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FALSE FRIENDS IN GENERAL BILINGUAL DICTIONARIES (ENGLISH AND FRENCH INTO LATVIAN)

Abstract Over the last few decades, the influence of the English language onto the Latvian language has significantly increased. This is due to geopolitical events, rapidly growing media and technological advances where the global language is English. Consequently, the influx of English borrowings into Latvian has increased, raising the incidence of false friends. Notably, some long-established false friends either adopt another meaning or lose the original one aligning more closely with their English counterpart. French has also impacted Latvian, albeit through intermediary languages such as German and Russian. In this paper, examples of false friends in English-Latvian and French-Latvian bilingual dictionaries will be viewed and compared. Currently, there is one English-Latvian false friend dictionary published over three decades ago; the necessity for revisions that would account for recent linguistic developments need to be determined. Contrastive lexicographic analysis is applied.

Keywords false friends; borrowings; diachronic change; lexicographic treatment

1. Introduction

There are numerous definitions of false friends with the focus point of them being ‘words within two different languages which are graphically or phonetically very similar but have different meanings and can therefore be easily confused by foreign language learners’ (Gorbahn & Hausmann, 1989, p. 2882). This definition outlines the possible problems in language acquisition, but they can create problems in translation, interpreting and general communication as well. Often the terms *false friends* and *false cognates* are used as synonyms (Hartmann & James, 1998, p. 56), but some linguists strongly distinguish them and propose the use of *false cognates* and *deceptive cognates* only (Sabino, 2016). In the present paper, the term *false friend* will be used as a superordinate term.

2. Current Situation of False Friends in Latvian

Lexicographers mainly focus on semantic false friends: cognates that either have completely different meanings in each language (monosemantic) or are highly polysemantic in the source language, but have significantly fewer meanings in the other language (polysemantic), thus narrowing the semantic scope and becoming a false friend. Attention to chance false friends with no etymological links is not usually as high on agenda since it is believed they pose less issues than semantic false friends. Veisbergs also mentions pseudo false friends made by language users creating non-existent words in a foreign language imitating their native tongue words (Veisbergs, 1996, p. 629).

2.1 Borrowings, Linguistic History

The Latvian language has a high number of borrowings because of protracted and extensive direct language contacts with German, Finno-Ugric languages, Polish, Swedish, and Russian. Due to historic reasons, most borrowings come from Russian and German, which have also served as intermediary languages for loans from other languages, like English and French. Now, however, many German borrowings as well as Russian ones have been downgraded to lower register. The current geopolitical situation is also marking a change in the role of the Russian language in Latvia, it being taken out of education programs among other changes introduced.

Even though the possibility of false friends is higher among kindred languages, Latvian, which is a Baltic language, has numerous false friends from English and French. These combinations present interest in two aspects: firstly, French was often the language behind the loans, with meaning already changed in the intermediate language. A few examples of this could be the French words ‘agitation’, ‘aspirant’, ‘intelligence’ – all have a different meaning in Russian or German and, thus, also in Latvian. Secondly, some have undergone semantic change aligning the meanings with the intermediary languages and some have developed specifically Latvian nuances.

It is considered that during the Soviet times the Latvian language was more controlled in the media and literature, therefore false friend mistakes were less frequent (Baldunčiks, 2006). However, it is a myth that the real language used to be purer in the past. This paper focuses on false friends from English and French, but if we viewed Russian and German false friends, it is very likely that we would find a similar situation.

2.2 Emerging Diachronic Changes

Since English as the global communication language has had a huge impact on Latvian during the last decades, it frequently affects the semantics of Latvian words. Some false friend meanings are merging, and words are used in such a context that previously would have been considered wrong. Some semantic change mechanisms include specialization or narrowing and generalization or widening (Broz, 2008, p. 205). This is showcased with the word *dekāde* which was previously mainly used with one stable meaning in Latvian: ‘a period of ten days.’ Now, it is increasingly being used with its English counterpart meaning ‘ten years’, as it can be observed in the Balanced Corpus of Modern Latvian (LVK2022).

