
False Cognates and Deceptive Cognates: Issues to Build Special Dictionaries

Marilei Amadeu Sabino

UNESP – Universidade Estadual Paulista – CSJRP/SP
e-mail: amadeusm@ibilce.unesp.br

Abstract

A discussion is presented of the terms “false cognate”, “false friend” and “deceptive cognate”, usually considered synonyms, in order to establish differences between them and eliminate theoretical confusion. It is argued that the terms “false cognate” and “deceptive cognate” refer to two different linguistic phenomena. Distinct definitions are proposed for both and illustrated with practical examples, based on Set Theory. It is hoped that the discussion may be of benefit to build special dictionaries of “false” and “deceptive” cognates, as well as to improve foreign language learning and teaching methodology.

Keywords: false cognates; deceptive cognates; special dictionaries

1 Introduction

The present research was motivated by the realization that the literature on false cognates offers no theoretical conceptualization of the term free from contradiction and that the definition of false friends is also quite confusing (Sabino 2002). It was found that the literature provides no adequate, unanimously accepted definition. On the one hand some authors rely on etymology to identify a “false cognate” (Nascentes 1981; Rónai 1983), while others disregard the importance of word origin and consider false cognates to be words with or without common etymology (Xatara and Oliveira 1995). This theoretical confusion is reflected in practice. In several languages, the so-called false cognate dictionaries list both words that share a common etymology and those originating from different etyma, grouping them all under the label of “false cognates”. In fact, many of these lexical items are true cognates, so it is misleading to call them “false” cognates. However, the word “cognate” originates from the Latin *cognatu(m)*, which is the junction of *cum* [= with] and *nātus* [= born], meaning therefore “born together” or “belonging to the same lineage, family, parentage”. Thus, two (or more) formally similar lexical items may not be called “false cognates” if they are words with the same origin, that is, true cognates.

2 Some Theoretical Considerations

Online dictionaries offer various definitions of “*false*” (Sabino 2002; 2007; 2011a).

false *adj.*

1. Contrary to fact or truth; not true or correct; erroneous.
2. Deliberately untrue.
3. Arising from mistaken ideas.
4. Intentionally deceptive; tending to deceive or mislead.

5. Not faithful or loyal (disloyal); treacherous; perfidious.
6. Not genuine or real; counterfeit.
7. Based on mistaken, erroneous, or inconsistent impressions, ideas, or facts.
8. Unwise; imprudent.
9. Not properly, accurately, or honestly made, done, or adjusted.
10. Fitted or likely to deceive or disappoint.

Seven out of the ten definitions refer to something that is untrue, incorrect, erroneous, mistaken, not genuine, unreal, counterfeit, inconsistent, unwise and imprudent. It is illogical to ascribe the qualities of untrue, erroneous, incorrect or unreal to similar words in two different languages (commonly known as false cognates), which have a common etymological origin (true cognates), but which, as a result of divergent semantic developments, have different meanings.

However, the definitions of “false” that adequately describe the cognates in question are “deceptive”, “unfaithful or disloyal”, “treacherous”, “perfidious”, “fitted or likely to deceive, disappoint or mislead”. It is reasonable to say that words with a shared root, which are formally similar, but which have assumed different meanings due to their separate semantic history can only be understood as “false” in the sense of “deceitful” or “treacherous”. Any other interpretation would be illogical, and this polysemy of the word “false” suggests that the very term “false cognate” is misleading. The expression “false cognate” is only acceptable for those words that are formally similar but which have no common origin, and whose formal similarity could lead to a misunderstanding of their meaning.

So, we therefore propose the following definitions for “false cognates” and “deceptive cognates” (Sabino 2002; 2007; 2011a).

“False Cognates” are lexical units that belong to two (or more) different languages and which, despite deriving from two completely different etyma, have converged to have the same (or almost the same) spelling or similar pronunciation, even though their semantic values are entirely different. In other words, false cognates are words which have the same or very similar form in (at least) two languages, but which have different meaning(s) in each.

According to this definition, the following pairs of lexical units are examples of this process in English and Italian: “pane” (= glass panel) v. “pane” (= bread); “mare” (= adult female horse) v. “mare” (= sea); “fame” (= renown, reputation) v. “fame” (= hunger); “cold” (= lack of warmth, chill; gelid) v. “caldo” (= hot); “ape” (= monkey) v. “ape” (= bee).

