TEACHING AND LEARNING "FALSE FRIENDS": A REVIEW OF SOME USEFUL RESOURCES

Mª Luisa Roca Varela
University of Santiago de Compostela

Resumen

Denominamos falsos amigos a palabras similares en dos o más lenguas que poseen significado/s diferentes (*library* "biblioteca" y *librería* "tienda de libros", en inglés y en español respectivamente). Desde el punto de vista de la enseñanza y el aprendizaje del inglés, los falsos amigos son importantes porque con frecuencia nos llevan a errores en la expresión, y malentendidos a nivel de comprensión (e.g. *I am constipated; it has been a fastidious speech* or *you should eat food without preservatives)*. Este artículo pretende dar a conocer una serie de herramientas útiles (diccionarios, recursos en línea, glosarios y blogs) para el estudio de los falsos amigos. Los recursos que aquí se presentan contribuirán a comprender la complejidad del fenómeno de los falsos amigos y aportarán la información necesaria para tratar este tema en el aula de inglés.

Palabras Clave: falsos amigos, aprendizaje y enseñanza del inglés, diccionarios, recursos en línea

Abstract

False friends are words in two languages that are similar in form but different in meaning (e.g. English *library* "place for reading and borrowing books" *v*s Spanish *librería* "bookshop"). From the point of view of EFL teaching and learning, false friends are important because they lead us to errors in L2 production and comprehension (e.g. *I am very constipated; it has been a fastidious speech* and *you should eat food without preservatives)*. This paper intends to present some useful tools (dictionaries, online resources, glossaries and blogs) for the teaching and learning of false friends. The resources presented here will allow us to discover the complexity of the false friend phenomenon and will contribute to the teaching and to the learning of these words.

Key Words: false friends, EFL teaching and learning, dictionaries, online resources

1. INTRODUCTION

False friends are words in two languages that are similar in form but different in meaning (e.g. English *library* "place for reading or borrowing books" *v*s Spanish *librería* "bookshop"; English *sane* "judicious" vs Spanish *sano* "healthy"). From the point of view of EFL teaching and learning, false friends are important because they may lead us to errors in L2 production and to misunderstandings in L2 comprehension. A sentence such as *My nose is bleeding because I am very constipated* could be embarrassing when uttered by a Spanish person in front of an English person with no knowledge of Spanish. *Constipated* in English means "having difficulty to get rid of solid waste from one's body", this has nothing to do with what the Spanish speaker really means in this utterance. This speaker tries to say that "he has a tremendous cold" not that he suffers from c*onstipation*. He uses the English adjective *constipated* under the influence of the Spanish word *constipado* and makes a big mistake. This example illustrates the way false friends may hinder the communication process. Likewise, the phrase *fastidious speech* which is not offensive at all in an English context might result in an unfortunate comment if the receiver is a native speaker of Spanish (Chamizo Domínguez, 2008:10). Any Spanish speaker who does not know the word *fastidious* in English may associate it with the Spanish word *fastidio* which means "tiresome or boring". This would lead to a misinterpretation of the English phrase *fastidious speech,* which would become an insult rather than a

80

Teaching and learning "false friends": a review of some useful resources
Mª Luisa Roca Varela   *Encuentro* 20, 2011, ISSN 1989-0796, pp. 80-87

flattering remark. Finally, a sensible recommendation in English, such as *You should eat food without preservatives* ("Deberías comer comida sin aditivos") may sound funny to a Spanish person due to the presence of the English word *preservatives,* meaning "prophylactic" in Spanish. This type of mistakes and other funny situations have not gone unnoticed to lexicographers and language teachers who started to create different materials to register these words. This paper intends to show some of these resources. After presenting two important dictionaries, such as Robert Hill's *Dictionary of False Friends* (1982) and the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (Procter, 1995) which register false friends between English and other languages, the focus will narrow down to dictionaries of false friends between English and Spanish. This will give us cause to comment on the defining traits of these "specialized" dictionaries. To finish with, the last part of this paper provides some information about different online tools, glossaries, blogs and other audiovisual tools which deal with the issue of false friends. Undoubtedly, the resources presented here will give a better insight into the complexity of the false friend phenomenon and will contribute to the teaching and to the learning of these "confusing" terms.

