The Influence of Semantic Incongruency on Vocabulary Acquisition of Kurdish Learners of English Language

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	This study investigates the influence of semantic incongruency on the vocabulary acquisition of Kurdish learners of English and the different factors involved in resolving such incongruency. It also examines whether the level of language proficiency is key in facilitating learner understanding of this phenomenon. To these ends, a mixed method approach that features quantitative and qualitative data collection was adopted, for which two groups of learners were tested and interviewed. Findings indicate that semantic incongruency hinders vocabulary acquisition because it causes different types of lexical errors. Learners found semantically incongruent words that conceptually refer to two different domains easier to understand than those referring to one domain. Furthermore, knowledge of the collocational behavior of words and equivalent L3 words can help learners successfully use such vocabulary. The evidence derived in this study suggests that attention should be given to how meanings are ascribed to words in different languages and to the limitations presented by the tendency of learners to refer to their L1 as they use L2 vocabulary. Examining these issues is vital in increasing learner awareness of the differences between L1 and L2. Semantically congruent, collocation, and L3 words can be better incorporated into teaching and testing materials through inclusion in syllabi designed for vocabulary instruction.

1. Introduction

Vocabulary acquisition is an integral component of learning and acquiring a second/ foreign language (1). The process is highly interactive with the various skills of

language usage, and no communication can occur without sufficient knowledge of the target language (TL) vocabulary. Therefore, foreign language learners always struggle with problems that arise from lexical issues. James (1998: 143) points out that 'lexical errors are the most frequent category of error'. He also indicates that even native speakers find learners' lexical errors the most frustrating and confusing types of errors, especially at the early stages of language learning during which knowledge of grammar is insufficient and the communication load comprises primarily of vocabularies. Hedge (2000: 111) points out that errors in vocabulary are 'potentially more misleading than grammar' since they leave the intended message open to different interpretations by the interlocutor. A good example can be the following sentence by a Swedish-speaking learner of English 'Yes, my father has an affair in that village' where the Swedish word *affär*, which means *shop*, can be confused with the English word *affair* for an English-speaking listener (ibid: 2000).

1.2 Stages of Learning a New L2 Word

For a native infant, learning a new word covers the stages of labelling, categorizing, and network building (Thornbury 2002). The infant labels the word as concepts, places them under categories, and builds a vocabulary web to retrieve the concepts. By contrast, when an L2 learner encounters a new L2 word, he/she refers to prior knowledge about his/her L1. Therefore, L2 learners have an advantage over infants because the former already know how one language categorizes the world (Swan 1997). At this stage, learners look forward to identifying the similarities between L1 and L2 because it facilitates a learning task. Confirming this observation, Swan (1997) states that learners inevitably map new words using their L1. Ringbom (2007) shows that Finnish learners more frequently refer to the Swedish language as they learn English than to their L1 because they perceive the distance between Swedish and English to be small. The distance between L1 and L2 and the differences between the two languages determine the frequency at which a learner refers to L1 when learning another language. Therefore, **language distance** is significant in language learning because it drives referral to existing knowledge on mother tongues.

Another stage in vocabulary acquisition is validating what Swan (1997) calls the **equivalence hypothesis**. In this stage, not all learners' hypotheses are accurate,

causing them to commit errors. Some hypotheses are negated before a learner makes a mistake and at the time during which the learner encounters usage of a word in different contexts. During this stage, the learner is confronted with the necessity to update his/her way of labelling words in accordance with previous conceptual knowledge or to 'create a new concept if one does not already exist' (walker 2008:69). Difficulties arise when L1 and L2 lexical items do not share identical semantic features. This problem is rectified when learners refine the existing vocabulary in their mental lexicon, which can be completed by producing words in various contexts, and paying attention to feedback or correction. Jiang (2004) summarizes the different stages of learning a new L2 word into two: the **comprehension stage**, at which learners understand and store words, and the **development stage**, during which the semantic properties and translation equivalences in both languages are validated.

1.2 Cross-linguistic Influence on L2 Vocabulary Acquisition and Use

The influence of learner L1 on L2 acquisition was first referred to by Weinreich (1963) as **language interference**. Walker (2008) argues, however, that this term leaves no possibility for any positive effect of a learner's L1 on L2 learning. Weinreich's view is therefore restricted to obstacles and not to the assistance that an L1 may provide. Conversely, other researchers use **language transfer** as a reference to the fact that learner L1 can positively and negatively affect L2 acquisition. Odlin (1989: 27) defines this term as 'the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired'. Learners use the similarities between their L1 and the target L2 in identifying every possible factor that can aid in L2 use; the potential for committing errors and using odd expressions is attributed to the differences between the two languages. Specifying the negative effects of existing languages is easy when implemented based on errors, but positive effects are intangible and difficult to monitor. Therefore, according to Ringbom (2007), learners concentrate on similarities rather than differences (in contrast to the method applied by linguists).

Vocabulary is highly susceptible to influence from learners' mother tongues. This influence depends on what Swan (1997) refers to as **cultural distance**, i.e., differences in conceptual structures amongst languages. The greater the cultural difference, the

higher the number of difficulties a learner experiences in identifying L2 words with the same concepts as in L1. Laufer (1991: 14-16) classifies the cross-linguistic factors in learning an L2 word into three categories: The first is the **similarity in form between L1 and L2 words** (referring to cognates and false cognates). Cognates facilitate vocabulary acquisition, whereas false cognates do not. The second factor is **meaning relations among the words in L1 and L2**. Words in different languages do not correspond to the same concepts, as in Hebrew's *bait*, French's *mansion*, and English's *home*. The third factor is **incongruencies in lexical gridding** or **semantic incongruency**, which is the main subject of the present study.

