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FAMILIAR FORMS, DIVERGENT GUESSES: ENGLISH AND UKRAINIAN LEXICAL CUES IN GERMAN WORD RECOGNITION AMONG UPPER-SECONDARY SCHOOL LEARNERS

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Abstract

German vocabulary recognition in a multilingual classroom involves more than knowledge of the target language. Learners may associate unfamiliar German words with English or Ukrainian lexical forms, using these similarities to identify meanings or arriving at misleading interpretations. This study examines German word recognition among Ukrainian upper-secondary school learners, focusing on recognition accuracy, previously acquired vocabulary knowledge and reported cross-linguistic associations. Twelve pupils completed a Google Forms questionnaire comprising 11 German lexical items, a retrospective familiarity checklist and questions concerning the perceived role of English and Ukrainian. Of 132 lexical responses, 88 were correct (66.7%). Recognition accuracy differed considerably between individual words. Dach and Hand were each identified correctly by 11 respondents, whereas only three recognised the meaning of hell. Several incorrect responses corresponded to meanings of formally similar English words. Recognition accuracy was considerably higher for words reported as previously known than for unfamiliar words: 75 of 79

responses to previously known words were correct, compared with 13 of 53 responses to unfamiliar words. English similarities were frequently perceived as misleading, while Ukrainian similarities were more often reported as helpful. The results demonstrate the importance of considering semantic correspondence and previous language knowledge when interpreting lexical recognition in multilingual learners.

Keywords: cross-linguistic influence, German vocabulary, lexical recognition, false friends, multilingual learners, Ukrainian, English, upper-secondary education.

1. Introduction

A German word may appear familiar to a Ukrainian school learner even before its meaning has been formally introduced. The resemblance may originate from English, Ukrainian or another already known German expression. Such similarities can provide useful lexical clues, although they do not always lead to an accurate interpretation. German Hand, for example, corresponds directly to English hand, while Dach resembles Ukrainian дах. In contrast, German bald means 'soon' rather than 'without hair', and hell means 'bright' rather than the English noun hell. These examples illustrate a practical difficulty in German language learning: learners must distinguish between a familiar word form and a reliable indication of meaning.

Makukhina (2024) examines interference in learning German after English within the Ukrainian educational context and discusses the effects of previously acquired languages on grammar, vocabulary and other aspects of language use. Borysko et al. (2020) similarly emphasise the educational relevance of learners' previous knowledge of English when studying German, although their investigation focuses primarily on grammatical learning.

The present study examines how Ukrainian upper-secondary school learners recognise German vocabulary and use similarities with English and Ukrainian when identifying word meanings. Particular attention is given to recognition accuracy, previous knowledge of German words and learners' perceptions of cross-linguistic similarities. By examining these aspects together, the study identifies lexical relationships that support recognition, associations that lead to incorrect interpretations and implications for teaching German vocabulary in multilingual classrooms.

2. Theoretical Background

Cross-linguistic similarity is an important variable in multilingual vocabulary processing. Otwinowska (2024) reviews evidence from lexical processing experiments, cognate-guessing tasks and vocabulary-learning studies, demonstrating that previously acquired languages may contribute to the recognition and learning of additional-language words. The consequences of similarity nevertheless depend on the relationship between form and meaning, the learner's proficiency and the demands of the task.

Words that resemble one another across languages are commonly discussed in relation to cognates and false friends. Cognates share historical or formal relationships and may retain similar meanings, whereas false friends exhibit resemblance that can encourage an incorrect semantic association. Roembke et al. (2024) note that the classification of cognates requires attention to the degree and nature of cross-language

similarity. For research purposes, resemblance should therefore not be treated as a uniform characteristic shared equally by all lexical items.

Evidence from multilingual vocabulary-learning research indicates that formal similarity interacts with the languages learners already know. Hirosh and Degani (2021) examined German word learning through bilingual participants' first and second languages, while Elias and Degani (2022) investigated the relationship between word-form similarity, meaning and learner characteristics. Both studies show why lexical resemblance should be considered alongside individual language experience rather than treated as an independent explanation of recognition accuracy.

Studies involving school learners also provide evidence for the educational importance of lexical relationships. Salomé et al. (2022) investigated third-language vocabulary learning among children with different linguistic backgrounds, examining both multilingual experience and cross-language similarity. Hicks (2024) studied the potential benefits of explicit instruction in orthographic correspondences between German and English among Swiss school learners of English. The latter investigation found advantages associated with systematic attention to lexical similarities, suggesting that learners can benefit from guidance in recognising cross-language patterns.

