The processing of English-Turkish (false) cognates: What is the role of morphology?

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Words that have similar orthographic and/or phonological properties in two languages but little or no semantic similarity (e.g., German Tag - day vs. English tag) are known as false cognates. Although there have been numerous studies investigating the processing of (false) cognates, the effect of morphology has to date been largely ignored (cf. Janke & Kolokonte, 2015). Moreover, studies on the processing of (false) cognates have mostly focused on typologically-related language pairs like English-German, disregarding the processing of (false) cognates from typologically distant language pairs.

In the present study, we investigated the processing of English-Turkish real and false cognate word pairs and examined the potential role of the morphological properties of the stimuli. 50 L1 Turkish learners of L2 English participated in a self-paced backward lexical translation task (Janke & Kolokonte, 2015), in which they had to provide Turkish translations for English words appearing on a computer screen. The experiment employed Turkish-English word pairs in 6 different conditions:

1. False Cognate Simplex: monomorphemic false cognates (Turkish pasta – cake vs. English pasta)
2. False Cognate Mismatch: false cognates; monomorphemic in Turkish but polymorphemic in English (Turkish izolasyon – insulation vs. English isolation)
3. Real Cognate Simplex: monomorphemic real cognates (Turkish and English limit)
4. Real Cognate Mismatch: real cognates; monomorphemic in Turkish but polymorphemic in English (Turkish lider vs. English leader)
5. Control Simplex: non-cognate, monomorphemic equivalents (Turkish zehir vs. English poison)
6. Control Mismatch: non-cognate equivalents; monomorphemic in Turkish but polymorphemic in English (Turkish istisna vs. English exception)

The results revealed a significant cognate facilitation effect and a significant false cognate inhibition effect. Moreover, it was found that morphological mismatch played a significant role
in the processing of cognates and false cognates, which was evident in longer reaction times to mismatch items compared to simplex items.

**Reference:**