1.4 Semantic Incongruency

Different terminologies have been employed in identifying semantic incongruency. Laufer (1991) refers to this phenomenon as **incongruencies in lexical gridding**, which refers to the semantic mismatch in specific items between two languages. Such mismatch occurs when two L2 items are equivalent to one L1 item, or vice versa, or when a word of a language only partially covers the meaning of another word in another language. The first case is called divergent incongruency. For instance, the Kurdish word *ziman* is equivalent to both the English *language* and *tongue*. An example of convergent incongruency is the English word for *fly* as being equivalent to both the Hebrew *af* (flying with wings) and *tas* (flying with a machine) (ibid: 16). These examples are applicable where English is a learner's L2. The third type of incongruency is the partial overlap of meaning. For example, the Hebrew word *tafkid* can mean *duty* and *function*, depending on context.

Learners' efforts to grasp all the features of an L2 item prompt the examination of the existing equivalence hypotheses of such learners. At this stage, the constraints on the usage of new items are revealed to the learners given that hypotheses can be negated or confirmed. Swan (1997) illustrates that semantic incongruency can cause lexical errors because sometimes, a learner's hypothesis on the equivalence between L1 and L2 fails. The source of these errors is the learner's familiarity with some features of a word but non-familiarity with the semantic restrictions posed by the word. For example, an English learner of French may confusingly use the two equivalent French words for English *door*: *porte* (door) and *portiére* (door of a car).

When a new word is incorporated into learners' existing mental lexicon, learning goes through various stages before accurate acquisition is reached. Ringbom (2001: 64), who refers to semantic incongruency as the **semantic extension of single lexical units**, reveals that in this process, a learner can generally depend on the formal similarities between specific items in both L1 and L2. Walker (2008) explains that convergent incongruency is problematic for L2 learners, but native speakers can clarify themselves in context and generate the intended meaning. In divergent incongruency, however, accurate expression necessitates familiarity with more than one word and accurate use in context, making this issue a more serious problem.

As a part of lexical error analysis, different empirical studies determined the influence of semantic incongruency, divergent incongruency, and convergent incongruency on learning/acquiring TL vocabulary. In a study on Czech learners of English, Duškova (1969) found that the source of 54 lexical errors (out of 233 errors) is that these items are semantically incongruent in the two languages. Czech learners fail to discriminate between such items. In analyzing the vocabulary errors committed by Burmese learners of English, Myint Su (1971 cited in Laufer 1991) shows that divergent incongruency causes many of the lexical errors identified in the study. The Burmese words *hoi* and *pyo* can mean *borrow/lend* and *talk/ask/speak/say*, respectively. The following errors clearly explain the influence of semantic incongruency (ibid: 177, 162, 180, 175):

1. I will *borrow* my bicycle from my father.
2. They *talk* that they get a new car.
3. Landowners *hire* their wide lands to the poor.
4. He *lends* the book from his friend.

Macaulay (1966) illustrates that Spanish learners of English encounter many obstacles in vocabulary acquisition because a certain lexical item in Spanish can cover the semantic features of two or more than two items, as in the case of *discutir*, which corresponds to *argue* and *discuss*. Divergent incongruency is another type of difficulty encountered by Spanish speaking learners, as in the case of *esquina* (from the outside) and *rincón* (from the inside) being equivalent to the English *corner* (ibid: 132):

5. It is in the corner.	Esta en la *rincón*.
6. It is on the corner.	Esta en la *esquina*.

1.5 The Research Questions

As previously stated, this work centers on investigating the effects of semantic incongruency on Kurdish learners' English vocabulary acquisition. It looks into the influence of divergent incongruency, i.e., a situation where a Kurdish word is equivalent to two English words. This incongruency is caused by the fact that the L2 words outnumber the L1 words. The questions explored in this study are as follows:

1. To what extent can semantic incongruency hinder Kurdish learners' acquisition and use of English vocabulary?
2. What factors are involved in Kurdish learners' understanding and usage of semantically incongruent words?
3. To what extent, does a learner's level of English language proficiency facilitate the understanding of semantic incongruency (i.e., the awareness of the semantic restrictions imposed by semantically incongruent words) and the prevention of errors in using such words?

1.6 The Research Hypotheses

Based on the research questions, the hypotheses formulated are as follows:

1. Semantic incongruency hinders Kurdish learners' English vocabulary acquisition and use.
2. A high level of language proficiency considerably aids the understanding of semantic incongruency, thereby reducing lexical errors.

2. Methodology

2.1 Materials

An original measurement instrument was designed for this study given that no other research has been targeted explicitly towards investigating the influence of semantic incongruency on Kurdish learners. The material used in the current research aims to assess the participants' ability to differentiate English and Kurdish words that are semantically incongruent. The material also enables the investigation of learner accuracy in terms of the receptive and productive use of semantically incongruent

words. This exploration intends to elucidate the problems that participants regard as difficult. Note that this study examines divergent incongruency because my initial research reveals that considerably more cases of divergent incongruency between English and Kurdish are available than convergent incongruency and partial overlap of meaning in the two languages. Moreover, divergent incongruency constitutes the major problem for the learners given that they have more L2 word alternatives to choose from; in convergent incongruency, a learner can potentially recognize intended meaning (Walker 2008). Given these considerations, the first step in designing the survey questions for the present research was to select divergently incongruent words. Each Kurdish word used has two equivalent English words; thus, 20 Kurdish words with 40 equivalent English words were chosen. Words chosen are of different parts of speech, but nouns and verbs constitute the greater part of the group of words.