For Ukrainian learners, German-Ukrainian lexical relationships introduce a further dimension. Oberste-Berghaus (2025) proposes a classification of German-Ukrainian cognates based on a corpus of 1,000 lexical items. The research considers relationships involving meaning, spelling, pronunciation and other formal properties. These findings are relevant to words such as German Dach and Ukrainian дах, which may be recognisable despite the use of different writing systems.

This distinction is also important for vocabulary teaching. Stratton (2022) investigated the contribution of historical linguistic knowledge to English-German cognate learning among university students. The study examined whether explicit knowledge of historical linguistic relationships could facilitate vocabulary learning.

More recent research introduces an important qualification to the pedagogical value of cross-linguistic awareness. Silva et al. (2026) examined the contextual learning of cognates, false cognates and noncognates through reading. Their findings indicated that more informative contexts facilitated vocabulary learning, particularly for false cognates. However, explicit awareness-raising concerning cross-linguistic similarity did not provide an additional learning advantage under the conditions of their experiment. This suggests that identifying similarities should not be regarded as sufficient instruction in itself. Learners also need opportunities to verify and apply meanings in context.

The pedagogical use of several languages can additionally be considered within the framework of translanguaging. Cenoz and Gorter (2022) describe pedagogical translanguaging as the planned activation of linguistic resources from learners' multilingual repertoires. In vocabulary instruction, this may involve comparing German lexical forms with English and Ukrainian equivalents, identifying both similarities and differences, and clarifying potentially misleading meanings.

3. Aim and Research Methodology

The aim of the study was to examine German word recognition among Ukrainian upper-secondary school learners and determine how recognition accuracy relates to previous German vocabulary knowledge and perceived English and Ukrainian lexical similarities.

Three research questions guided the investigation:

Q1. What patterns of correct and incorrect German word recognition can be observed among upper-secondary school learners?

Q2. How does learners' reported prior familiarity with German words relate to recognition accuracy?

Q3. How do learners perceive the supportive and misleading roles of English and Ukrainian lexical similarities?

The study employed a descriptive research design using a structured Google Forms questionnaire. Twelve eleventh-grade pupils from a Ukrainian secondary school participated in the investigation. The questionnaire was designed to examine German vocabulary recognition within this classroom group, with particular attention to lexical accuracy, reported familiarity and learners' perceptions of English and Ukrainian similarities.

All respondents identified Ukrainian as the language most frequently spoken at home. Eight reported that they did not study German outside school, three indicated occasional additional study, and one reported regular study beyond school lessons. The participants therefore differed in their additional exposure to German vocabulary.

The questionnaire contained 11 German lexical items: fast, Dach, bald, Hand, hell, Handy, Brief, Termin, Marmelade, Fabrik and Familie. Each word was presented with three Ukrainian-language response alternatives, one corresponding to the expected German meaning. The pupils were instructed to complete the task without using dictionaries or translation tools.

The lexical items were purposefully selected to illustrate different relationships between German words and familiar English or Ukrainian forms. Words such as Hand and Dach provided examples of useful cross-linguistic correspondences, whereas fast, bald and hell represented misleading similarities. This selection enabled the investigation to compare recognition patterns across contrasting lexical relationships and examine how pupils interpreted familiar-looking German vocabulary.

After the lexical recognition task, participants indicated which of the 11 German words they had known previously and selected the resources they believed had helped them identify meanings: Ukrainian, English, both languages, previous German knowledge or guessing. Multiple selections were permitted. Two additional questions examined whether resemblance to English or Ukrainian had been helpful, misleading, noticed but not used, or uncertain.

One point was assigned for each correct lexical answer, giving a maximum individual score of 11. The analysis calculated item-level frequencies, percentages and the overall number of correct responses. Responses were also grouped according to whether each word was reported as previously known or unfamiliar.

The exported dataset contained no names or personal contact details. Results were analysed in aggregated form, without identifying individual participants. All 12 participants provided consent to participate in the study and to have their anonymised responses used for research purposes.

The analysis focused on three complementary aspects of vocabulary recognition: the accuracy of responses to individual German words, the relationship between reported prior familiarity and correct recognition, and learners' perceptions of English and Ukrainian lexical similarities. Frequencies and percentages were used to identify recurring response patterns and compare the different types of lexical information reported by participants. This approach provided a structured description of vocabulary recognition within the participating classroom group.

