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THE IMPACT OF COGNATES IN THE CROATIAN LOCAL IDIOM  
ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE RECEPTIVE COMPETENCE  
OF ITALIAN NATIVE SPEAKERS

## Abstract

In accordance with research of crosslinguistic influences occurring on the lexical level, which bears witness to a greater initial comprehension of unfamiliar foreign language vocabulary on the basis of crosslinguistic similarities (Browne, 1982; Palmberg, 1985; Ringbom, 2007; Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008; Rast, 2008, 2010), we have focused on the role of cognates - semantically related words, sharing phonological and/or orthographic forms in two or more languages, as defined in the psycholinguistic literature (Hammer, 1975; Browne, 1982; Carroll, 1992; Daulton, 2008). We have examined the effect of the lexical transparency of two typologically distinct idioms - the Italian language and the Split idiom, characterised by the presence of Italian loanwords, on native speakers of Italian. The examinees were subjected to a vocabulary test which aimed to show their level of understanding of 60 separate words from the Split idiom. Form and content were the parameters of similarity for the selection of the word samples. The examination was undertaken by means of translation into L1 following the research conducted by Rast (2010) and Uchida (2007). The hypothesis of this research was that the participants would, while determining meaning, use interlinguistic information from their L1. It was also assumed that the key element in the initial understanding would be the orthographic similarity of words in the Italian language and words in the Split idiom. The acquired information confirmed the abovementioned hypotheses.

Key words: crosslinguistic influences, vocabulary, cognates, Italian language, the Split idiom

### 1. Introduction

The term *crosslinguistic influence* (CLI) proposed by Kellerman and Sharwood Smith (1986) refers to a broad spectrum of ways in which a "person's knowledge of one language may affect the acquisition and use of another language" (Jarvis et al. 2008: 3). In the last decade, the focus of interlinguistic research has changed

in such a way that, as Medved Krajnović (2010) suggests, besides the positive or negative transfer from the mother tongue during the foreign language acquisition, the multidimensional influences of all available language systems have become the subject of empirical research. According to Ringbom (1992), the reception level, inevitably preceding the production level, is equally worthy of being studied as a phase of production. When encountering an unfamiliar word in a foreign language, whether through reading or listening, students dispose of a number of *word-attack strategies* that enable them to obtain the necessary information about the given word (Nuttall 1983). Uchida (2001) points out that a student can grasp the meaning of an unknown word just by relying on conclusion strategies. When determining the meaning of a word, students can be supported by *contextual clues*, *intra-lingual clues*, and *interlingual clues* (Carton 1971 in Palmberg 1988; Haastrup 1991). Within the last mentioned category, cognates occupy a very prominent role. In accordance with previous empirical research on crosslinguistic influences on the lexical level which bears witness to a greater and facilitated initial comprehension of unknown vocabulary on the basis of crosslinguistic similarities (Browne 1982; Palmberg 1985; Ringbom 2007; Jarvis et al. 2008; Rast 2008, 2010), this paper focuses on the role and effect of cognates - semantically related words, sharing phonological and/or orthographic form in two or more languages, as defined in the psycholinguistic literature on the basis of experimental data rather than historical connections (Hammer 1975; Browne 1982; Carroll 1992; Daulton 2008). While linguists insist on the historical links between the words that constitute a pair of cognates, according to the psycholinguistic perception of the phenomenon, cognates are words related in form and meaning, regardless of their origin (Anthony 1952; Hammer 1979; Browne 1982, Carroll 1992). According to this definition, loanwords deriving from distinct languages also belong to the category of cognates (Friel et al. 2001; Melka 1997; Lubliner et al. 2011). Empirical studies have shown that the psychotypology and informant's attitude are necessary preconditions to effectuate language transfer and cognate-pairing (Kellerman 1983; Nagy et al. 1992; D'Aquino Hilt 2000; Rast 2010).