The second step was to formulate activities that feature the use of these words. Three were designed, i.e., activities A, B, and C. The materials were divided into three tests for the following reasons. The first is because this approach enables the separate observation of learner ability in receptive and productive vocabulary use when learning English word pairs. Second, the activities are characterized by gradual difficulty; the first in the series revolves around the participants' first exposure to the words (also represents the receptive perspective of the words), the second is a relatively more difficult activity, and the third is the most difficult one. In other words, difficulty level is gradually increased following this sequence: the receptive component, represented by activity A, is presented first, after which the productive aspect, represented by activity C, is presented given that the knowledge about lexis basically shifts from the receptive to the productive perspective (Melka 1997). The third reason the materials were divided into different sets is to avoid monotonous and tedious testing of the same types of words; variety ensures learner engagement and encourages them to do their best in tests. Activity A is a gap-filling exercise, in which the equivalent English words are used in context. The participants were provided with paragraphs with gaps; an incongruent pair was given for each gap and the participants were asked to choose one of the words in a pair. A total of 38 gaps

were created from the 20 words because 18-word pairs were used twice, with each word placed in a gap to ensure balance in testing all the words.

2.2 Participants

The participants were two groups of Kurdish learners of English language. They were chosen basically because the study focuses on Kurdish learners and because these groups held different language proficiencies, enabling the comparison of performance. This selection also allowed for the examination of the hypothesis that the level of language proficiency facilitates a better understanding of semantic incongruency. The first group comprised 15 students (9 males, 6 females) aged 24 to 28. They attended a pre-sessional course at the English Language Teaching Unit (ELTU) of the University of Leicester for eligibility in the MA and PhD programs of the university. They were advanced students of English, with overall IELTS test scores of 5 to 6.

The second group also comprised 15 students (8 males, 7 females) aged 22 to 24. They were second-year English Department students at the College of Languages, University of Salahaddin (Kurdistan Region). The students' level of language proficiency was lower intermediate, which was in accordance with their academic year level. None of the students had taken IELTS tests. Permission was obtained from all the participants prior to the tests and interviews.

3. Application and Analysis

3.1 Results of Activities

In activity A, the inaccuracies of the participants had to do with the fact that they placed items in inappropriate gaps. Table 1 shows the results for the two groups, whose errors (quantity committed) were compared. Each group's answers were checked. The recurring errors that occurred in 30-word usages were identified given that each word pair was used twice in two gaps; these word pairs were distributed to 15 students; however, the *start/begin* and *speak/talk* pairs were used in 15 gaps and identified out of 15 usages.

Table (1): Results of activity A

word pairs	wrong answers - lower-intermediate students	word pairs	wrong answers - advanced students
Error, mistake	23	Error, mistake	17
Close, slam	16	Close, slam	10
Under, below	13	Wide, broad	9
Shade, shadow	13	Sound, voice	8
Wide, broad	13	Shade, shadow	7
Big, great	12	Speak, talk	6 (out of 15)
Kill, murder	10	Under, below	5
Sound, voice	10	Kill, murder	5
Wounded, injured	9	End, finish	5
Try, attempt	9	Try, attempt	5
Too, very	8	Start, begin	3 (out of 15)
End, finish	8	Wounded, injured	2
Start, begin	5	Too, very	2
Speak, talk	4	Big, great	2
Extinguish, switch off	4	Extinguish, switch off	1
Boy, son	4	Language, tongue	1
Language, tongue	3	Boy, son	1
Daughter, girl	2	Hour, o'clock	1
Door, gate	1	Door, gate	1
Hour, o'clock	1	Daughter, girl	0

In activity B, the incorrect answers stem from the participants' use of the wrong item in translating the Kurdish sentences. These responses were identified from amongst 30 usages for each group because each word pair in Table 2 was used to compose two meaningful Kurdish sentences. This exercise was administered to 15 participants.

Table (2): Results of activity B

word pairs	wrong word choices - lower-intermediate students	word pairs	wrong word choices - advanced students
Kill, murder	13	Wide, broad	9
Wide, broad	12	End, finish	6
Close, slam	10	Kill, murder	5
Speak, talk	6	Under, below	5
Wounded, injured	6	Close, slam	4

End, finish	4	Wounded, injured	4
Under, below	3	Speak, talk	4
Boy, son	1	Boy, son	0

In activity C, the responses were likewise identified from 30 usages given that each English word pair was used to compose two Kurdish sentences. The exercise was administered to the 15 participants of each group. The errors that the participants made were those that revolved around using the wrong item in translating the Kurdish sentences. Table 3 compares the performance of the two groups.

Table (3): Results of activity C

word pairs	*wrong word choices - lower-intermediate students*	*word pairs*	*wrong choices - advanced students*
Shade, shadow	*16*	*Shade, shadow*	*9*
Too, very	*13*	*Big, great*	*7*
Big, great	*7*	*Too, very*	*6*
Sound, voice	*3*	*Sound, voice*	*2*
Extinguish, switch off	*2*	*Hour, o'clock*	*1*
Hour, o'clock	*1*	*Extinguish, switch off*	*0*
Daughter, girl	*1*	*Daughter, girl*	*0*
Language, tongue	*0*	*Language, tongue*	*0*

Table 4 compares the results of the activities on the receptiveness (i.e., activity A) and productivity (i.e., activity C) of some selected lexical items. The word pairs were identified from amongst 30 answers.