“Deceptive cognates”, on the other hand, are lexical units from two (or more) different languages that have the same etymon. They have similar (or identical) spelling or pronunciation but, because of their different semantic history, they no longer share the same meanings.

However, despite partial or full changes in meaning, many pairs of formally similar words in two (or more) different languages may be true cognates, even though they are usually known as “false” cognates – such as, the English and Italian lexical items “assist” v. “assistere”; “attend” v. “attendere”; “argument” v. “argomento”; “cucumber” v. “cocomero”; “fabric” v. “fabbrica”; “factory” v. “fattoria”; “library” v. “libreria”; “pretend” v. “pretendere”, to list but a few examples.

Another widespread term in the literature on the teaching of foreign languages, which is considered by most scholars to be a synonym for “false cognate”, is “false friend”. Derocquigny and Koessler (1928) are acknowledged to have been the first to use the term “faux amis” in French, by many authors, including Prado (1989:721):

Desde que Maxime Koessler y Jules Derocquigny publicaron *Les Faux Amis* en 1928, la expresión “falsos amigos” se ha usado para denominar los vocablos de dos lenguas que son iguales o muy similares, pero que difieren, a veces considerablemente, en significado o uso. Estos falsos amigos son sumamente traicioneros porque a primera vista parecen ser una gran ayuda por la similitud ortográfica, pero en realidad hacen más ardua la tarea de maestros, estudiantes y traductores.¹ (Prado 1989:721)

According to Campenhoudt (1997 - online), contrary to popular belief, the term “false friends” was borrowed by English from French and subsequently spread in several other languages. He argues that English-speaking linguists sometimes resort to the translation of the French expression *faux amis* (false friends), while some purists prefer the terms “false cognates” or “deceptive cognates”. However, the polysemy of the word “false” can lead to ambiguous interpretations of the word combination “false cognate”, as was demonstrated above.

According to Santos (1981), “false friend” is not a suitable expression to designate false cognates or deceptive cognates. He argues that the word “false” does not designate something treacherous or to be avoided, and points out that the expression *faux amis* was translated literally from French into English and remained inadequate and artificial. Thus, for the sake of accuracy and clarity, Santos (1981) prefers the expression “deceptive cognates”.

It is therefore argued in the present paper that the term “deceptive cognate” avoids the polysemy of “false” (where true cognates are called false cognates), as well as the connotative meaning of the word “friends” (where true or false cognates are called “false friends”). The term “false friends”, however, being a term with a broader meaning than the others, may be useful in referring to deceptive or treacherous words, without specifying if they are merely deceptive or really false cognates, even though the term is inaccurate.

For many authors, however, (such as Prado 1989), the terms “false cognate” and “false friend” (in English), “falso cognado” or “seudocognado” and “falso amigo” (in Spanish), “falso cognato” and “falso amigo” (in Portuguese) and “falso amico” (in Italian – “falso cognato” is not a used term in this sense) are all synonyms. The present paper argues that they are not, since they do not designate the same linguistic process or phenomenon.

Having clarified these terminological questions, we can now examine the processes of semantic change (word meaning development or evolution) based on Set Theory (Pais 2001; Sabino 2002, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2011a, 2011b).

3 Understanding Set Theory

In order to apply Set Theory to Linguistic issues, it is important to understand some basic concepts of Set Theory, functions and relations.

A set is a collection of different objects or items called elements or members of the set. The symbol \in is used to express that an element is (or belongs to) a set, for instance $3 \in D$. Its negation is represented by \notin , e.g. $7 \notin D$. A set cannot contain the same object more than once, and its elements are not ordered.

¹ Since Maxime Koessler and Jules Derocquigny published *Les Faux Amis* in 1928, the term “false friends” has been used to describe the words in two languages that are equal or very similar, but differ, sometimes considerably, in meaning or use. These false friends are extremely treacherous because at first glance they appear to be of great help because of their orthographic similarity, but actually make the task of teachers, students and translators more difficult. (The translation from Spanish into English is ours.)