2. DICTIONARIES OF FALSE FRIENDS

False friends have received worldwide lexicographic consideration. The fact that similar words in different languages do not necessarily overlap semantically has inspired many linguists to identify false friends in different languages and provide a lexical description of them in dictionaries (Szpila, 2005:74). The lexicography of false friends is wide in scope and covers different languages. This is due to the fact that false friends are found among many different languages belonging to either related or non-related linguistic families. Thus, there are false friends between German and English (*Gift* "poison" / *gift* "present"), Italian and Spanish (cazzo "cock, penis"/ cazo "saucepan"), Dutch and English (*room* "cream"/ *room* "bedroom"), Slovakian and Spanish (*misa* "dish" / *misa* "religious mass"), English and Russian (*sympathetic* "compassionate" / *simpatichniy* "good-looking") or Portuguese and Czeck (bunda "buttocks"/ bunda "coat").

When considering false friends across languages, it is necessary to point out that the amount of false friends differs from one language pair to another (see Hill's dictionary or the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*). As Gouws *et al*. state:

> 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. (2004: 797).

In any case, the existence of false friends has led many lexicographers to work on specialized dictionaries which gather these special words altogether. Two important attempts at assembling false friends between English and other languages are Robert J. Hill's dictionary (1982) and *The Cambridge International Dictionary of English*, edited by Paul Procter (1995). The former is the first and the most well-known dictionary of false friends and covers fourteen languages, the latter devotes particular pages to list false friends for specific languages (see page 435 for English- Spanish false friends).

Hill's *Dictionary of False Friends* is a classic in the study of false friends. It can be considered a multilingual dictionary since it covers examples of false friends between English and fourteen foreign languages (Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, French, Dutch, German, Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, Japanese, Swiss, modern Greek, Arabic and Turkish). This dictionary consists of two parts. The first part contains a list of English words which are typical examples of false friends with other languages. This list is arranged in

alphabetical order and includes information on the languages where we can find these false friends. For instance, SAMPLE ENTRY 1, extracted from this dictionary, indicates that English *comedian* is a false friend for Spanish (S), Italian (I) and French (F) learners of English. This implies that speakers of Spanish, Italian and French have a similar term in their own languages (Spanish *cómico*, Italian *comico* and French *comice*) which are not equivalent to English *comedian*.

a **comedian** ≠ an actor/actress, player   E I F

SAMPLE ENTRY 1: *Comedian* as shown in Hill´s Dictionary

On the other hand, the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English (CIDE)* is a monolingual learners' dictionary which contains language-specific lists of English false friends and sixteen other languages. Whenever a lexical item is shown to have a false friend in one of these sixteen languages, a symbol appears in the entry. All the false friends for a particular language are grouped together and explained at a certain point. Below is an item of the list devoted to English- Spanish false friends, namely the English noun *parent* which is a false friend with Spanish *pariente,* meaning "relative" or "the hubby" in an informal context.

parent *n*   pariente/a   relative; (infml) the hubby, the missus   SAMPLE

ENTRY 2: One item from the CIDE list of English-Spanish FF (page 435)

Hill´s dictionary as well as *CIDE´*s lists of false friends represent two different examples of the lexicographical work done in relation to false friends between English and other languages. The following section limits the scope to dictionaries which concentrate on false friends between English and Spanish.

3.   DICTIONARIES OF ENGLISH-SPANISH FALSE FRIENDS

In this section, our focus of attention is on two reference dictionaries for the study of English-Spanish false friends. They are the *Diccionario de falsos amigos: inglés-español* by Marcial Prado (2003) and the *Diccionario de falsos amigos: inglés-español* by Encarnación Postigo-Pinazo (2007), two dictionaries published at the beginning of the twenty-first century. They have similar features but they are not identical in their structure.