Another example would be *afēra* [*affair* in English, *affaire* in French], which is a highly polysemantic word both in English and French. It had only one meaning in Latvian, that of ‘a dishonest, speculative venture, a fraudulent transaction’ (MLVV). Now, it is also being used with the meaning ‘love affair’ – the same as in English. This shows expanding polysemy and semantic broadening. The English language influence is manifested as adoption of the English meaning parallel to the Latvian one. This leads us to the treatment of such semi transient false friends in bilingual dictionaries and on the most appropriate ways to reflect these ongoing semantic changes.

3. False Friends in Latvian Bilingual Dictionaries

False friends constitute a small share of the overall dictionary entry numbers, but their treatment deserves close attention. The question of equivalent validity is of importance. It has been stated that since the studies of false friends have appeared relatively recently, mistakes of their translation in bilingual dictionaries are possible (Veldi, 2006). It depends on the false friend type, but the dictionary should not delude the user into thinking that the similar counterparts in both languages are complete equivalents. This leads to several possible suggestions on how to best inform the dictionary user of false friends.

Often, specific information on false friends is not incorporated in bilingual dictionaries at all, them not being distinguished apart in any way. This leads to false friends “disappearing” in the large mass of words with the only treatment strategy being correct equivalent, example provided if possible, and abbreviations of labels to indicate the field of use. Some imply the use of a specific symbol of false friends in dictionaries (Gouws, Prinsloo & de Schryver, 2004, p. 799). Even though every additional symbol or mark would increase the dictionary size, perhaps this would lead to saving some space at the end, as it would erase the need to use additional examples to explain the semantic differences. However, it is not clear whether only informing the user about a false friend would be sufficient; most likely, some indications would be needed to explain the difference. Even more so, the question of marking would arise – should all false friends be marked or the most frequent or popular ones? Would the mark not complicate perception?

Space limitations in paper dictionaries are considered the main obstacle when dealing with false friends since they are so complex in nature (Granger & Swallow, 1988). Digital dictionaries do not possess this obstacle and could theoretically have lengthy dictionary entries. But there are counterarguments to this as well: ‘it would make looking up a fairly simple entry a more complicated task simply because of the amount of information, and it would obliterate the notion of lexical set’ (Corréard, 2002, p. 466). This leads to the conclusion that treatment of false friends in general dictionaries is complicated; there are advantages and disadvantages to every solution or strategy. Veldi states that “comprehensive treatment of false friends is possible only in specialized dictionaries where various meanings can be adequately compared and contrasted” (Veldi, 2006, p. 179). Perhaps a starting point would be providing correct equivalents of false friends in bilingual dictionaries, i.e., not putting an equivalence mark between the two and creating the illusion of both words meaning the same. Labels can be used to underline different domains of word use. It is not known whether it would be an efficient practice to include a specific statement at the end of the lemma informing of the specific false friend and explaining the differences. An illustration of this example could look like this: “translation: tulkojums [translation], not translācija [broadcast]!”.

In this paper, false friend examples in English-Latvian and French-Latvian bilingual dictionaries are analysed. They have been randomly chosen from the false friend corpus currently being collected by the author consisting in total of 194 false friends,

32 of which are chance false friends, 65 monosemantic and 97 polysemantic false friends. 115 examples or 59 percent of the total are English-Latvian false friends, and 79 examples or almost 41 percent are French-Latvian examples.

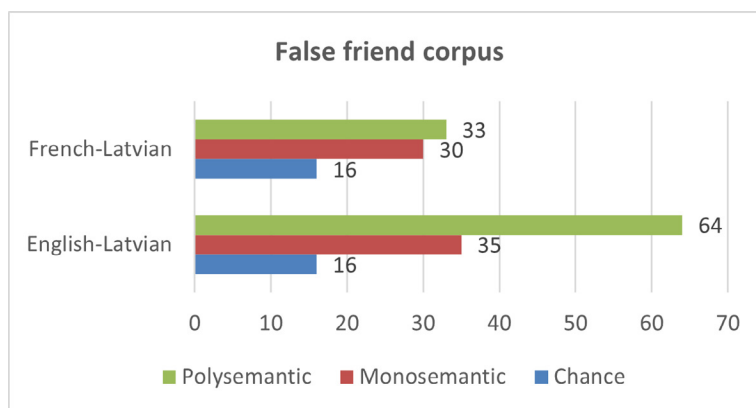


Fig. 1: Information on the false friend corpus collected by the author

The samples provide an insight in the treatment of false friends in Latvian bilingual dictionaries analysed during this paper. Four English-Latvian and three French-Latvian dictionaries were reviewed, which are the most recent dictionaries available. The digital dictionary *Tilde*, which is one of the few Latvian digital dictionaries available online, was used in both language combinations. *Tilde* is based on paper dictionaries.

