

**Kľucové slová:** false friends, cognates, homographs, language interference

## **With Friends Like These, Who Needs Enemies? Harnessing Pattern Recognition in Second-Language Learners**

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The tendency of the human mind to seek out pattern and similarity is well documented and accepted. A clear example of this phenomenon is the variety of constellation systems found in various cultures. Looking up at the inherently random array of stars in the night sky, people have always tended to “connect the dots”, superimposing order and meaning upon the disorder, and often even anthropomorphizing it. Of course, the fully realized constellation systems we see today are the results of efforts carried out over many millennia by entire civilizations. Still, such systems remain rooted in individuals’ tendency to recognize patterns. This tendency is one of the definitive traits of the human mind, and should be acknowledged by teachers of foreign languages as a double-edge sword, with the capacity to both bolster the learning process and lead language learners astray, bolstering when they recognize legitimate similarities between languages and consistencies within a language itself, and leading them astray when they perceive false similarities or overextend a generalization. For languages, while being in a sense human-made systems, develop organically, and thus display a great deal of inconsistency to thwart the pattern-seeking learner.

This is of course not news to language teachers. What does seem to be as yet unexplored, is how exactly teachers can harness language learners’ tendency to recognize similarities.

One type of pattern that language learners commonly recognize are similarities between words and phenomena in the foreign language (FL) and those in their native language (NL). Let’s take a look at the different types of similarities often noticed, with examples from various languages:

1. Similar-sounding words (homophones):

Mandarin Chinese “shì” (to be, yes)

English “sure”

2. Similarly spelled words (homographs):

French “chance” (luck, chance)

English “chance”

3. Of course, some pairs are similar in both respects (homonyms):

German “ich” (I)

Slovak “ich” (them / their)

4. Similar literal translation (calques or coincidentally similar constructions):

Slovak “mrakodrap” (skyscraper, lit. “cloud-ripper”)  
English “skyscraper”

#### 5. Similar idioms:

English “that’s not my cup of tea”

German “das ist nicht mein Bier” (lit. “that’s not my beer”)

Slovak “toto nie je moja šálka kávy” (lit. “that’s not my cup of coffee”)

Now that we’ve noticed them, what do these various similarities mean to a language learner? The first example is in fact very convenient for learners in either direction, because “shì” and “sure” both sound very similar and are often used in similar contexts, specifically to express agreement or confirmation. Even the phonemic downward intonation in the Mandarin (represented by the downward diacritic in pinyin romanization) corresponds coincidentally to the most common intonation of the English word.

Some may argue that because this is a mere coincidence, there isn’t much likelihood of finding more such examples between languages as distant as Mandarin and English, thus limiting the utility of this “technique” in building or solidifying a student’s vocabulary.

Others will point out that “shì” and “sure” are not one-hundred-percent equivalent, and overemphasizing their similarity will lead students to use them improperly.

We counter this by stressing that the main benefit of discovering such a similarity is that it boosts the learner’s confidence, which is especially vital in the early stages of learning an FL, and it impels them to further compare the other languages they know with the FL. This kind of exploration is one of the advantageous of multilingual teaching (as opposed to the oft-touted “total immersion” method).

Which brings us to example #2: French “chance” and English “chance”. Homographs are likely to be noticed by FL learners even more often, given that they most commonly learn new words in written form (for better or worse). These two words’ uses correspond to some degree, but they differ enough to be often cited as “false friends”. For example, the French phrase “bonne chance!” translates roughly as “good luck!”, not “good chance!”. Students will inevitably notice these similarities, but it is up to the teacher to initiate a discussion on when the English “chance” can be used in the same way as its French homographic counterpart.

Speaking of false friends, #3 is a good example of the type of similarity that can often trip up learners. “Ich” and “ich” are among the several confusing similarities between German and Slovak’s respective pronoun systems. It probably isn’t necessary to bring up problematic similarities like these in class, but it can be helpful for the teacher to be aware of them as a possible cause of student errors.

Whether they be the result of calques or coincidentally similar constructions, pairs such as Slovak “mrakodrap” (lit. “cloud-ripper”) and English “skyscraper”<sup>1</sup> are a boon for learners and teachers alike. In a beginner-level English classroom, introduction of the word “skyscraper” may even be students’ first encounter with the words “sky” and “scrape”, and will thus serve as a useful mnemonic device for them. In higher-level classrooms, an interesting discussion may arise from comparing the metaphor used in Slovak with that used in English and their respective connotations. All of this will help fix the word and its associated vocabulary in the learner’s mind.