4. Research Results

The 12 participants provided 132 responses to the 11 German vocabulary items. Of these, 88 were correct, corresponding to an overall recognition accuracy of 66.7%. Individual scores ranged from two to ten correct answers, with a mean of 7.33.

Table 1. Recognition Accuracy across Eleven German Lexical Items

German word	Correct meaning	Correct responses (n)	Accuracy (%)
fast	Almost	5	41.7
Dach	Roof	11	91.7
bald	Soon	7	58.3
Hand	Hand	11	91.7
hell	Bright	3	25.0
Handy	Mobile phone	10	83.3
Brief	Letter	8	66.7
Termin	Appointment	6	50.0
Marmelade	Jam	7	58.3
Fabrik	Factory	10	83.3
Familie	Family	10	83.3
Total		88/132	66.7

Source: Authors' calculations based on Google Forms response data (n = 12).

Several incorrect responses corresponded to meanings of familiar English words. For hell, eight pupils selected 'Пекло' ('hell') instead of 'bright', while one chose 'hot'. Six respondents interpreted fast as 'quick', three associated bald with 'without hair', and two selected 'short' for Brief. These recurring response patterns highlight the role of misleading formal similarities in German vocabulary recognition. They also identify specific lexical contrasts that deserve attention when teaching German to learners with previous knowledge of English.

Other items revealed different associations. Two pupils interpreted Fabrik as 'fabric', and five selected 'jelly sweets' for Marmelade, a meaning associated with Ukrainian мармелад. For Termin, six participants chose 'appointment', five selected 'period of time' and one chose 'holiday'.

Table 2. Prior Familiarity with German Words and Recognition Accuracy

Reported prior familiarity	Total responses	Correct	Incorrect	Accuracy (%)
Previously known	79	75	4	94.9
Previously unknown	53	13	40	24.5
Total	132	88	44	66.7

Source: Authors' calculations based on Google Forms response data (n = 12). Each observation represents one response to one lexical item.

Reported prior familiarity was associated with a pronounced difference in recognition accuracy. Of the 79 responses to words identified as previously known, 75 were correct (94.9%), compared with 13 of 53 responses (24.5%) to unfamiliar words. The difference of 70.4 percentage points highlights the importance of existing German vocabulary knowledge in the recognition task. At the same time, two incorrect responses to Familie, which all participants reported knowing previously, demonstrate that familiarity and accurate recognition are closely related but not identical. The findings therefore support the value of considering learners' existing vocabulary knowledge when planning activities involving cognates and unfamiliar German words.

Table 3. Learners' Self-Reported Linguistic Resources and Perceptions of Similarity

Question category	Response	Respondents (n)	Percentage (%)
Linguistic resources	English	4	33.3
Linguistic resources	Ukrainian	2	16.7
Linguistic resources	Both languages	3	25.0
Linguistic resources	Previous German knowledge	4	33.3
Linguistic resources	Guessing	1	8.3
English similarity	Sometimes misleading	9	75.0
English similarity	Noticed but not used	2	16.7
English similarity	Uncertain	1	8.3
Ukrainian similarity	Helpful	8	66.7
Ukrainian similarity	Sometimes misleading	1	8.3
Ukrainian similarity	Noticed but not used	2	16.7
Ukrainian similarity	Uncertain	1	8.3

Source: Authors' calculations based on Google Forms response data (n = 12). Multiple selections were permitted for the question concerning linguistic resources; consequently, the first five categories are not mutually exclusive.

Learners reported different experiences with English and Ukrainian lexical similarities. Nine pupils (75.0%) indicated that resemblance to English had sometimes led to misleading interpretations, whereas eight (66.7%) described similarities with Ukrainian as helpful. These responses reveal two distinct aspects of multilingual vocabulary recognition within the selected word set: the potential for familiar English forms to suggest incorrect meanings and the supportive role of recognisable Ukrainian-German correspondences. The findings highlight the value of considering learners' perceptions alongside their actual recognition performance.

5. Discussion and Pedagogical Implications

The findings demonstrate the importance of distinguishing formal resemblance from semantic correspondence in German vocabulary recognition. Dach and Hand were recognised with high accuracy, whereas hell and fast produced more incorrect responses, illustrating different outcomes associated with familiar-looking lexical forms. These patterns correspond to the role of cross-linguistic similarity discussed by Otwinowska (2024) and the need to distinguish different types of lexical relationships emphasised by Roembke et al. (2024). The results also highlight the relevance of learners' previous German vocabulary knowledge, which provides an additional perspective on recognition accuracy.

