

False Friends: A Historical Perspective and Present Implications for Lexical Acquisition

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ABSTRACT

Deceptive cognates exist in all European vernaculars as a result of borrowing from a common source, Latin. When languages come into contact, as happens in second language acquisition, these deceptive cognates constitute a source of lexical interference at all levels of dominion of the language. This article traces the origin of false friends and presents the results of preliminary research involving intermediate and proficiency level students of English whose mother tongue is Catalan.

Introduction

It is the purpose of this article to examine the dynamic nature of false friends by offering a description of both their diachronic and synchronic characteristics. Our study focuses on lexical transfer from Catalan to English in Catalan speakers studying English. The first part of the article consists of a brief overview of the history of borrowing in the English language, concentrating on the periods which are richest in the importation of Latin words and which, in this way, may have contributed most false friends. The numerous examples provided supply ample proof of the dynamism of words which is the source of this type of lexical interference. The second section deals with theoretical aspects of false friends in a synchronic framework. This is followed by the presentation of the results of two studies carried out in 1994 which analyse false friends as they appear in the written work of students of English whose mother tongue is Catalan.

Diachronic Perspective

When we speak about false friends, we are normally referring to interlingual deceptive cognates, that is, words which have the same, or a similar orthographic/phonetic form, which share some meanings but which have others which are not in common. There are, however, two areas, both intralingual, where we may speak of "second degree false friends" (Koessler, 1975: 15). They are products of the temporal and spatial variations which operate in language. Words and their meanings change through time. Language is not a fixed and stable thing as the 18th century philosophers considered it. It is closer to a living organism

than a finished building. These were the terms in which the 16th century writers such as Mulcaster and Wilson described it. Language is dynamic, in a continual state of flux and modification, as the circumstances in which it is used change.

False friends are the result of words having a common origin, in this case, Latin. The English language borrowed copiously from over fifty languages over the centuries but its chief source of borrowing was Latin. The motives for the importation correspond to two basic factors the result “ of pure necessitie in new matters or of mere braverie to garnish itself withall” (Mulcaster, 1925: 351). The introduction of new things, concepts and ideas in the everyday life of a society brings about a need to name and express them, especially if no combination of existing words fills the purpose. Thus, the Germanic tribes of the Rhineland, familiar with beer and ale borrowed the word *wine* (OE *win* L *vinum*) from the Romans who had introduced it to them. The need to express new concepts and abstract notions after the christianization of the Anglo-Saxons in 597 A.D. saw the introduction of new words such as *demon* and *sacrament*.

Borrowing is not, however, always motivated by a lack or a gap in the language. In the Renaissance period, ‘enfranchisement’ was the result of a conscious effort to enrich the language which was thought by many to be “barbarous” and ill-equipped to deal with the torrent of new ideas and areas of learning that were flooding in from the renewed interest in classical studies.

Whatever the motive, English borrowed extensively from Latin either directly or indirectly through French. It is estimated that the number of words transferred to English from the eleventh to the eighteenth century is between 22,000 and 25,000, 75% of which are still in use (Pyles, 1982: 191). Even before the Angles arrived in Britain, they had been in contact with the Roman civilization on the Continent. The words borrowed reflect the type of relations between the two communities and their shared interests. There are approximately 50 words (Baugh & Cable, 1951: 78) identified from this period dealing with trade, agriculture, military matters and living refinements. Many of these survive in modern English including *street* (L *strata*), *pound* (L *pondo*), and *mile* (L *milia*). The second early contact with the Latin language took place in Britain itself, a colony of the Roman Empire when the Germanic tribes first arrived. This period yields only five words of indisputably Latin origin, due in part to the fact that after the fall of the empire, the Roman institutions were quickly dismantled. Some Latin words came in through the Celtic languages; *caester*, from the Latin *castra* is still recognisable in placenames.

Latin influence on the language, slight up until now, increased with the attempt to christianize which began in 597 A.D. The initial fervour for the

building of places of worship and monastic centres of learning changed the face of society and led to the rapid importation of Latin words relating to the church and its organization, education and learning and to aspects of domestic life. Words such as *mass*, *priest*, *grammatical* and *verse* were imported. The vast majority of these words were nouns with few adjectives. In the late 10th century and the 11th century, with the Benedictine reform, the number of Latin words increased, this time of a learned and scientific nature. This period saw renewed literary activity and the channel of transmission was predominantly written. Religious matters (*sabbath*), scientific terms (*fig*) and literary affairs (*meter*) were the areas most enriched by this importation. In all, 450 words, of which 100 retained their original form were introduced and eventually made their way into common speech. Some of them were borrowed again in the 16th century, with a change in meaning. *Bishop* (L. *episcopus*) reappeared as *episcopal*. As Koessler states, "les Anglo Saxons sont passés maîtres dans l'art de couler des significations nouvelles dans des vieilles formes" (1975: 22).

