

# 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 circonflexe 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 pre-consonantal *s* in a word, while its English cognate may have retained the *s*.

- E.g. *the crust* = *la croûte*; *to cloister* = *cloître*

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 (Grevisse et Goosse 127).

- It affects the pronunciation of the vowels *a*, *e*, and *o*.
- It distinguishes verb conjugations and words that would be homographs without the circumflex.

### History of the Circumflex

**16<sup>th</sup> century:** The circumflex debuted in French in the work of several engravers, such as Tory, Dubois and Sébillet (Cazal and Parussa 196). Sébillet 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).

**17<sup>th</sup> century:** As the duration of vowels became more important, spelling reformers began to use the circumflex to distinguish long vowels from short vowels (Tournier, 105). In 1640, Richelet became the first to systematically replace the silent *s* with the circumflex accent (Catach, *Débat* 115).

**18<sup>th</sup> 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).

**20<sup>th</sup> 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.

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

Image: Lowndes, Nick. *Je suis circonflexe*. Digital image. Nick Lowndes. 27th Feb. 2016. Web. 27th Feb. 2017. <<http://www.nicklowndes.com>>. Reprinted with permission of Nick Lowndes.



### English and the Circumflex

The history of the circumflex is significant to English language because of the encounters 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 (Midgeley et al. 1634). Among the hundreds of words borrowed from the Norman occupants after 1066, were many French words that included a pre-consonantal *s* (Walter 109).

- E.g. *la forest* (forest), *la beste* (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 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries (Cerquiglini 11). Nevertheless, the pre-consonantal *s* did not disappear without leaving a phonetic trace; the duration of the articulation of the *s* was transferred to the preceding vowel (Walter 109).

- E.g. *paste* : [past] → [pat]

In written French, the pre-consonantal *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 souvenir", acting as a reminder of etymology (Cerquiglini 11).

- E.g. *paste* → *pâte*

### Evolution of English-French cognates:

This tree illustrates how French words that have lost a pre-consonantal *s* may have cognates in English that have preserved the *s*.

