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Friends will be Friends – True or False. Lexicographic Approaches to the Treatment of False Friends

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to provide a lexicographic perspective on the treatment of different types and degrees of false friends (*faux amis*) in two closely related languages. The discussion goes beyond traditional descriptions, which often offer little more than the mere listing of interesting false friends in selected language pairs. An attempt will be made at distinguishing between absolute and various partial false friend relations, taking formal characteristics, degrees of semantic resemblance, stylistic levels, and frequency considerations into account. It will also be emphasised that the lexicographer should be sensitive to the dynamic nature of such relations as false friends may develop into true friends and vice versa. The focus will be on Afrikaans and Dutch.

1. Introduction

Compilers of especially bilingual dictionaries are acutely aware of the existence of false friends (Hayward & Moulin 1984; Bunčić 2003). The occurrence of false friends differs from one language pair to another (see e.g. the false friends for various language pairs listed throughout *CIDE*). For a given language pair it may happen that false friends play a minor role, whereas in another language pair the occurrence of false friends could be of such an extent that special dictionaries of false friends can be compiled. The focus on the lexicographic treatment of false friends in this paper is not directed at dictionaries of false friends, but rather at the treatment of false friends in general bilingual dictionaries.

In order to make provision for a thorough and systematic lexicographic treatment of false friends it is important to familiarise oneself with the notion of false friends and to be aware of the nature and the extent of this relation.

2. Afrikaans versus Dutch in Respect of False Friends

Afrikaans developed from seventeenth century Dutch and at present the lexicon of Afrikaans still displays a strong Dutch base. For the purpose of the current study the 10-million-word Pretoria Afrikaans Corpus *PAfC* (De Schryver & Prinsloo 2003) was contrasted to the 48-million-word Dutch *CONDIV* corpus (Grondelaers et al. 2000). A comparison of Afrikaans and Dutch immediately reveals the large number of mutual lexical items occurring in both Afrikaans and Dutch. Consider in this regard a selection of such mutual lexical items with high occurrence frequencies per million running words in Table 1.

ITEM	AFRIKAANS	DUTCH	ITEM	AFRIKAANS	DUTCH	ITEM	AFRIKAANS	DUTCH
<i>van</i>	19,688	18,091	<i>niet</i>	46	7,358	<i>als</i>	26	4,011
<i>het</i>	15,111	16,655	<i>te</i>	8,876	7,025	<i>aan</i>	4,338	3,846
<i>een</i>	1,892	16,223	<i>die</i>	58,733	6,520	<i>of</i>	6,653	3,811
<i>en</i>	22,516	13,663	<i>met</i>	7,139	6,268	<i>nog</i>	1,930	3,507
<i>in</i>	15,619	13,483	<i>voor</i>	1,316	6,220	<i>wel</i>	276	3,146
<i>is</i>	15,628	11,539	<i>maar</i>	3,862	5,121	<i>om</i>	7,323	3,074
<i>dat</i>	4,841	9,565	<i>ook</i>	3,068	4,414	<i>wat</i>	5,268	2,918
<i>op</i>	7,132	8,125	<i>dan</i>	907	4,032	<i>kan</i>	2,069	2,488

Table 1: Mutual lexical items, with frequencies per million running words

This list includes highly used true friends such as *en* ‘and’, *in* ‘in’, *op* ‘on’, *maar* ‘but’, etc. but also frequently used false friends such as *van* ‘of’, but also ‘surname’ in Afrikaans, *een* ‘one’, but also ‘a’ in Dutch, *niet* ‘not’ in Dutch, but ‘nothing’ in Afrikaans, *voor* ‘in front of’, but also ‘for’ in Dutch, etc. A comparison of all non-hapaxes in PAFc and CONDIV indicates that *over one fifth* of the lexical items have the same orthographic form in Afrikaans and Dutch. This only reflects exact homographs, thus excluding lexical items with different formal characteristics that should be added to the overlap percentage for lexicographic considerations in terms of false friends.

