Andrejs Veisbergs, University of Latvia

False Friends Dictionaries: A Tool for Translators or Learners or Both

Abstract

Dictionaries of false friends is a sphere of bilingual lexicography mainly addressing the needs of translators (interpreters) and language learners. The variety of false friends – false friends proper (complete, partial, nuance-differentiated), accidental false friends, pseudo false friends – determines the necessity to focus on specific false friends for specific groups of language users if dictionaries are to be user-friendly. This problem is also connected with the dictionary type – basic, more expanded, detailed, learner's – as the target groups need specific form of presentation. The author analyses the learners' and translators' expectations of false friends dictionaries and views pragmatic aspects of false friends usage and their dictionary reflection.

Dictionaries of false friends (false cognates, faux amis, deceptive doubles, paronyms) reflect a sphere of linguistics where problems of translation, learning and contrastive semantic studies interface. After a relatively long period of emphasis on grammatical patterns and structuralism, contrastive linguistics again addresses problems of lexicology, however, with a more semantic emphasis. Lexicography, particularly bilingual lexicography was the branch that maintained the contrastive studies within lexicology and the revival of interest seems to be caused mainly by learning problems in lexis. False friends (FFs) studies have always been more or less successfully exploited in practical teaching and now with attempts of setting up parallel databases, FFs are being integrated into tools for the learner (Nicholls, 1995).

Another aspect that testifies to the growing interest in FFs is a rather intensive growth in variety of the FFs dictionaries genre – learner's manuals, multilanguage dictionaries, mixed variants. This points to aspects and approaches of FFs still to be studied. It also puts under a question the view that False friends dictionaries are solely learner's dictionaries (Gorbahn-Orme, 1991:2883). Broadly speaking any dictionary can be viewed as a tool for learning, but specifically tailored FFs learner's dictionaries suggest that the other FFs dictionaries are closer to the informative, specialist (Jackson, 1988:165) type, e.g. Hill's dictionary on FFs in 15 languages (Hill, 1982).

False friends are word pairs that have similar spelling and pronunciation but different meaning. The similarity leads to false associations, wrong use or misunderstanding, or in the best case distortion of context, imprecision, disregard for the right stylistic colouring.Contrastive analysis of both related and not related languages presents a large corpus of similar or identical lexemes – words similar in spelling, pronunciation and often in meaning. Even in many non-related languages this phenomenon would reach the proportion of 10 to 20 %. It is much higher in terminological corpora where there is a high percentage of international (Neoclassical) words. A considerable share of these lexemes are FFs.

Language material, coupled with actual use, shows that the FFs can be divided into several types:

1. false friends proper
2. occasional or accidental false friends
3. pseudo false friends

False friends proper.

1. *Complete (absolute) false friends* – pairs of words in the respective languages which are monosemantic in both or one language and this meaning differs from that of its counterpart.

2. *Partial False friends* – pairs of words in the respective languages where the Language One word is more polysemantic than Language Two word, i.e. in one or several meanings the words are identical but in some meaning different. Here the situation is more subtle, the possible "trap" – more hidden.

3. *Nuance differentiated word pairs* basically have the same denotative meaning, yet have slight semantic, usually connotative differences. The difference can have a variety of reasons and features:

- semantic limits – the word in one language has a more general meaning than in the other, for example, the word is used as a term in one language while belongs to the general stock in another
- register (stylistic) differences – the difference between literary, neutral and colloquial type of the words, also the general attitudinal characteristics – the word may have, for example, negative connotation. Words can have different usual contexts of usage or certain contextual limits can be imposed in different languages

- frequency of use
- collocation limitations – in one language the word is lexically less free, or words may not share the same syntactic structures
- diachronic digression – the word in one language is more archaic than in the other – this leads to the words having restricted usage sphere, when one cognate has become more archaic or even obsolete while the homonym can be used in modern speech.

There can be a combination of the above mentioned features.

Occasional or accidental false friends – word pairs that are similar by almost pure coincidence, not by common etymology – these are non-cognate interlingual analogues. They lack the etymological link and normally belong to a different logico-subject group which usually helps differentiate them, especially because they stand isolated only in dictionaries, while context usually helps avoid misunderstanding, acts as a life saver. Occasional FFs are normally not included in dictionaries.

