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The influence of cognates on the acquisition of legal terminology: help or hindrance? A corpus-based study.

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Abstract

The present research explores the impact that cognates, that is, words which share formal and often semantic features in the L1 and the L2, may have on the understanding and acquisition of legal English terminology. To that end, a DDL experiment was carried out using two corpora, one of them the *BLaRC*, an 8.85 million-word collection of judicial decisions issued by British courts, and the *LACELL*, a general English corpus of 21 million words. 56 first-year Spanish Law students were asked to translate 12 legal terms, 10 of which were English/Spanish cognates. The results showed that, as it was indeed expected, the higher the students' proficiency level (they were administered a level test prior to the experiment), the higher their rate of success in providing correct answers. This was so both for the general and specialised fields proving that partial semantic equivalence between cognates did pose certain difficulties in their understanding even for the higher level groups.

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1. Introduction

In spite of the fact that teaching methods based on the comparison between the learners' L1 and L2 are often regarded as obsolete, cognates, that is, words which have a common etymological origin both in the L1 and the L2 and also share formal and sometimes semantic features, still remain a challenge for ESL and ESAP[†] practitioners. As it will be illustrated below, this peculiarity of the language becomes particularly remarkable in legal English and Spanish, which are highly influenced by Latin terminology for historical reasons. Despite the fact that English and Spanish pertain to different language families (Germanic and Romanic respectively), legal English was fed at different stages from Romanic languages, mostly French or directly Latin. As a matter of fact, the Spanish legal system is largely based on the Roman one, and so is its language. This “map of common influences” clearly reflects on the usage of cognates in both languages, which is one of the main reasons why this study was carried out.

As demonstrated in this research, one of the major obstacles posed by this specific type of terms is the learning and usage of false cognates, that is, L2 words which look or sound very much –or exactly– the same as their L1 equivalent, but whose meanings may not coincide. This might possibly be due to the common meaning they once shared, which later evolved into a different one either in the L1 or the L2, resulting into a partial overlap.

As a result of the above, a decision was made to explore the possible difficulties generated in the acquisition of legal English cognates by Spanish speakers, specifically, first year students of the Law degree at the University of Murcia (Spain) who took a legal English course as one of their compulsory subjects.

In this preliminary approach to this question, we specifically focused on false cognates through their recognition both in a specialised and a general context. In order to do so, two corpora were employed as the source to obtain such contexts from. One of these corpora is the *BLaRC* (the *British Law Report Corpus*), an 8.85 million-word legal English collection of judicial decisions designed and compiled by Marín (2014), the other one, the *LACELL* (*Lingüística Aplicada Computacional, Enseñanza de Lenguas y Lexicografía*), a 21 million-word general English corpus compiled and owned by the *LACELL* research group at the University of Murcia.

Section 2 of this research introduces a literature review on the use of corpora in ESL and ESAP language instruction and also on the studies devoted to explore the presence and influence of cognates in these areas. In section 3, the methodology and research procedure are presented while the results and discussion are offered in section 4. Finally, section 5 includes the final remarks and major conclusions reached through this study.

2. Literature review

2.1. DDL studies on ESL and ESAP

The advantages and disadvantages of the use of corpora in second language instruction have been widely discussed by scholars. On the whole, authors tend to favour their use as a learning tool or reference source, acknowledging their potential benefits but also their limitations. Regarding the advantages of the use of corpora in language teaching, various scholars (Johns, 1986; McNery and Wilson, 1996; Sinclair, 2003; Hunston, 2007; Boulton, 2012) envisage them as a highly motivating and valuable resource which exposes learners to genuine instances of language usage.

According to Johns (1986), who coins the term *DDL* (*data-driven learning*), by discovering the rules of the

[†] English as a Second Language; English for Specific and Academic Purposes.

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