The definitions used to differentiate false friend meanings in each language have been chosen from the *Mūsdienu latviešu valodas vārdnīca* [Contemporary Latvian language Dictionary] (hereinafter – MLVV), *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries* (OLD) and *Larousse French dictionary* (Larousse). Two English-Latvian false friend examples will be analysed first, then moving on to two examples from French into Latvian.

1. In English, *anecdote* can be a joke and ‘a personal account of an event’ (OLD). *Anekdotē* in Latvian signifies ‘a short story about a comic event with an unexpected and witty ending’ (MLVV). It is a polysemantic false friend with two respective meanings in English and one in Latvian. Below is the information available at the English-Latvian dictionaries. The translation is provided in brackets next to the entry.

Table 1: Comparison of English-Latvian dictionary entries of “anecdote”

ENG 1	ENG 2	ENG 3	ENG 4
anekdotē [a joke]	anekdotē [a joke]	1.anekdotē [a joke]; 2.īss stāsts, epizode, asprātīgs stāsts [a short, witty story, episode] 3.privātās dzīves sīkumi par slavenību (parasti nepublicēti) [details of celebrity private life (usually unpublished)]	anekdotē [a joke]

Only one meaning is provided without mentioning semantic nuances in three out of four dictionaries. Therefore, the language user might automatically presume that words in both languages carry identical semantic weight, which is not true. The situation is similar with other false friend examples like *exploitation* [eksploatācija] and *utilisation* [utilizācija], which all have significant meaning differences that are not indicated in dictionaries.

- In English, *gymnasium* designates a sports hall. Ģimnāzija in Latvian is a loan from German, referencing to a type of a secondary school starting from the 7th grade until the 12th with higher education standards and requirements. In some countries, the meaning of this word coincides with the Latvian meaning, but the first equivalent of this word from English into Latvian should be ‘a gym’.

Table 2: Comparison of English-Latvian dictionary entries of “gymnasium”

ENG 1	ENG 2	ENG 3	ENG 4
1.vingrošanas zāle [gym]; 2.ģimnāzija [secondary school]	1.ģimnāzija [secondary school]; 2.vingrošanas zāle [gym]	1.vingrošanas zāle [gym]; 2.ģimnāzija [secondary school]	1.vingrošanas zāle [gym]; 2.ģimnāzija [secondary school]

As we can see, all dictionaries provide two meanings; three offer the correct first equivalent. The information and context provided is indeed very limited; it might not be clear to the language user which meaning applies in the specific case. This example also showcases a lack of subject labels or explanations of differing word meanings in different countries. The same with the false friend *partisan* [partizāns], which is being used in different contexts both in English and Latvian.

Now some examples in French-Latvian dictionaries:

- A polysemantic false friend is the French word *collaboration*. Its semantic spectrum is broad with the first meaning being ‘participation, cooperation’ (Larousse). *Kolaborācija* in Latvian is used with negative connotations, referring to collaboration with the enemies of the state, referencing mainly historical events of the 20th century. Results suggest that the field of use is indicated for the agent noun (explaining that it is a political term), but without the explanation of the historical and political context to what it refers to.

Table 3: Comparison of French-Latvian dictionary entries of “collaboration”

FR 1	FR 2	FR 3
līdzdarbība [complicity]; collaborationiste <i>m. pol.</i> kolaboracionists [collaborationist]	1.piedalīšanās [participation]; sadarbība [cooperation]; 2. <i>hist.pol.</i> sadarbošanās [collaboration]	līdzdarbība [complicity]; collaborationiste <i>m. pol.</i> kolaboracionists [collaborationist]

All three sources provide additional labels to indicate a specific domain of use which proves to be a useful practice. The polysemantic false friend *audience* [audience] with numerous meanings in both French and Latvian was treated in dictionaries similarly. The same with *diète* [diēta] with two meanings in French but only one in Latvian: two distinct subject labels solved the ambiguity.