Viewed from a frequency angle, highly used false friends can be regarded as dangerous false friends and deserve special attention from the descriptive lexicographer. This simply means that the lexicographer should be sensitive to frequency considerations in respect of false friend relations. Consider the true/false friend relations for Afrikaans *bakkie* / Dutch *bakje* in this regard. In respect of the meaning ‘small container’ Afrikaans and Dutch are true friends, but the Afrikaans sense *bakkie* ‘pickup truck’ is a false friend. The fact that the false friend, based upon corpus data, constitutes 67% of the use of *bakkie* in Afrikaans should be taken into consideration by the compilers of, say, an Afrikaans learners’ dictionary aimed at Dutch speakers. A possible treatment in such a dictionary is as follows:

bakkie s.nw. (-s) **1 v.v.!** Ligte vragmotor: *Ons laai die tuinvullis sommer self op die ~ en neem dit na die stortingsterrein.* **2** ’n Klein houer: *Ma sit my toebroodjies soggens in ’n plastiese ~.* Verkleinwoord van **bak**.

In this example the abbreviation *v.v.* (*valse vriend* ‘false friend’) is used to mark a false friend relation and an exclamation mark is added in cases where such a false friend is regarded as ‘dangerous’ on the basis of frequency of use, offence, etc. Depending on the target user, non-typographical structural markers such as @, cf. Martin & Gouws (2000: 789), can be used for this purpose as long as their function is properly explained in the front matter text containing the users’ guidelines.

3. Absolute False Friends

A typical interpretation of the term false friends refers to two lexical items from different languages with the same form but different meanings. The possibility for confusion is not that

realistic when the two languages are totally unrelated because speakers do not expect lexical and semantic correlation between unrelated languages. Both Sepedi (spoken in South Africa, and a member of the Bantu language family) and French (a member of the Romance language family) have the lexical item *gare*. Due to the lack of relatedness between Sepedi and French, speakers do not expect a translation equivalent with the same form in the target language and when confronted with a Sepedi form *gare* ‘in the centre’ the speaker of French will not take it for granted that this word should be used as an equivalent for the French form *gare* ‘station’. The lexical pair *gare* (in Sepedi and French) can be regarded as absolute false friends. This implies a formal resemblance without any semantic resemblance and it is a mere coincidence that Sepedi and French both have a lexical item *gare*. Note that it is furthermore possible that language pairs, totally coincidentally, show both a formal and a semantic resemblance for certain lexical items. Examples between languages such as English, Afrikaans or Dutch (from the Germanic stock) on the one hand, and Hausa (spoken in West Africa, from the Chadic stock) on the other, include *lip* and *hand* versus *leebèe* and *hannuu* respectively (Theil 1999). Such instances can be viewed as *orthographic* false friends. Such coincidences, where the lexicalisation of a certain concept just happens to show a formal resemblance across languages, will however not be treated in this paper.

From a lexicographic perspective the occurrence of absolute false friends does pose a bigger challenge to the lexicographer compiling a bilingual dictionary with closely related languages as treated language pair. Language influence and language distortion constitute a real problem when learning a language that is closely related to a language one is already familiar with, and the stronger the resemblance between two languages the bigger the confusion potential. In a bilingual dictionary dealing with closely related languages, the occurrence of absolute false friends may not be ignored by the lexicographer, but compels him/her to make the user aware of the confusion potential of the members of such a word pair. Both Dutch and Afrikaans have lexical items *rat* and *mus*. The Dutch forms have ‘rat’ and ‘sparrow’ as their respective English equivalents, whereas the Afrikaans forms have ‘gear’ and ‘cap’ as their respective English equivalents. Afrikaans and Dutch speakers who consult a bilingual dictionary with Dutch and Afrikaans as treated language pair to find an equivalent for the words *rat* and *mus* will need definite guidance from the dictionary to warn them not to be confused by the false friends occurring in the other language (Martin & Gouws 2000).

