

THE THREAT OF "FALSE FRIENDS" IN LEARNING ENGLISH

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A permanent problem for the learners of English as a foreign language will remain the so called "false friends" – words presenting an utter resemblance with terms in the learner's mother tongue, but actually having a distinct meaning. Are such words really a danger for the non-native speaker of English and then are there ways of avoiding the confusion?

Key words: false friends, avoiding confusion, meaning, differentiated evolution.

The concept of "false friend"

False friends or false cognates are words that may sound similar in two or more languages but in actuality mean different things. The concept was born bearing precisely this idea that the English word seems to be "friendly" to the learner. That is to say that being very similar to some notion already known by the speaker from his/her language, the English word helps him/her to produce communication in English too, relatively easier than when using totally new and unknown words. So, these words are seen as helping "friends". Still, they turn out to have very different meanings from those believed on the basis of the similarity with the mother tongue, being deceptive and tricky. Thus, they finally prove to be "false", pretended, and very much less friendly than expected.

Sources of confusion

There are some clear sources of confusion in what the use of false friends is regarded. We may distinguish a category of sources related to behavioural aspects of the speaker and another one concerning the linguistic approach.

Thus, in what the human element is implied, it is first of all a question of wrong choice of words due to directness and spontaneity of conversations. It occurs because of the normal tendency to use the most familiar words that come to one's mind when talking, as an unconscious and uncontrolled means of producing fluent communication. This comes really natural and unnoticed because of the similarity with the mother tongue of the speaker. It is doubtless that in such situations the fact that these words exist might be considered somewhat helpful. The use of some of these words presents the advantage of better fluency and higher speed. Of course, this holds true for the mistakes that are not very dangerous, neither creating too much confusion nor impeding the real comprehension of the general facts communicated.

Of the same category, laziness is another cause for the production of false friends. Even aware that something may be inappropriate, too easy, or too much alike, the speaker indulges in using that term anyhow as opposed to the more tiresome activity of checking it up, though time and situation (e.g. not conversational but writing – less demanding) would allow.

Regarding the linguistic issue, etymology is the first responsible. These words may have a common root, from an original language that both languages in question derive from or have borrowed and assimilated the particular word from. Some similar meanings can be still preserved, more or less, in both languages, as main senses or, on the contrary, as figurative or secondary. But new meanings can develop and there are restricted or enlarged senses that influence the future development of the word in one language as distinct from the other. Distinct alterations of meanings, the development of a polysemy, in certain circumstances, or of a simply different particularization would bring about such confusions with these words.

There might, unquestionably, appear situations of mere coincidence, when there is no connection between the two words, but a misunderstanding will still occur because of a chance similitude in form or pronunciation.

Exemplifications

English vocabulary and the Romanian one do not have too many words in common as they derive from different ancient languages, still the Roman influence has affected the Anglo-Saxon base of English.

On the other hand, subsequent borrowings from other languages may have had the same effect of assimilating words much alike.

Some words may have a very close meaning to the real one (see table 1), the wrong usage will have no major consequence in understanding the speaker:

Table 1

English term:	seemingly resembling the Romanian term:	meaning, in fact:
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cake	chec	prăjitură
assist	a asista	a ajuta
carpet	carpetă	covor
crayon	creion	cretă cerată
pork		carne de porc
sanity	sănătate	sănătate mintală

There is a number of lexical items that come from a common root and then the continuous development and transformation of language altered meanings differently.

Some false friends are less important because they are not so easily mistaken (see table 2):

Table 2

English term:	seemingly resembling the Romanian term:	meaning, in fact:
stanza	ștanță	strofă
smoking	smoching	fumat
car	căruță, a căra	mașină
deserve	a deservei	a merita
elevator		lift
office	oficiu	birou
policy	poliție	poliță, politică
brilliant		minunat, grozav
ordinary	ordinar	comun, obișnuit

Differentiated evolution of the same word in linguistically isolated circumstances, as the situation of Romanian and English languages, will bring about different implications and meanings attributed to the words that. They start from the same root but will come to mean something else in Romanian than in English, adopting various procedures of enlarging, restricting or focusing the notion embodied in the symbol represented by the certain word. A list of such false friends (as in table 3 below), may prove very useful when learning English, these causing the most important and dangerous mistakes.

Table 3

English term:	seemingly resembling the Romanian term:	meaning, in fact:
actual		real, adevărat
abstract		rezumat
advertisement	avertisment	publicitate
affluent		bogat
apology	apologie	scuză
billion		miliard
camera		aparat foto
casual	cazual	obișnuit
caution	cauțiune	atenție, avertisment
chance	șansă	hazard
chef	șef	bucătar șef
cognate	cumnat	înrudit, cu origine comună
contest		concurs
confectionery	confecționare	cofetărie

consequent	consecvent	ulterior, următor
crime	crimă	delict, infracțiune
deception	decepție	înșelăciune, iluzie
editor		redactor
entitle	a intitula	a îndreptăți
eventual		final
extenuating	extenuant	atenuant, diminuator
fabric	fabrică	stofă
finally	final	în sfârșit
gracious	grațios	gentil, amabil
grave	grav	mormânt
introduce	a introduce	a prezenta
invidious		discriminatoriu
Island	Islanda	insulă
library	librărie	biblioteca
magazine	magazin	revistă
novel	nuvelă	roman
petrol		benzină
physician	fizician	medic
pregnant	pregnant, accentuat	gravidă
preservative	prezervativ	conservant
prevent	preveni	împiedica
prospect	prospect, broșura	potențial, de perspectivă
rent	rentă	chirie
resume	a rezuma	a relua
scholar	școlar	erudit
scope	scop	gamă, extindere
sensible	sensibil	rațional, înțelept
soda		sifon
supply	a suplini	a aproviziona
sympathetic	simpativ	înțelegător, empatic
sympathy		condoleanțe
topic	topică	subiect