It has been empirically proven that students acquiring a foreign language lexically similar to their first language have access to potential vocabulary composed of those words - cognates - the meaning of which they are able to recognize immediately upon encountering them for the first time, even if they had been unfamiliar with these words (Palmberg 1987). Since cognates have attracted both researchers' and educators' interest, there has been an extensive body of empirical research on the advantages they provide over non-cognates to L2 learners. There is a large number of studies examining various combinations and relations of languages which provide results on the efficiency and importance of cognates in the process of vocabulary comprehension and acquisition (Palmberg 1985; Nation 1990; De Groot et al. 1991; Carroll 1992; Nagy et al. 1992; Granger 1993; Meara et al. 1994; Dijkstra et al. 1998, 2010; Uchida 2003; Ringbom 2007; Daulton 2008; Lam 2010; Dressler et al. 2011 and others).

The empirical findings thus suggest that cognates can serve as a significant source of positive transfer and provide a "springboard" into learning a new language

(Ellis 1994). Besides constituting the basis for understanding the meanings of unknown words, cognates also facilitate memorization and, analogously, vocabulary acquisition (De Groot et al. 2000).

Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that cognate awareness is conditioned by individual differences, such as age and psychotypology, exposure to cognate instruction and semantic, orthographic and phonological features which characterize particular sets of cognates (August et al. 2005). Researchers have come to recognize orthographic transparency as a key factor in recognizing cognates and getting benefit from them in the SLA context (Cristoffanini et al. 1986; Durgunoglu et al. 1993). They also point to the fact that “cognate relationships are explicitly coded within the orthographic system” (Bowers et al. 2000: 1292) and that the orthographic processing of words is a better facilitator of cognate recognition than the processing of the cognates through the oral input.

Along with cognates, loanwords - words adapted to the phonological and morphological system of the recipient language (Vidović 1973) - have also been recognized as important lexical resources which the L2 learner brings from his or her first language to the language classroom; so in the SLA context loanwords constitute a class of cognates, having the same facilitative effect as cognates in the EFL classroom (Granger 1993; Melka 1997). Mugford (2008) describes cognates and loanwords as different concepts from the linguistic perspective, considering their functions in the didactic context equally important for L2 users.

Although Croatian, to be more precise, its variety spoken in Split, and Italian are not related languages, geographical, historical, and cultural circumstances have resulted in lexical transparency conditioned by the presence of Italianisms in the Split idiom. Owing to loanwords, the Split idiom and Italian share a number of cognates, and in spite of the fact that they are typologically distinct idioms, they share specific lexical and syntactic similarities that provide an advantage to the dialectal speakers from Split learning Italian as L2.

According to the postulates of contrastive analysis, the structures in L2 that are similar to those found in L1 impose a lighter learning burden to L2 students and, as previously acquired knowledge, they get utilised to facilitate a new language learning task (Batstone 2002); in addition, it has been hypothesised and empirically proven (Alujević Jukić 2012) that the lexical similarity between the Split idiom and Italian could condition positive transfer in the context of the acquisition of Italian as a foreign language. Thus, such a circumstance could be used for didactic purposes. The assumption is that indirect exposure to the Italian lexicon through adapted loanwords in the Split idiom could lead to unconscious acquisition of such a repertoire of words, given the Input Hypothesis of unintentional and unconscious acquisition without explicit teaching (Krashen 1985).

In accordance with the study carried out on a sample of Croatian students, the study presented hereafter aims at determining whether there is a reciprocal intelligibility between the two idioms, given the predispositions in the form of lexical similarity (Calvi 1995, 2004; Carrera Díaz 2007). It examines the initial comprehension of the words in the Split idiom by Italian native speakers with regard to the lexical transparency of Italian vocabulary and the vocabulary of the Split idiom.