4. *Démonstration* in French has seven listed meanings in Larousse, starting from ‘scientific proof or argument’ and ‘manifestation’ to ‘a display of emotions’. *Demonstrācija* has two meanings in Latvian: a display of something and ‘the expression of public sentiment, political demands or protest in a mass march, rally’ (MLVV), making it a polysemantic false friend. Below are the results obtained from French-Latvian dictionaries.

Table 4: Comparison of French-Latvian dictionary entries of “démonstration”

FR 1	FR 2	FR 3
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>mat.</i> pierādījums [proof]; 2. izrādīšana; parādīšana [display]; 3. <i>daž. noz. [different domains]</i> demonstrēšana; demonstrācija [demonstration] 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. izrādīšana [display]; 2. demonstrējums [demo]; 3. pierādījums [proof]; 4. spēka/drosmes izrādīšana [manifestation of force/courage] 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>mat.</i> pierādījums [proof]; 2. izrādīšana; parādīšana [display]; 3. <i>daž. noz. [different domains]</i> demonstrēšana; demonstrācija [demonstration]

Though several meanings appear in the Latvian lemma, *demonstrācija* with its multiple domain label will look the most attractive Latvian counterpart to the user. Here again labels are used to provide additional information to the dictionary user. The provided equivalents could necessitate some examples in context to understand how these words really function. But that, of course, is a question of space – since only one of the six dictionaries analysed in this paper is digital, this is an important factor that must be taken into consideration.

4. False Friend Dictionaries in Latvian

False friend dictionaries constitute a specific lexicographical category. Their target audience would be language professionals like interpreters, translators, language teachers and others. Therefore, these types of dictionaries have specific requirements: accidental false friends should be excluded; specific attention needs to be paid to the selection of headwords; the offered equivalent should be correct with clear examples, reflecting the present-day usage of the word; difference explanations should not be long but to the point, and others (Gorbahn & Hausmann, 1989, p. 2883). The field of use, register level and possible idiomatic meanings of the false friends should be indicated separately.

Currently, there is one false friend dictionary in the English-Latvian language combination by Andrejs Veisbergs (1994). It consists of approximately 800 entries. Only semantic false friends are included, excluding chance and pseudo false

friends. The domain of use and explanation is provided in the brackets to facilitate comprehension. Both Latvian and English false friends and their correct equivalents are in columns next to each other which helps see semantic differences visually.

A study of French-Latvian false friends was carried out by Andrejs Bankavs (1989), offering analysis of false friends on a morphological, lexical, and syntactical level. Here the goal was not to compile as many false friends as possible, but to explain differences in French and Latvian. Sometimes, it seems, the author diverges from the notion of false friends, providing examples of words that are not false friends. It is a useful material, but not so much in the case of semantic false friends between French and Latvian.

More than thirty years have passed since their compilation. It seems that their revision could be useful to remove the words that are not false friends anymore, add a new sense to the words undergoing diachronic changes, and include newly emerged false friend examples. Such updated lexicographical material could be integrated into digital dictionaries to improve the information available on false friends. Since false friend dictionaries are in comparison very small and would therefore have a very limited target audience, it would not suffice to leave them as a stand-alone lexicographical material.

5. Conclusions

This paper sheds light on the treatment of false friends in the most recent English-Latvian and French-Latvian general dictionaries. Analysis revealed recurring patterns of management of false friends across several dictionaries. False friends in them are not specifically marked; labels are most frequently used to indicate differences in word use. In general, the treatment of false friends is sufficient if the provided meanings are clear and unambiguous. Yet, in some cases, only one equivalent was provided, thereby sustaining the illusion of complete equivalence. This is not helpful since diverging contextual, cultural and semantic references are not disambiguated.

The possibility of false friend marking was discussed to understand the potential and possibilities of such a solution. It is not being practised in the analysed dictionaries which might be due to space constraints – a significant limitation for printed dictionaries.

Existing false friend dictionaries could be revised to update entries where false friends have become “true friends” due to diachronic changes. Since the target audience for such dictionaries is minimal, it would be best to incorporate them into existing digital dictionaries, which would increase the likelihood of this information reaching a larger public. The above observations would be valid for lexicographic treatment of any language pairs with false friends.

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