

FALSE FRIENDS INVIGORATED

Introduction

Our theme is confusion - a particular and yet very frequent type of mainly inter-lingual error. As we are not tragic authors but merely language teachers, we tend to think that these errors can be prevented. After diagnosing them, we shall therefore attempt to prescribe prophylactic rather than curative measures.

Since the original work by Koessler and Derocquigny appeared in 1928, the concept of false friends ('faux amis', 'faux frères', 'mots sosies') has received a lot of attention from scholars, although they have apparently never granted it the status it deserves in mainstream research. Yet, its significance is considerable if one takes into account not only the high frequency of many of the words involved but also the importance of clear understanding and exact translation in the commercial, political and scientific fields as well as in many others.

One simply has to look in such a prestigious publication as Time to see the problem. Speaking about American economic policy in the issue of May 30th, 1983, President François Mitterand is reported to have said: "It is not normal for the U.S. budget to be paid by us in Europe". Without even looking at the original, the false-friend detector knows that the translator has been a little bit incautious.

Defining the problem

The kind of error we are dealing with usually involves two different languages. Confusion arises because word A (which belongs to the foreign language being learned or used) looks or sounds exactly or nearly like word B, which belongs to the learner's mother tongue. The user then establishes an unwarranted inter-lingual equivalence on the basis of this total or partial similarity. We do not intend to go into the intra-lingual aspect of the problem, i.e. the mistakes made inside one and the same language because of the close phonetic or graphic resemblance between words whose senses are either related or far-removed. Neither shall we examine another variety in which the mistake is due to the graphic resemblance or identity between words which belong to different though possibly related languages foreign to the user.

The best definition of the problem one can give is probably in Saussurean terms. In the learner's mother tongue a particular signifiant is associated with a particular signifié. Once the signifiant appears, even in a foreign-language context, the above-mentioned association is so strong that the user automatically thinks of his mother-tongue signifié (in its totality).

In fact, this is a many-faceted phenomenon. According as one or the other aspect is emphasized, it is even possible to distinguish orthographical, morphological, syntactic, idiomatic, semantic and

even pragmatic false friends. We shall presently say a few words about each of these varieties, while keeping in mind the fact that, although categories may be pedagogically defensible, they seldom do justice to the complexity of the facts. On the other hand, it would be interesting to find out whether the probability of error increases in proportion to the number of similarities. For instance, are homographs more likely to be confused if they are also (near-) homophones?

With orthographical false friends, the deceptive similarity is mainly a matter of spelling: the two words are so much alike that the user fails to notice or to remember that one of them has a single consonant whereas its counterpart has a double one. Examples are:

French	English
<u>millêni<sup>u</sup>m</u>	<u>millennium</u>
<u>développer</u>	<u>develop</u>
<u>danse</u>	<u>dance</u>

This kind of similarity often causes mistakes when the foreign learner is working from a spoken source or writing under dictation. Of course, the words which belong to this category may very well fit into another one as well.

A further type of orthographical false friend, which we may call 'spelling-semantic' occurs when there are two or more pairs of near homographs in one or in both of the languages involved:

French	English
<u>atteindre</u>	<u>attain</u>
<u>attendre</u>	<u>attend</u>

Here is a tentative explanation of what may happen in such cases:

- (1) The French learner wants to translate atteindre into English;
- (2) he remembers that the English and the French terms are very similar in spelling;
- (3) he chooses the English word whose spelling is nearest to atteindre, i.e. attend.

A similar process can be imagined for an English learner translating attain by attendre. Not surprisingly, the wrong choice is often a more frequent word than the right one. Incidentally, translating attendre by attend would, in our classification, be considered as a semantic false-friend error.

The morphological false friend is of a more insidious type. The mistake usually consists in adding the wrong ending to the right stem. French examples (produced by a British user) are:

\*dénigration instead of dénigrement  
\*audacitê instead of audace

Conceivably, the user knows there is a word in the foreign language,

somehow remembers that it is very close to the term he knows in his mother tongue but, in his attempt to reconstruct it, unconsciously falls back on the morphological system of that mother tongue. The erroneous assumption is here that, because the same word exists in the two languages, it also has exactly the same morphology in both. This assumption may also lead to mistakes in which a word-class change (e.g. zero-suffix derivation) quite natural in one language is treated as directly transferable into the other.