Table (4): Activities completed by lower-intermediate students

Receptive		*Productive*	
word pairs	*wrong answers*	*word pairs*	*wrong answers*
Shade, shadow	*13*	*Shade, shadow*	*16*
Big, great	*12*	*Big, great*	*7*
Sound, voice	*10*	*Sound, voice*	*3*
Too, very	*8*	*Too, very*	*13*
Extinguish, switch off	*5*	*Extinguish, switch off*	*2*
Language, tongue	*5*	*Language, tongue*	*0*
Daughter, girl	*2*	*Daughter, girl*	*1*
Hour, o'clock	*1*	*Hour, o'clock*	*1*

Table (5): Activities completed by advanced students

Receptive		*Productive*	
word pairs	*wrong answers*	*word pairs*	*wrong answers*
Sound, voice	*8*	*Sound, voice*	*9*
Shade, shadow	*7*	*Shade, shadow*	*6*
Big, great	*2*	*Big, great*	*6*
Language, tongue	*2*	*Language, tongue*	*3*
Too, very	*1*	*Too, very*	*2*
Extinguish, switch off	*1*	*Extinguish, switch off*	*0*
Hour, o'clock	*1*	*Hour, o'clock*	*0*
Daughter, girl	*0*	*Daughter, girl*	*0*

Tables 4 and 5 show that some lexical items were more successfully used, and others were more productive in the productive sense. For instance, the lower-intermediate students used shade/ shadow and too/very in their receptive sense more correctly. The rest of the paired lexical items were more correctly used in their productive sense. As for the advanced learners, four-word pairs were more accurately used in their receptive sense: *sound/voice*, *big/great*, *language/tongue*, and *too/very*. The other word pairs were used more successfully in their productive sense. The comparison of performance demonstrates that the advanced learners committed fewer errors than did the lower-intermediate learners in receptively using the selected pairs, except for *language/tongue*; the advanced learners also more successfully used all the word pairs, except for *sound/voice*, in their productive sense than did the lower-intermediate learners.

2.2 Interview Responses

The participants' perspectives on the most difficult and easiest choices were determined. The three advanced students were interviewed first, and their responses are presented in Table 6.

Table (6): Word choices of advanced students

Participants	*Most difficult choice*	*Easiest choice*
Participant 1	*Shade/shadow, wide/broad, end/finish, speak/talk, too/very.*	*Language/tongue, boy/son, wounded/injured, close/slam, daughter/girl, extinguish/switch off.*

Participant 2	*Shade/shadow, wide/broad, error/mistake, kill/murder, end/finish.*	*Door/gate, hour/o'clock, boy/son, speak/talk, daughter/girl, language/tongue,* extinguish/*switch off.*
Participant 3	*Wide/broad, kill/murder.*	*Door/gate, start/begin, daughter/girl.*

Participant 1: In activity A, the most difficult choices for the first participant were *shade/shadow* and *wide/broad*, whereas the easiest was *son/boy* and *language/tongue*. In activity B, *end/finish* and *speak/talk* was the most difficult, whereas *wounded/injured* and *close/slam* were the easiest. Under activity C, *too/very* was the most difficult choice, whereas *daughter/girl* and *extinguish/switch off* were the easiest.

Participant 2: The second participant identified *wide/broad*, *shade/shadow*, and *error/mistake* as the most difficult items and gate/*door* and *o'clock/hour* as the easiest in activity A. In activity B, *murder/kill*, *end/finish* were the difficult choices, whereas *son/boy* and *speak/talk* were the easy options. Finally, the learner found *girl/daughter*, *language/tongue*, *switch off/extinguish* very easy under activity C; she found no difficult words in this activity.

Participant 3: In activity A, the last participant deemed *wide/broad* and *kill/murder* confusing, and *gate/door*, *start/begin*, and *girl/daughter* easy to understand. The following table (table 7) provides a general picture of the learners' choices.

Table (7): Word choices of lower-intermediate

Participants	Most difficult choice	Easiest choice
Participant 1	*Door/gate, close/slam under/below, sound/voice.*	*Boy/son, wounded/injured daughter/girl.*
Participant 2	*Wide/broad, under/below big/great, speak/talk too/very, big/great.*	*Language/tongue, kill/murder boy/son, extinguish/switch off.*
Participant 3	*Error/mistake, under/below speak/talk, end/finish under/below, too/very sound/voice, big/great.*	*Daughter/girl, big/great boy/son, daughter/girl language/tongue.*

Participant 1 viewed *door/gate* and *close/slam* as the most difficult choices and *wounded/injured* and *son/boy* as the easiest in activity A. In activity B, *below/under*

was the most difficult, whereas *son/boy* was the easiest. As for activity C, *sound/voice* was the most difficult option, whereas *daughter/girl* was the easiest.

Participant 2 considered *wide/broad*, *big/great*, and *below/under* as the most difficult choices and *language/tongue* as the easiest in activity A. The most difficult word pairs were *speak/talk* and *below/under*, but the easiest was *kill/murder* and *son/boy* in activity B. In activity C, *too/very* and *big/great* were the most difficult, whereas *extinguish/switch off* and *language/tongue* were the easiest choices.

Participant 3 regarded *error/mistake*, *below/under* as difficult and *big/great*, *girl/daughter* as easy in activity A. In activity B, *end/finish*, *speak/talk*, and *wide/broad* were evaluated as difficult, whereas son/boy were assessed as easy. The learner found *daughter/girl*, and *language/tongue* easy, but *too/very*, *voice/sound*, and *big/great* difficult.

Overall, the trends in choices of the participants varied from learner to learner; however, the participants shared many common choices. For example, the following word pairs were the most frequently selected as the easiest: *boy/son*, *daughter/girl*, *language/tongue*, *extinguish/switch off*, and *gate/door*. Conversely, the word pairs repeatedly chosen as the most difficult were *wide/broad*, *under/below*, *too/very*, *speak/talk*, *shade/shadow*, and *end/finish*.

