

Chapter Eight

SPANISH-ENGLISH FALSE FRIENDS: POSSIBLE PROBLEMS FOR THE NIGERIAN LEARNER OF SPANISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Purity Ada Uchechukwu

Abstract

While cognate words may facilitate the foreign language learning process because they have similar meanings, they may however, be deceptive cognate words or false friends and as such, become a problem for the foreign language learner (Chacón Beltrán, 2006, p. 29). This is due to the tendency of the non-native speakers to over generalize their usage and assume they know the meaning of these words which may not only be misleading, but also lead to frustration in learning. At the end of the day, the learner may only realize the mistakes when negative evidence is proved by means of explicit information (Lightbrown and Spada, 1993). This paper is a projection of the possible problems a Nigerian learner of the Spanish language may encounter with false friends in English and Spanish.

Introduction

Spanish and English share many cognates that derive from the same Latin root (Lamadrid, Briscoe, Phillips, and Lamadrid, 1984, p. 161). Even though English is classified under the Germanic languages, some loanwords in English date back to the periods of Middle English and Early Modern English when the language was extensively influenced by Latin. Because of the occasioned non-parallel lexical development in the relationship of English and Spanish, both languages have many words with a common Latin origin, which because they evolved differently, have given rise to uneven correspondences (Chacón Betrán, 2006, p. 30). While proficiency or none in Latin may not necessarily affect the Nigerian learner's grasp of Spanish, the English language, being the official language of instruction in our educational system, most probably may interfere in the acquisition of certain words. More so if they are *false friends* in both languages and, as a result, share some sort of formal and/or semantic resemblance. The paper goes into these issues as follows. Section 2 is a brief literature review on the concept of *false friends*. Section 3 provides a typological classification of cognates. Section 4 gives examples of *false friends* in English and Spanish and the consequences for the Nigerian learner of Spanish. Section 5 forms the summary and conclusion.

False Friends: An Overview

The problem of false friends is not limited to only learners of English and another foreign language. The publication of a dictionary of false friends in Spanish and Portuguese, the

Department of Modern European Languages, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

Diccionario de Falsos Amigos do Espanhol e do Português (Hoyos and Hoyos, 1992) is based on investigations of translation errors (see Rónai, 1976, p. 20 as cited in Hoyos and Hoyos-Andrade, 1994, p. 138) proving that deceptive cognates also pose a problem for related Romance languages such as Portuguese and Spanish. Other investigations highlight the problem of false friends in languages that are apparently not similar such as Spanish and Arabic (Gogazeh, 2007) as well as Spanish and Modern Greek (Leontaridi, Peramos Soler, and Ruiz Morales, 2007). What really are cognates? Is there a difference between false cognates and false friends? A review of some definitions might shed more light.

According to Sabino (2006), “generalmente las expresiones falsos cognados y falsos amigos se consideran sinónimos y por esa razón, utilizadas para designar el mismo fenómeno lingüístico” (p. 251) ‘the expressions false cognates and false friends are generally considered to be synonymous, and are for this reason, used to designate the same linguistic phenomenon’. The author adds that the term is not without contradictions and as such, there neither exists an ideal definition nor a unanimous acceptance on the subject. In conclusion, Sabino admits that while some authors lean on etymology as a basis for identifying *false friends*, there are those, who, in categorizing the words include those with a similar origin as well as others with different etymological backgrounds.

Alves (2002) declares “la denominación [...] es ingenua, no científica, sin embargo, tal denominación se adopta en los libros didácticos que suelen tratar de manera burlesca y divertida esas trampas” (p. 2) ‘the denomination is [...] naive, not scientific. Nevertheless, it is used in didactic works that usually treat these pit-falls in a comical and amusing manner’. The author arrived at this conclusion from a lexico-semantic perspective in the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language to Portuguese speakers.

Andrade Neta (SD, p. 7) surmises the concept as “vocablos heterosemánticos ya que pueden provocar interferencias más significativas en la comunicación...son vocablos idénticos o semejantes en su forma gráfica y/o fónica, pero que divergen parcial o totalmente en cuanto a su significado en ambas lenguas” ‘polysemous words is a group made up of the so-called false friends who are very copious between two languages and are most dangerous because they can provoke very significant interference during communication. False friends are identical or similar words in graphical or phonetic form. They however, diverge partially or totally in regard to their meaning in both languages’.