Parenthetically, one might ask at this point if we are not already overstressing the notion of false friend. If an Englishman says: "Ce fait est évidencé par de nombreux témoignages", is he falling into a false-friend trap or is he rather over-extending the derivational rules of his mother tongue, thus evidencing a somehow awkward but well-meaning creativity?

With syntactic false friends, the erroneous assumption is that because two words have the same spelling and the same meaning (in many acceptations) they also have the same grammatical behaviour. Examples are:

"It is difficult to comment what the author calls..."  
 "Je suis familier avec ce livre"

This kind of over-generalization of grammatical behaviour also occurs with non-false friends:

Que voulez-vous?    What do you want?  
 Que voulez-vous que nous fassions?                   What do you want that we do?

Here too it would be interesting to see if the presence of a semantic false friend increases the probability of a syntactic mistake.

The most frequent type is, it seems, the semantic false friend and it is with this category that most lists of or works on false friends deal. Examples abound:

The actual French Government (present)  
 Il est arrivé avec un certain délai (retard)  
 Les personnes dont les accomplissements et l'activité  
 ont affecté notre vie (réalisations; influencé)

At this point we wish to offer two remarks which, to some extent, anticipate what we shall say about the teaching of false friends:

(1) The problem would be easier to solve if all false friends were total false friends. Examples are: abortive/abortif; achievement/achèvement. As the words associated have nothing in common except their graphic appearance and perhaps their etymology, it is comparatively easier for the foreign learner to keep them apart and ascribe to them the correct meaning in the right language, although it seems that adult foreign language learners often think that the etymology of a word is its only real and permanent meaning. The difficulty lies with the numerous partial false friends, i.e. pairs of words which are very close to each other and often share some senses while they

differ in others.

(2) Experience shows that context (or simply co-text) plays an important part in the genesis of false-friend mistakes. During the past academic year a group of Business School students who had been talking a lot about (un)employment problems had been drilled in the use of words such as employ, hire, lay off, etc. Confronted at the written examination with a text concerned with the effects of robotics on employment, most of them made a mistake of the type: "They must engage new staff..." (hire, French engager)

The frequency of the mistake, it turned out, was simply due to the presence in the text of the following sentence: "Robots will replace workers engaged in monotonous tasks". The influence of the context is, on the other hand, not necessarily negative: it may bring out the monstrosity of a literal translation and induce a healthy reaction.

Recent research has led us to enlarge our original definition to include what we are tentatively calling idiomatic false friends, in which either a false friend - or even a 'true' friend - creates the deceptive impression that the idiom which contains it can be translated word for word. Spotting this type of false friend often requires a very detailed and precise knowledge of the two languages involved and of the encyclopaedic information they convey. The COLLINS/ROBERT DICTIONARY gives the following entry, E<sub>1</sub>.

E<sub>1</sub>: livre de chevet bedside book

In French, livre de chevet is often used to mean livre de prédilection. Many people use the word to speak of a favourite reference work which contains such vital information that one should never stop reading or consulting it ("Vous devriez en faire votre livre de chevet"). The English equivalent is, according to the definition in E<sub>2</sub> from WEBSTER'S THIRD, for light entertainment.

E<sub>2</sub>: bedside ... suitable for reading in bed esp. in short bits; sometimes: light and entertaining (-book, -reading)

A final variety we wish to mention are the pragmatic false friends. Even total beginners know that French merci is the equivalent of Thank you. However, among the many nuances which intonation may impart to the French word, there is a particular one, often accompanied by a negative gesture, in which merci clearly means No, thank you. A better example is, probably, the phrase "Don't mention it" which had better not be translated literally when used to mean "There is no need for thanks".

To round up this theoretical examination of the problem, we shall mention a series of factors which further compound it, whatever the 'category' one may be dealing with:

(1) diachronic differences: like other words, false friends shed some of their senses and develop new ones - their semantic area is not stable. One of the results is that former false friends have now gained acceptance, although they may still be frowned upon by purists (a well-known example is French réaliser in the

sense of "to become aware of").

(2) geographical variation: American English may allow what British usage forbids. A phrase like to dispose of with the meaning "to have at one's disposal" (French: disposer de) can thus be considered by French users as a false friend in British English but as quite acceptable in American English.

(3) frequency difference: one term of the pair is very current whereas its counterpart is correct, but rather infrequent.