2.3 Discussions

2.3.1 Influence of Semantic Incongruency on Kurdish Learners' Vocabulary Acquisition and Use

The results indicate that the semantically incongruent words posed lexical problems for the Kurdish learners in the receptive and productive senses of the words. The learners attempted to use their knowledge of some L2 lexical items in working out L1 issues without exercising caution regarding the limitations of the semantic restrictions posed by these items. Therefore, semantic incongruency is a source of frequent and different lexical errors, as well as inaccuracies in vocabulary usage. In activity A, no English word pair was accurately used (error free) by the lower-intermediate learners. The errors on some of the word pairs were as follows: *shade/shadow*, 23 errors; *close/slam*, 16 errors, *big/great*, 12 errors; *sound/voice*, 10 errors; *end/finish*, 8 errors; and *boy/son*, 4 errors. As for the advanced learners, only

one word pair was appropriately used by all the participants, i.e., *daughter/girl*; all the other word pairs were inappropriately used although with differences that are discussed in Section 5.2. The frequencies of some of the errors committed by the advanced learners are as follows: *error/mistake*, 17 errors; *close/slam*, 10 errors; *wide/broad*, 9 errors; *kill/murder*, 5 errors; *try/attempt*, 5 errors; *language/tongue*, 2 errors. The two groups of learners mis-selected many of the appropriate lexical items for the contexts provided, consequently committing different lexical errors that cause confusion, collocational errors, and void avoidance.

2.3.2 Lexical Errors that Cause Confusion

The learners' failure to use the correct lexical items produced patterns that resulted in confusing constructions and sentences. The following example errors were made by the lower-intermediate learners in activity A:

7. It was nine *hour* in the morning…
8. … the *voice* of my brother's footsteps…
9. … he left fingerprints on the car's *gate*…
10. … the temperature went down to two degrees *under* zero…
11. We would hastily *switch off* the fire…
12. … the north *door* of the university campus.
13. Although the street was *broad*…
14. … the *language* has been cut.

The errors made by the advanced learners in activity A are as follows:

15. … it was hot and we were looking for *shadow*.
16. … it takes her an *o'clock* to get back…
17. … to make the opponents *finish* the war.
18. … I could hear my brother *talking* Spanish…
19. … my dog was still asleep *below* the couch, …
20. … one of the students were *wounded* (in a car accident) …
21. … I could only see his *shade*.
22. I heard the *sound* of somebody shouting outside.

The remarks of the learners interviewed about their vocabulary choices reflected the difficulty of the cognitive process involved in learning to distinguish incongruent words. One of the learners expressed this difficulty thus: 'I don't know the difference between *shade/shadow*, but I think *shadow* is for something big; you see it like, the building shadow, or a tree shadow'. The other participants' comments indicate that divergent incongruency impedes vocabulary usage. A participant confirms this observation as follows: 'I don't know which time we use *gate* and which time we use *door'* […] yes they are different'. Conceptual efforts were exerted to categorize their mental lexicon by using the L2, but in many instances, their existing L1 knowledge intervened and posed challenges to the process because the L1 and L2 provide them different types of information.

In activity B, some learners failed to employ the accurate lexical item in producing meaningful English sentences, despite fact the word pairs being given in brackets. The productive use of the incongruent words in activity B drove the learners to use their L1 vocabulary equivalences in translating the English sentences. Examples of the errors made by the lower-intermediate participants in activity B are as follows:

23. The cat is *below* the table.
24. Cancer *murders* many people.
25. My father was *injured* in war.
26. The road *finishes* here.

The incorrect decisions made by advanced learners in choosing lexical resulted in the following errors:

27. He did not let me *end* my sentence.
28. Netherlands is *under* the sea level.
29. Helen is *wounded* in a car accident.
30. Azad has *wide* shoulders.

In activity C, all the sentences include a Kurdish word that can be translated into two English words caused the participants to commit many lexical errors. Divergent incongruency impedes the conceptual process, as indicated by a participant: '*voice*

and *sound* are *deng* [Kurdish equivalent word], but I do not know how to translate *sound*, and how to translate *voice*'. The learners from both groups frequently referred to the Kurdish vocabulary equivalents of English in attempting to translate the English sentences. Therefore, they misinterpreted how meaning for some of the Kurdish words is constructed in the English language. This error was confirmed by some of their lexical choices, which constituted the largest proportion of the errors. These learners refer to their L1 without exercising caution in comparing some of the L2 items to L1 items. Thus, the semantically incongruent words were used to produce English sentences without awareness of the semantic restrictions of the words; thus, with vocabulary selections, negative elements of language transfer can be identified in the following outcomes produced by the two groups:

31. Azad sat under the *shadow*.
32. This is the car's *voice*.
33. Helen is *too* clever.
34. Look at your *shade*!
35. I *switched off* the fire.
36. It is *very* hot for playing today.

2.3.3 Collocational Errors

The semantically incongruent words also caused collocational errors. The learners produced incorrect collocations because a given lexical item was used to create unnatural combinations; this tendency was prompted by the fact that an item has two L1 equivalences. An example is using *begin* instead of *start* in producing the combination **begin the engine*. The learners' L1 provides them two alternatives causes them to occasionally violate collocational rules – an error that can be regarded as an interlingual factor affecting collocation production. Some other examples of deviant collocations produced by the lower-intermediate and advanced Kurdish learners because of semantic incongruency are enumerated below.

37. **made the try*
38. ** big victory*
39. ** wide shoulders*

40. * great problem
41. * have an attempt
42. * guilty of killing

Other studies have highlighted the influence of divergent incongruency on collocation production. In a study on the English collocations produced by German learners, Nesselhauf (2005: 242), it is found out that lexical incongruency between the learners' L1 and L2 is the primary cause of deviant collocations: '[f]or nouns, negative L1 influence is particularly likely if one German noun corresponds to several English ones […] It is also strong if two L2 verbs can translate L1 verb'. This study supports the conclusion drawn in the current work; that is, the semantic incongruency significantly affects the production of incorrect collocations. Furthermore, awareness of semantic incongruency can help learners produce correct collocations.