Summarizing, Sabino (2006) makes no distinction between *false friends* and false cognates and claims both terms are used synonymously. Alves (2002) on the other hand, only refers to the inconsistency in the employment of the term false friends. Andrade Neta (p.7) on the contrary, subsumes *false friends* under the category of polysemous words which may bear similar patterns in their phonetic and graphical realizations, but may differ partially or totally in the languages concerned. Agreement amongst the authors is however, evident in the fact

that whether designated as false cognates or *false friends*, the aspect of interference and transfer of meaning from one language to the other does occur. The question then is how does this interference come into play? This is looked at in the next sub-section.

Partial and Total False Friends

Chacón Beltrán (2006, pp. 31-33) links the degree of difficulty in learning *false friends* to two inherent features: whether they are total false friends or if they are only partially deceptive.

To the first group belong those *false friends* which have an utterly different meaning in both languages as in (1):

(1) Engl: 'terrific' ≠ Span: *estupendo*

The English *terrific* translates 'tremendo' in Spanish. The Spanish *estupendo* on the other hand translates the English 'fantastic/great'.

In the second group, the author classified as partial friends or polysemous words, whose one meaning is a false friend (2a) while the other (or others) is a true cognate word as in (2b):

(2) a. Engl: 'approve' = Span: *dar el visto bueno; dar su aprobación*

b. Engl: 'approve' ≠ Span: *aprobar*

The English verb 'to approve' is realized as the constructions *dar el visto bueno; dar su aprobación* in Spanish. The Spanish cognate *aprobar* which to some extent graphically and phonetically seems similar to the English 'approve', nevertheless, implies *pasar una prueba o examen* 'to pass a test or an exam'. A complete deviation from the English 'to approve'.

From a pedagogic point of view, Frantzen (1998) based the difficulty *false friends* may pose for students on two factors: intrinsic and extrinsic factors.

Intrinsic Factors

The intrinsic factors emerge from the confusing character of false friends *per se*. That is, some of them have a deceptive meaning in all circumstances (3a; b). Some however, may be true cognates as in (4):

(3) a. Engl: carpet ≠ Span: *carpeta*

b. Engl: fabric ≠ Span: *fábrica*

(4) Engl: 'to introduce' ≠ Span: *introducir*

a foreign language. The corresponding word for the English *carpet* is 'alfombra' in Spanish. The Spanish *carpeta* on the other hand, in its original meaning reads 'letter-file; portfolio; table-cover; writing-case', etc. In the same vein, the Spanish *fábrica* translates 'factory' and not *fabric* as in English.

In (4) the English verb 'to introduce' has the additional meanings 'to introduce someone to something/someone else; bring up a topic'. The Spanish *introducir* is used in the sense of 'enter a place'. This does not apply in English. So, depending on the context in which *introducir* is employed, its meaning might create confusion for the learner.

The second aspect that may create difficulty for students involves cases where both words may appear graphically similar and belong to the same semantic field, but have different meanings in their respective languages as in (5) below:

(5) Engl: 'constipated' ≠ Span: *constipado*

The English *constipated* means 'to have indigestion'. The Spanish *constipado* translates 'to have a cold'.

Thirdly, Frantzen (1998) notes that the tendency for students to over generalize may be due to the large number of cognate words they will encounter while learning a foreign language, on the teacher himself/herself, or in the teaching methodology employed.

Extrinsic Factors

To the extrinsic factors include different types of contradictory input that students may be exposed to. This is especially true in Spanish-speaking communities within the US where some *false friends* have become common place expressions. For example, *marqueta*=market=*mercado*. The first word, *marqueta* is actually a calque formation derived from the English word, 'market'. The root word, but hispanized by adding the Spanish productive nominal suffix, *-eta*. Phonological adaptation is evident in the pronunciation (Ringbom 2001 refers to this as *transfer of meaning*). Cases such as this are becoming rampant in the US because of language contact between Spanish and English. Another extrinsic point is that while language learners are encouraged to make use and take advantage of true cognates, they are not properly prepared to recognize false cognates. Finally, lack of systemicity in media translations and the oversimplification of lexicographers when writing dictionaries form part of the problems for the language learner.