Similarly, consistent pan-linguistic idiomatic paradigms such as example #5 are easy for learners to remember, and their variations are great food for thought and discussion. Why do English refer to tea, Germans to beer and Slovaks to coffee as a metaphor for general preference? Does this say anything about the position of these beverages in their respective cultures? Such socio-linguistic questions may inspire lively conversation, but the teacher should be careful not to dominate, even if their knowledge of such issues is greater.

Now we’d like to present a few more similarities, specifically between Slovak and English. Being English teachers at a Slovak university, we often find ourselves confronted with the mixed blessing of a monolingual class, where all of the students are native speakers of Slovak. We say a mixed blessing because on one hand it allows the students to converse in their NL, making communication in the FL forced, unlike in a classroom where the students’ only common language is the FL. On the other hand, the students’ common NL allows the group as a whole to compare their NL with the FL and address interferences particular to their NL.

Thus the following discussion will be of most use to teachers of English to Slovak-speakers or teachers of Slovak to English-speakers. That said, we hope it will also provide teachers in other situations an example of how to address similarities between students’ NLs and the FL.

One great way to begin a class of beginners is to show them how many words they can already recognize in the FL, thanks to the wealth of international words and, in the case of English, loanwords. This is most effective using a short text with a high frequency of such words, preferably consisting of phrases, not prose, to minimize the role of grammar and pronunciation in comprehension. When students realize their ability to understand texts right off the bat, their confidence will skyrocket, facilitating their ability to communicate and speeding up their development.

Here is a concrete example of such a text featuring words even absolute beginners are likely to recognize from Slovak. It could be used as an introductory activity leading into a retail-oriented role-play. First the students have to put items into two groups: “What to Buy for Lunch” and “What to Buy for the Office”.

a telephone

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<sup>1</sup> In this case the Slovak is a calque from the English via Czech (Rejzek, 2001)

three hamburgers  
ten sandwiches  
twenty-seven pizzas  
eight notebooks [clue students in on the non-laptop meaning]  
two rucksacks  
three monitors  
a hot dog

A student of ours once had a running joke of greeting not with the standard “How are you?”, but with “havária?”, which means “car accident” in Slovak, but bears coincidental resemblance to the English phrase “how are ya?”. The power of humor in language-learning should not be underestimated. It is, after all, child’s play, so why not look at how children, certainly the world’s most talented language learners, learn languages? Children play with language, they make it their own, and we encourage our students to do the same. In fact, most students require very little encouragement; all they need is a relaxed classroom atmosphere with lots of laughter. Once such an atmosphere is accomplished, many more examples will pop up. The most helpful effect of such games are that they give the learner a sense of owning the language – of the language as a communicational tool, a playground, not as an imposing cliff to scale.

One common misconception about mnemonic devices is that the associations they are based on have to be logical to function. By logical associations I mean noticing things like equivalents in two languages having the same first letter (e.g. English “head” and Slovak “hlava”) or distinguishing “lend” and “borrow” by remembering that since “lend” rhymes with “send”, it pertains to giving, not receiving. While devices such as these certainly do work well for many learners, to limit oneself to them is to ignore devices that utilize absurdity.

One American learner of Slovak recounted the following experience: “When I first came to Slovakia, I was amazed at the number of gun stores. I’d been under the impression that laws around gun sale were more restrictive here than in the USA. And yet everywhere I looked, I saw signs proclaiming ‘Rifle! Rifle!’. Only later did I learn that “rifle” in Slovak means ‘jeans’. And you can be sure I haven’t forgotten the word since.” An entertaining story to be sure, and we would argue that the American’s reported retention of the term is due in no small part to the hilarity and absurdity of his experience. After recounting this story to our Slovak students, they have also retained the English meaning of the word “rifle”, showing that such a device works both ways.

As you can see, so-called “false friends” can thus very easily be turned into true friends. In the end, it is up to the educator to decide how to address false friends, but they should do so sooner rather than later. To this end we’ve prepared a list of some of the most common false friends between Slovak and English. The table will need a bit of explaining: we’ve listed the pairs alphabetically, with the English words on the left and their Slovak false friends on the right. In the parentheses next to each word is a possible proper equivalent in the other language. The occasional bracketed comments explain a specific context the equivalent is used in, when necessary. For truly the most problematic

false equivalents are those which are equivalent in certain contexts, but not in others. Take for example English “author” and Slovak “autor”. On the surface, the words are equivalent. They certainly are cognates, and their definitions appear to match. But beware of cases such as this one:

Slovak “autor filmu”

English “the **author** of the film”

In Slovak, “autor” can apply to a creator of nearly any work of art – a painting, a film, a novel, a song, etc. The English “author”, however, has a more restricted meaning, generally used only to describe a writer. The proper English translation would likely be either “the director of the film” or “the filmmaker”. Hence the qualification “[when not referring to a writer]” in the entry for “author/autor”.