3.1 Equal sets

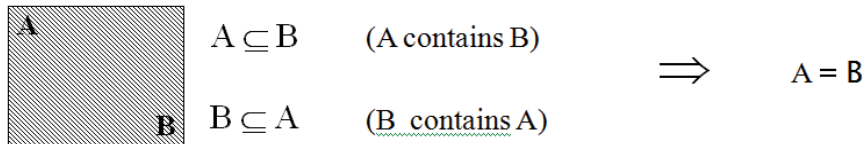
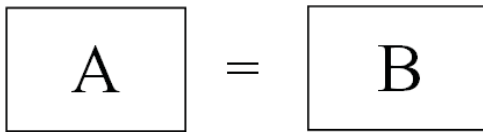


Figure 1: Set Theory representing equal sets.

The sets A and B are equal (written $A = B$) if and only if they have the same elements, that is, each is a subset of the other. Rephrasing this definition, we may say that $A = B$ if $A \subseteq B$ and $B \subseteq A$.

3.2. Intersection sets

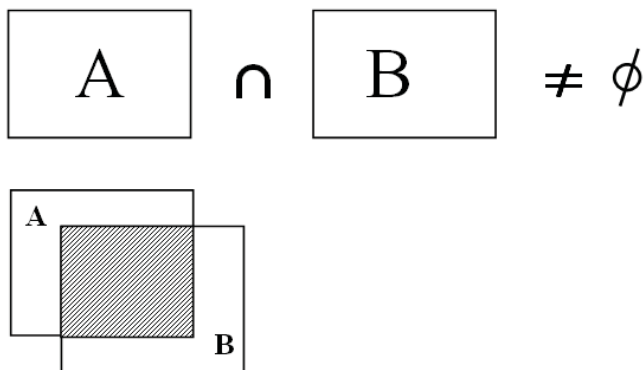


Figure 2: Set Theory representing intersection sets.

The intersection of set A and B (written $A \cap B$) is the set of elements that are both in A and in B .

3.3 Inclusion subsets

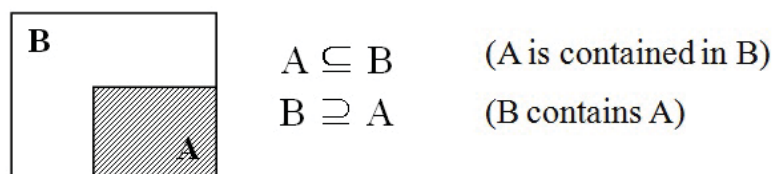


Figure 3: Set Theory representing inclusion subsets.

For two sets A and B , we say that A is a subset of B , or that A is contained in B (written $A \subseteq B$), if all elements of A are in B . Formally, if $A = \{a, b, c\}$ and $B = \{a, b, c, d, e\}$, then $A \subseteq B$. A is a proper subset of B (represented $A \subset B$ or $B \supset A$). If $A \subseteq B$ but $A \neq B$, there is some element in B which is not in A .

3.4 Disjoint sets

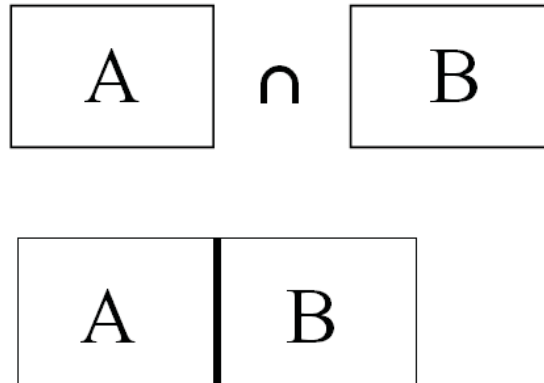


Figure 4: Set Theory representing disjoint sets.

Sets A and B are disjoint if $A \cap B = \emptyset$. A set with no elements is called an empty set (or null set or void set), and is represented by \emptyset or $\{\}$.

