Work in progress: A parallexicon of English-French 'faux amis'

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'Faux amis' as an error-conducive factor

The significance of English-French cognates as a source of error for French speakers learning English has recently been played down by some scholars. Thus it has been claimed firstly, that the ratio of good cognates to deceptive ones is about 11 to 1, and secondly, that incorrect use of deceptive cognates is probably the least enduring type of interference between two languages (Hammer and Monod, 1976, XVI).

Whoever has long experience of teaching English to native speakers of French at an advanced level is likely to disagree on these points. Serious analysis of formally similar and etymologically related word-pairs clearly reveals that, with the exception of technical or specialized terms, their equivalence is limited in the majority of cases, if not by their cognitive content (where the non-equivalence may have to do with basic or secondary conceptual features or with diverging polysemy), at least by the connotation they carry, the level of language they belong to, or the collocations into which they enter. As the "French" words of the English vocabulary are stored more easily in the memories of our learners, they tend to fall frequently into the traps of misuse or overuse at the production level.

Lexicographical achievements

With French as target language, the oldest dictionary of "faux amis" to my knowledge is a 200 page volume by R.D. Seward, DICTIONARY OF FRENCH DECEPTIVE COGNATES (New York, 1947). On average it devotes no more than two lines to the deceptive pairs selected, thus limiting its comments to what the author considers to be the most basic pitfalls. Of P. Hammer and M.J. Monod's ENGLISH-FRENCH COGNATE DICTIONARY only a few copies were issued in 1976 by the Printing Department of the University of Alberta, Edmonton (Canada). This thick volume (over 600 pages) is in fact a list of nearly 11000 "good" cognates, i.e. of "items that have the same meaning in ordinary use", intended to draw the learner's attention to this considerable stock of "common words" and help him build up his vocabulary. Two more recent books are the ones by C.W.E. Kirk-Greene, FRENCH FALSE FRIENDS (London, 1981), and by P. Thody & H. Evans, FAUX AMIS & KEY WORDS (London, 1985), also

published under the title MISTAKABLE FRENCH (New York, 1986). Kirk-Greene's book is the only up-to-date "dictionary" in the conventional sense on the English market: it covers approximately 3000 pairs of words, including even such incidental homonyms as *chat:chat* or *pain:pain*, but on the whole limits itself to the use of these words in their most common sense. Thody and Evan's book is a very original and stimulating one. Not so much because the authors present their material in sections according to general topics such as Administration, History, Economics etc., but because their interest is in culture-bound difficulties, which are dealt with in the light of their social and historical context. As Thody and Evans point out, none of their entries exhaust all the actual or potential meanings of the words under discussion, and the book is therefore intended for use in combination with a dictionary.

On the French side LES FAUX AMIS DES VOCABULAIRES ANGLAIS ET AMÉRICAINS by M. Koessler (Paris, 1975) is, actually, the only dictionary in the field. It is in fact the latest version of previous work which M. Koessler and J. Derocquigny published successively in 1931 and 1964. This is a very erudite book, which is particularly valuable from a historical and cultural point of view. It is the author's concern, above all, to show how English words borrowed from Latin or from French have gradually dropped or inflected old meanings and developed new ones. This he does on the basis of an impressive number of examples, very often taken from classical literature or from more specialized areas of language, but paying no particular attention to current, present-day usage.

It thus seems fair to say that, especially with the French speaking public in mind, there is room for a dictionary of cognates which meets the normal expectations of the intermediate and advanced learner or the trainee translator. These expectations are, in my view: 1) that the entries represent a scientifically and pedagogically justified selection of the most frequent and most misleading cognates; 2) that the new dictionary gives a more accurate picture of the cross-language relationship between cognates than the conventional bilingual dictionary does, i.e. that it goes into more details with regard to cognitive, situational and collocational divergence, and 3) that the access to this information is easier than it is in bilingual dictionaries.

This is the task the research team of the English Language Department of the Université Catholique de Louvain has set itself.

