



## Jornades de Foment de la Investigació

# **FALSE FRIENDS IN ENGLISH FOR SPA- NISH-SPEAKING STUDENTS OF ENGLISH: MORPHOLOGY, SYNTAX AND LEXIS AS SOURCES OF FALSE FRIENDSHIP.**

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## INTRODUCTION

False friends are words in a target language (L2) whose signifier is similar to (or identical with) the signifier of one or more words in the student's native language (L1) because they derive from a common etymon. Students normally take it for granted that these similarities also occur at the plane of the signified but, unfortunately, this is not always so. The result of all this process is that semantic features from one word in L1 are ascribed to its cognate in L2.

Some of the reasons why natives of a given language establish a wrong identification between words in L1 and L2 escape all sort of scientific analysis, as Holmes et al (1993) have shown; others, however, can be explained on linguistic grounds. Among the former we can mention the context or the personal mental associations of SSE, bearing as high a degree of arbitrariness as the nature of the linguistic sign itself. This paper deals mainly with the latter, which are the result of morphological, syntactic and lexical processes.

All throughout this paper, Spanish is L1 and English, L2. The subjects taking part in the learning process are supposed to be Spanish-speaking students of English (SSE, henceforth). Likewise, it should be stated that the communication aimed at is the written level.

In the following lines I shall intend to study how morphology, syntax and lexis start the process of false friendship. Each discipline is devoted a whole section.

## 1. MORPHOLOGY

From the above lines it can be deduced that a false friend is, primarily, a misidentification of two words. This misidentification may have different sources as far as morphology is concerned:

### 1.1. CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN WORDS.

Although the usual is the identification of one word in L2 with one word in L1 (1=1 type), occasionally we may encounter more than one word at either end: English *in front* is very often translated by Spanish *enfrente* (2 = 1).

Taking for granted that (1 = 1), or word-to-word correspondence is the most usual, I shall focus now on the correspondence that is established between the morphemes inside the word. Here, several possibilities can occur:

- i) **Full correspondence.** Each morpheme in the English word, no matter how many it may have, has its match in the Spanish cognate. Such is the case of English *camera* vs. Spanish *cámara* (i = i) and English *library* (*libr + ary*) vs. Spanish *librería* (*libr + ería*): (ii = ii).
- ii) **Incomplete correspondence.** Here we may find one loose morpheme at either end:
  - a) One morpheme in English has no match in Spanish (i = 0): the prefix *in* in English *inhabitant*, *inherit*, *invigorate* has no equivalent in Spanish cognates *habitante*, *heredar*, *vigorizar*.
  - b) One morpheme in Spanish has no match in English (0 = i): Spanish *desnudo* vs. English *nude*.
  - c) One morpheme in English is interpreted as two in Spanish (i = ii): English *alms* vs. Spanish *almas* (*alma + s*). Etc.

## 1.2. WHAT MORPHEME BRINGS ABOUT FALSE FRIENDSHIP:

In the case of full correspondence studied in 1.1.i, the only morpheme is fully responsible for diversions in meaning but in cases where more than one morpheme is involved, like 1.1.ii, it is useful to study the behaviour of the different morphemes and see which of them brings about semantic diversion. This can be:

**i) The root of the word.** In English *eventual*, (paired to Spanish *eventual\**) both suffixes *-ual* can be said to match semantically; it is English *event* that does not 'fit' Spanish *evento*.

**ii) An affix in the word.** This can be:

**a) Derivational.** If we accept that English *jewelry* and *collar* are frequent false friends for wrong identifications with Spanish *joyería* and *collar*, then, we have to admit that it is not due to their roots, which match each other (*jewel* = joy; *coll* = coll); Rather, it is the suffixes *-ry* and *-ar* that do not correspond to the 'expected' Spanish suffixes *-ría* and *-ar*; thus creating false friendship in the English cognate words.

**b) Inflectional:** Not a very common type, but still occurring at times: *-s* in English *series* can be interpreted as plural (and then identified with Spanish *series* instead of *serie*)

## 2. SYNTAX

Syntax can be a source of false friendship, too. Different syntactic behaviour in cognates may trigger off a divert meaning. Here are some of the most usual differences in behaviour that result in false friendship:

### 2.1 TRANSITIVITY/INTRANSITIVITY.

Considering an intransitive verb as transitive can determine a divert meaning: English *enter* (usually intransitive) would bring about an important change in meaning if thought of as transitive in the sentence:

(1) Julia entered the car at last,  
translated wrongly as

(2) Julia entró el coche por fin\*  
instead of

(3) Julia entró en el coche por fin

### 2.2. CHANGE OF WORD CATEGORY

One word may prove safe as a given word category but a false friend as another: English *private* is 'safe' as an adjective in the noun phrase

(4) private affairs

but may become a 'dangerous' false friend as a noun in:

(5) a private soldier

### 2.3. PRONOMINALIZATION

The so-called *usos pronominales* of some verbs in Spanish usually imply slight, unimportant variations in meaning sometimes (*ir/irse*). On other occasions, though, semantic differences may be more relevant, as it can be seen in the *ocurrir/ocurrirse* couple. In addition, this may suppose a

new source of ambiguity, since the English cognate verb can be associated to two Spanish cognates instead of just one. The duality *ocurrir/ ocurrirse* (for the English *occur*) in the example below would create false friendship if

(6) It had never occurred to me were interpreted as

(7) Nunca me había ocurrido\*

instead of

(8) Nunca se me había ocurrido.