We can now proceed to demonstrate how Set Theory can be utilised to achieve a more precise classification of the lexical units defined above as “false cognates” and as “deceptive cognates”. As the objects of our investigation are formally similar Italian lexical units that have at least one different meaning when compared to their similar pairs in the English language, the first type of relationship mentioned here, i.e. equality, has been excluded from the analysis. Equal sets were ignored since it was assumed that they include all the synonym words (true cognates) between the two foreign languages in question, which is not the scope of the present research. Only the three other types of set relation are relevant to this investigation: intersection sets, inclusion subsets and disjoint sets.

4 Set Theory Applied to Linguistic Issues

To understand what kind of relation exists between two intersection sets, let us consider two sets, A and B. Set A contains all the meanings that an English lexical item has, while set B contains all the meanings that its formally equal or similar “pair” has in Italian. The intersection of sets A and B is the set that contains all elements of A that also belong to B, i.e., the same or similar meanings that both lexical units have, each one in its own language. This can be exemplified by the cognate and formally similar verbs “pretend” (in English) and “pretendere” (in Italian), both originated from the Latin *praetendere*:

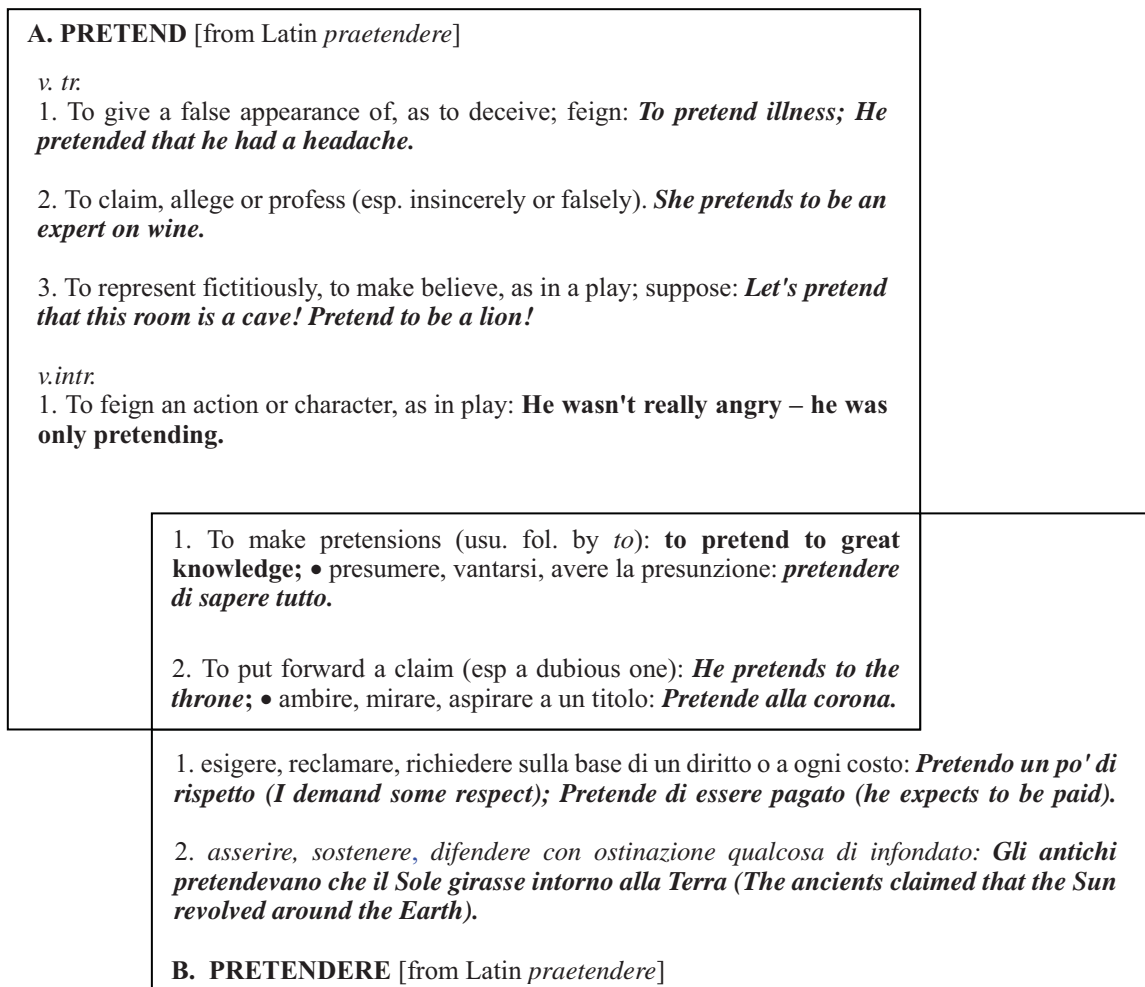


Figure 5: Set theory applied to represent linguistic intersection sets: *pretend* vs *pretendere*.