Pseudo false friends are actually non-existent word pairs and accordingly rarely discussed. The language learner builds a nonexistent word on the basis of the native word, usually believing that the native word must have a corresponding identical foreign word. Though theoretically hypothetical, any teacher will have met these in the speech of the students. The pseudo friend is usually created on the basis of false analogy, belief that the lexeme (usually international) must have the same use in the other language. For example, there is no *blocade* in French while Latvian *blokāde* (a loan from German *die Blockade*), being similar to loans from French *kanonāde* (*canonnade*), *glisāde* (*glissade*), traditionally leads to the pseudo friend use. Neoclassical root compounds often differ in other languages, e.g. Latvian lexemes *autostrāde, automatistrāle* often lead to pseudo friend coinage in English (correct *motorway*, though Italian loan in English *autostrada*) or German (correct *Autobahn*). Also *narkomāns* leads to creation of *narcoman (drug addict)*, the association being that the shortened affix of *māns* is the loan from English *man.* Similar: *alpinisms – alpinism (mountaineering* though there is *alpinist), psihiska slimiba – psychic disease (mental illness).*

An experiment carried out with rather advanced students, who were given a connected text and instructed to supply the English translation, but were not informed about the problem, (were told to pay special attention to grammar) actually showed that in 60% of the likely cases there were pseudo friends created.

Pseudo friends are normally not represented in dictionaries. In theory their number could be dramatically high, in practice it is rather limited.

Not all above mentioned types and subtypes of FFs present real interest for all users, accordingly the existing dictionaries are not always user-friendly.

FFs Dictionary Types

Of the multitude of FFs dictionaries in different languages there seem to be four general types:

1. The basic FFs dictionary (Muravyev, 1969; Hill, 1982) which aims at drawing the user's attention to the diversity of meaning of the formally similar word pairs, offering, however, no explanation. The shortcoming of this dictionary type is that it can practically be used only in conjunction with another dictionary, as it offers neither explanation of the FF meaning in the Language Two, nor the correct variant for Language One word. Thus the only function of this dictionary is that of awareness raising (informing the reader of the of the danger). This sort of dictionary normally covers only the subtype of complete false friends proper.

2. More expanded FFs dictionary (Browne, 1987; Labarre, 1989; Schwarz, 1993; Parker, 1992; A.Veisbergs, 1994) which gives at least the main meanings of both FFs thus offering the users the possibility of judging for themselves the real difference in meanings and providing the correct variant. Some of these dictionaries also offer examples or/and translations of limited scope (Sane, 1992; Prado, 1993).

3. A detailed FFs dictionary (V. Akulenko, 1969; Gottlieb, 1972; Dictionnaire, 1979; Thody, 1985) going into in-depth analysis of the word pairs, often presenting excerpts from original texts, translations, covering all meanings of the entries, sometimes pointing out examples of wrong use. An academic dictionary of this type has a certainly smaller number of users as neither learners nor most of the advanced users would have time, interest or ability to read the lengthy semantic analysis. Yet linguists or perfectionist users and translators may find this sophisticated approach of interest. Dictionaries of this type often present also confusible words and rather far-fetched cases.

4. Learner's dictionary of FFs (Breitkreuz, 1991, 1992) concentrates on the most typical and frequent FFs pairs, analyzing them and supplying a

variety of exercises aimed at recognition and training of the right use. The learner's dictionary may sometimes be more like a textbook (Dretzke, 1990).

These dictionary types do not always appear in so clear-cut a form – more and more dictionaries tend to add the exercise part as appendixes, there are different mixed cases.

It is evident that making a dictionary user-friendly in all cases means including apart from the word pairs also their meanings, thus providing the user with something more than a scant warning. Absence of the correct variant is as confusing for the learner as dull for the advanced reader. Thus dictionary Type 2 is certainly preferable to dictionary of Type 1. Avoiding the necessity of cross-references in other dictionaries is an obligatory condition for several reasons:

- There may be FFs mistakes in the general bilingual dictionaries.
- Semantic explanations in monolingual as well as bilingual diction-aries are not always sufficient for judging the meaning details – it especially refers to the nuance differentiated FFs meanings.
- Sending the users for another dictionary is wasting their time and unethical.

Thus, for example Thody's (1985) dictionary of FFs (a good and rather detailed dictionary in fact) repeats several times in the preface: "This book should therefore be used in combination with one of the diction-aries mentioned in the Selective Reading List" (p.8). "This book is intended to be used in conjunction with and not instead of a dictionary" (p.11).