Although lexicographers are fully aware of false friends, bilingual dictionaries often do not reflect this because there is no real need in terms of possible communication problems. This is especially true in bilingual dictionaries dealing with wholly unrelated languages. However, if (s)he feels inclined to assist the user in order to prevent communication problems the lexicographer may introduce a system which marks lexical items participating in such a relation of false friends. This does not have to be a sophisticated or lengthy discussion of the nature of false friends but a structural indicator, like *v.v.* or *@* mentioned above, could be used to mark such a lexical item.

4. Partial False Friends

Discussions on the topic of false friends have predominantly focused on the occurrence of absolute false friends, which should be seen as the strongest version of false friends. However, friendship, also within the lexicon, is much more complex than this and provision has to be made for different types and varying degrees of false friends. Besides absolute false friends one can also identify different types of partial false friends, ranging from strong to weak, and this has definite implications for the lexicographic practice.

4.1. Homonymic convergence

Homonymy is a language specific feature and it is highly unlikely that a pair of source language homonyms will have translation equivalents functioning as homonyms in the target language. When dealing with closely related languages the occurrence of homonymic convergence could easily lead to the introduction of false friends. Dutch has two lexical items *vaak* constituting a pair of homonyms. These items have ‘often’ and ‘sleepy’ as their respective English equivalents. Afrikaans has only one lexical item *vaak*, with ‘sleepy’ as its English equivalent. See Figure 1.

DUTCH	AFRIKAANS
<i>vaak</i> ¹ ‘often’	<i>dikwels</i>
<i>vaak</i> ² ‘sleepy’	<i>vaak</i>

Figure 1: Dutch homonyms *vaak*

DUTCH	AFRIKAANS
<i>vaak</i> ¹ ‘often’	<i>dikwels</i>
<i>vaak</i> ² ‘sleepy’	<i>vaak</i>

Figure 2: Partial false friends *vaak*

With reference to the form *vaak* there is a relation of homonymic convergence in the direction Dutch → Afrikaans (and a relation of homonymic divergence in the direction Afrikaans → Dutch). In Dutch the homonym *vaak* ‘often’ has a very high usage frequency, whereas the homonym *vaak* ‘sleepy’ has a very low usage frequency. In Afrikaans *vaak* is a high frequency lexical item (1084 times per million words). In Dutch and Afrikaans a relation of false friends exists between the items *vaak* but it only prevails between the Afrikaans item *vaak* and one member of the Dutch homonym pair, i.e. the item *vaak* ‘often’. The Dutch item *vaak* ‘sleepy’ is not a participant in the relation of false friends and therefore there is not a relation of absolute false friends between Dutch and Afrikaans with regard to the lexical items *vaak* but only a relation of partial false friends. The Dutch item *vaak* ‘often’ and the Afrikaans item

vaak ‘sleepy’ are false friends, as shown in Figure 2, and special care needs to be given to the lexicographic treatment of this particular homonym.

Homonymic convergence represents a fairly strong version of partial false friends due to the total lack of a semantic relation between a given source and target language item. Just as is the case with absolute false friends the relation of false friends prevailing here remains on the lexical level, i.e. between two lexical items in terms of the full semantic load of these items.

4.2. Related but opposing meanings – Moving to weaker versions of false friends

The prototypical occurrence of false friends prevails where there is no semantic resemblance between formally identical lexical items from two languages. The formal identity remains a criterion in both the strong and the weaker versions of false friends. A major difference between stronger and weaker versions lies on the semantic level where weaker versions do not necessarily imply a total absence of semantic resemblance but rather work with varying degrees of resemblance. Where false friends do display some semantic resemblance the lexicographer will be well advised to be sensitive in the treatment of these items to ensure that the user will receive the necessary guidance to avoid confusion.

Both Dutch and Afrikaans have a lexical item *amper*. These formally identical lexical items display a semantic resemblance albeit that they are exact opposites. The Afrikaans word *amper* has ‘almost’ as an English equivalent, whereas the Dutch word *amper* has ‘almost not’ as equivalent. They are false friends and users need to be cautioned that the Afrikaans form should not be used as an equivalent for the Dutch form. Because these items can easily lead to confusion on the side of the dictionary user the lexicographer needs to employ a system that will make the user aware of this type of problem. Yet again, structural indicators can play an important role in identifying items participating in such a relation of partial false friends.