As we can see, the verbs “pretend” and “pretendere”, in English and Italian, share some common meanings but also have some that are uniquely their own. The elements held in common are the meanings of “to make pretensions (= presumere)” and “to put forward a claim (= aspirare)”.

Regarding the second type of relationship that interests us, the inclusion subset, it can be seen that, although the two lexical units share some identical meanings, in one of the languages (in subset A) the range of total meanings is less extensive or more limited than in set B. Below we describe the formally similar nouns “campione” (in Italian, in set B) and “champion” (in English, in subset A), which both originated from medieval Latin *campio(n-)/campus*.

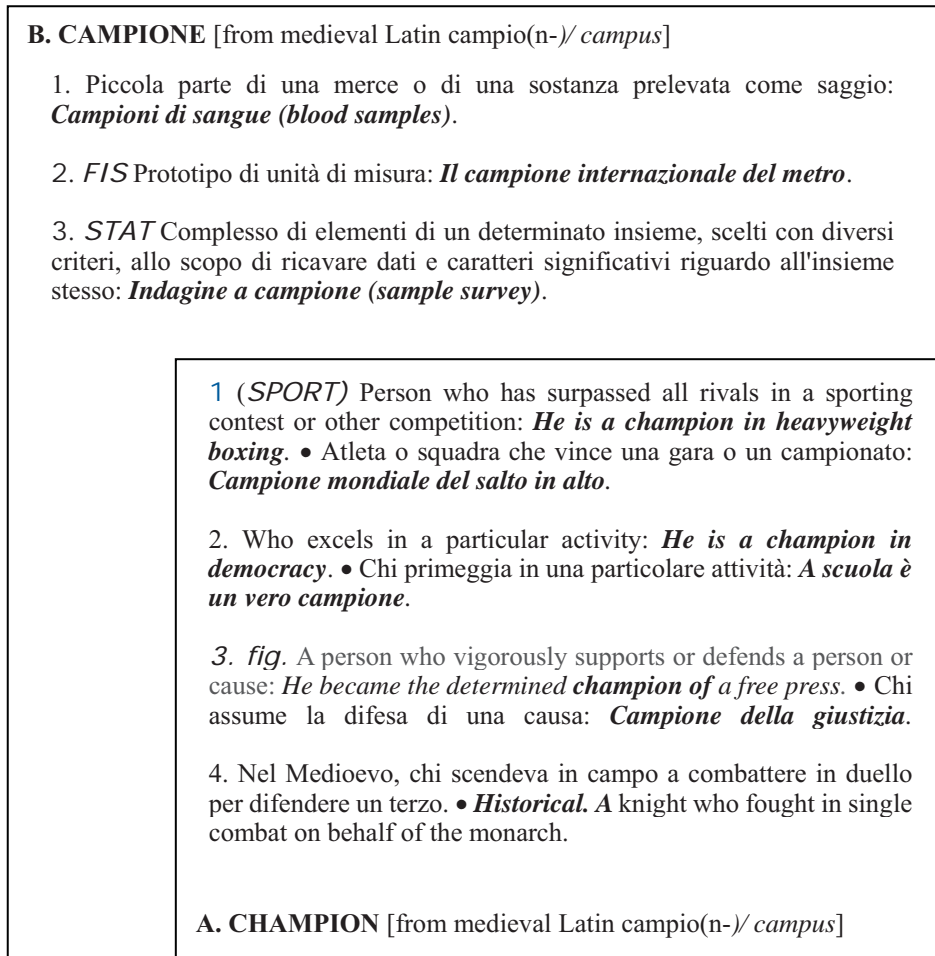


Figure 6: Set theory applied to represent linguistic inclusion subsets: *campione* vs *champion*.