From the 11th to the 14th century, ca. 10,000 new words came into the language, many of them of Latin origin. This was a result of the Norman conquest of England in the late 11th century. As Baugh & Cable (1951: 163) remark: "There is nothing comparable to it in the previous or subsequent history of the language". This phenomenon profoundly marked the nature of the English language, introducing words which affected all spheres of life and facilitating subsequent borrowing in later periods. Two phases of borrowing can be distinguished. The first, from the XI century to the XIII, when about 900 words found their way in to English (Baugh & Cable, 1951: 102), was basically through oral transmission. They are words which the English lower classes would have acquired through contact with the French ascendancy, words such as *baron* and *manor*. In the second period, when the former French speakers began to use English, literature and the written word assumed importance as channels of transmission. The bulk of French words in English were introduced in this period (40%) and they deal with all walks of life - government and administration (*state*, *rebel*), the legal and military fields (*proof*, *lieutenant*), fashion (*coat*), food (*beef*), social life (*feast*), learning (*volumn*), the arts and medicine (*malady*). Borrowed words from this period are a source of many false friends.

Following on the trail of borrowed words in English, the next period when words were imported on a large scale was the Renaissance period when above 12,000 words were transferred (Baugh & Cable, 1951: 102). Borrowing in this period responded to two needs; firstly, the objective need to express new ideas in English and secondly, the subjective desire to enrich the rhetorical potential of the

language, to make English a noble language, capable of discoursing on philosophy, the sciences, the arts and the newly rediscovered fields of learning coming out of classical Greece and Rome. Credit for the initial impulse to transport words from the Latin and to a lesser extent Greek, can be laid at the hands of the translators who had first hand experience of the lacks and deficiencies in English. The penchant for loanwords was enhanced by the stylistic ideal of copiousness (*copia verborum*) which relies on large numbers of partial synonyms which were easily supplied by loans from French or Latin. Latin was almost a mother-tongue for the translators and so they slipped easily between the two languages. Initial opposition to these imported learned words or “inkhorne terms” gradually spent its force and by the 16th century became no more than a cautionary warning about abuse of this practice. 75% of the words introduced are not only still in use but are part of the common lexicon. A key point in the formation of false friends is that the majority of these words came into the language through specialist fields and when they transferred to the common lexicon, they underwent a process of generalization. They were basic words, nouns, adjectives and verbs which to the modern speaker are indispensable, words like *democracy*, *encyclopedia*, *insane*, *exist*, *excursion*. Some of them retained their original Latin form while others were adapted by cutting off and substituting the Latin ending with a new suffix. A few words were reborrowed and the second introduction brought a new meaning or connotations. *Fastidious* had been introduced in the 15th century, meaning *proud* and *scornful*. When it was reintroduced in the 16th century it reverted to the original Latin sense of *distasteful*, *disgusting*. This is a pattern which Koessler (1975: 39) sees as extending to the majority of English borrowings- English tends to retain the most primitive meaning from the Latin, becoming as he states more Latin than Latin itself. Again, Chaucer had used *artificial* and *declination* in the 14th century in their astronomical sense but the meaning we attribute to them today stems from the 16th century. It is sometimes difficult to say if a word was borrowed directly from Latin or through French as both languages were going through a similar enrichment process. As has already been mentioned, the vast bulk of these words passed into common currency and in so doing they acquired new, less exact meanings or at least shades of meanings. *Philosophy* is a case in point, meaning originally *love of wisdom* and now used to mean *opinion*.

The 18th and 19th centuries saw an exaggerated fear of corruption of the language by foreign borrowings, among the other evils that the prescriptive grammarians saw lurking in the wings. The situation was described as an “intolerable grievance” (Baugh & Cable, 1951: 282). Borrowing from French was

considered to be particularly nefarious but the total number of words adopted from this language did not exceed that of other periods⁷.

Borrowing continues but the sources have changed. The establishment of the British Empire opened up new sources, new needs and aspirations. The Latin foundation has left an indelible imprint on the language and a pitfall filled course for the student of English whose mother-tongue is Catalan or Spanish. Being acquainted with the development of the language and how its vocabulary store was built up will be an invaluable aid to the student to, if not eradicate these stumbling blocks, at least to heighten his conscience of how they came about.