4.3. Different polysemous senses

Afrikaans has inherited numerous lexical items from Dutch. In some instances the inheritance has been complete with the Afrikaans item maintaining all the polysemous senses of the original Dutch form. In other cases Afrikaans has taken some but not all the senses of a given Dutch lexical item. When compiling a bilingual dictionary with Dutch and Afrikaans as treated languages, the treatment of identical Afrikaans and Dutch lexical items with different polysemous senses compels the lexicographer to make provision for an occurrence of an even weaker version of false friends.

The Dutch verb *bestellen* has the senses ‘to order’ and ‘to deliver’. Afrikaans has inherited this word but only with its first sense, i.e. ‘to order’. On a lexical level Dutch *bestellen* and Afrikaans *bestel* cannot be regarded as false friends due to the sense ‘to order’ prevailing in both the Afrikaans and the Dutch items. Speakers of Afrikaans and Dutch are however easily confused when it comes to items like *bestellen* and *bestel* with people translating the Dutch *bestellen* in the sense ‘to deliver’ with the Afrikaans lexical item *bestel*. This illustrates an occurrence of partial false friends holding between the items *bestellen* and *bestel* albeit only on the level of one polysemous sense, as can be seen in Figure 3.

DUTCH	AFRIKAANS
<i>bestellen</i>	
1 'to order'	<i>bestel</i>
2 'to deliver'	<i>aflewer</i>

Figure 3: Partial false friends *bestellen* / *bestel*

When speakers of either Afrikaans or Dutch consult a bilingual Afrikaans/Dutch // Dutch/Afrikaans dictionary to retrieve information regarding the respective Dutch or Afrikaans lexical items *bestellen* and *bestel* they need guidance to warn them that although the items in both languages have the sense 'to order', only the Dutch item has the sense 'to deliver'. On the level of the polysemous paradigm the items *bestellen* and *bestel* display a weak version of partial false friends and this asks for a microstructural indication, in which the relevant entries are marked as items participating in a relation of false friends, to assist the user to ensure an optimal retrieval of information.

4.4. Different usage levels

Language development and language dynamics often result in changes in the polysemous paradigm of lexical items. These changes can be seen in new senses added to the polysemous paradigm of a given lexical item or certain senses becoming extinct and being phased out. The changes often start on the level of the usage of a certain sense of a given item. A lesser usage may result in a specific sense being moved from the core of the polysemous paradigm to the periphery and eventually being omitted. A dictionary should keep its users informed not only with regard to the usage frequency of a lexical item as such but also with regard to the use of the specific senses of a lexical item.

Both Dutch and Afrikaans have the lexical item *kar* 'car'. In both languages this is a polysemous lexical item with one sense referring to a 'cart drawn by an animal' and another sense referring to a 'motorcar'. In Afrikaans this second sense has a high usage frequency and the word *kar* is predominantly used in this sense. This usage represents a neutral style and register and occurs without any restrictions. Contrary to this Dutch primarily uses the word *auto* to refer to a 'motorcar' and although the Dutch word *kar* still has this sense in its polysemous paradigm there are stringent register restrictions limiting the use of this word in this sense to situations of informal communication. Although the Afrikaans and Dutch lexical items *kar* are not false friends on a lexical or a polysemous level a dictionary should warn its users that the Afrikaans word *kar* should rather not be translated with the Dutch *kar* – a certain degree of falseness has crept into the friendship. Typical language development may see the Dutch word *kar* eventually losing its sense 'motorcar'. That would then constitute a version of partial false friends on the level of polysemy. In the weakest version of false friends, i.e. false friends on the level of usage, the dictionary has to make its users aware of the stylistic and register differences between source and target language items.