Marcial Prado's dictionary (2001) is a bilingual tool listing over 4.000 English entries which are false friends with similar Spanish lexical items. As seen from SAMPLE ENTRY 3 below, the English item is taken as the headword and this is contrasted with the Spanish counterpart in its meaning and use. The information that the author provides for each item aims at giving a clear picture of the conceptual divergence and the pragmatic use of both items in their respective languages. The use of translational equivalency and the inclusion of the item in context make the semantic differences between the two languages clearer and more noticeable.

actual no es *actual*, sino *real, verdadero, efectivo, concreto, auténtico, mismo* [**very**]; en cambio, *actual* del español traduce **present, today, current, modern, fashionable / trendy, up-to-date**. En correspondencia comercial, *el actual* se refiere a **this month**. En la misma línea, **actually** traduce *realmente, de hecho, en efecto, en realidad,* mientras que *actualmente* significa **presently, now, nowadays**. El sustantivo **actuality** se usa para *realidad,* en cambio *actualidad* es **present time, topicality, current importance**. El plural *actualidades* traduce **current events**.

At the moment = *en la actualidad.*

Castro has been the only Marxist head of state who actually believed in the doctrine [Harper's, 26-3-92] = Castro ha sido el único jefe marxista de estado que en realidad creyó en esa doctrina. / The present situation is dangerous. = La situación actual es peligrosa. / The actual thief is on the loose. = El verdadero ladrón anda suelto. / Actually it is less expensive than it looks. = En realidad es más barato de lo que parece. / His actual name is Pablo Ruiz Picasso. = Su nombre real es Pablo Ruiz Picasso. / It is a very topical subject. = Es un tema de gran actualidad / I read the current events section. = Leo la sección de actualidades. / It happened the actual (very) week of vacation. = Ocurrió en la misma semana de vacaciones. / That reasoning sounds nice on the surface but it is actually completely wrong [L.A. Times 15-11-99]. = Ese razonamiento parece bueno en la superficie, pero de hecho está completamente equivocado. / Apparent Lesbianism in Beetle Actually May Be Ruse to Lure Males [L.A. Times, 21-10-99]. = El lesbianismo evidente de este insecto en realidad puede ser una estratagema para seducir a los machos.

SAMPLE ENTRY 3: *actual* in Prado´s dictionary (page 29)

On the other hand, Postigo-Pinazo´s dictionary (2007) follows a similar pattern. It takes the English term as the headword for the entries; this headword is immediately contrasted with the Spanish lexical item. Then, dictionary users are given information on the various meanings of the English lexeme; in the case of the verb *notice*, the author points out nine different meanings. In the middle of the entries and in bold type, the lexicographer includes some examples of the word in context, which illustrate the words' usage (e.g. *I have never noticed that picture; I noticed him in the crowd*, etc).

One of the main differences between these two specialized dictionaries is that Prado´s dictionary analyzes all the inflected forms of a word within the same entry, while Postigo-Pinazo´s wordbook is lemmatized. Thus, there are different entries for *actual, actualize, actuality, actually,* or *actualities* in the latter; while in the former, the dictionary entry for *actual* gives information of their derivatives *actuality* and *actually.* In any case, the differences in these dictionaries are not so relevant. In fact, they share a number of common traits that I will explain in the following section.

4. GENERAL FEATURES OF THESE SPECIALIZED DICTIONARIES

The organization of the entries in these dictionaries is discussed here in order to have an idea of the way these reference works are structured and the information which can be retrieved from them.

Dictionaries of false friends are technical dictionaries which share some common features with other more general dictionaries. They are books of words arranged in alphabetical order and provide information on the meaning and use of these words. They are real bilingual dictionaries, but with different word coverage. Bilingual dictionaries register a general and wide spectrum of lexemes related to different fields, while specialized dictionaries, like those of false friends, are specifically devoted to a particular and distinctive set of lexical items.

These dictionaries provide bidirectional translations, the English term is translated into Spanish (English *actual* is Spanish *real*), and the Spanish similar term (*actual*) is rendered into English *(present)*.

Some dictionaries of false friends indicate the part of the speech of the lexeme under analysis (noun, adjective, adverb, verb, etc), together with other features, like register (colloquial, formal, informal) or other semantic nuances (connotative considerations), which help the non-native speaker to grasp the shades of meaning and use of these items in each of the languages.