## 2. Research methodology

### 2.1. Aims and hypotheses

The objective of the research was to examine to what extent Italian native speakers correctly attribute the meaning to the Split idiom words in the written form and to establish the awareness of Italian native speakers of the lexical transparency and similarity between Italian words and the Split idiom equivalents. We hypothesized that the examinees would have a heightened awareness of the orthographic and semantic similarities between Italian words and the related words from the Split idiom and that the examinees would find it easier to determine the meaning of those Split idiom words which are orthographically similar to their Italian equivalents than the meaning of those which are less similar.

### 2.2. Sampling; Instrument; Procedure

In September 2017, twenty high-school-aged native speakers of Italian participated in the research by being subjected to the receptive vocabulary testing. The testing was conducted in writing while the subject teacher emailed the completed tests to the researcher.

A two-part test was designed with the purpose of examining the level of the initial comprehension of 60 separate words from the Split idiom. The first part of the test has been designed according to the pattern of the *Yes/No Vocabulary Test* (Meara et al. 1987), a valid and reliable instrument for measuring receptive vocabulary size, which requires examinees simply to indicate whether they understand the given word or not. The sample of the Split idiom words included in the test consists of items with a high rate of frequency in popular literary works, such as *Mala Floramyje*, *Splis'ki Akvarel* and *Ribarske svade* written by the well-known author and composer Ivo Tijardović as well as *Velo misto* and *Malo misto* by the writer and journalist Miljenko Smoje. All of the abovementioned literary works are intended for popular festivities and comedy and since these works are written in the original everyday idiom (Sočanac 2002) they abound in Italian loanwords. Special attention was given to ensure that the chosen words occur in some prominent dictionaries and glossaries of the Split idiom such as: *Ričnik splitskog govora* by Tonko Radišić (2003), *Ričnik velovareškega Splita* by Dobrila Matoković Berezina (2004), *Rječnik splitskog govora* by Thomas F. Wagner and Dunja Jutronić (2006) and *Splitski rječnik* by Željko Petrić (2008).

The Split idiom words used in the *Yes/No Vocabulary Test* were chosen according to the frequency criterion; the chosen examples satisfied the criterion of high frequency in the local vernacular as well as the pragmatic and communication criterion considering that these words designate the phenomena of everyday life in Split (Alujević Jukić 2012).

The selected 60 words from the Split idiom have similar translation equivalents in the Italian language, registered in the frequency dictionary of Italian, *Dizionario di Base della Lingua Italiana*, constituting "the core of the Italian vocabulary" (De Mauro et al. 1998). Form and content were the parameters of similarity for the selection of

the word samples in our research, as in the study conducted by Ard and Homburg (1983). The fact that for most of the examples the orthographic similarity ratio (*The Longest Common Subsequence Ratio*, Melamed 1999) between the Italian and Split word samples exceeded 0.5 was also taken into consideration. This statistical method consists in dividing the longest sequence of letters shared by two words by the total number of letters of the longer word (Kondrak 2001) and the result figures as “a measure of the two words’ cognateness” (Adams 2008). The selected words had similar translation equivalents in the Italian language. At the same time the words did not have orthographically similar forms in French, German and Spanish in order to prevent the participants from relying on their background knowledge of their L3.

The *Yes/No Vocabulary Test* was followed by a translation test into L1, yet another in a series of tests aimed at measuring receptive vocabulary knowledge. In accordance with foreign research methodology, these tests were used simultaneously since they can provide more reliable answers than the *Yes/No Vocabulary Test* alone. While examining the range of vocabulary among native French speakers who study Dutch, Eyckmans (2004) also combined the *Yes/No* test format with translation into the mother tongue, whereas Thoma (2011) used a translation test in addition to the computer version of the *Yes/No* test. Within the framework of this research the examinees were asked to translate into mother tongue only those lexical items they previously identified as known.