The idea of a parallexicon

The specific characteristics of the dictionary in preparation are the following:

1. Though it is being written with French users in mind, the general presentation and the detailed index will, we hope, make it attractive also to English speaking learners of French.

2. It is selective. In this first version 1000 deceptive pairs of cognates will be treated. The criteria for selection have been:

a) Frequency of occurrence of the items in both languages. Thus, even if E. *spire* and F. *spire* ("tour d'hélice") are theoretically a deceptive pair, the French item is too rare for the pair to be considered in our corpus.

b) The degree to which the items are error-conducive. Thus, though E. *infant* and F. *enfant* are potentially deceptive, they rarely lead to misunderstanding or error, as *child* is commonly presented in the first learning stages.

Whereas the first criterion has been applied in a relatively objective way on the basis of frequency lists, the second one has been applied empirically, i.e. on the basis of the long experience the members of the research team have of teaching English to French learners.

3. The dictionary deals with "faux amis" rather than with "deceptive cognates" in the strict sense. This means that it deals with "amis", i.e. pairs of words with identical or similar spelling form, but "faux" because this formal resemblance leads the learner to make false hypotheses about meaning and use. But such pairs are not necessarily cognates, i.e. not necessarily etymologically related. Thus F. *mâcher* and E. *mash* are of totally different origin, yet our experience tells us they are false friends. It is true, however, that misleading pairs are almost invariably cognates, for the large majority of purely incidental homonyms (such as *chat* and *chat*, or *son* and *son*, which Kirk-Greene includes in his corpus) belong to such distant areas of meaning that context is likely to prevent the learner from being trapped.

For want of a scientific definition of formal similarity, our selection from this point of view is also impressionistic and empirical. It is difficult to accept the principle adopted by Hammer and Monod in their word-list, whereby the status of "faux amis" is reserved for pairs showing a difference in spelling form of one letter at most (disregarding recurrent affixes such as *-eur/-or* in e.g. *acteur/actor*). Experience with French learners does not indicate that the difference of, say, three letters (in e.g. *avis/advice*) makes cognates less deceptive than the difference of one single letter (in e.g. *délai/delay*).

4. An attempt is made to break new ground a) in the general presentation of the entries and of their lexico-semantic analysis, b) in the fact that this analysis, apart from important footnotes where necessary, is given as it were indirectly, i.e. by means of example sentences illustrating the meanings and uses of the items as clearly and unambiguously as possible.

Let us take the general layout first. As may be seen in sample 1 below *(disposer/dispose)*, the analysis starts from entries that are not individual words, but pairs of words, i.e. the two cognates. The description of the meanings and uses is then presented in two separate but parallel columns, with the cognates in the left-hand column and their translation equivalents in the right-hand one. (It is, by the way, this parallel treatment that led R. Nash to coin the term "parallexi-

con" in 1981, though her project is considerably different from the Louvain one).

In samples 1 and 3 *(disposer, peste)* the information is spread over three sections: section I deals with the areas of overlapping, whereas sections II and III represent areas of divergence. These particular pairs are thus treated in three sections because the two cognates are only partially deceptive. Other cases of partially deceptive cognates have only two sections: I and II, for instance, in sample 2 *(interroger),* simply because the English item has no meanings of its own, i.e. different from the one it shares with the French cognate. Totally deceptive cognates lack section I, but have II and III, as is illustrated by sample 4 *(génial).*

In each section then, as can again be seen in sample 1, the different meanings of polysemous items are listed under the Arabic numerals 1, 2 etc. with, possibly, further distinctions from a conceptual, stylistic or collocational point of view, involving different translational equivalents.

The advantage of such parallel or bi-directional treatment seems obvious. If, on the basis of a conventional bilingual dictionary, a learner wants to find out what two cognates share and do not share semantically, and what the translation equivalents are when there is no overlap, he will have to look up the meanings of both cognates and of their translation equivalents in both halves of the dictionary. In a parallexicon all this information can be found in one place.