2.3.4 Void Avoidance

Another error caused by divergent incongruency is **void avoidance**, pertaining to the linguistic behavior in which a learner avoids using certain L2 lexical items because no L1 counterparts exist. Five participants avoided using such words and instead identified alternatives for the translation exercises. For example, they used *she* for *daughter*/*girl*, and *a.m.* for *o'clock*/*hour*; another alternative was altering the structure of a sentence to avoid using a word pair, as in '*It is hot today; it is difficult to play*', instead of using *too hot* or *very hot* in the sentence. This tendency is also regarded because of a weakness in the methodology employed in this study, generating a lexical problem that the learners encounter under divergent incongruency. This finding is also observed in other foreign learners of English. As Blum-Kulka and Levenston indicate, Hebrew learners

> tend to avoid words for which no precise equivalents occur in their mother tongues, especially when the semantic components of such words require them to make distinctions they are not used to making at the level of single words (1983: 124).

The current study confirms the findings of the aforementioned research; that is, the semantic incongruency impedes English vocabulary acquisition. Therefore, the first hypothesis is supported; the Kurdish learners struggled in appropriately selecting lexical items and using English vocabulary because of semantic incongruency. The significance of these results lies in their implications for vocabulary instruction in general, and their semantic dimension in relation to language distance between L1 and L2 in particular. Further research should be carried out to comprehensively examine the effects of Kurdish and English interlingual factors on Kurdish learners.

2.3.5 Factors Involved in Understanding/Resolving Semantic Incongruency

Because semantic incongruency has been demonstrated to affect Kurdish learners, and important requirement is to more specifically examine the factors involved in the way the learners understood the phenomenon.

One of the factors involved in the participants' understanding of semantic incongruency is whether two equivalent L2 words refer to one or two domains. The conceptual knowledge required of a learner prior to the use of a lexical item significantly affected the ability of the participants to distinguish the word pairs. Thus, although the L2 presented two words for one L1 word, the learners tended to more easily process the two L2 items that cognitively refer to two completely different actions or ideas. The pairs that illustrate this point are *language/ tongue*, *door/ gate*, *extinguish/ switch off*, *hour/ o'clock*, *boy/ son*, and *daughter/ girl*. A lower-intermediate learner stated that '*language* and *tongue* are very easy because *language* is learning and studying, but *tongue*, that's the physical part of our body'. Another learner remarked on the difference between *extinguish/switch off* in this manner: 'we use *switch off* for lights and plugs, but for fire, it is *extinguish*; it is wrong to say *extinguish* lights'. An advanced learner declared that 'we use *o'clock* with telling the time, while *hour* is used with a period of time'. Most of the learners tended to exert fully automated control over distinguishing such word pairs in both the receptive and productive senses. Some other conceptual representations of their mental lexicon are as follows:

43. '*Gate* is usually used by larger number of people and not *door*, like a university *gate*; it is also like a big *door*'.

44. '*Son*…if someone have a *son*, we use *son*, but if somebody is not your possession, it is a *boy*'.

The learners tended to articulate the contrast between the semantic aspects of these words without constraints. This behavior is also visibly reflected by the number of errors committed for these word pairs both receptively and productively. In activity A, the least number of errors committed by both two groups are those on *extinguish/switch off*, *boy/son*, *language/tongue*, *daughter/girl*, *hour/o'clock*, and *door/gate*. In activity C, the smallest number of errors are those on *extinguish/switch off*, *hour/o'clock*, *daughter/girl*, and *language/tongue*. These results are listed in Tables 1 and 3, which indicate that these word pairs are more easily processed than others.

Conversely, the Kurdish learners tended to experience more difficulty using other English word pairs that conceptually refer to one domain; they also deem effectively using such pairs in receptive and productive contexts a challenge. The complete interrelation of two L2 items caused most learners to commit recurring errors. In cases where word pairs deceptively resemble each other, the learners' tended to exert more substantial cognitive effort because they are not used to such new labelling. These observations are confirmed by the learners' tendency to reflect on L2 word pairs, as well as by error frequency. For instance, an advanced learner remarked that '*wide* and *broad*…and *kill* and *murder* are confusing because for me both the same meaning and idea'. A lower-intermediate learner stated that '*error* and *mistake* are same thing, I mean same meaning; it was difficult for me'. These items completely overlap, and lack of distinctive tangible distinctive features required for accurate discrimination. These observations are supported thus:

45. 'I know that *shade* and *shadow* means *sêber*, and both of them mean a dark place, but it is difficult to know how to use each one'.
46. 'We have different languages; it is hard to know how is *under* and how is *below*'.
47. '*Very* and *too* was very difficult for me; it is first time that I know they are different. They have the same meaning in our language'.

The characteristics of these word pairs confusing the participants above, consequently preventing them from internalizing the pairs. These pairs can be regarded as the strongest sources of lexical inaccuracies and problems. Accordingly, many of these word pairs are responsible for numerous errors, such as *shade/shadow*, *error/mistake*, *start/begin*, *wide/broad*, *under/below*, and *close/slam*. More precisely, *error/mistake* and *close/slam* are the most frequently committed errors in activity (1) by both groups of learners (Table 1). In activity B, the word pairs that account for the highest number of errors committed by the advanced learners are *kill/murder*, *wide/broad*, and *close/slam*; the errors most frequently committed by the lower-intermediate learners are *wide/broad*, *end/finish*, and *kill/murder*. In activity C, three-word pairs were responsible for the errors committed by the two groups: *shade/shadow*, *too/very*, and *big/great*.