### 3. Results and discussion

The aim of the research was to examine to what extent Italian native speakers correctly attribute meaning to Split idiom words in the written form. We were interested in the average number of the correctly attributed words as well as the percentage of the examinees who gave the correct attribute to each and every word. In analysing the results, we have used the descriptive data analysis method. While doing so we have calculated the arithmetic mean (M) and the central value (C) as measures of central tendency. As measures of dispersion we have determined the standard deviation (SD) and the range (interval, or in other words the difference between the largest and the smallest observed value) while percentages (%) have been determined as measures of the occurrence frequency of an answer, that is, the distribution of the acquired results. For calculating the relationship between variables, we have used Pearson’s (r) correlation coefficient. We have obtained the following results:

Table 1. The average percentage of correctly attributed words of the Split idiom

C	M	Range	SD
37.5	42.5	0-100	31.94

Due to a greater degree of dispersion, besides the arithmetic mean which slightly exceeded forty-two percent of correctly attributed meanings, the central value has also been outlined as a central tendency. We have noticed that on average the

examinees attributed the correct meanings to more than a third of the given words. Besides the accuracy level for the whole sample we have established the percentage of correct responses for each given example.

The analysis shows the following facts: 100% of the participants have correctly determined the significance of the items *bušta* and *poltrona*. A very high percentage of the participants (95%), accurately guessed the meaning of the words *borša*, *karta*, *pomidor*, 90% understood the meaning of the words *lanterna* and *šoldi*, 85% the words *lokanda* and *merlo*, 80% the words *dišpet*, *gušt* and *riga*, 75% the words *tavalja* and *grez*, 70% the word *šug*, 65 % the words *goba* and *skalina*, 60% the words *ravanela*, *feta*, *fjok*, *beštimat* and *beštimja*, 55% the words *šugaman*, *kartolina*, *melancana* and *šufit*, 50% the word *barufa*, 45% the words *grop*, *kanočal* and *bjankerija*, 40% the word *škatula*, 35% the words *lavandin* and *perikul*, 30% the words *bokun*, *fažol* and *mudante*, 25% the words *lišo*, *pitura* and *šporkica*, 20% the words *fregat*, *banj*, *kokolat*, *fermat*, *fonja* and *šporkat*, 15% the words *debuleca* and *kantun*, 10% the words *fjaka*, *matun*, *dištakat* and *štuf* and 5% the words *brontulat* and *afitat*. None of the participants correctly attributed the meaning to the following words: *đita*, *maštil*, *frigat*, *šticat se* and *švora*. That is what we had expected for the noun *maštil* and the verbs *frigat* i *šticat se* because they derive from the Venetian language or Dalmatic.<sup>1</sup>

Despite unfamiliarity with the orthographic characteristics of the Croatian language, Italian examinees did not have any problem with the letter *š* in the words *bušta*, *borša*, *šoldi*, *šugaman*, *lišo*, *šporkica* and *šufit* or with the letter *j* in the word *fjok*. The same goes for the letter *lj* as in *tavalja* and the letter *ć* in the case of *kanočal*. The examinees were successful in understanding the suffix *-at*, meaning that the words such as *beštimat*, *fregat*, and *kokolat* were actually verbs in their infinitive forms.

In most cases the examinees corroborated the assumptions of the meaning of the word with an analogous example from the standard Italian language and also indicated the existence of a similar form in their mother tongue.

Since direct contact with the forms characteristic of the Split idiom was ruled out as a variable that could have influenced the Italian native speakers in attributing meaning, we have assumed that the key factor in the discovery would be the orthographic similarity between the words in Italian with the words from the idiom of Split. We have examined the afore-mentioned and have shown the results in *Table 2*.