This list is far from exhaustive, and even the entries themselves are certainly not complete explanations of the complex relationship between the two terms. Our goal is to merely **sensitize** teachers, students and translators to the inconsistency between the terms; to acquire a full understanding of when to use each word and all of the possible equivalents, one must look to dictionaries and authentic texts.

#### English (Slovak Equivalent)

absolve (oslobodiť)  
 abstinent (abstinujúci)  
 accord (dohoda, poskytnúť, súlad)  
 action (čin, dianie, žaloba [práv.])  
 actual (skutočný)  
 affect ['æfɛkt] ([neprirodzený] afekt)  
 affect [ə'fɛkt] (ovplyvniť)  
 affected (ovplyvnený, afektovaný)  
 angina (srdcová angína)  
 apartment (byt [Am.])  
 approbation (schválenie)  
 author (autor [knihy ap.])  
 basin (misa, umývadlo [Br.])  
 benzene (benzén [chem.])  
 billion (miliarda)  
 blanket (deka)  
 brigade (vojenská brigáda)  
 camera (fotoaparát)  
 closet (šatník)  
 colleague (kolega [v práci])  
 concourse (veľká hala na letisku/stanici)  
 concurrence (súhlas, súbežnosť)  
 confection (cukrík)  
 confidant (dôverník)  
 confident (presvedčený, sebaistý)  
 control (riadenie)

#### Slovak (English Equivalent)

absolvovať (attend)  
 abstinent (teetotaler)  
 akord (chord)  
 akcia (event [social, sporting, etc.])  
 aktuálny (current)  
 afekt (heat of passion)  
 afekt (heat of passion)  
 afektovaný (affected [behaving with an affect])  
 angína (tonsillitis)  
 apartmán (suite)  
 aprobácia (teaching qualification)  
 autor ([when not referring to a writer] painter, composer, filmmaker, etc.)  
 bazén (swimming pool)  
 benzín (petrol [Br.], gasoline [Am.])  
 bilión (trillion)  
 blanketa (form)  
 brigáda (summer job, temporary work, work team)  
 kamera (video camera)  
 klozet (toilet)  
 kolega (fellow student [from university])  
 konkurz (open competition, audition, bankruptcy)  
 konkurencia (competition)  
 konfekcia (clothing)  
 konfident (informer)  
 konfident (informer)  
 kontrola (inspection / supervision)

creature (tvor)	kreatúra (monster)
criminal (zločinec)	kriminál (jail)
delicatessen (lahôdky [predajňa])	delikates (gourmet food shop)
demented (dementný)	dementovaný (officially denied)
dome (kupola, objekt v tvare kupoly)	dom (house / building) / dóm (cathedral)
dose (dóza)	dóza (box)
dress (šaty)	dres (sports uniform)
esoteric (tajný, zrozumiteľný len zasväteným)	ezoterický (occult, arcane, new-age)
eventually (nakoniec)	eventuálne (possibly)
extravagant (rozhadzovačný)	extravagantný (outlandish)
fabric (tkanina)	fabrika (factory)
faggot (buzerant [Am.] / zväzok triesok [Br.])	fagot (bassoon)
fantasy (sen, fantastická literatúra)	fantázia ([ability to imagine/predstavivosť] imagination)
	fitnes ([športové centrum] fitness centre [Br.] / center [Am.])
fitness (kondícia, posilňovanie)	folklór (folk culture)
folklore (ústna tradícia, povera)	galantéria (haberdasher's)
gallantry (galantnosť)	geniálny (brilliant, genius)
genial (láskavý)	granát ([mineral] garnet)
grenade ([voj.] granát)	groggy (exhausted)
groggy (dezorientovaný zo spánku)	guma (rubber)
gum (žuvačka)	gymnázium (grammar school)
gymnasium (telocvičňa)	hazard (risk)
hazard (nebezpečenstvo)	haló ([upozornenie] excuse me! / hey!)
hello (dobrý deň, haló [pri telefonovaní])	hymna (anthem)
hymn (chválospev)	šéf (boss)
chef (šéfkuchár)	šéf (boss)
chief (náčelník, hlavný)	Lentilky (Smarties)
lentils (šošovice)	likvidovať (dispose of)
liquidate (likvidovať [ekon.])	lokál (pub)
local (miestny)	lubrikácia (sexual lubricant)
lubrication (mastenie)	mail (e-mail)
mail (pošta [okrem budovy])	manifestácia (demonstration)
manifestation (prejav)	marmeláda (jam)
marmalade (marmeláda z citrusových plodov)	maturita (school-leaving exam)
maturity (dospelosť)	mixér (blender)
mixer (šľahač, spoločenský človek)	nervózny (high-strung)
nervous (úzkostlivý)	novela (novella [lit.], amendment [pol.])
novel (román)	obskúrny (obscurant)
obscure (málo známy)	ordinárny (vulgar)
ordinary (obyčajný)	pamflet (lampoon [satirical], defamatory article)
pamphlet (brožúra)	paragraf (article [in a law])
paragraph (odsek)	parapet (windowsill)
parapet (nízky ochranný múrik)	parcela (parcel [of land])
parcel (balík)	pasta (paste)
pasta (cestoviny)	patetický (histrionic)
pathetic (žalostný)	perfektný (great, excellent)
perfect (bezchybný)	perspektíva ([future] prospects)
perspective (hľadisko)	fotograf (photographer)
photograph (fotografie)	platonický (ideal, platonic, spiritual)
platonic (vzťah len medzi kamarátmi [hov.])	pregnantný (apt)
pregnant (tehotná)	