Another feature that characterizes these specialized works is the comparative nature of their entries. Lexicographers strive to show the semantic differences of similar items in two languages. The problem is that they sometimes establish links and concatenated explanations that might be confusing to the reader. One solution to this problem is the one adopted by Cuenca (1987), who distributed these problematic word-pairs in two columns, one devoted to the description of the term in one language (with its corresponding meaning) and the other dedicated to its counterpart in the other language indicating its respective semantic description (see SAMPLE ENTRY 4). This organization of the entries allows for a comparison of the meaning of these words in the two languages.

pretend [pri'tend]
v aparentar, fingir, simular, ex. '*He preten-
ded ignorance*' —aparentó no saber—,
'*She pretended to be mad*' —Se fingió
loca—.

pretender
1 *(+ infinitivo)* try, attempt, claim, ex, 'He
tried/attempted to rob me' —*pretendió
robarme*— 'He claims to be rich' —*pre-
tende ser rico*—. **2** *(+ clause)* expect, sug-
gest, allege, ex. 'She suggests that I should
write to her' —*pretende que le escriba*—
'She alleges that the car knocked her
down' —*pretende, alega que el coche le
atropelló*— **3** *(+ O. Directo)* apply for *(un
trabajo)* aim at *(objetivo)* court, woo *(mu-
jer)* be after, ex. 'What are you after?'
—*¿qué pretendes?*—.

SAMPLE ENTRY 4: *pretend-pretender* in Cuenca´s *Diccionario de Términos Equívocos*

These general features (their contrastive character, the examination of a very specific set of words, the bidirectional translations, the inclusion of illustrative examples) are shared by both the paper and the online versions of these technical dictionaries. In addition to this, there are other lexicographical tools to which teachers, students and translators might resort in order to find out more about the meaning and use of false friends. The next section includes some of these online resources (glossaries, educational blogs, and less elaborate lists of false friends) which might also be helpful in the English classroom.

5. ONLINE DICTIONARIES, GLOSSARIES, AND BLOGS OF FALSE FRIENDS

So far the focus was on paper resources. At this point, it seems expedient to mention some online tools for the study of English false friends, such as online "dictionaries", glossaries and blogs which deal with English false friends.

Regarding online lists of false friends, Eloy Cuadra is the creator of an online "dictionary" which contains 134 false friends between English and Spanish. An interesting feature of this online resource is that it is continuously being updated and expanded according to the users' feedback and contributions. As regards it use, there are three ways of looking up false friends in this dictionary. It is possible to click on the initial letter of the false friend you are interested in (for instance, you click on "s" in order to search for the word *sane)*, you can use the search box by typing the term you have in mind, or you can see the full list of false friends at once by clicking on "listado". This dictionary is available online at: <http://www.eloihr.net/falsefriends/index.php?page=diccionario>.

A different tool is represented by a glossary of false friends compiled by an EFL teacher who created an educational website to help secondary school students and highschool students with English at the Colegio Cardenal Xavierre. This glossary contains lists of false friends that are distributed according to the initial letter of the word. In order to perform any search, the user has to click on a letter and a chart with all the false friends beginning with this letter turns up. The English word is taken as the headword (e.g. *bizarre),*

which is contrasted with a Spanish similar term (*bizarro*). The meaning of the headword is then presented with the Spanish translation (*bizarre* means *raro, extraño* in Spanish*). Finally, the Spanish similar item (*bizarre*) is translated into English (*brave, courageous*). In case students need more information on any particular lexeme, there is a link to a bilingual online dictionary on the right handside, which directs us to the Collins Online Dictionary powered by Reverso. The interface of this glossary is available at <http://mbonillo.xavierre.com/httpdocs/gramatica/falsefriends/Bfalse.html> and is illustrated in FIGURE 1.
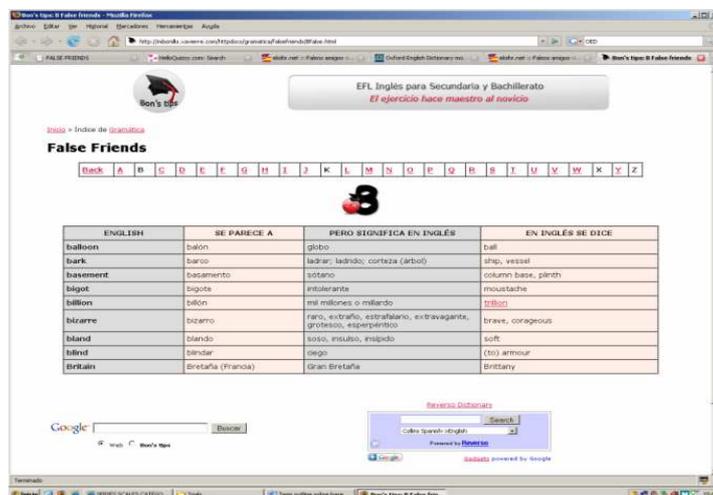