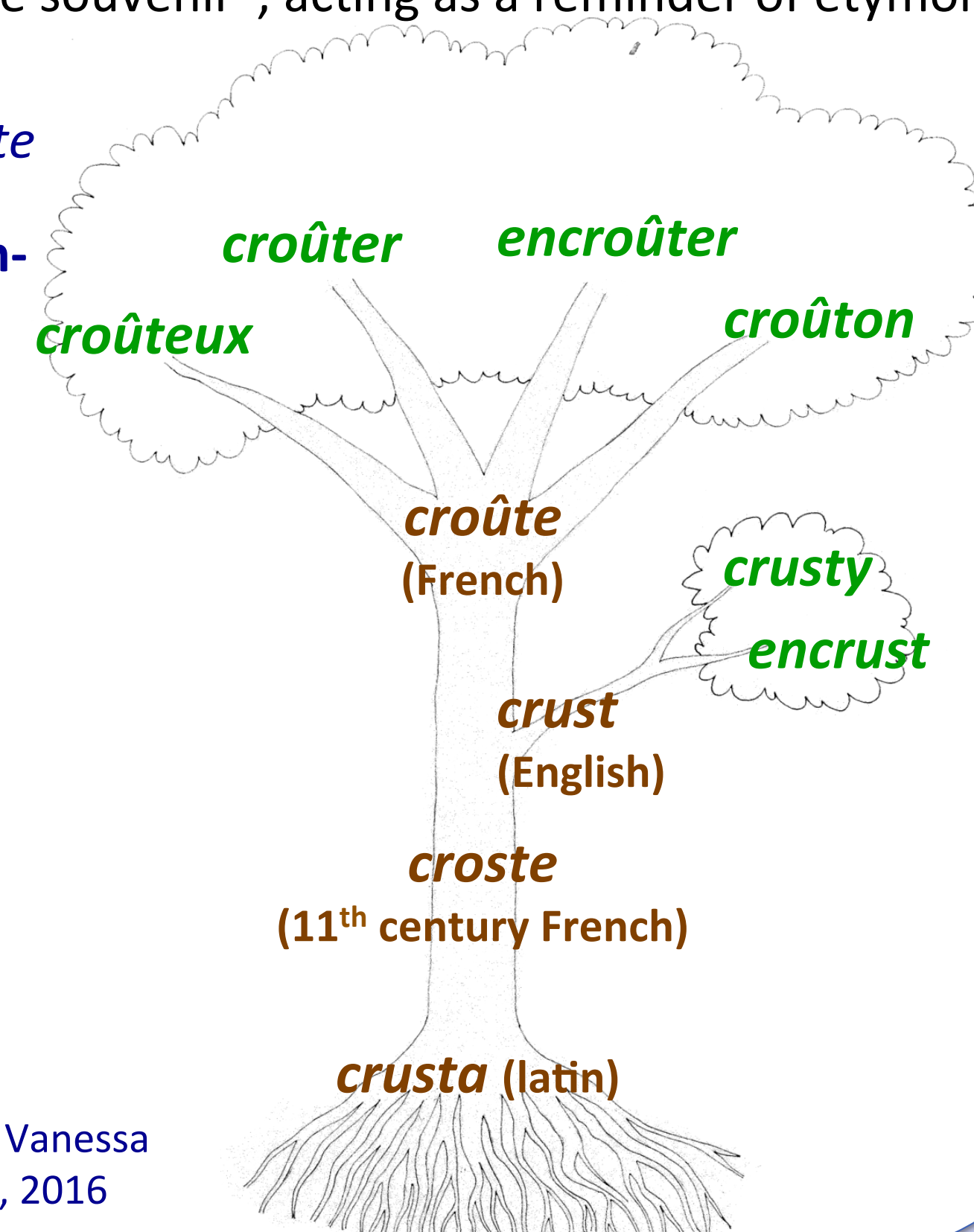


Image created by Vanessa Justice, March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016

### Research Question

*Does 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*. The 40 students who completed Version 1 constitute the treatment group.
- 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*. The 45 students who completed Version 2 constitute the control group.

### 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 10 isolated French words.

**Section III:** 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 to it. Then, it asked the student to indicate which English word seemed to be more closely etymologically related to the French word in question.

### Importance of cognates

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. 5). One Canadian study demonstrated the utility of French-English cognates, noting that cognate instruction benefited reading comprehension (White and Horst 183). As well, the work of De Groot and Keijzer found that students learn cognates more easily than 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

*la crosta* (Italian)      *the crust* (English)  
*la croûte* (French)      *a crosta* (Portuguese)



Image: Youngson, Nick. *French Baguette*. Digital image. Picserver.org. July 2015. Web. 27th Feb. 2015.

