



False Cognates between Persian and the Serbian–Bosnian–Croatian Language

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Abstract: False cognates, one of the most intriguing topics in linguistics, entered academic discussion over the past century. These are words that appear identical or very similar in form within one language or across two languages but differ significantly in meaning. This semantic divergence can lead to misunderstanding and ambiguity, while also serving as a source for certain literary devices. Given the considerable influence of Persian vocabulary on South Slavic languages (Serbian–Bosnian–Croatian), it is expected that some of these borrowed terms would exhibit cases of false cognates when compared to their original Persian meanings. In this study, 100 such false cognates were identified and analyzed within the target language. The findings indicate that 88% of these false friends involve semantic expansion, while 12% reflect semantic narrowing. This suggests that most of the examined words carry meanings that differ from their standard usage in Persian. Regarding semantic relationships, *proportionality* occurred most frequently (46%), while *contrast* occurred least frequently (6%). This indicates that phonological and semantic similarities have been the primary factors contributing to the formation of false cognates.

Keywords: Linguistics, false cognates, Persian language, Serbian–Bosnian–Croatian language.

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1.Introduction

It has been nearly 95 years since the term *faux amis* (*False friends*) was introduced into linguistic scholarship, and approximately 35 years since its Persian counterpart, literally equivalent to *deceptive words* entered academic discourse. During this period, with the exception of a limited number of contributions by a few scholars, the topic has received virtually no sustained or systematic scholarly attention in Persian. The conditions for the emergence of Persian words with identical or highly similar pronunciations but distinct meanings have long been present, given the vast geographic expanse of Iran, its considerable linguistic diversity across languages, dialects, and regional accents, the ancient history of Persian, the transnational reach of the Persian cultural sphere, and Persian's extensive historical contact with neighboring languages. Such words can sometimes result in ambiguity or hesitation in transmission of meaning, while at other times they become a source of subtlety and humor for creating witty anecdotes.

Despite its geographical distance from Iran and lack of a common border, the Western Balkans has absorbed numerous cultural elements from Iran due to the influence of Islam and the dominance of the Ottoman Empire. Shared vocabulary constitutes a major component of these cultural elements, and while many of these lexical items retain identical or highly similar pronunciations and meanings across both regions, others have undergone semantic change over time in one of the two linguistic communities. As a result, when speakers from one region use such words, speakers from the other may face difficulty in understanding their meaning.

The present study is an attempt to identify and analyze *deceptive words* in the Persian and Serbo-Bosnian-Croatian languages.

2.Methodology

This study employs a descriptive-analytical method, combining library research and field observations. The target words were collected from the author's conversations with Bosnian speakers and through consultation with bilingual dictionaries. Next, they were compared with Persian dictionaries and analyzed in subsequent stages.

3.Findings and discussion

In view of the extensive historical connections between Persian and the Serbo-Bosnian-Croatian languages, the emergence of *deceptive words*, especially among cognates, appeared highly probable, and the results of the present study substantiate this assumption. From a semantic-shift perspective, some lexical items demonstrated semantic narrowing, whereby their meaning in Serbo-Bosnian-Croatian has become more

restricted or specialized than their corresponding sense in Persian. For instance, the Persian word *abrisham* denotes “silk threads obtained from cocoons for sewing and weaving”, as well as “the strings of musical instruments”, whereas in Serbo-Bosnian-Croatian the cognate *ibrišim* refers specifically to a type of silk waistcoat. Conversely, some deceptive words exhibited semantic expansion, whereby their usage in Serbo-Bosnian-Croatian extends beyond the Persian meaning to encompass an additional sense. For example, the Persian word *parishan* means “disheveled, confused, or love-stricken”, whereas it retains these original meanings and additionally denotes a type of women’s silver jewelry in Serbo-Bosnian-Croatian. Furthermore, the study examined deceptive words in terms of their underlying semantic relationships, identifying patterns such as similarity, inclusion, synonymy, and antonymy.

4.Results

In total, 100 deceptive words shared between Persian and Serbo-Bosnian-Croatian were analyzed. Among these, 88 items (88%) exhibited semantic narrowing, whereas 12 items (12%) demonstrated semantic expansion, indicating that the majority of the examined words convey meanings divergent from their primary sense in Persian. With respect to semantic relationships, 46 instances (46%) reflected similarity (including 11 cases in which phonetic resemblance also led to semantic similarity), 33 instances (33%) involved inclusion, 15 (15%) represented synonymy, and 6 (6%) showed antonymy. Collectively, these findings suggest that semantic and phonetic correspondences constitute the principal mechanisms underlying the formation of deceptive words.