At the Drop of a Hat
L’accent circonflexe: friend or foe?

Introduction
In September 2016, the French education system introduced the orthographic rectifications proposed by le Conseil supérieur de la langue française that simplify the spelling of approximately 2,400 words. This research focuses on the recommendation to omit the accent circumflex on the letters i and u. Although the circumflex has no phonetic value on these letters, it has etymological significance that can help learners of French trace a word back to its Latin root or to cognates in other languages. While this partial elimination of the circumflex was intended to facilitate the learning of spelling, it could have the opposite effect for Anglophone students as it may obscure the relationship between certain French and English words. For example, the circumflex often indicates the omission of a preconsonantal s in a word, while its English cognate may have retained the s.

- E.g. the crust (la croûte), to: cluster (clafet) in English.
In order to determine whether the circumflex is a useful etymological clue in the recognition of cognates, I conducted an experiment with 99 Anglophone learners of French.

The Circumflex Accent:
The circumflex is an accent, or a diacritical sign that appears on the vowels a, e, i, o, and u. In modern French, the circumflex has two main functions (Grevísse et Gossè 127).

1. It affects the pronunciation of the vowels a, e, and o.
2. It distinguishes words that would be homophones without the circumflex. This study investigated the etymological importance of the circumflex.

History of the Circumflex
16th century: The circumflex debuted in French in the work of several envoys, such as Troy, Daudet and Sibellé (Cazal et Parussa 196). Sibellé was the only one to use this accent in a way that reflects its official purpose, using it to replace the silent s in several words (Catach, Histoire 131).

17th century: As the duration of the vowels became more important, spelling reformers began to use the circumflex to distinguish long vowels from short vowels (Tournier, 104). In 1640, Richelie became the first to systematically replace the silent s with the circumflex accent (Catach, Débat 115).

18th century: The circumflex was officially introduced into the French spelling system in 1740 with the third edition of the French Academy’s dictionary (Cazal and Parussa 86).

20th century: Les Rectifications de l’orthographe (1990) state that the circumflex accent will no longer be required on the letters i and u (8). It is only obligatory when it distinguishes verbal conjugations or changes the meaning of a word.

21st century: There have been many negative reactions to the suggested removal of the circumflex (Cazal and Parussa 88).

English and the Circumflex
The history of the circumflex is significant to English language because of the encounter between the English and French languages during certain historical events such as the Conquest of 1066. One of the legacies of the victory of William the Conqueror at the battle of Hastings is the large shared vocabulary between English and French (Midgley et al. 1634). Among the hundreds of words borrowed from the Norman occupants after 1066, were many French words that included a preconsonantal s (Walter 109).

- E.g. la forest (forest), la beast (beast), la paste (pastry)

When these French words were borrowed, the s was still pronounced. However, in oral French, the s before a consonant became silent in the 11th and 12th centuries (Cerculinii 11).

Nevertheless, the preconsonantal s did not disappear without a phonetic trace; the duration of the articulation of the s was transferred to the preceding vowel (Walter 109).

- E.g. paste [paust] [past]

In written French, the preconsonantal s persisted for centuries after it disappeared from pronunciation (Cazal et Parussa 87). In 1740, the circumflex officially replaced the silent s and has since become “l’accent de souvenirs”, acting as a reminder of etymology (Cerculinii 11).

- E.g. paste [past] [pate]

Evolution of English-French cognates:
This illustration shows how French words that have lost a preconsonantal s may have cognates in English that have preserved the s.

- croûton (11th century French)
- crusty (11th century English)

Research Question
Do the presence of the circumflex accent in French words help Anglophones identify its corresponding English cognates?

Methods
Context: The study took place at the University of Victoria in four first-year French courses in January 2017. The professor of each class allowed me 15 minutes of class-time to administer my questionnaire to their students.

Participants:
- UVIC students in four first-year French classes (Fran 100, Fran 120, Fran 160, and Fran 180)
- 99 participants, 85 usable responses

Questionnaires:
I created two different versions of a questionnaire to give to the participants.

- Version 1 includes the circumflex on the given words and provides an explanation about the relationship between the circumflex and the letter s.
- Version 2 omits the circumflex on the given words and does not provide an explanation about the relationship between the circumflex and the letter s.

Each questionnaire included the following sections:
Section I: Asked if English was the student’s first language and if the student spoke English fluently (the results of students who indicated that they do not speak English fluently were not included in the study).

Section II: Instructed the student to identify the English cognates of the 10 bolded French words given in sentences.

Section IV: Gave 10 French words and for each French word, provided two English words that look similar. Then, it asked the student to indicate which English word seemed to be more closely etymologically related to the French word in question.

In comparison to the control group, a higher percentage of the treatment group successfully identified the English word that is more closely related to the given French word in 6/10 cases.

Cognates, or “words that share a related form with their translation in another language”, are important tools for second-language learners as they help them gain the vocabulary needed for language proficiency (Beinborn et al. 201). One Canadian study demonstrated the utility of English cognates, noting that cognate instruction benefitted reading comprehension (White and Horst 183). As well, the work of De Groot and Keijzer found that English learners can more easily recognize noncognates and that once acquired, cognates are less easily forgotten (1).

Conclusion
In all three sections of the questionnaire, the presence of the circumflex accent helped the participants in the treatment group to distinguish the English cognates and related words for the majority of the French words given. However, the results suggest that the helpfulness of the circumflex in the identification of English cognates highly depends on two factors: the student’s familiarity with the English word and the conformity of the English word to the established pattern. In order to better understand the benefit of the circumflex accent for French language learners, more research will be required. In addition, it would be worthwhile to widen the scope of this study by evaluating the utility of the circumflex for learners of French whose first language is a Romance language such as Italian, Spanish, or Portuguese.

Example of the link between the French circumflex and the s in other languages
- le crust (English) la croûte (French)
- le crosta (Portuguese)

Works Cited


Thanks to the professors and participants of Fran 100, Fran 120, Fran 160 and Fran 180.

Importance of cognates
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