### Works Cited

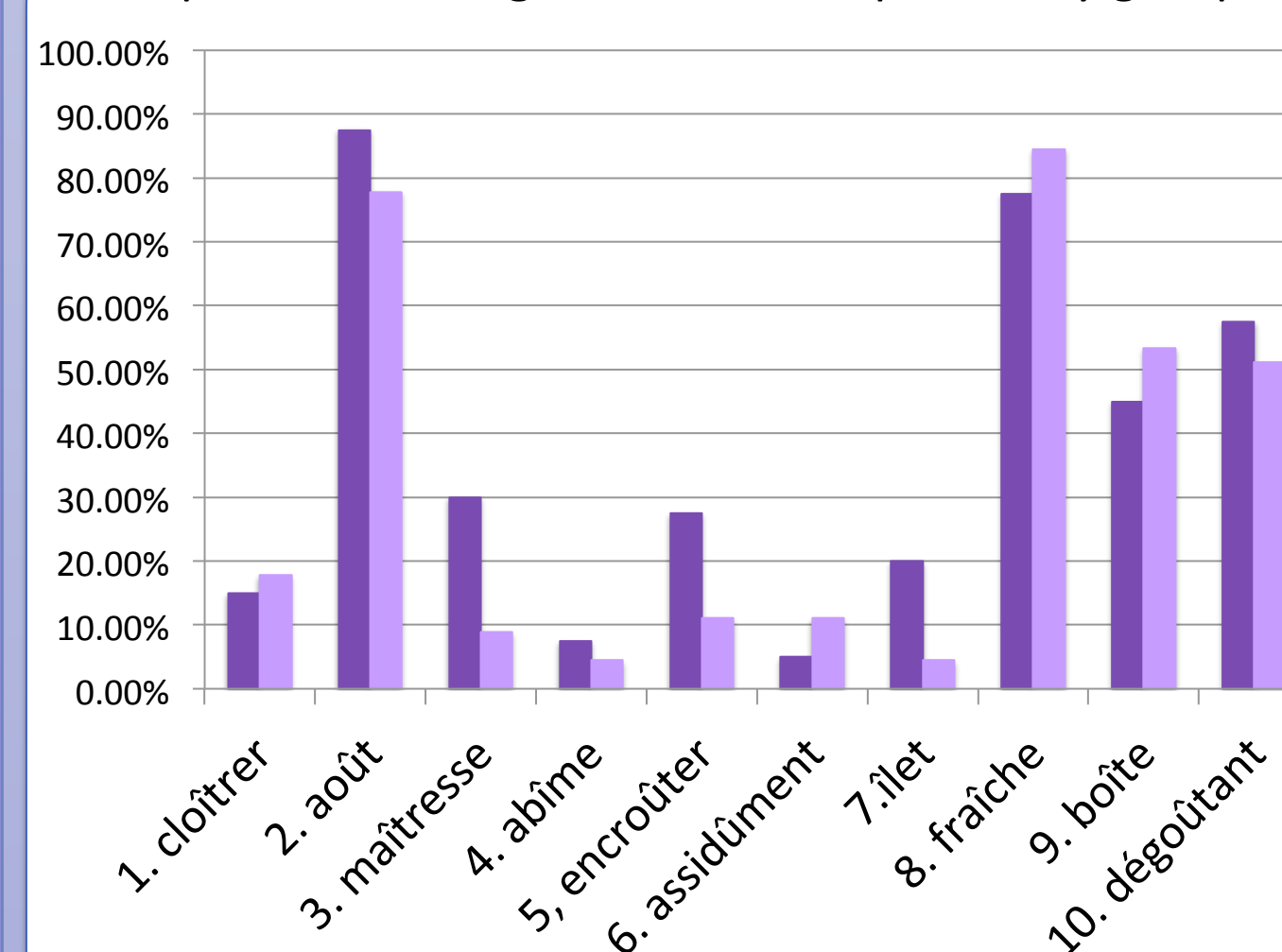
- Beinborn, Lisa, Torsten Zesch and Iryna Gurevych. "Readability for foreign language learning: The importance of cognates", *ITL. Institut voor Toegepaste linguïstic*, vol. 165, no. 2, 2015, pp. 136-162. DOI : 10.1075/itl.165.2.02bei. Accessed October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016.
- Catach, Nina. *Histoire de l'orthographe française*. Champion, 2001. Print.
- Catach, Nina. *L'Orthographe en débat*. Nathan, 1991. Print.
- Cazal, Yvonne, and Gabrielle Parussa. *Introduction à l'histoire de l'orthographe*. Armand Colin, 2015. Print.
- Cerquiglini, Bernard. *L'accent du souvenir*. Les Éditions de Minuit, 1996. Print.
- De Groot, Annette, and Rineke Keijzer. "What Is Hard to Learn Is Easy to Forget: The Roles of Word Concreteness, Cognate Status, and Word Frequency in Foreign-Language Vocabulary Learning and Forgetting", *Language Learning*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2000. Accessed March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017.
- Grevisse, Maurice, and André Grevisse et Goosse. *Le Bon Usage: Grammaire Française*. Paris: Duculot, 2007. Print.
- "Les Rectifications de l'orthographe", 1990, *Journal Officiel, Documents Administratifs (JODA)*, n° 100, 6/12/1990, Rapport du Conseil supérieur de la langue française.
- Midgley, Katherine J, Phillip J Holcomb, and Jonathan Grainger. « Effects of Cognate Status on Word Comprehension in Second Language Learners: An ERP Investigation », *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, vol. 23, no. 7, 2011, pp. 1634-1647. DOI : 10.1162/jocn.2010.21463. Accessed October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016.
- Tournier, Maurice. "A quoi sert l'accent circonflexe ?", *Orthographe et société*, vol. 28, no. 1, 1991. DOI : 10.3406/mots.1991.2039. Accessed October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016.
- Walter, Henriette. *Le Français dans tous les sens*. Robert Laffont, 1988. Print.
- White, Joanna L., and Marlise Horst. "Cognate awareness- raising in late childhood: teachable and useful", *Language awareness*, vol. 2, no. 1-2, 2012. DOI: 10.1080/09658416.2011.639885. Accessed October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

