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Newsletter

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By Dr. Valeria Rigobon

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DO SIMILARITIES BETWEEN LANGUAGES HELP BILINGUALS SPELL WORDS CORRECTLY?

BY DR. VALERIA RIGOBON

Many bilingual adults regularly draw on knowledge from more than one language when speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Words that share meaning and form across languages - known as cognates (e.g., animal in English and Spanish) - offer a unique window into answering questions about how these languages interact in the bilingual mind. For example, does knowing a similar word in another language help bilinguals spell words accurately?

[Read the full article here.](#)

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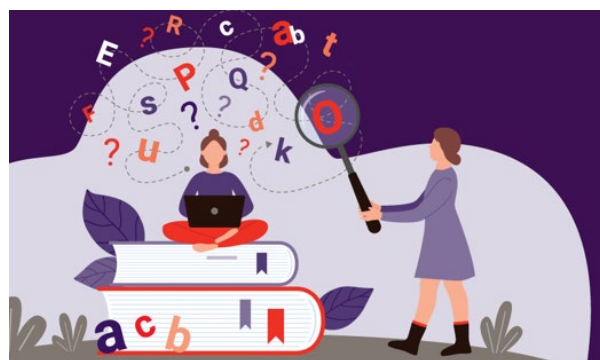
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Many bilingual adults regularly draw on knowledge from more than one language when speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Words that share meaning and form across languages - known as cognates (e.g., *animal* in English and Spanish) - offer a unique window into answering questions about how these languages interact in the bilingual mind. For example, does knowing a similar word in another language help bilinguals spell words accurately?

What does the research say?

[Previous research has shown](#) that bilinguals often process cognates more efficiently than non-cognates, suggesting that overlapping words between languages tend to be more easily activated in a person's memory. However, findings are mixed, with some studies reporting faster, more accurate recognition and production of words cognates vs non-cognates, and others showing little or no benefit depending on the task and the type of cognate involved.

In [a recent study](#), my colleagues and I examined how word characteristics and literacy skills predict English spelling accuracy in adult Spanish-English bilinguals. We found that spelling accuracy was strongly influenced by the words' cross-linguistic orthographic similarity and frequency, that is, how similar a word's spelling is across the two languages and how often that word appears in print in each language. Words that looked more similar in English and Spanish and appeared more frequently in both languages were generally spelled more accurately.

However, this advantage was largely driven by words that are identical in spelling across languages. When these cognates were removed from the analyses, the benefit of similarity was much smaller. This suggests that not all cross-linguistic overlap is equally helpful - some word pairs provide a stronger advantage in spelling accuracy than others, a finding that [has also been reported](#) in recognition of written words.

We also found that both English and Spanish decoding fluency had a similarly positive relationship with non-cognate spelling accuracy. This suggests that when words do not overlap in spelling, meaning, or pronunciation across languages, bilinguals may rely on flexible, cross-linguistic knowledge of letter-sound relationships to help them spell a word rather than relying only on language-specific knowledge.

What does this mean for the classroom?

These findings highlight that cross-linguistic similarities can support English spelling accuracy, but not uniformly. Words that share the same spelling and meaning across languages may be stored with stronger and more easily accessible representations in memory, making them easier to spell correctly. In contrast, words with less or no cross-linguistic overlap may require greater reliance on other strategies to correctly spell from memory.

For educators and practitioners working with bilingual students, this study's findings have implications for how cognates may be used strategically in literacy instruction. Leveraging students' exposure to identically spelled cognates in more than one language may be useful in building students' confidence and supporting their early success with word spelling. This is mostly relevant to students who are learning to read/write in languages that share similar alphabets to English, like Spanish, Italian, and Vietnamese. However, drawing on students' knowledge of similarly (but not identically) spelled cognates in other languages might be better suited for other targets of literacy instruction instead, such as vocabulary.

Learn more here:

"Investigating individual differences in adult bilinguals' spelling of cognates: An analysis of cross-linguistic effects" in [Bilingualism: Language and Cognition](#).

MYTH:

"Children always struggle with literacy at school if they're exposed to more than one language at home."

FACTS:

- No; being exposed to more than one language at home does not directly cause literacy learning struggles.
- Children who grow up using multiple languages can do just as well at school as their monolingual peers when they receive high-quality instruction.
- Some children who speak more than one language at home even show higher literacy achievement compared to monolingual peers.

[Read here for further information](#)