With regard to what has just been referred to as "indirect analysis of meaning", the importance of examples in dictionaries has been repeatedly emphasized in recent years (for instance at the EURALEX Seminar in April 1985). In bilingual dictionaries, however, this practice is still very limited. Many such dictionaries only give a list of the main or most common translation equivalents, without any specification as to the difference of usage between them, except perhaps for current idiomatic combinations. More elaborate dictionaries will often illustrate these differences by means of specifying glosses, i.e. words usually given in italics or in brackets and denoting the specific area of meaning to which a given translation equivalent belongs. (For example, when an English-French dictionary informs the user that E. *to rise* = (smoke, mist) *s'élever, monter*; (sun, moon, wind) *se lever*; (hair) *se dresser*, etc.) But the systematic use of example sentences to explain the meanings and uses of items in the source language and of their translation equivalents in the target language is an innovative characteristic of this parallexicon, which, at the same time, will make it more suitable for use by English learners of French.

It is true that the exclusive use of examples, even if they are numerous and well-chosen, cannot in all instances inform the reader adequately about the rules which govern the uses of a word in a foreign language. The general policy that has been adopted is therefore to add usage notes wherever examples did not seem to "speak for themselves".

The value of a new dictionary is of course not determined in the first place by original layout or novelty in presentation. If the Louvain parallexicon did no

more than take over what is contained in the bilingual or monolingual diction-
aries availabe and present this in a new form, it would be of little interest. It has
therefore been the research team's constant concern to examine this information
from the specific point of view of cross-language relationship, to complete or ad-
just it where necessary, not only with regard to cognitive meaning content, but
also with regard to situational usage, collocational restraints or cultural differen-
ces.

Samples

(SE) DISPOSER (v.)	/ TO DISPOSE
I 1 — Il est bien, mal *disposé* envers ses voisins	He is well-, ill-*disposed* towards his neighbours
— Je ne suis pas *disposée* à le recevoir	I don't feel/I'm not *disposed*° to see him (plus couramment: *inclined*)[a]
II 2 — Donne-moi quelques idées pour *disposer* mes nouveaux meubles	Give me some ideas on how I should *arrange/place* my new furniture[b]
3 — Si je *dispose* d'une voiture, je viendrai	If I *can get* a car, *have the use of* a car, I'll come
— Il *dispose* d'une grosse somme d'argent pour entreprendre son projet	He *has* a large sum of money *available* for his scheme[c]
— Il *dispose* de moi comme si j'étais sa servante!	He *uses* me/*orders* me *around* as if I were his servant!
4 — Je *me disposais* à vendre ma maison mais il m'a fait changer d'avis	I was *preparing* to sell the house but he made me change my mind
— Je *me disposais* à partir quand il est arrivé	I was *preparing* to leave/*getting ready* to leave when he turned up
5 — Vous pouvez *disposer*. Je n'ai plus besoin de vous pour l'instant	You can *leave/go* (now). I don't need you for the moment
III 6 — In the past many firms *disposed* of their nuclear waste in the sea	Dans le passé de nombreuses firmes *se débarrassaient* de leurs déchets nucléaires dans la mer
— The heiress *disposed* of the family estate	L'héritière a *vendu* le domaine familial
— The children *disposed** of the meal in no time	Les enfant ont *expédié/liquidé** le repas en moins de deux
— They *disposed* of the problem, of his argument easily	Ils ont *réglé/expédié* le problème, *démoli* son argument avec facilité

Notes

a. — *Etre disposé* signifie 'être dans un certain état d'esprit' et/ou 'vouloir'. Lorsque ce second sens prédomine, on emploiera plutôt en anglais *to be prepared to/ready to/ willing to.* Exemple : Je (ne) suis pas *disposé* à me battre
I am (not) *prepared* to fight
— You can come for a drive *if you feel so disposed*: Vous pouvez venir faire un tour en voiture *si le coeur vous en dit*

b. Mais: *disposer* (des troupes) : *to dispose*

c. Droit des peuples à *disposer* d'eux-mêmes: The right of nations to *self-determination*