In summary, the works of Chacón Beltrán (2006) and Frantzen (1998) give not only the problems students may encounter in the use of cognates, but also an idea of the nature of

cognates. There are those that have a deceptive meaning in all circumstances, some may be true cognates and others may be partial cognates. An insight into the typological classification of cognates in general might simplify the issue. This is addressed below.

Typological Classification of False Friends

Summarizing some corpus works on false friends (see Moss, 1992; Postigo Pinazo, 1997) Chacón Beltrán (2006) concludes that not much research has been carried out on the classification of cognate words and false friends, because there is a lack of conclusive research and broad categorization of cognate words (p. 34). The author developed taxonomy, the (CCvF) schema, abbreviated for *Clasificación de Cognados Verdaderos y Falsos* ‘Classification of True and False Cognates’; in which he grouped cognates into six. A summarized version of the CCvF schema is presented in Table 1 below:

	Meaning	Spelling	Pronunciation	Degree of difficulty
Type 1	+	+	+	Nil
Type 2	+	+	-	Low
Type 3	+/-	+	+	High
Type 4	-	+	+	Medium
Type 5	+/-	+	-	Very high
Type 6	-	+	-	Medium

Table 1

- 1 = True Cognates: Phonetic
- 2 = True Cognates: Graphic
- 3 = Partial False Friends: Phonetic
- 4 = Total False Friends: Phonetic
- 5 = Partial False Friends: Graphic
- 6 = Total False Friends: Graphic

In line with the CCvF schema, there are six possible types of cognate words, two of which qualify as true cognates and the remaining four are *false friends*. The examples given below are drawn from Chacón Beltrán (2006, pp. 35-37).

A. Type 1: True Cognates: Phonetic

Engl. laboratory /lə'borətəri/ = Span. *laboratorio* /laβora'torjo/
 Engl. vocabulary /və'kæbjuleri/ = Span. *vocabulario* /bokaβu'larjo/

Given the semantic, orthographic and phonological similarities in the cognate words, *laboratory/laboratorio* and *vocabulary/vocabulario*, the words in this category can be easily identified especially due to the similarity in their pronunciation. Their meanings also have a 1:1 correspondence in both languages.

B. Type 2: True Cognates: Graphic

Engl. horizon /hə'raizən/ = Span. *horizonte* /ori'thonte/

Engl. Ocean /'əuʃən/ = Span. *océano*/o'θeano/

The words in category B are also easily identifiable from their meanings. In this case the similarity encompasses the written form of the word, but not the pronunciation as such. The problem here is that while listening, one might fail to identify the word and consequently be unsuccessful in pronouncing it correctly.

C. Type 3: Partial False Friends: Phonetic

Engl. (to) attend /ə'tænd/= Span. *asistir a* (to be present)

= Span. *prestar atención* (to listen carefully)

≠ Span. *atender* (to pay attention)

Engl. (to) attend to = Span. *ocuparse de*

≠ Span. *atender* (a shop assistant)

In type 3 the semantic constituent is introduced as a part of a component in the classification of cognate words, and the partial variable refers to the characteristic. Partial false friends have one main meaning in one language but may represent a number of different meanings in the other languages. There is however, a clear semantic difference in both languages while maintaining a correspondence between one word and one meaning. The affinity between the languages is strong enough for the aural similarity to be perceptible.

D. Type 4: Total False Friends: Phonetic

Engl. (to) assist /ə'sist/ = Span. *ayudar* (to help)

≠Span. *asistir* (to attend)

Total false friends cause confusion in learning due to a lack of semantic equivalence because of a lack of equivalence in L₁ and L₂. This means that the words in type 4 are not excessively difficult to note as the cognitive processing in learning automatically requires that a new meaning is assigned to a word that appears to have another meaning.

E. Type 5: Partial False Friends: Graphic

Engl. career /kə'riə/ = Span. *carrera profesional* (e.g *carrera judicial*)

= Span. *trayectoria profesional*

≠ Span. *carrera* /ka'rera/ (universitaria)

Engl. *agenda* = Span. *orden del día*
 Span. *agenda* /a'xenda/ (programa)
 ≠Span. *libreta* (diary)

Words in this class just like in type 3 present a difficulty related to the lack of semantic correspondence between L₁ and L₂. In addition, while the graphical representation does not pose a major difficulty, aural identification and oral production of the word may prove difficult. It is this very group that can be the most confusing for students.

