

False Cognates

Languages

Words that look related and are not, and why they are so persistent.

Words in two languages that resemble each other by coincidence or by drift, without sharing the ancestor their similarity implies.

BEST TEST
a dictionary

RISKIEST
close languages

- English 'much' and Spanish 'mucho' are unrelated despite meaning the same.
- English 'have' and Latin 'habere' are not cognates.
- Some false friends were once true cognates that diverged.
- Learners over-trust resemblance precisely because it usually works.
- Cross-language interference is strongest between related languages.
- Checking a dictionary is faster than the resulting confusion.

LOOK FOR IT

Spanish 'embarazada' means pregnant, not embarrassed. The resemblance is coincidence.

The closer two languages are, the more false friends there are — and the more confidently learners fall for them.