(S') INTERROGER (v.)	/ TO INTERROGATE

I 1 — La police a *interrogé* les suspects pendant plus de trois heures

The police *interrogated* the suspects for more than three hours[a]
voir 2

II 2 — Si on t'*interroge* sur tes intentions, dis que tu n'es pas encore fixé

If they *ask* you about your intentions say you haven't decided yet

— Notre journaliste sur place a *interrogé* le leader du mouvement

Our local correspondent has *asked* the leader of the movement *some questions*

— Le député a *interrogé* le Premier Ministre au sujet de la nouvelle centrale nucléaire

The M.P. *questioned* the Prime Minister about the new nuclear power station[b]

  3 — Ils *s'interrogeaient* tous sur l'utilité d'une telle dépense

They all *wondered* about the usefulness of such an expense

— Il *s'interrogeait* sur la conduite à adopter en cas de refus

He *wondered/asked himself* what attitude he should adopt if they refused

  4 — Je vous *interrogerai* sur l'emploi du subjonctif la semaine prochaine

I'll *test* you/*give* you *a test* on the use of the subjunctive next week

— Le professeur qui devait *interroger* les candidats est malade

The lecturer who was to *examine* the candidates is ill

  5 — Il *interrogeait* sa conscience pour savoir s'il agissait correctement

He *examined* his conscience to see if he was acting correctly

— Il *interrogeait* en vain sa mémoire

He *searched* his memory vainly

Notes

a. *To interrogate* s'emploie lorsqu'on soumet un suspect, un prisonnier à un interrogatoire assez long et assez serré. *Interroger* a un sens beaucoup plus large.

b. *To question* signifie 'poser une série de questions' et s'emploie souvent lorsque la personne interrogée est mise en cause.
Interroger du regard: to give a questioning/inquiring look, to look questioningly/inquiringly.

PESTE (nf)	/ PEST
I 1 — Cette fillette est une vraie *peste**! Je ne sais pas comment vous pouvez la supporter	That little girl is a real *pest**! I don't know how you put up with her[a]
II 2 — Au 14ème siècle des millions de personnes moururent de la *peste* en Europe	In the 14th century millions of people died of the *plague* in Europe[b]
III 3 — Eliminating *pests* is essential if you want to have a successful vegetable garden	L'élimination des *insectes/animaux nuisibles* est essentielle si l'on veut avoir un beau potager[c]

Notes

a. Contrairement au mot français, *pest* peut également faire référence à une personne du sexe masculin ou à un animal: He's a real *pest**!: C'est un vrai *casse-pieds*/empoisonneur public**!; Mosquitoes are a *pest* in summer: Les moustiques sont un véritable *fléau* en été

b. Fuir qn comme la *peste*: to avoid sb like the *plague*

c. *Pest* control: lutte contre les insectes, dératisation

GENIAL (adj.)	/ GENIAL
II 1 — Cet immigré polonais, physicien *génial* s'il en est, fut obligé de travailler dans la clandestinité	This Polish immigrant, a physicist *of genius/a brilliant* physicist if ever there was one, was forced to work in secret
2 — Je viens d'avoir une idée *géniale*!	I've just had a *brilliant* idea!
— Mon nouveau professeur d'anglais est *génial**!	My new English teacher is *fantastic*/terrific*/great**![a]
III 3 — Our *genial* host immediately made us feel at home	Notre *aimable* hôte nous mit tout de suite à l'aise
— His *genial* face contrasted with the severity of his dress	Sa figure *joviale* contrastait avec l'austérité de sa tenue[b]

Notes

a. (C'est) *génial**!: (It's) *terrific*/great*/fantastic**!

b. Notez également: *genial* climate: climat *doux*

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