F. Type 6: Total False Friends: Graphic

Engl. *qualifications* /'kwəlɪfɪ'eɪʃənz/ = Span. *requisito, antecedentes laborales*
 ≠Span. *calificación* /kalifika'θjon/ (grades)

Engl. *lecture* /'lɛktʃə/ =Span. *charla, conferencia, clase universitaria*
 ≠Span. *lectura* /lɛk'tura/

Type 6 presents a clear divergence in meaning between L₁ and L₂. In relation to their formal written identification, they are not exceedingly complex but their pronunciation is often not so obvious.

In summary, the *CCvF schema* simplifies the problem of categorizing cognates. In classifying the words into groups or types, it gives an overview of whether they are partially deceptive, totally deceptive or true cognates. The significant role of phonological and graphical interference also helps to easily identify such words and induce their recognitions. Though based on the problems EFL students may encounter while acquiring English, this *schema* might also prove useful in assessing the possible problems total false friends may pose for Nigerian students learning Spanish as a foreign language. This is discussed in the next section.

Spanish-English False Friends and Problems for the Nigerian Learner of Spanish

English is the language of instruction in the Nigerian educational system. This implies that the average Nigerian student is expected to have a repertoire of English words and expressions in his mental lexicon. The examination in this section is based on the possible difficulties the Nigerian learner of Spanish as a second or foreign language may encounter in recognizing and differentiating Spanish verbal false friends from similar English verbs. The analysis draws on some sentence examples in which the verbs occur.

- (6) Engl: He **pretended** not to have heard me ≠Span: **pretendió** no haberme oído
Engl: He **pretended** not to have heard me =Span: **fingió** no haberme oído

The English 'to pretend' can be confusing for the Nigerian student who is accustomed to the meaning of *pretend* as 'to imagine that something is true', amongst a host of other meanings. Because the verb *pretender* also exists in Spanish, the same meaning may automatically be transferred, more so as the English *to pretend* is graphically and phonologically similar to the Spanish *pretender*. The Nigerian Spanish learner can assume that he already knows the corresponding verb in Spanish. However, the similarity between these two verbs ends at the phonological and graphical level: both verbs are total false friends. The English *pretend* is realized as the verb *fingir* in Spanish. The Spanish *pretender* on the other hand, translates 'to intend to do something'.

- (7) Engl: They've just **recorded** their new album
≠ Span: Acaban de **recordar** su nuevo álbum

Engl: They've just **recorded** their new album
= Span: Acaban de **grabar** su nuevo álbum

The English 'to record' and the Spanish *recordar* can be confusing in their usage because of the apparent graphical resemblance. Aural detection may also add to the confusion in listening comprehension. Both words are actually total false friends as the English 'to record' is realized as the verb *grabar* in Spanish. The Spanish *recordar* means 'to remind'.

- (8)Engl: My mum has always **supported** me
≠ Span: Mi madre siempre me ha **soportado**

Engl: My mum has always **supported** me
= Span: Mi madre siempre me ha **apoyado**

The English 'to support' and the Spanish *soportar* are clear cognates. However, they are totally false cognates because the Spanish *soportar* does not have the same semantic meaning of the English 'to support'. Instead, the Spanish verb *apoyar* translates the English 'to support'. The Spanish verb, *soportar* reads 'to stand' as in the sentence *no soporta que la critiquen* 'she can't stand being criticized'.

- (9) Engl: I was **embarrassed**≠ Span: **Estaba embarazada**
Engl: I was **embarrassed**= Span: **Me dio** mucha **vergüenza**

Example (9) is to be understood in the same vein as (6), (7) and (8). Here it is also a case of the English 'to be embarrassed' not only sounding like the Spanish *embarazada*, but the aural similarity will also make this false cognate the first choice of a student of English learning Spanish as a foreign language. The Spanish compound verb, *dares vergüenza* has the corresponding meaning of 'be embarrassed' in English. The Spanish construction *estar embarazada* on the contrary means 'to be pregnant'.