Tracing the history of words, observing the diverse fortunes that befall them as they journey in the time-machine from past to present brings to light the process of change to which they are subjected. The mutations that a word may undergo include radical changes in meaning, reversion to their original sense, specialization, generalization, and the acquisition of new connotations. These processes can create linguistic traps for the student reading Chaucer, Shakespeare or Jane Austen. Lapsing into a false sense of familiarity induced by recognised forms can distort understanding and inevitably opens a rift between the reader and the time in which the work was written. These changes can bring about a certain semantic discomfort in the reader. Some examples will suffice to illustrate the varying degrees of distortion that occur when these second degree false friends are not recognised as such. *Lovely* and *great* in their original sense meant *worthy to be loved* and *large in size* respectively. Current usage is much more generalized. The word *bug* in Middle English was used to refer to all kinds of insects but in the 19th century came to refer to bedbugs (a type of lice) alone and it is this sense that we retain so the word has undergone a process of specialization. Modern usage in slang provides an example of its further development. Its meaning - *to annoy* - has been extended by its conversion to a verb - *to bug*. Change in meaning can involve promotion or demotion. *Knave*, originally a *boy*, has gone through a process of specialization (*servicing boy*) and generalization (*bad human being*) to arrive at its present acceptation. The adjective *lewd* initially referred to a lay person while *silly* meant *innocent*, then *simple* and finally *frivolous*. Other words have come up in the world. Students may be surprised on hearing that the adjective *nice* as used by Austen is far from being a complement. *Nice* derives from the Latin *nescius* (*ignorant*). Its development in English has gone from

⁷ See table in Baugh & Cable (1951: 167).

meaning *foolishly particular* (this is the sense in which Austen uses it) to its current meaning of *pleasant*.

A reading of Renaissance literature again reveals the large number of false friends that the unsuspecting student may come up against. The adjective *humorous*, for example, has little in common with its current acceptation. It could mean *humid*, as in a *humorous night*, or *moody*, when describing a person. When Hamlet sends Ophelia on her way to the *nunnery* he was not in fact recommending a life of seclusion, a nunnery being a *brothel*. Several 16th century writers refer to the English language as being *barbarous* that is, unrefined, not outrageous. *Toilet*, borrowed from French has also come a long way from its original meaning of “piece of cloth in which to wrap clothes”. Later the word was used to refer to a cloth covering a dressing table and the table itself. When Peregrinne Pickle in Sheridan’s *School for Scandal* is told to hide behind the toilet, he does not have to leave the room.

Students must be alerted to the false friends on the temporal plane⁸ if they are to approach the literature of the past. They must be aware of the meaning the word had in the period in which it was written.

Synchronic Perspective: Theoretical aspects

From a synchronic point of view, interference⁹ results from the partial identification of two linguistic systems. This reduces the learners¹⁰ linguistic burden. The establishing of equivalences is governed by the desire for economy but these natural identifications made by the bilingual are the root of problems on the phonological, syntactic and lexical levels. This partial identification gives rise to what Selinker (1972) has called *negative transfer*.

Lado (1957) established six classes of words based on the relation of form

⁸ The colonization of America expanded the English word store as new words were invented to deal with an unfamiliar environment. In addition to coining new words some of the old word stock was adapted giving rise to second degree false friends caused by geographic factors. These are rarely a cause for serious misunderstandings given the increasing hybridization of the language and the fact that situation and context reduce the margin of incertitude. Some words have undergone specialization and others generalization. The laundry in USA is both the place where the operation is carried out and the clothes washed. In British English its meaning is more specialized being confined to the place alone. American *barn* is used to store grain, fodder and also to house animals. British English usage is more restricted - only to store fodder and grain. Lumber in the USA refers to timber. In Britain it is used, discarded furniture.

⁹ Payrató (1985: 50-60) gives a good critical summary of the history of the terminology.

¹⁰ As this study concentrates on the field of foreign languages in contact as defined by Weinreich (1953:1) do not concern us here. Weinreich examines the bilingual context. In the situation we describe the languages are not in direct contact, that is one of them, English, does not appear in its normal communicative context.

and meaning in two languages with the aim of establishing a scale of difficulty. *False friends* fall into the class of words he labels *deceptive cognates*. They are words which are similar in form, but different or only partly similar in meaning. They may have the same etymology but this is not always so. For this reason, Pit Corder (1973) prefers the term *faux amis*, which refers to the incorrect use of a word in the second language because of its physical resemblance to a word in the modern tongue. They occupy the highest position on Lado's scale of difficulty and he describes them as "sure-fire traps" (1957: 84).