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

### Results

#### Section II

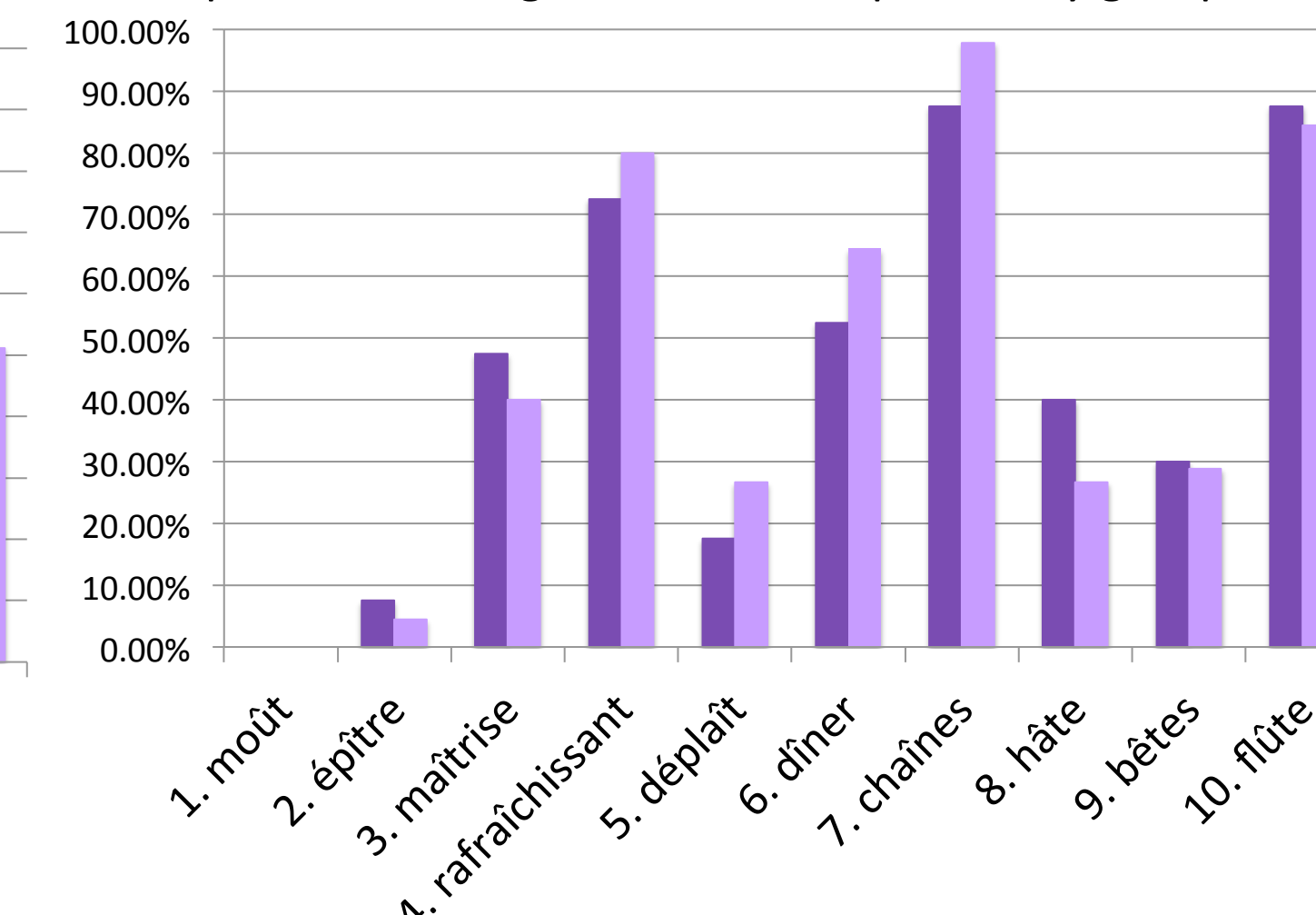
Graph 1. Percentage of correct responses by group



The treatment group had more success than the control group in the identification the English cognate for **6/9** French words whose English cognate has an *s*.