5. Changing Relations as a Result of Language Dynamics

The relation between real-world friends, true or false, is constantly changing and this also happens in the lexicon. In lexical semantics changes in semantic relations are well attested. Relations of false friends are also subjected to change and the influence of language dynamics. This is especially true in a multilingual environment.

Dutch and English have several false friends, e.g. the lexical items *braaf* ‘good, obedient’ and *eventueel* ‘any (possible); possibly’ in Dutch and the English forms *brave* and *eventual* respectively. Afrikaans has the lexical items *braaf* and *eventueel* as part of the lexical stock inherited from Dutch. Especially in older Afrikaans these words had been used in exactly the same way and meaning as in Dutch, functioning as false friends of the English forms *brave* and *eventual* respectively. In South Africa, Afrikaans and English are in a constant situation of contact. This has resulted in an ongoing influence between these two languages with the predictable changes and distortions resulting from the language contact. The influence of Dutch on present-day Afrikaans has diminished almost to a zero point, and the last few decades have witnessed a semantic change in the Afrikaans lexical items *braaf* and *eventueel*. These lexical items, formerly true friends of the correlating Dutch items and false friends of the English items *brave* and *eventual* respectively, have established a change in their friendship affinity. Afrikaans dictionaries reflecting especially older Afrikaans still indicate the original meanings of these two items. However, the real language usage, as attested by Afrikaans corpora, modern-day dictionaries and the typical member of the Afrikaans speech community, gives evidence that the older meanings no longer prevail in present-day Afrikaans. As an illustration, recent corpus lines for *braaf* as ‘brave’, together with their translations, are shown in Table 2.

en met reusagtige padkaarte rond te stap. ‘... and to walk around with gigantic maps.	Braaf	pak ek Stellenbosch aan op hierdie reënerige
telkens so wreed ontugter. Taai en	Brave	do I tackle Stellenbosch on this rainy ...’
‘... often severely disillusioned. Tough and	braaf	, vas aan hul Bybel, maar tog ook so
	brave	, glued to their Bible, but also so ...’

Table 2: KWIC lines for the Afrikaans *braaf* as ‘brave’

The Afrikaans lexical items *braaf* and *eventueel* have acquired the meanings of the respective English lexical items *brave* and *eventual*. What used to be true friends have become false friends and what used to be false friends have become true friends. Consider the schematic illustration in Figure 4 of the dynamic processes false friend ↔ true friend between Dutch, Afrikaans and English in respect of *braaf/brave* and *eventueel/eventual*.

DUTCH		AFRIKAANS		ENGLISH
* <i>braaf</i> 'good, obedient'		* <i>braaf</i> 'good, obedient'		* <i>brave</i>
* <i>eventueel</i> 'any (possible); possibly'		* <i>eventueel</i> 'any (possible); possibly'		* <i>eventual</i>
* <i>braaf</i> 'good, obedient'		* <i>braaf</i> 'brave'		* <i>brave</i>
* <i>eventueel</i> 'any (possible); possibly'		* <i>eventueel</i> 'eventual'		* <i>eventual</i>

Figure 4: Dynamic processes false friend ↔ true friend

In treating items like *braaf* and *eventueel* in Afrikaans dictionaries, lexicographers should reflect the real present-day meaning of these words. To make provision for the extinct meanings homonym entries could be lemmatised with a restricted treatment indicating the former meaning of the forms *braaf* and *eventueel*.

6. Conclusion – A Semantic Continuum of False Friends

The use of the term false friends should be seen as referring to a relation between pairs of lexical items from different languages positioned on a *continuum* where the nature and the extent of both the falseness and the friendship differ. The grading of false friends results in a scale or a continuum with absolute false friends, i.e. the strongest version of false friends, occupying the one pole of the continuum and partial false friends the middle region up to the other pole. Partial false friends do not only give evidence of different and varying relations between two languages, but also indicate some typical results of language dynamics prevailing in situations of language contact. Partial false friends display varying degrees of strongness or weakness with those occurrences representing the weakest version positioned at the end of the scale, next to the true friends. Language dynamics can also turn true friends into false friends and vice versa. All these processes are summarised schematically in Figure 5.