We may encounter words having in Romanian a certain meaning as the basic one, while in English that particular meaning is not very commonly used and the terms have other more important senses. The danger with these is to mistakenly translate the word into Romanian, directly and keeping the suggested inferred meaning, while the context would imply one of the other meanings. Much is the same way, a Romanian word may present a polysemy and stand for the meaning implied by more English words, still having one meaning common to the English correspondent (e.g. machine).

Table 4

English		Romanian
Sense:	1. He came to his senses and started to learn. 2. The sense of this word is unknown.	Sens
Classify:	1. An FBI classified document has recently been exposed. 2. The letters are classified into formal and informal.	A clasifica
Figure:	1. I cannot figure the meaning of these words: 5 is a figure.	Figură

	2. The oval is a geometrical figure. He has a familiar figure.	
Apply:	1. He applied for a job as a salesman. 2. They applied that theory; it proved efficient in practice.	A aplica
Determine:	1. I'm determined, I won't change my mind again. 2. We determined them to confess promising.	A determina
Effective:	1. To be effective, this medicine has to be taken with milk. 2. The effective work done is less than what was necessary.	Efectiv
Expose:	1. His secret was exposed and he was very embarrassed. 2. After exposing the data the teacher asked some questions.	A expune
Sentence:	1. Any sentence has to have a subject and a predicate. 2. The judge delivered a sentence less harsh than expected.	Sentiță
Machine	The washing machine was damaged during transportation.	Mașina: automobil/aparat

Table 4 presents some examples of words having similar meanings but not as basic, first meaning, in both languages (presenting another meaning as the main one). We can note that direct translations have been already adopted in Romanian for some of these cases (e.g. determination, to apply). In our opinion, they sound forced and improper, but, still, seem to be accepted by linguists.

Table 5

English term:	resembling the Romanian:	meaning, in fact:
stare		a se uita fix
resort		stațiune
rest		odihnă
pace	pace	pas
mare	mare	iapă
lack	lac	lipsă
horn	horn	corn, claxon
far	far	departe
glass	glas	pahar, sticlă
corn		porumb
comma	comă	virgulă
abate		a slăbi
adept		expert
cold	cald	rece
mercy	mulțumesc	milă

One less important category is that of coincidentally resembling words (table 5), not so confusing as the words coming from the same root, because there is no connection felt between the meaning and the form known from the mother tongue, as it is, instinctively, in the case when they derive from the same idea.

Ways of avoiding

Given the fact that such words are tricky, teachers should raise students' awareness of the danger of words sounding familiar. This is easiest to be done when the task to do is translation, as then it can be clearly mentioned that there is a certain number of words that are "false friends" and that have to be identified and the mistakes can be thus avoided by use of synonyms. However, this procedure, of trying to find a synonymic expression for the words that appear too close to someone's mother tongue, might be an effective way to avoid the false friends, at any time. Nevertheless, direct, live translation or face to face conversations are much more difficult to consciously and permanently control so deeply as to be capable of instantly recognizing, becoming aware of, and quickly finding a replacement for a word that might be problematical. Such an endeavour not only impedes fluency and clarity of communication unless the person talking is a very skilful speaker of his/her English as a foreign language, but it proves impossible for the ordinary speakers and learners. To permanently beware of mistakes is not an eligible manner of performing a conversational situation. The danger of over caring

lies both in this and in the fact that, ultimately, some mistakes related to the use of "false friends" can be more charming or easier understood. After all, the true meaning of your sayings can be, sometimes, more accurately grasped by the collocutor, who might himself/ herself be aware of the similarity that triggered your inappropriate choice of words, and it will bother him/her less than a slow, time-consuming disrupted and stumbling flow of too carefully (and maybe still unsuccessfully) selected words, resulting in a tiresome and poor excuse of dialogue. Least that can be done, the nearest to the best solution, would be teaching the most commonly met false friends during the English classes, the way all other troublesome English idioms or differences between British and American English are. Thus, awareness is assured and that should be a first step in avoiding embarrassing conversational situations and in overcoming the aversion towards speaking, at any rate the one caused by lack of this particular information.

Conclusion

Is the occurrence of the words known as false friends a real problem? When the word sounds forced or the communication alien, yes, it becomes a nuisance for regular speakers of English. Academic world and elevate language users shall not allow such flaws. But else, apart from the fact that it helps fluency and self confidence with speakers of poorer English, giving them a sense of ability to communicate, the whole process of using a word similar in meaning to some in the mother tongue, instead of the accurate one, may be seen as part of the tendency of globalization and uniformity of language.

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