



Cognates and False Cognates: American English and Mexican Spanish

How Words Connect and Confuse
Across Languages

Key Vocabulary



Cognate

A word that looks, sounds, and means the same in two languages, like 'animal.'



False Cognate

A word that looks or sounds similar in two languages but means different things, like 'embarazada' vs. 'embarrassed.'



Translation

Changing words or text to another language while keeping the meaning.



Meaning

What a word, phrase, or sentence represents or expresses in a language.

What Are Cognates?

Words That Cross Borders

Cognates are words in two languages that look, sound, and mean the same thing. For example, the word '**hospital**' is spelled and pronounced almost the same in both English and Spanish.

Why They Matter

Cognates make learning a new language easier because you can recognize and remember them quickly.



Cognates in Everyday Life



English: doctor, color, family

These words are used daily in American English.



Spanish: doctor, color, familia

They look and sound similar to their English versions.

What Are False Cognates?

Looks Can Be Deceiving

False cognates are words that look or sound similar in English and Spanish, but have very different meanings.

For example, '**actual**' in English means 'real', but in Spanish, '**actual**' means 'current' or 'present'.



Common False Cognates



Embarazada

In Spanish, this means
'pregnant', not
'embarrassed'.



Ropa

In Spanish, this means
'clothes', not 'rope'.



Sensible

In Spanish, it means
'sensitive', not 'reasonable'.

Why Do Cognates and False Cognates Exist?

Language History

Many English and Spanish words come from Latin, so they share roots and look alike. But over time, some words changed their meanings in one language but not the other.

Real-World Example

'Assistir' in Spanish means 'to attend', while 'assist' in English means 'to help'.



Match the words with the definitions

1.

éxito

a) Spanish for 'success', not 'exit'.

2.

carpeta

b) Spanish for 'bookstore', not 'library'.

3.

librería

c) Spanish for 'last' or 'final', not 'ultimate'.

4.

último

d) Spanish for 'folder', not 'carpet'.

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Using Cognates and Avoiding Mistakes

Tips for Learners

- Use cognates to expand your vocabulary quickly.
- Always double-check words that look similar—they might be false cognates!
- When in doubt, ask a native speaker or use a trusted dictionary.

Real-World Application

Understanding cognates and false cognates helps avoid awkward or funny mistakes when speaking or writing in a new language.

Summary: Connecting Languages

Cognates help us learn and communicate across English and Spanish, while false cognates remind us to be careful with words that look familiar. By understanding both, you can be a more confident and accurate communicator.

For more information:
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