The second factor involved in the participants' resolution of semantic incongruency was collocation, which was crucial to the participants' efforts in determining the paired items that are incongruent in L1 and L2. Some of the learners found that a helpful strategy is to avoid committing lexical errors that originate from semantic incongruency. An advanced learner explained that 'we don't say *made a try*, but *have a try*, and also *make an attempt* and *have a try* it was easy for me'. Another advanced learner commented that '*start* and *begin* was not difficult, because *the engine* goes with *start* and not with *begin*'. These learners' awareness of the collocational behavior of these lexical items enabled distinction. In these cases, the learners' knowledge about the natural combination and phraseology of incongruent paired items facilitated discrimination between two items. Moreover, this knowledge created a complementary relationship between collocation and semantic incongruency, in which awareness of one of these concepts leads to the successful use of the other. However, these results do not indicate that all the learners employed the collocational conventions that govern certain paired items to successfully use these items in the appropriate contexts in activity A, or use them in activity C; only the learners with knowledge about the collocations of the items effectively used collocational rules as bases for providing correct answers. Supporting these observations are the multiple errors made by the two groups activity A; that is, errors

on *big/great*, *wide/broad*, *try/attempt*, and *start/begin*. In activity C, each group mistranslated *big problem* into **great problem* in seven sentences.

The third factor that affected the participants' resolution of semantic incongruency is the relationship between the receptive and productive dimensions of some selected semantically incongruent words in Kurdish and English. Some of the items that can be processed under these perspectives were receptively tested in activity (A) and productively examined in activity C. The comparison of group performance presents variable and contradictory results from a paired item to another. Some paired items were used more successfully in their receptive sense than in their productive dimension, whereas the others were more successfully used productively than receptively. For the lower-intermediate learners, only *shade/shadow* and *too/very* were used more accurately in the receptive sense, whereas *big/great*, *sound/voice*, *extinguish/switch off*, *language/tongue*, and *daughter/girl* were used more accurately in the productive dimension; *hour/o'clock* was misused to an even extent. The advanced learners used three paired items in their receptive dimension more successfully: *sound/voice*, *big/great*, and *language/tongue*. The other paired items, such as *shade/shadow*, *extinguish/switch off*, and *hour/o'clock*, were more successfully used in the productive sense; finally, *too/very* and *daughter/girl* were evenly used across the two dimensions.

2.3.6 Role of Language Proficiency in Understanding Semantic Incongruency

Data were collected from two groups of Kurdish learners with different language proficiencies primarily because this approach enables the investigation proficiency's role in understanding semantic incongruency. The hypothesis is that the higher the language proficiency, the better a learner's ability to avoid lexical errors due to negative L2 transfer. As indicated by the results of activity A, the lower-intermediate learners committed considerably more errors on 18 paired items and evenly misplaced 2 other paired items (Table 1). This finding shows advanced learners' higher level of potential vocabulary knowledge enables them to use the word pairs in appropriate contexts. In activity B, the advanced learners more accurately chose items in translating the Kurdish sentences than did the lower-intermediate learners, except for one paired item—*end/finish*. Furthermore, the advanced learners more

successfully translated the Kurdish sentences into English with appropriate lexical choices. Therefore, they also committed fewer errors. The differences in results for a couple of word pairs are minimal, but for most of the paired items, such differences are huge.

The advanced learners showed stronger conceptual abilities on discriminating the word pairs. These learners also exhibited awareness of the collocational behavior of some of the items. The reference shows how learners develop cognitive and linguistic strategies for processing vocabulary knowledge. Moreover, none of the advanced committed the void avoidance error, suggesting that advanced learners more strongly progress in terms of accuracy. The advanced learners also exhibited better performance in receptively and productively using certain selected items. For example, the lower-intermediate students committed 13 errors in using *shade/shadow*, 12 in *big/great*, 8 in *too/very*, and 5 in *extinguish/switch off*, whereas the advanced learners committed 7, 2, 1, and 1 error in using these word pairs, respectively. As for the productive dimension, the lower-intermediate students made 16 errors in using *shade/shadow*, 13 in *too/very*, and 7 in *big/great*, whereas the advanced learners committed 6, 2, and 6 errors in using these word pairs, respectively. These results and implications are adequate indicators of the extent to which high language proficiency improves the awareness of the differences between the linguistic labels of L1 and L2 and the understanding of semantic incongruency. This advantage also intensifies the relationship of overall language proficiency and mastery of various types of knowledge on vocabulary, as discussed in Section 2.1. The current study shows the significance of language proficiency in the mastery of the semantic aspects of L2 vocabulary. The second hypothesis is therefore supported.

4. Conclusion

The influence of semantic incongruency on Kurdish learners' English vocabulary acquisition and use has been investigated. Three issues were explored: the influence of semantic incongruency, the factors involved in understanding semantic incongruency, and the relationship between language proficiency and lexical errors that result from semantic incongruency. Two hypotheses were formulated and validated.

The factors involved in the understanding of semantic incongruency were also determined. First, the incongruent paired items that refer to two separate domains were more easily understood, whereas those that refer to one domain presented more difficulties. This result is attributed to the fact that the first category requires less conceptual effort than does the second one. Nevertheless, some of the participants had no difficulty distinguishing certain paired items that refer to one domain. Second, the learners' awareness of the collocational behavior of certain items helped prevent lexical errors. Third, the differences between the receptive and productive domains of the semantically incongruent words depended on the level of difficulty of each test. Finally, the learners' knowledge of congruent items in L2 and L3 can serve as helpful reference for solving lexical problems and accurately using these items.

The comparison of group performance indicates that high language proficiency facilitates better understanding and resolution of semantic incongruency. The advanced learners were more strongly aware of the constraints that may arise from semantic incongruency. Furthermore, these learners exhibited more conceptual abilities in distinguishing the paired items before they receptively and productively used such items.

