Learners' awareness of difficulty of loanword cognates: 
Is *katakana eigo* really helpful?

Emi Uchida

*Waseda University*

Although cognate knowledge is widely acknowledged as a useful tool for L2 learners in many pedagogical handbooks and studies of L2 reading, there has been little empirical research in this area, particularly between languages with perceived distance. This presentation reports an empirical study to investigate cognate inferencing strategies when guessing the meaning of unfamiliar L2 words. We examined how Japanese learners comprehend the meaning of the five contrastive semantic types of loanword cognates, i.e. true cognates, close/distant false cognates, and convergent/divergent cognates, with or without contextual cues, at first encounter or later in their learning of L2 and to what extent they are aware of the accuracy of their answers.

169 3rd grade junior high school students, who were labelled as low proficient (LP) learners, and 55 university students as high proficient (HP) learners were tested on a multiple-choice test of 20 cognates consisting of equal numbers of the five semantic types, presented in either helpful or neutral contexts. Cognates were controlled to be known in L1 by both groups but unknown in L2 only by the LP group. Subjects' comprehension ability was measured from accuracy of selecting the correct meaning of L2 cognates presented in a sentence out of three alternatives. They were also asked to record confidence on a five-point scale after each question to show their awareness.

Accuracy scores suggested that, in first-time inferencing, whereas true cognates were the easiest, and partially overlapping divergent and convergent cognates relatively easier, close/distant false cognates were the hardest. Higher learnability was observed in divergent and distant false cognates than other types of cognates. Effects of contextual cues were greater with divergent and convergent cognates. The broad difficulty hierarchy emerging in the present study is interestingly partly similar to, but partly different from, the predictions that go back to the contrastive/behaviourist days of Lado.

Confidence scores stayed near-medium with less variation than for accuracy scores,
suggesting their insufficient awareness. Still, TL proficiency and availability of contextual cues were the major determinants of appropriate confidence highly correlating with accuracy. There was also a tendency for LP learners to be less confident than HP learners but exceedingly overconfident with their inferencing with or without contextual cues, which suggests a danger that they may make wrong guesses but be satisfied with them without checking the accuracy by appealing to a dictionary or a teacher. Once more information was available, they became less confident in absolute terms, but more appropriately confident or even under-confident with their inferencing. HP learners were appropriately confident with cognates in neutral contexts but slightly under-confident with ones in helpful contexts. In terms of pedagogy, underconfidence here does not lead to any practical problems, as this implies that learners will be exceedingly cautious with their inferencing.

The correlations between accuracy and confidence illuminate learners’ consciousness about misleadingness of cognates. When successful learners are accurate in comprehending cognates, they should be relatively more confident in their answers. When they are inaccurate, they should be less confident. Nevertheless, such awareness was not demonstrated by low and nonsignificant correlations among HP learners and negative and partly significant correlations among LP learners. The findings from confident scores showed that cognates belong to the area where true awareness of accuracy is difficult to develop due to their frequent deceptiveness.