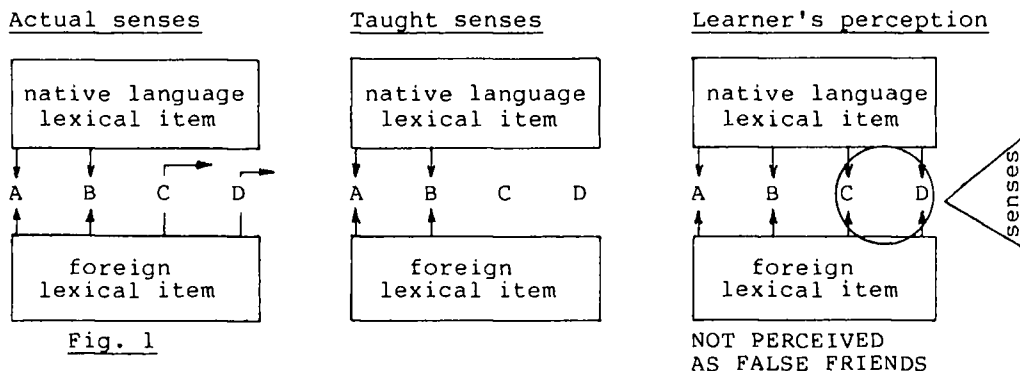
(4) stylistic differences: an English word may be used mainly in writing or be very formal whereas its French counterpart belongs to another register.

(5) cultural differences: which English word do you use to identify the Head of a Belgian University (le Recteur): the Rector, Vice-Chancellor or President?

All these considerations are of course daily routine to lexicographers. But our concern is with learners. No wonder the latter get caught so often, when you think of the constant control which language specialists must exercise over their own output in a foreign language to avoid the sophisticated traps we have just described.

#### The teaching of false friends

At present, no false friend component is incorporated in foreign-language courses, with the result that a significant number of errors can be blamed on methodology. This has become especially common with audio-visual and even communicative approaches, which too often tend to present an over-simplified picture of word behaviour and can downgrade accuracy in favour of other factors. Diagrammatically, what happens e.g. with a partial false friend can be represented as follows:



The first column shows the actual behaviour of the item with the traps it includes for a particular foreign language; the second shows the item as taught and the third shows the item as finally perceived as a result of the deficient teaching: the false-friend elements are not perceived as such and become errors. This diagram

implies that the patterns and meanings introduced by the teacher should be presented NOT as transferable en bloc into another context, but as restricted to a particular area. This has important pedagogic consequences which we shall develop later.

Technically speaking, the problem is even more complicated than first appears and the above figure should be supplemented by the following one:

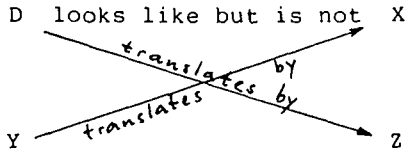
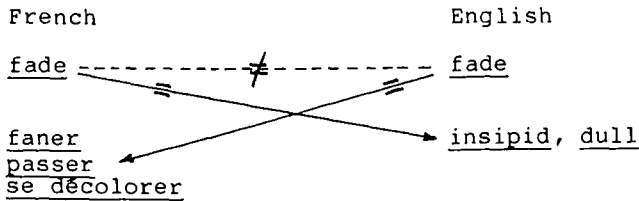


Fig. 2

Example:



As Fig. 2 suggests, every false friend represents for the learner a fairly complicated problem in which at least four different terms are involved (D,X,Y,Z). In the case of partial false friends the network of criss-cross relationships becomes very difficult to draw, let alone remember:

COVER v.t. -----#----->	COUVRIR v.t.
(gen.) (object, person)	couvrir
(protect) (person)	couvrir, protéger
to cover one's face	se couvrir la face
(insurance)	couvrir
(distance)	couvrir, parcourir
<del>COVER</del> -----#-----<	COUVRIR
drown, conceal	cacher, masquer (son, bruits)
shower so. with (kisses, praises)	couvrir de (baisers, éloges)
COVER v.i. -----#----->	SE COUVRIR v. pron.
to cover up, wrap up	(s'habiller)
to bring shame upon oneself	~ de ridicule

This is not just theory. Suppose you are starting from the French, thus teaching English to French-speaking learners. Once you have drawn their attention to the non-equivalence between French fade and English fade, you sooner or later have to supply the other terms of the fourfold relationship. Our contention is thus that you cannot warn learners against a possible mistake and then leave them to their own devices to put things right. We are not saying that

the whole picture must be completed at once. As a matter of fact, we think this should be done in stages, although our experience is that some adult learners will demand the whole truth at once; probably this satisfies their sense of symmetry.

What are the pedagogic implications of what precedes?