1 **maštil** – a loanword from Venetian language: *mastèla* “vaso di legno fatto a doghe e cerchiato, che serve segnatamente a far bucato”, *mastèlo* “mastello” (Boerio 1993: 404), *mastèla* (Miotto 1984: 119). In a dictionary of the Triestine dialect: *mastel*, *mastela* “mastello, mastella” (Pinguentini 1986: 197). According to Skok: *maštil* < Venetian form *mastello* (Skok 1972: 384). Matoković Berezina offers its detailed meaning: *maštil* “drveno, željezno ili bakreno vjedro (za pranje robe), čabar, kabao” (Matoković Berezina 2004: 549);

**šticat**, **šticavat (se)** – a loanword from Venetian language: *stizzàr* “attizzare, ratizzare; stuzicare; stizzarsi – incollerire, adirarsi, arrabbiarsi” (Boerio 1993: 705), *stizzàr-se* “arrabiarsi” (Miotto 1984: 200). Vinja also notes: *sticati se* “naljutiti se, rasrditi se” and relates it to the Venetian form *stizzar* “attizzare” (Vinja 2004: III/193). Matoković Berezina describes its meaning in a following way: *šticat*, *šticavat (se)* “naljutiti se (kratkotrajno), naduriti se; ljutiti, duriti (se); preneseno značenje – odustati od nekog posla” (Matoković Berezina 2004: 932);

**frigat** – it originates from the Dalmatic language and derives from the Latin form *frigere* (Bartoli 2000: 301). Skok also relates it to the Latin form *frigere* > Italian form *friggere* (Skok 1971: 530).

*Table 2. Results of the examination of the relationship (Pearson's correlation coefficient) between orthographic similarities of Italian and Split words and the success in finding their meaning*

Relationship	r	p
Orthographic similarity between the Italian word and the Split idiom word and the success in finding the meaning of the word	0.496	.000*

\* correlation coefficient is statistically significant at the 5% level

The statistically significant correlation coefficient shows that orthographic similarity has played an important part in attributing meaning to the Split idiom words. The result is in accordance with the previous studies of the effect of cognates and thus supports the fact that orthographic transparency is the key factor in the successful identification of cognates.

Post-task, some of the participants stated and explained to the teacher that they had noticed the lexical similarity of the two idioms, proving that they were aware of the lexical transfer they employed while trying to understand the meaning of the unknown lexical items. On the basis of translation equivalents in the Italian language with which they supported their affirmative answers in the vocabulary test, it is evident that they experienced the facilitation effect on the basis of those words in their L1 sharing the orthographic aspect with the Split idiom counterparts.

#### *4. Conclusion*

We have examined the effect of the lexical transparency existing between Italian and the Split idiom, as determined by the presence of Italian loanwords in the Split idiom, on the initial comprehension of Split idiom words by native speakers of Italian. The examination was undertaken by means of a vocabulary test and translation to L1. The hypothesis of this research was that the examinees would, while determining the meaning of the Split idiom words, use interlinguistic information from the Italian language. The fact that the examinees explained their suggested meanings of the Split idiom words by referring to their mother tongue and citing the Italian equivalents serves to corroborate this assumption. It was assumed and proven that the key element in the initial comprehension of words would be the orthographic similarity between the words in the Italian language and the Split idiom. The acquired information bears witness to the abovementioned hypotheses as well as to the transparency of Italian vocabulary and the vocabulary of the Split idiom - it shows the intercomprehension of two idioms based on crosslinguistic similarities on the lexical level.

According to the translation equivalents in the Italian language with which the informants supported their affirmative answers it is evident that they experienced the facilitation effect on the basis of the words in their L1 which share an orthographic aspect with their Split idiom counterparts. Research has thus shown that orthographic similarity is the key element affecting the efficiency of cognates.

Application of the results can serve to increase Italian native speakers' motivation

and sense of familiarity with the Croatian language and its variants and cultural varieties and contribute towards a more successful integration into local society. Since the effect of the lexical similarity between the Italian language and Split speech has not yet been empirically researched, this paper will contribute to the greater awareness of the linguistic advantages found in examinees who successfully applied the cognate pairing. The insights generated by this research can be practically applied to raising awareness regarding methodological procedures with lecturers who teach the Croatian language to Italian native speakers so that they could take advantage of the students' potential vocabulary as a good basis for developing the motivation for formal language acquisition.