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کاریگەری ناتەبایی واتاسازی لەسەر فێربوونی وشە لەلایەن فێرخوازانی کوردی زمانی ئینگلیزییدا

پوختە

ئەم توێژینەوەیە لێکۆڵینەوە دەکات لە کاریگەریەکانی ناتەبایی واتاسازی (Semantic Incongruency) لەسەر فێربوونی وشەکان و ئەو فاکتەرە جیاوازانەی کە بەشدارن لەو پرۆسەیەدا لەلایەن فێرخوازانی کوردەوە کە فێری زمانی ئینگلیزی دەبن، هەروەها توێژینەوەکە لەوە دەکۆڵێتەوە کە ئایا ئاستی توانستی زمانی رۆڵێکی سەرەکی هەیە لە تێگەیشتنی ئەم دیاردەیەدا یاخود نا، بەم پێیەش، رێبازێکی تێکەڵاوی کۆکردنەوەی داتای چەندایەتی و چۆنایەتی بەکارهێنراوە کە تیایدا تاقیکردنەوە و چاوپێکەوتن ئەنجام دراون لەگەڵ دوو گروپی فێرخوازاندا، ئەنجامەکان ئەوەیان دەرخست کە دژیەکی سیمانتیکی بەربەست دروست دەکات بۆ فێربوونی وشەکان و دەبێتە هۆی چەندین جۆری هەڵەی وشەسازی، فێرخوازەکان ئەوەیان بینی کە ئەو وشانەی کە لەرووی چەمکەوە دوو سەرچاوەی واتایان هەیە ئاسانترن لەو وشانەی کە یەک سەرچاوەی واتایان هەیە، هەروەها زانیاری دەربارەی پێکەوەهاتنی وشەکان (Collocation) و وشەی هاوواتا لە زمانی سێیەمدا (هەر زمانێک کە فێرخواز دەیزانێت بێجگە لە زمانی دایک و ئەو زمانەی فێری دەبێت) یارمەتی فێرخوازان دەدا کە بە سەرکەوتووی ئەو وشانە بەکاربهێنن، بەڵگەکانی ئەم توێژینەوەیە ئەوەش دەردەخەن کە پێویستە گرنگی تایبەت بدرێت بەوەی کە چۆن زمانە جیاجیاکان واتا بەشێوەیەکی جیاواز دەخەنە ناو وشەکانیانەوە، هەروەها پێویستە بزانرێت کە چەندین سنووردارییەتی هەن کاتێک فێرخواز دەگەرێتەوە بۆ زمانی یەکەمی خۆی (زمانی فێرخواز) لە کاتی بەکارهێنانی وشەکانی زمانی دووەمدا (ئەو زمانەی کە دەیەوێت فێری ببێت)، سەرنجدانی ئەم کێشانە گرنگە بۆ بەرزکردنەوەی ئاستی هۆشیاری فێرخواز سەبارەت بە جیاوازیەکی نێوان زمانی یەکەم و زمانی دووەمدا، لە کۆتاییدا، دەکرێت هەریەکە لە ئەو وشانەی بە شێوەیەکی سیمانتیکی هاوواتان و ئەو وشانەی کە بەیەکەوە دێن و هەندێ وشەی زمانی سێیەم بخرێنە ناو کەرەستەی وانەوتنەوە و تاقیکردنەوە و لە رێگای ئاماژەپێکردنیان لەناو ئەو کۆرپسبوکانەی کە بۆ وتنەوەی وشەسازی بەکاردەهێنرێن.

وشەی سەرەکی: ناتەبایی واتاسازی، فێربوونی وشەکان، پێکەوەهاتنی وشەکان، هەڵەی وشەیی، توانستی زمان

تأثير التناقض الدلالي على اكتساب المفردات لدى المتعلمين الأكراد للغة الإنجليزية

الملخص:

تبحث هذه الدراسة في تأثير التعارض الدلالي (Semantic Incongruency) على اكتساب المفردات لدى المتعلمين الأكراد للغة الإنجليزية والعوامل المختلفة التي تساهم في حل هذا التناقض. كما يستقصي هذه الدراسة ما إذا كان مستوى إتقان اللغة عاملاً أساسيًا في تسهيل فهم المتعلم لهذه الظاهرة. تحقيقا لهذه الغايات، تم اعتماد نهج أسلوب مختلط يتميز بجمع البيانات الكمية والنوعية، حيث تم اختبار مجموعتين من المتعلمين وإجراء مقابلات معهم، تشير النتائج إلى أن التناقض الدلالي يعيق اكتساب المفردات لأنه يسبب أنواعًا مختلفة من الأخطاء المعجمية، وجد المتعلمون كلمات متناقضة لغويًا تشير من الناحية المفاهيمية إلى مجالين مختلفين أسهل من فهم تلك التي تشير إلى مجال واحد، علاوة على ذلك، يمكن أن تساعد المعرفة بالمتصاحبات اللفظية (Collocations) للكلمات المكافئة في اللغة الثالثة (L3) المتعلمين على استخدام هذه المفردات بنجاح، تشير الأدلة المستمدة من هذه الدراسة إلى أنه ينبغي الاهتمام بكيفية إسناد المعاني إلى كلمات في اللغات المختلفة وإلى القيود التي يقدمها ميل المتعلمين للعودة إلى لغتهم الأولى (L1) أثناء استخدامهم لمفردات اللغة الثانية (L2). يعد الأستقصاء في هذه القضايا أمرًا مهمًا في زيادة وعي المتعلم بالاختلافات بين اللغة الأولى (L1) واللغة الثانية (L2)، واخيرا، يمكن تضمين الكلمات المتطابقة لغويًا والمتصاحبات اللفظية والكلمات اللغة الثالثة (L3) بشكل أفضل في مواد التدريس والاختبار من خلال تضمينها في المناهج المصممة لتعليم المفردات.

الكلمات الأساسية: التعاض الدلالي، أكتساب المفردات، المتصاحبات اللفظية، الأخطاء المعجمية، الكفئاة اللغوية