The response patterns reveal several types of lexical associations that are relevant to multilingual vocabulary learning. Incorrect interpretations of fast, bald, hell and Brief corresponded to familiar English meanings, while responses to Fabrik and Marmelade illustrated other potentially misleading cross-linguistic correspondences. These patterns can be considered in relation to research on lexical similarity and semantic competition (Hirosh & Degani, 2021; Elias & Degani, 2022). For classroom instruction, they demonstrate the importance of addressing specific differences between similar-looking words and encouraging learners to check meanings rather than relying on formal resemblance alone.

Previous German vocabulary knowledge emerged as an important factor associated with recognition accuracy. Words reported as previously known were identified correctly much more frequently than unfamiliar items, indicating the value of examining learners' existing lexical knowledge alongside cross-linguistic similarities. This finding has a direct pedagogical implication: teachers can use brief diagnostic activities to identify familiar vocabulary before introducing new German words and design subsequent tasks that distinguish previously acquired knowledge from recognition based on lexical clues.

The pupils' self-reports revealed distinct perceptions of English and Ukrainian similarities during the recognition task. English resemblance was more frequently associated with misleading interpretations, particularly in a word set containing several English-German false friends, whereas Ukrainian resemblance was generally perceived as helpful. These responses illustrate the different roles that previously acquired languages may play when learners encounter unfamiliar German vocabulary. In teaching practice, both languages can therefore serve as resources for comparison, with attention directed towards recognising reliable correspondences and identifying misleading similarities.

For classroom instruction, the results suggest combining reliable and misleading lexical correspondences within the same learning activity. Pupils could compare German fast, bald, hell and Brief with their English lookalikes, identify differences in meaning and use the German words in short sentences. Transparent examples, including Hand and Dach, could then illustrate cases in which similarity provides a useful clue. This approach is consistent with research on explicit cross-linguistic vocabulary instruction (Hicks, 2024; Stratton, 2022).

A short diagnostic activity would also help teachers distinguish previously acquired vocabulary from genuinely unfamiliar words. Following initial recognition and contrastive explanation, new lexical items could be practised in meaningful sentences, dialogues or reading passages. Silva et al. (2026) found that contextual information facilitated vocabulary learning, while additional awareness-raising did not provide a further advantage in their experimental conditions. These findings suggest that recognising cross-language similarities should be accompanied by opportunities to verify and apply meanings in context.

The selective use of Ukrainian and English in German vocabulary instruction is consistent with pedagogical translanguaging (Cenoz & Gorter, 2022), which encourages the purposeful use of learners' multilingual resources. The present findings provide a basis for classroom activities in which pupils compare German words with familiar English and Ukrainian forms, identify semantic differences and practise the correct meanings in context. Combining lexical comparison with German-language sentences, dialogues and discussions offers a practical way to develop more precise awareness of cross-linguistic relationships and encourage informed vocabulary recognition.

6. Conclusions

The study identified clear patterns in German vocabulary recognition among Ukrainian upper-secondary school learners. Of the 132 lexical responses, 88 were correct (66.7%), with recognition accuracy varying considerably across individual words. Previously known vocabulary was recognised substantially more accurately than unfamiliar items (94.9% compared with 24.5%), highlighting the importance of learners' existing German vocabulary knowledge. The results also revealed different associations with familiar English and Ukrainian forms: certain English-German similarities corresponded to incorrect interpretations, whereas Ukrainian-German correspondences were frequently perceived as helpful. Together, these findings demonstrate the relevance of previous vocabulary knowledge and cross-linguistic similarity when examining German word recognition in multilingual classrooms.

The findings have practical implications for German vocabulary instruction in multilingual classrooms. Teachers can build on learners' existing knowledge of English and Ukrainian by introducing both reliable lexical correspondences and false friends, encouraging pupils to compare forms, examine meanings and verify their interpretations in context. Particular attention should be given to misleading English-German similarities, such as fast, bald and hell, alongside useful correspondences involving words such as Hand and Dach. The recognition patterns observed in this study also highlight the value of assessing previous vocabulary knowledge before introducing unfamiliar lexical items. Integrating these practices into classroom activities can support systematic attention to cross-linguistic relationships and provide learners with strategies for more informed German vocabulary recognition.

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