#### Section III

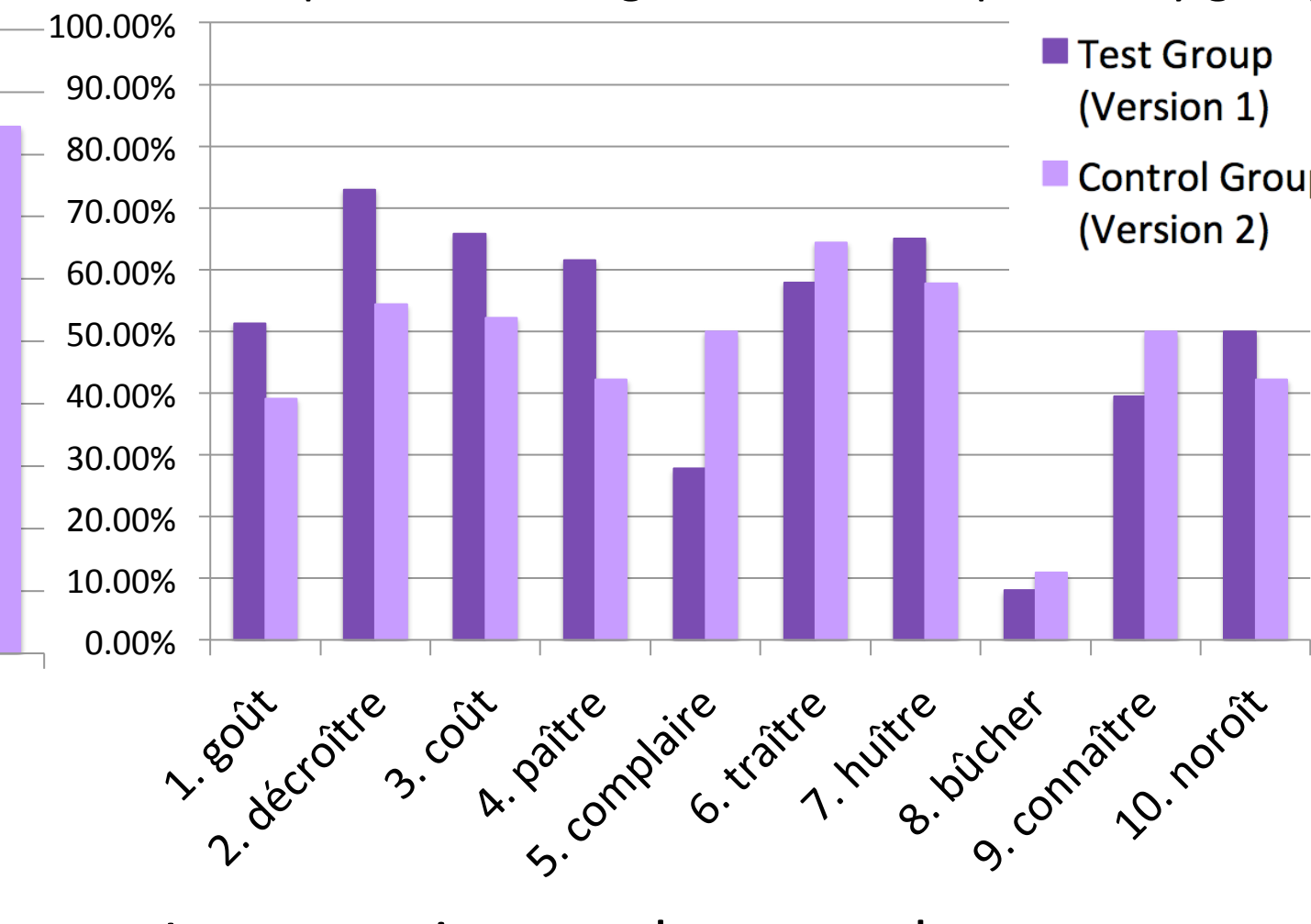
Graph 2. Percentage of correct responses by group



The treatment group had more success than the control group in the identification the English cognate for **4/5** French words whose English cognate has an *s*.

#### Section IV

Graph 3. Percentage of correct responses by group



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.