## 2.4. THE USE OF PREPOSITIONS AND ADVERBS

Sometimes a divert meaning arises when students expect that a word in English will take the same preposition or adverb as its cognate in Spanish. Of course, sometimes, a change in these particles amounts to a complete change in the meaning of the word it goes with. See what happens with English *dispense*, cognate with Spanish *dispensar*, with which it has a match sense (*prepare and distribute medicine*). But if the English cognate is followed by *with*, as in

(9) Are all countries ready to dispense with nuclear weapons?

then, no match meaning is found in its Spanish cognate and, hence, false friendship arises. It can be said that it is *with* the element bringing forth diversion in meaning.

## 2.5. COLLOCATIONS

This is a very frequent source of false friendship and offers, in my opinion, a vast field for research still unexplored. Frequently, words that are not considered ambiguous -and, therefore, do not receive any extra attention on the part of the teachers- vary their meanings in a relevant way under the influence of words they collocate with. English *servant* usually does SSE a good turn in many contexts if linked with Spanish *sirviente*. Both words, however, lose much of its semantic likeness when the English cognate occurs in the noun phrase

(10) Civil servant

## 2.6. THE TYPE OF SENTENCE.

Cognates apparently safe in a given type of sentence (say, affirmative) can become false friends if the sentence is changed into interrogative or negative. The English adverb *possibly* shows what is meant here: a good match with Spanish half-cognate *posiblemente* in an affirmative sentence like

(11) Possibly, the house is empty now

it would require a new word or phrase far in meaning from *posiblemente* in:

(12) You can't possibly come to work without a tie

## 3. LEXIS

Lexis can be a source of false friendship too. I intend to present below just a few situations in which lexis brings ambiguity to the text:

### 3.1. ONOMASIOLOGICAL MULTIPLICATION

In this case, etymological reasons have provided more than one cognate in either language; then, in a process similar to the one described for (2.3), SSEs simply take the wrong one. Onomasiological multiplicity may occur either in Spanish, such as in

- (1) *Vacación* and *vacante* for English *vacation*  
or (more frequently) in English:
- (2) *Estate* and *state* for Spanish *estado*
- (3) *Personal* and *personnel* for Spanish *personal*
- (4) *Costume*, *custom*, and *customs* for Spanish *costumbre*  
etc.

### 3.2. LOAN WORDS AND 'FALSE' LOAN WORDS

Very often an English word (such as *clip*) enters the Spanish language and settles as a loan (Spanish *clip*). On other occasions, though, it is not accepted by the Real Academia de la Lengua Española (as in the case of *pub*); I shall refer to the latter phenomenon as 'false loans' henceforth. Anyway, false or not, the fact is that, very often, these loans are accepted by a large part of speakers and they are, therefore, known to many SSEs. This implies that teachers of English are faced with a peculiar situation in the classroom, namely that a link has been established by SSEs between an English word 'A' and the Spanish loan 'B' that comes from it.

The reason why this situation is studied here is that the referred link, very often, causes false friendship. Here is a thorough revision of the whole process:

- i) As a preliminary step, the English word 'A' and the Spanish loan (or false loan) 'B' are to be considered as two different words since 'B' usually does not keep all the meanings of 'A' (indeed, it sometimes keeps none). This is evident in Spanish *clip*, which keeps just one of the meanings of its English cognate, namely

(10) object for holding sheets of paper together  
but not others, such as:

(11) pointed flange on a horseshoe that secures it to the front part of the roof

- ii) SSEs get acquainted with those meanings shared by both cognates, like (10) above, but not with the rest (11).
- iii) Whenever 'A' occurs with the meaning (11) SSEs are naturally inclined to ascribe it the meaning (10) with the subsequent diversion in meaning.

### 3.3. LEXICAL GAPS

The fact that either language involved in the learning process may fail to provide an equivalent for the cognate in the other language can produce wrong, inadequate identifications. An example will show what is meant here: Latin *implicare* has resulted in English *employee* and *employer* (among others) but these can only be identified with one cognate in Spanish (*empleado*). It could be said that in Spanish there is a lexical gap, or, if preferred, an absence of an equivalent for *employer*. The 'expected' word *empleador*, is hardly used and speakers prefer *patrono*, *empresario*, *jefe*, etc. The result of this lexical gap in L1 is that both *employee* and *employer* are liable to be

identified with *empleado*. Needless to say, identifications of the type *empleado* = *employer* will bring about false friendship.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Along this paper, I have tried to demonstrate that, although, false friends always suppose a lexical interference of L1 in L2, its origin can be other than lexis. I have presented three sources, namely morphology, syntax and lexis itself. For each of the above sources, I have provided a number of linguistic facts that may result in false friendship. These do not try to be a closed set in any way, since the number is continuously growing due to the unpredictable development of languages and, especially, the growing interference of languages with each other in bilingual communities, such as Blas (1999) has demonstrated.

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