FIGURE 1: *Interface of the glossary of false friends*

Another online list of alphabetically ordered false friends can be found under the name *My own Resources* at <http://www.miguelmllop.com/glos/index.php>. This list presents bidirectional translations of false friend pairs between English and Spanish. It proceeds from the English term (e.g. *arena*) to the Spanish translation of this term (*estadio);* and then it goes from the Spanish similar item (*arena*) to its English equivalent (s*and).*

Undoubtedly, all these resources are valuable tools for the study of these lexical items. However, we cannot forget the presence of false friends in blogs. These lexical items have become the focus of attention of entire blogs. This is the case of the blogs available at <http://falsos-amigos.blogspot.com/> and at < http://falsecognates.blogspot.com/>. On the other hand, there are blogs on translation and other linguistic matters which give some space to this phenomenon. See *Gente Digital* at <http://www.gentedigital.es/blogs/gentedeinternet/32/blog-post/3087/los-falsos-amigos-y-los-amigos-falsos/> or *Switch Off and Let´s Go* at <http://traduccionydoblaje.blogspot.com/2007/05/algunos-fallos-comunes-en-los-doblajes.html>. There are also websites with resources for learners of English which contain lists of false friends, explanations and activities to learn these lexical items (for example, in the website *Saber Inglés*) and we find some videos on the net, like the one available at <http://www.kewego.es/video/iLyROoaft_b1.html>, which describe the semantic properties and the pragmatic side of some false friends between English and Spanish. Therefore, the possibilities offered by the web are numerous and can be of great help for learners, teachers and translators who want to learn more about false friends. FIGURE 4 below illustrates some of these resources. Some look more professional than others but they are all equally useful and give new insights on these lexical items.
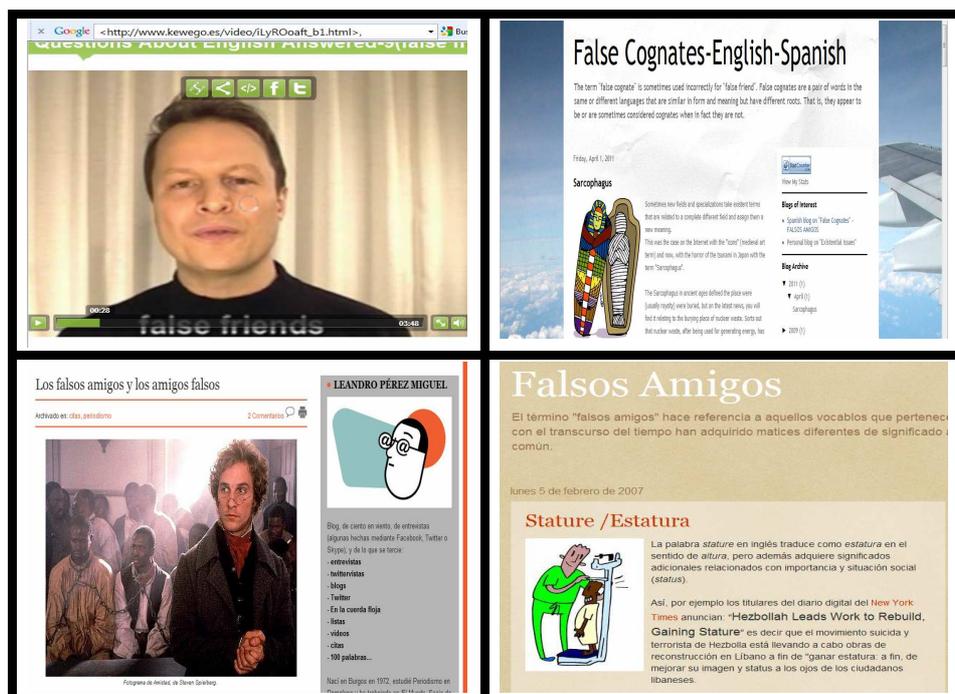
FIGURE 2: *Videos and blogs of False Friends*

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

As gathered from this paper, there exist innumerable resources for the study of false friends. I have presented some of the most outstanding reference tools which deal with this phenomenon, traditionally recognized as an area of lexical difficulty for students of English. The existence of these materials will help learners and language professionals to understand and learn these words in a successful way.