In a dictionary treating two closely related languages the position of a specific occurrence of false friends on the false friend continuum should play a decisive role in determining the way in which the lexicographer has to make the user aware of a specific lexical item's participation in a relation of false friends. The stronger the false friend version, the slimmer the chances are that the user will experience difficulties or confusion with the relevant items from the two languages. The weaker the false friend version is, the better are the chances of the user being confused and experiencing difficulties. Weak version false friends typically require disambiguating entries in their lexicographic treatment.

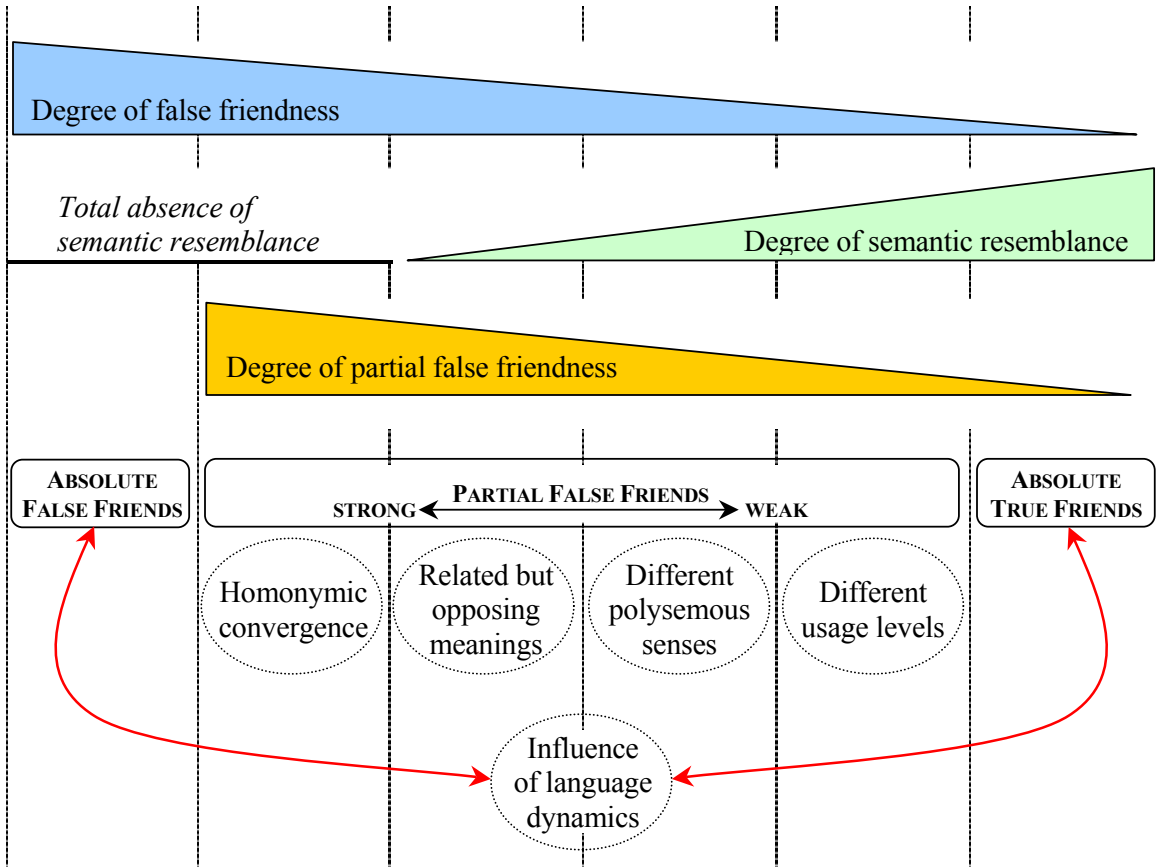


Figure 5: A semantic continuum of false friends

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