On the other hand, the analysis of FFs dictionaries shows also a very broad approach – often diverse linguistic phenomena are included (diachronically diverging words of common etymology, synchronically accidental words of common spelling and/or sound, just similar words). Thus, for example, Birbrajer's (1987) dictionary deals with false friends, words "which might share several meanings (friends) .. but differ with regard to at least one meaning", also words that "may seem identical but are not and in such instances there is a stylistic or frequentative difference", etc. It is dealing with too many lexical groups at once and is neither effective nor useful. This often borders on the so called con-fusible words enhanced by the arrival of new confusible word diction-aries (Williams, 1993; Carpenter, 1993). These are as a rule monolingual (partly aimed at a native speaker) and pronunciation seems to play great

role in determining what to include. It seems that inclusion of con-fusibles in a FFs dictionary should be carefully weighed and imple-mented on individual basis only.

As two rather different groups of people – learners and advanced users – seem to take interest in these dictionaries a more specific readership targetting could be expected, along the broad lines of these two groups.

The User:

a. Translator – Advanced User

Noncognate interlanguage analogues (accidental FFs) and pseudo friends are usually of little interest for a mature bilingual speaker which the translator is presumed to be. Translators (less so interpreters) rarely confuse the complete FFs – these are generally the trap for the beginner learners. Partial FFs, with broader and more polysemantic meaning in one of the languages, are more likely to present difficulties for the translator. Perhaps the most important type for the advanced user is the nuance differentiated word pairs that basically have the same denotative meaning, yet, have connotative differences (semantic limits, stylistic colouring, collocation limitations, diachronic digression). Thus only two groups are of practical interest for the translator and these would deserve well thought-over though concise treatment.

A poll conducted by the author among translators and MA students of Translation and Interpreting suggests that they prefer Type 2 dictionary, while the detailed Type 3 dictionary was judged too sophisticated and time consuming. If even these professionals considered dictionaries of this type too hard to handle, they can be viewed as interesting research studies but not tools for professional performance.

The subgroup analysis in different translations (mistake hunting) suggested that partial friends are the real problem for translators and should be in the centre of attention of dictionaries, but study of nuance differentiated word pairs is even more important for quality translation.

This does not mean that absolute FFs have to be excluded from the advanced users' dictionaries. They have their rightful place there, but, being simpler, should command neither most attention nor most space.

b. Learner – the Beginner

The learner interest seems to lie mostly in the sphere of FFs proper, partial false friends and occasional pseudo friends, plus, perhaps, some

regularly mistaken confusibles (e.g. *genius, genie, gin*). Pseudo-homonymy presents a serious problem for dictionary compilation as theoretically one can create an unlimited number of false association pairs, thus increasing the scope of corpora considerably. Here teachers' experience is of importance and could help elucidate words that really occur in the speech of the learners. One can also set out the risk groups where there is a bigger chance of pseudo friend occurrence. These are usually compounds, one element of which is present in both languages, e.g. having *portrait* and *portrets* in English and Latvian leads to creating the pseudo friend *autoportrait* for Latvian *autoportrets* instead of *self-portrait*.

And finally, the possibility of changes within the corpus of FFs has to be recognized. Separate FFs may cease to be such because the meaning of the word can undergo a change or a new meaning can be developed. Thus FFs dictionaries need regular updating. At specific periods of time, when there is a great language shift, this phenomenon can take an overwhelming effect. At present one can observe it in those European communities of speakers who reorient themselves towards the western world. Many of the FFs were, for example, the result of Russian serving as the intermediary language, and now, with direct contacts between, say Baltic languages and English, scores of former FFs within a very short period are more and more used as "real friends". This may present serious problems for dictionary compilers in deciding whether to list them as such or not. The traditional approach would claim that here is an instance of massive and deplorable foreign interference into the semantic system of the language. The descriptive approach, supplemented by computer gathered corpus, would suggest a change in the reality – a semantic change has taken place and a particular pair of false friends may have ceased to exist, e.g. *ambulance, biljons, studija, dekāde, tehnika,* etc. in Latvian in the period of 1993–1995. Here again the compiler has to balance between the old dilemma and reckon the risk of being lost in the flux of time. Thus false friends dictionaries need regular updating. This refers in particular to languages the speakers of which belong to communities that are undergoing all-embracing transform-ations.

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