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*Attachment**The longest common subsequence ratio of the sample words*

THE WORD IN ITALIAN	THE WORD IN THE SPLIT IDIOM	THE LONGEST COMMON SUBSEQUENCE RATIO
ravanello	ravana	0.7
asciugamano	šugaman	0.5
fiacca	fiaka	0.5
fregare	fregat	0.7
gobba	goba	0.8
cartolina	kartolina	0.8
bagno	banj	0.4
brontolare	brontulat	0.7
debolezza	debuleca	0.6
dispetto	dišpet	0.6
gita	đita	0.7
gropo	grop	0.6
cantone	kantun	0.5
coccolare	kokolat	0.4
cannocchiale	kanočal	0.4
lavandino	lavandin	0.8
mastello	maštil	0.5
mattone	matun	0.5
svelto	žvelt	0.6
pericolo	perikul	0.6
fermare	fermat	0.7
tovaglia	tavalja	0.5
affittare	afitat	0.5
baruffa	barufa	0.8
bestemmiare	beštimat	0.4
bestemmia	beštimja	0.5
biancheria	bjanckerija	0.7
boccone	bokun	0.4
borsa	borša	0.8
busta	bušta	0.8
distaccare	dištakat	0.5
fagiolo	fažol	0.5
fetta	feta	0.8
fiocco	fiok	0.3
friggere	frigat	0.5
fogna	fonja	0.6
grezzo	grez	0.6
gusto	gušt	0.6
carta	karta	0.8
collana	kolajna	0.7
lanterna	lanterna	1
liso	lišo	0.7
locanda	lokanda	0.8
melanzana	melancana	0.8
merlo	merlo	1
mutande	mudante	0.7
pittura	pitura	0.8
poltrona	poltrona	1
pomodoro	pomidor	0.7
sporchezza	šporkica	0.4
stizzire	šticat	0.3
riga	rija	1
sugo	šug	0.5
scatola	škatula	0.5
scalina	škalina	0.8
soffitto	šufit	0.3
sporcare	šporkat	0.5
suora	švora	0.6
soldi	šoldi	0.8
stuf	štuf	0.6

## UTJECAJ SRODNICA U SPLITSKOME GOVORU NA RAZVOJ RECEPTIVNE KOMPETENCIJE KOD TALIJANSKIH IZVORNIH GOVORNIKA

### Sažetak

U skladu s istraživanjima međujezičnih utjecaja na leksičkoj razini koja svjedoče o olakšanome inicijalnom razumijevanju nepoznatoga vokabulara na osnovi srodnica, u radu se istražuje učinak leksičke transparentnosti talijanskoga jezika i splitskoga govora, uvjetovane prisutnošću talijanskih posuđenica u splitskome idiomu, na inicijalno razumijevanje riječi u splitskome govoru kod izvornih govornika talijanskoga jezika. Upotrijebljen je prijevodni test na temelju 60 riječi splitske čakavštine koje su zastupljene i u testu kojemu su podvrgnuti hrvatski ispitanici, sa svrhom ustanovljivanja svijesti o leksičkoj transparentnosti i bliskosti talijanskoga jezika i splitskoga govora kod talijanskih srednjoškolaca. Budući da je kod talijanskih izvornih govornika kao varijabla koja je mogla utjecati na uspješnost u pretpostavljanju značenja isključen direktan kontakt s oblicima karakterističnim za splitski govor, krenuli smo u istraživanje s pretpostavkom da će se kao ključan faktor u otkrivanju pokazati ortografska sličnost riječi na talijanskome jeziku i riječi splitskoga govora, te smo navedenu pretpostavku i potvrdili. Evidentno je kako navedeni podatci idu u prilog transparentnosti talijanskoga leksika i leksika splitskoga govora, odnosno potvrđuju uzajamno razumijevanje dvaju idioma na leksičkoj razini.

Ključne riječi: međujezični utjecaji, vokabular, srodnice, talijanski jezik, splitski govor