Furthermore, because of the false sense of security they induce, they have a high frequency of occurrence. Lado specifies that his use of the term *form* refers to the phonetic realisation but similarity of graphic representation yields a strong influence on students in the group we are dealing with because the main channel of input for them is the written word. In addition to this, as the linguistic register required of them is formal and the most formal words in English are of Latin origin, either directly, or indirectly through French, both of which have also influenced the Catalan lexicon, opportunities for the formulation of false equivalences are increased. Two examples show how a word of common etymology has evolved. A word in one language may have undergone a process of specialisation. This seems to be the case with *llarg* in Catalan compared with *large* in English, the latter having a wider meaning than in Catalan. Another possibility is change of meaning, as is seen in *sensible* in English. It meant *sensitive* in 17th and 18th centuries. This meaning is retained by Catalan but has been lost by English.

False friends can be treated as total or partial. Total false friends tend not to cause problems, as, though morphologically similar or identical, their meaning is completely different. So, it is very difficult to find them in the same contexts. Take the example of the English-Spanish false friend *pan*. Errors involving total false friends occur in the early stages of learning and are often the unhappy result of an indiscriminate use of the dictionary. Partial false friends, however, are especially persistent because the similarity in morphological structure is matched by partial correspondence in meaning -overlapping occurs.

Different classifications of false friends have been put forward. One of these, which we have adopted in this study, ranks false friends according to the degree of meaning overlap. Following this criterion, false friends fall into three groups. The first category, **segregation**, refers to the situation in which none of the meanings of the words coincide in either of the two languages. *Desgràcia* in Catalan and *disgrace* in English exemplify this first case. The second degree, **intersection**, applies when two words share some meanings but not all, as

inscriure and *inscribe*. Finally **inclusion** occurs when the meanings of one word absorbs those of the other, that is, all the acceptations of one word coincide with the other and moreover, other meanings may be added as in *to resolve* and *resoldre*.

It is not sufficient, when studying false friends and lexical interference, to examine the lexical items in isolation. The possible meanings of a word are highly dependent on the structure in which it occurs. Equally important is the global situation in which the structure occurs and the utterances that precede and follow it. Therefore, in this study, we have taken into account, not only the presence of the words which give rise to lexical interference but also the context in which the word appears.

Summary of the practical study.

Two studies on Catalan-English false friends are presented. They were conducted in 1994 in two unpublished works: O'Neill (1994) *False Friends in Advanced Students of English*, and Casanovas Catalá (1994) *Anàlisi dels false friends recollits en una classe d'anglès de nivell intermediate (llengua escrita)*. The studies are, it must be stressed, exploratory. The number of compositions analysed does not permit conclusive statistical conclusions to be drawn. Consequently, they must be analysed as preliminary observations which serve as ground work for further research, that is, they are orientative.

49 pairs of words (27 and 22 respectively) were collected from written texts produced by Catalan speaking students, the majority of which are middle-class females. The difference between the two groups lies in their level of English. The first group consisted of students in the 4th course of English philology. A large number of them work as part-time teachers in English language schools and almost all have spent time in English-speaking countries. Their level of English approaches that of the Cambridge Proficiency in English and they are a highly motivated group. Their mother tongue is Catalan.

The group in the second study were students in a private language school with a level corresponding to the Cambridge Preliminary English Test. The majority also study English as part of their school curriculum at secondary level. Contact with the English language is reduced to the classroom and they have not spent any time in an English speaking country. Their fundamental interest lies in the acquisition of a rudimentary and functional level of English. They are also Catalan speaking.

As regards the written work produced, it took the form of supplementary work to be done outside class hours. This allowed free access to dictionaries, text

books and manuals and an unlimited time for completion. In the first, however, two of the topics were carried out in exam-like conditions, a fact which is not reflected in the results in any way. These compositions had a 350 word-limit while the second group's was 150 words. The topics of the essays were related to the grammatical and lexical items studied in previous classes. The Proficiency students wrote on the following topics: *Perfect Parents*, *Shopping* and *Beauty is in the eye of the beholder*. The Intermediate group was asked to write about the following: *What was your school like?*, *Write the story of a famous play or novel*, *Write an account of an incident which has happened to you or someone you know*, *Make notes about your own life or the life of somebody in your family*.