preservative (konzervačný prostriedok)	prezervatív (condom)
process (priebeh)	proces (trial)
promote (podporovať, povýšiť)	promovať (graduate from university)
prosaic (všedný)	prozaicky (prose)
prospect (vyhliadka, perspektíva)	prospekt (leaflet)
protection (ochrana)	protekcia (favouritism)
psst! (s-s! [tiché upútanie pozornosti])	pst! (hush! [be quiet])
psychic (nadprirodzený [moc], parapsychologický, jasnovidec)	psychický (mental, psychological)
race (rasa [skupina ľudí])	rasa (breed of animal)
receipt (účtenka)	receipt (recipe [cooking], prescription [from a doctor])
relax (uvoľniť sa, relaxovať)	relax (relaxation)
rendezvous (stretnutie, tajná schôdzka, stretnúť sa)	rande (date)
represent (zastupovať)	reprezentovať (be, comprise, form [act as an example of])
rifle (puška)	rifle (jeans)
script (scenár)	skriptá (university textbook)
smoking (fajčenie)	smoking (dinner jacket, tuxedo)
specific (určitý, konkrétny)	špecifický ([odlišujúci] distinctive)
spleen (slezina, hnev)	splín (melancholy)
stipend (dôchodok [Br.], príspevok na pokrytie životných nákladov študenta [Am.])	štipendium (scholarship [financial support for a student's tuition])
stop (prestáť)	stopovať (hitchhike)
sympathetic (súcitný)	sympatický (likeable)
tourism (cestovný ruch)	turistika ([by foot/pešo] hiking, trekking)
tourist (turista [všeobecne])	turista ([by foot/pešo] hiker, trekker)
transparent (priehľadný)	transparent (banner)
wagon (povoz)	vagón (railway carriage [Br.], train car [Am.])

The teachers among our readers may be thinking “Great – but how do I actually apply this to my lessons?” We recommend first of all giving students a copy of this table, or an abridged version of it corresponding to their level. Using the table as an aid, ask them to correct a text written in “slovakicized” English (or anglicized Slovak, in the case of a Slovak class for speakers of English). Exercises such as this will help sensitize students to native-language interference, and making a text less recognizably “Slovak” (or “English”) should give them a great sense of achievement, encouraging them to do the same with their communication in general. Nevertheless, it is vital to maintain a supportive atmosphere in the classroom – realize that incorrect use of false friends may already be deeply ingrained in learners, and simply becoming aware of the difference won’t make the problem instantly disappear. As elsewhere, humor is a great way to gently remind students of repeated errors. Instead of reprimanding a student for the 100<sup>th</sup> time they “action” instead of “event” (careful – the stress is on the **second** syllable), try cracking a good-humored joke. “Action action, for our satisfaction!” is a catch-phrase that is already deeply etched in our students’ minds, for instance.

**Resumé:** Študenti cudzích jazykov si stále všimajú podobnosti medzi cieľovým jazykom a ostatnými jazykmi, ktoré vedia. Nejaké podobnosti urýchľujú učenie, a nejaké stoja v ceste k dokonalosti. Pozeráme sa na konkrétne prípady takýchto podobností, napríklad homofóny, homografy a podobné idiómy, a diskutujeme, aké prístupy k nim môže

prevziať učiteľ. Hlavne ide o používanie humoru. Ešte k tomu uvádzame stručný zoznam neverných ekvivalentov (false friends) medzi angličtinou a slovenčinou.

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