REFERENCES

Álvarez Lugrís, A. 1997. *Os falsos amigos da traducción: Criterios de estudio e clasificación.* Vigo: Universidade de Vigo.

Cuenca, M. 1987. *Diccionario de términos equívocos ("falsos amigos") inglés-español-inglés*. Madrid: Editorial Alhambra.

Hill, R. 1982. *A dictionary of false friends.* London: Macmillan Press.

Koessler, M.; Derocquigny, J. 1928. *Les faux amis ou les trahisons du vocabulaire anglais*. Paris: Librairie Vuibert.

Nicholls, D. 2006. «False Friends between Spanish and English». *MED Magazine* http://www.macmillandictionary.com/MED-Magazine/August2003/10-Spanish-English-false-friends.htm

Palacios Martínez, I.; Alonso, R. 2005. «Lexis and learner corpora. A study of english/spanish false friends on the basis of the data provided by SULEC (Santiago University Learner of English Corpus)». In Mourón, C. and T. Moralejo (eds), *Proceedings of the 4th International Contrastive Linguistics Conference,* 749-760. Santiago de Compostela: Servizo de Publicacións.

Gouws, R; Prinsloo, D; de Schryver, G. 2004. «Friends will be friends – true or false. Lexicographic approaches to the treatment of false friends». In Williams, G. and S. Vessier (eds), *Euralex 2004 Proceedings of the 11th EURALEX international congress,* 797-806. France: Université de Bretagne Sud.

Postigo Pinazo, E. 2007. *Diccionario de falsos amigos: inglés-español.* Madrid: Ediciones Verba.

Prado, M. 2001. *Diccionario de falsos amigos: inglés-español.* Madrid: Gredos, D.L.

Procter, P. (ed). 1995. *Cambridge International Dictionary of English..* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Szpila, G. 2006. «False friends in dictionaries. Bilingual false cognates lexicography in poland international». *Journal of Lexicography* 19/ 1, 73-97.

Walsh, A. S. 2005. *False Friends and Semantic Shifts.* Granada: Universidad de Granada.

ONLINE RESOURCES

An online dictionary of false friends: http://www.eloihr.net/falsefriends/index.php?page=diccionario

Online glossaries:

  http://mbonillo.xavierre.com/httpdocs/gramatica/falsefriends/Bfalse.html

  http://www.miguelmllop.com/glos/index.php

Blogs on false friends:

  http://falsos-amigos.blogspot.com/

  http://falsecognates.blogspot.com/

  http://traduccionydoblaje.blogspot.com/2007/05/algunos-fallos-comunes-en-los-doblajes.html

  http://www.gentedigital.es/blogs/gentedeinternet/32/blog-post/3087/los-falsos-amigos-y-los-amigos-falsos/

Videos on false friends:

  http://www.kewego.es/video/iLyROoaft_b1.html

  http://www.metacafe.com/watch/3536390/ingl_s_intermedio_false_friends_phrasal_nivel_3_ejercito/

Mª Luisa Roca-Varela holds an MA in English Language and Literature from the University of Santiago de Compostela. She is an FPU researcher interested in the fields of applied linguistics, English language teaching and vocabulary acquisition. She collaborated in different research projects, namely in the Santiago University Learner of English Corpus, in the Communicating in Multilingual Matters meets the Enterprises project, funded by the European Commission, and she is currently a member of the Spoken English Research Team at the University of Santiago. She has carried out research at the Centre for Advanced Research in English at the University of Birmingham and at the College of Arts and Humanities at Swansea Wales.

87

Teaching and learning "false friends": a review of some useful resources
Mª Luisa Roca Varela   *Encuentro* 20, 2011, ISSN 1989-0796, pp. 80-87