The methodology consists of three stages. In the first place the etymology for each pair of words was given for both languages. The source of the English etymology was *Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language* (1989), that of the Catalan, Joan Corominas (1980) *Diccionari etimològic i complementari de la llengua catalana*. The acceptations as given by *Webster's* and *Diccionari* follow in order to demonstrate the overlapping or divergence in meanings which confirms the source of confusion. Secondly, a graphic representation which illustrates the convergence was drawn up. This showed the type of false friend being dealt with. The analysis concludes with examples taken from the students' work accompanied by a more suitable alternative to the false friend.

The two studies have different initial hypotheses. Casanovas Català's study set out to show that the majority of false friends appearing in the work of a group with a low level of English would be complete false friends, that is, those most easily detected when the level of English improves. An additional factor worth mention is the negligible use of the formal register. O'Neill (1994) held that, given the advanced level of English and degree of specialization, students would not have problems in detecting false friends and consequently, the number of interferences of this type would be low.

The false friends found by Casanovas Català (1994) were, in alphabetical order, the following:

address	adreçar	large	llarg
advertise	advertir	parent	parent
approve	aprovar	pass	passar
argument	argument	profit	profit
atmosphere	atmosfera	qualify	qualificar
aspect	aspecte	resolve	resoldre
comprehensive	comprensiu	reunion	reunió

False Friends

concrete	concret	sensible	sensible
decant	decantar	support	suportar
discuss	discutir	sympathetic	simpàtic
experiment	experimentar	topic	tòpic
extravagant	extravagant	treat	tractar
expose	exposar	unique	únic
familiar	familiar		

In the second work O'Neill (1994) listed the following:

action	acció	inscribe	inscriure
advise	avisar	inversion	inversió
argument	argument	letter	lletra
assist	assistir	notes	notes
camp	camp	parents	parents
career	carrera	parking	pàrquing
carpet	carpeta	particular	particular
complete	complet	personage	personatge
countable	comptable	public	public
crane	crani	qualifications	qualificacions
cure	curar	receipt	recepta

The words on the two lists coincide only in two words: *argument* and *parent*. Fifteen of the false friends in the second study can be considered to belong to the least problematic group as they are total false friends. The opposite is true of the first study. Only one of the word pairs is a total false friend (*reunió/reunion*) but this pair belong to the same semantic field (*coming together*). The difference between them lies in the connotation attributed to *reunion*, that of repetition, a shade of meaning absent from *reunió*.

In both of the above lists it is clear that the word pairs have a common origin in Latin, either directly or filtered through French. In the first group two word pairs merit further comment. *Sensible/sensible* is an example of how the diachronic evolution has lead the words from a point of convergence in the 18th century, when *sensible* meant *sensitive*, to their present stage of divergence.

The second word pair, *familiar/familiar*, exemplifies the fact that the context in which the word appears and the user's intentionality are factors which must be taken into account in identifying a false friend. The student example *Small familiar shops are going through a crisis* poses questions of ambiguity. The writer meant *shops owned by a family* as opposed to *chain stores*, that is, *family owned shops*. The ambiguity lies in the context. The sentence would be

acceptable if the writer meant *shops with which one is familiar*. In general, in the first list, the majority of the false friends fall into the second category of intersection. It is the shades of meaning or connotations that are the source of confusion.

Conclusion

In the advanced, near proficiency students whose work has been used here, there is a relatively small number of false friends which, however, are frequently repeated. As indicated above, the topics written about and the register used may influence the type of false friend that occurs. In the case of intermediate level students we can point to the fact that the number of total false friends is higher than in the first group, thereby verifying the initial hypothesis.

The distortion which false friends cause in the teaching of foreign languages must be taken into account at all levels. It is a stumbling block which is difficult to remove. Students can be encouraged to compile their own lists of false friends, collected from analyses of their own work and their reading/listening activities. This would raise their consciousness of the problem. With advanced level students this activity can be broadened in scope by extending it into a course project. Students at this level can benefit from their study of the history of the English language.

The fact is that quite a significant number of false friends in the texts analysed prompts reflection on the relations which are established between Catalan and Spanish in Catalonia. If Catalan and English, the linguistic contact under study here and which coincide only minimally in the formal context such as the classroom, with little interpersonal communication and in short time spans produce such interference, there are logical grounds to believe that a broader contact is bound to produce a much greater transference, which clearly opens a new line of research beyond the topic of this paper.

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