(1) False friends - particularly if one accepts the fairly broad definition given here and takes into account all the varieties or aspects of the problem we have enumerated - are an important source of confusion. Although this is not a typical beginner's error, the difficulty should be tackled early in the learning/teaching process. It seems to us that, were it only for reasons of economy, preventing mistakes is easier and safer than erasing them.

(2) We consider it sound teaching practice to teach first the 'safe' senses of a false friend. Incidentally, we hope that these senses will be among the most current ones. We think that at this point already pupils should be warned against any grammatical or lexical over-generalization (and this, of course, does not apply to false friends only). Not that the teacher should forbid anything but rather that he should illustrate and explain the problem in very simple terms.

(3) Similarly, we think that dictionaries (both bilingual and monolingual learners' dictionaries) should help them in this by providing convenient signs or labels warning users of the danger. So, if we take the entry library in the LONGMAN DICTIONARY OF CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH, it would become something like this:

E<sub>3</sub>: library ... (+Fr. 1, 2, 3, 4, Sem.)

Within the brackets, the abbreviation shows in which language there is a false-friend relationship and of what type, whilst the numbers refer to the different meanings in the entry. In this way, the user is presented with a warning and reference early in the entry. In a bilingual dictionary, one can introduce a more complex marking system to function as a warning, which might be within the meanings in an entry, preceding those elements which are tricky. The simplest of these might be the dagger symbol, whilst a further step would involve the application of a similar process with even more detailed indications to the monolingual learner's dictionary.

The arguments so far put forward lead towards a duality of approach in dictionary-making: the production of accurate reference lists of false friends and the application of a false-friend overlay to the production and revision of existing dictionaries. Clearly, this is intended to go much further than the simple warning-mark procedures just advocated and which are in most senses the result of applying an overlay. What is required is the construction of entries which eliminate the confusions due to false-friendship. This would introduce a new dimension in dictionary-making and could be achieved by applying the following practical recommendations.

In bilingual dictionaries, the two parts should no longer be

written separately. In the case of false friends especially, the entry for a particular item should always be compared with that of its counterpart in order to eliminate discrepancies. Let us take two examples (both from the COLLINS/ROBERT). In the French-English entry E<sub>4</sub> for motiver we find:

E<sub>4</sub>: motiver ... (a) (justifier, expliquer) action, attitude,  
réclamation: to justify, account for ...

In the English-French entry we read:

E<sub>5</sub> motivate ... act, decision motiver; person pousser ...

This suggests several points. Firstly, that motivate is in certain senses translatable by the French motiver, which is correct, but also that act is a collocate. Now, this act is of course quite close to the action given as collocate in the French-English entry. But in fact the two senses are totally different. So we have:

French-English: motiver: (action) justify (1)  
English-French: motivate: (act) motiver (2)

In (1) motiver means "justify, account for" (action)  
In (2) motiver means "prompt, be the motive of" (act)

In our opinion, the choice of collocates is unfortunate because it might easily lead the user to think that motivate can mean "justify, account for (act)".

Or take the word evidence. Its most important sense in French (and that from which all the others are derived) is that of "obviousness, evident character". Curiously enough, this sense is not listed in the English-French entry, although the English word appears in the translation of several French examples in the French-English part: "se rendre à l'évidence": "to bow (ou) yield to facts (ou) the evidence". Supposing a learner consults the two parts, what will he make of this apparent discordance?

This also raises the problem of entry ordering. Let us return to our evidence example. Strangely enough, the sense in question comes first in the CONCISE OXFORD DICTIONARY (1964 edition): this probably reflects the historical order. In HARRAP'S STANDARD FRENCH & ENGLISH DICTIONARY, Part Two, English-French, it also comes first and in E<sub>6</sub> is followed by two examples:

E<sub>6</sub>: evidence ... to acknowledge the evidence of the facts:  
reconnaître l'évidence des faits;  
to fly in the face of evidence:  
se refuser à l'évidence

One might wonder whether the decision to place this sense first was dictated by historical or by practical considerations, i.e. by a wish to suggest to the bilingual user that the two words do have common acceptations. We are not quite convinced that this is the best policy, although it might, if accompanied by the adequate warning sign, draw at once the user's or learner's attention to the fact that he is on tricky ground.



Finally, it almost sounds like a trite saying in this age of computerized dictionary-making to suggest that the juxtaposition of the two corresponding entries presented above as a necessary stage in the compilation of bilingual dictionaries has now become much easier if one has the suitable facilities.

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