As we have seen, it is possible that two etymologically cognate words may have different semantic developments. Thus, although the nouns “champion” (English) and “campione” (Italian) have the same etymon, they have undergone different semantic evolutions or changes throughout their history. For this reason, they do not share all their meanings, since the Italian word “campione” has also acquired the meaning of “sample”.

Finally, with regard to the disjoint sets, it may be observed that two lexical items that fit this type of relationship have no point in common other than the formal similarity between them. As stated above, they do not share a single meaning or sense. For example:

A. APE (Engl.) [Old English <i>apa</i> ; related to Old Saxon <i>ape</i> , Old Norse <i>api</i> ; Old High German <i>affo</i>].	B. APE (Ital.) [lat. <i>apem</i>]
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. any of a group of anthropoid primates characterized by long arms, a broad chest, and the absence of a tail, comprising the great apes and lesser apes. 2. (loosely) any <i>monkey</i>. 3. an imitator; mimic. 4. a large, clumsy, or coarse person. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Insetto con il corpo peloso bruno, addome con pungiglione, antenne corte, due paia di ali (<i>bee</i>). a. regina, unica femmina feconda a. operaia, femmina sterile che si occupa delle larve e produce il miele e la cera a. maschio, fuco.

Figure 7: Set theory applied to represent Linguistic disjoint sets: *ape* vs *ape*.

Figure 7 above elucidates this phenomenon. The bold line that divides set A (“APE” in English) from set B (“APE” in Italian) is the only element the two sets have in common, which represents the formal similarity between them, even though their meanings are completely different: in set A “APE” = monkey; and in set B “APE” = bee.

5 Set Theory: an Aid in Producing Specialised Dictionaries of “False Friends” and in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching Methodology

The objective of the discussions and examples presented here is to provide clarification regarding the two different linguistic phenomena known as “false cognates” and “deceptive cognates”, in order to resolve discrepancies and provide a good understanding of this theoretical and practical issue.

We may conclude that all those pairs of lexical units that are suited to the first two types of relation addressed (i.e., intersection set and inclusion subset) characterize “deceptive cognates” between two or more languages. This is because they have the same etymology, but their meanings have changed over time. On the other hand, the great majority of those pairs of lexical items that fit the last type of relation discussed (disjoint sets) are likely to characterize “false cognates” between languages.

With regard to this latter type of relation, however, it may occasionally be the case that disjoint sets do not contain false cognates, but real ones. This may happen when the historical changes of meaning in two cognate lexical units were so deep that they no longer share any common meaning in the two languages. Thus, they might easily be considered to be “false cognates”, unless a good etymological dictionary were consulted. For example, the pairs of words “fabric” (English) v. “fabbrica” (Italian), “cucumber” (English) v. “cocomero” (Italian) are derived from the same etymon, but they no longer have related meanings.

These considerations may be helpful to foreign language teachers as well as to “false friend” dictionary makers. In the case of lexicographers, these issues may represent an aid to them in the task of building special dictionaries of “false friends”, enabling them to provide the treacherous lexical

items in their works with graphic marks denoting whether a given word is a false or merely a deceptive cognate.

6 Conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed the terms “false cognate”, “false friend” and “deceptive cognate”, usually considered to be synonyms. We concluded that the terms “false cognate” and “deceptive cognate” refer to two different linguistic phenomena, and that the term “false friend”, which is wider in meaning than the others, may be useful when we wish to refer to deceptive or treacherous words, without specifying whether they are true or false cognates. However, the term “false friend” is too vague to be used in situations requiring greater precision.

We went on to present examples of intersection and disjoint sets as well as of inclusion subsets made up of formally similar pairs of words in English and Italian.

It is hoped that the theoretical and practical background provided by Set Theory will not only contribute to a better identification of “deceptive” and “false” cognates in several foreign languages, but will also clarify how the process of meaning change occurs and gives birth to these treacherous pairs of words. It is also hoped that the improved identification of “deceptive” and “false cognates” may be of use in foreign language learning and teaching methodology, since teachers will be better enabled to explore the relationship between two (or more) formally similar lexical items, which may in turn benefit students’ learning strategies.

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