did in this research are shown in Table 5 below. The other items are not shown in the table, as the percentage of mistakes was quite low.

Table 5.

	Item in the test	Correct word	False cognate	Mistakes
1	аккуратный	neat	accurate	52.6%
2	студент третьего *курса*	3rd-year student	3rd-course student	21.1%
3	интеллегентный	cultured	intelligent	73.7%
4	(экзаменационный) *билет*	exam card	(exam) ticket	47.4%
5	*фрагмент* (из фильма)	scene	fragment	26.3%
6	митинг	demonstration; rally	meeting	63.2%
7	чувствовать *симпатию* к кому-либо	like somebody	have sympathy for somebody	36.8%

Results of the research show that students can easily be misled by false cognates and make mistakes that can cause misunderstanding. One of the items in the test that draws attention is 'роман' a novel, which was translated by three students as 'roman'. This kind of mistake can hamper communication or at least cause predicament and humorous moments at best.

Another item that has a totally different meaning is 'интеллегентный' which means cultured. 73.7% of population translated this item as 'intelligent, though intelligent people are not necessarily cultured. Surprisingly, three subjects did not know the exact meaning of 'интеллегентный' in their mother tongue. They supposed it was 'wise' and 'smart'.

The phrase 'examination card' was mistaken for 'examination ticket' by 47.3% of the subjects. Both items exist in the educational society but both of them have different purpose and usage. If examination ticket grants access to the exam, examination card has questions in it to be answerred.

15 participants were surprised to learn that 'neat' and 'accurate' are different words in English, while 4 students used different equivalents such as 'careful, scrupulous' and 'responsible', though the latter does not fully match the meaning of 'neat'.

The Russian word 'митинг (rally)' was incorrectly translated as 'meeting' by 12 subjects. However, six participants used other words, such as 'demonstration, protest' and 'rebel'.

Limitations of the research

Unfortunately, due to time restriction and no funding, the subjects were not interested in contribution to the research. As a result, no pre-test evaluation of participants' language proficiency was conducted. The subjects' word was taken for granted and they themselves evaluated their language proficiency in Russian and Kazakh, which might not reflect their real language competence. In addition, young age of the students usually has its effect on their self-evaluation and they could have given themselves higher credits than they deserve.

Another limitation of the research could be the limited number of participants. Only 19 students were involved in the research, thought the ethnic diversity is believed to meet the minimum requirements, as the sample almost represents the population proportion in the country. In spite of this fact, it is believed that more accurate results could be yielded with a bigger number of subjects and, thus, it needs further research.

The number of items used in the test could be another limitation of the present study. Only 15 false cognates and 10 true cognates were used in the test. Had there been more items in the test, the results could have been different. Consequently, the current study cannot claim that it covered the whole scope of false friends that students use in their everyday life. As a result, with funding and more time, further research could shed more light on this issue.

Age of the participants in the current study ranged between 20 and 21. A broader range could be used for further investigation.

The present study showed that both bilingual and multilingual subjects made mistakes with false cognates. However, multilingual participants made fewer mistakes than their bilingual counterparts, dominant in Russian and Kazakh. Nevertheless, the results showed that multilingual learners also made mistakes and could not avoid using false friends, in spite of speaking several languages. As a result, the current research indicates that the ratio between mistakes in false cognates and proficiency in the Russian language is direct. The better participants speak Russian, the more mistakes they are prone to commit.

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