In conclusion, examples (6), (7), (8) and (9) are clear cases of total false friends which may pose initial problems for the Nigerian learner of Spanish because he is only conversant with their meanings in the English language. When in the course of study these verbs are memorized, the initial insecurity will in the course of time be overcome. This will most probably be accomplished because instances of *verbal false friends* of English and Spanish are considerably less when compared with *false friends* in other parts of speech.

Summary and Conclusion

At the end of the analysis one can conclude that the affinity of the verbs which appear as cognates in similar languages may pose problems at the initial stage in learning a foreign language. The issue of *false friends* as a whole shows that what at first appears very complex and insurmountable is easily identifiable through classification. The general categorization of false friends by Chacón Beltrán (2006) simplified the analysis through its breakdown of what had been grouped simply into three types as identical cognates, non-identical cognates and deceptive cognates (Lamadrid et al., 1984, p. 505). As Frantzen (1998) pointed out, the teacher and the methodology used in passing on the knowledge of these words is truly an intrinsic factor that may determine the ease or difficulty in their acquisition. For the Nigerian learner of Spanish as a foreign language, grasping the use of false friends should form a part of the Spanish curriculum from the beginners' level in order to acquaint him/her as early as possible with these pit-falls that are present in every language with a homogeneous etymological origin. As Spanish is at its early stage in the Nigerian university system, this paper is the first in a series of reflections of possible problems the Nigerian learner of Spanish as a foreign language may be confronted with. Further experiences with students will reveal more in the years to come.

References

- Alves, Janaína S. (2002). Los heterosemánticos en español y portugués. Un desafío a la lectura/interpretación: el caso de los “vestibulandos” brasileños. In *Congreso Brasileiro de hispanistas. 2002. São Paulo, Brazil*. doi SPSPSP, [online]. [Cited 27 March 2011]. Retrieved from:
<http://www.proceedings.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=MSC0000000012002000100032&lng=en&nrm=iso>.
- Alves, Janaína S. (2008). Los significados de los falsos amigos español/Portugués. *Revista Eletrônica de Divulgação Científica em Lingua Portuguesa, Lingüística e Literatura*, Ano 04, n. 08-10m Semestre de 2008.
- Andrade Neta, N. Aprender español es fácil porque hablo portugués. Ventajas y desventajas de los brasileños para aprender español. [Cited 27 March, 2011] Retrieved from
<http://www.cuadernos cervantes.com/le_portugues.html>.
- Chacón Beltrán, R. (2006). Towards A Typological Classification of False Friends (Spanish-English). In *RELSA 19*, (pp. 29-39).
- Collins Spanish Dictionary (2009). Great Britain: Harper Collins Publishers Limited.
- Frantzen, D. (1998). “Intrinsic and extrinsic factors that contribute to the difficulty of learning false cognates”, *Foreign Language Annals* 3(2), (pp. 243-254).
- Gogazeh, Z. (2007). Los falsos amigos en el léxico español de origen árabe. In *Philologia Hispalensis* 21 (pp. 83-103).
- Hoyos, B., & Hoyos, R. (1992). *Dicionário de Falsos Amigos do Espanhol e do Português*. São Paulo. Página Aberta: Consejería de Educación de la Embajada de España.
- Hoyos, B., & Hoyos-Andrade, R. (1994). Dictionarización de los Falsos Amigos del Español-Portugués: Historia, Metodología y Resultados. In: *ASELE. Actas V. Centro Virtual Cervantes* (pp. 137-142).
- Lamarid, E., Briscoe, L., Phillips, R. & Lamadrid, E. (1984). *Communicating In Spanish*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Leontaridi, E., Peramos Soler, N. & Ruiz Morales, M. (2007). Amistades peligrosas: Una aproximación teórica y una clasificación práctica de los falsos amigos entre el español y el griego moderno. In *Ogigia. Revista electrónica de estudios hispánicos*, n.^o 2.

- Lightbrown, P. & Spada, N. (1993). *How Languages are Learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners (2002). United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.
- Moss, G. (1992). Cognate recognition: Its importance in the teaching of ESP reading courses to Spanish speakers. In *English for Specific Purposes*, 11 (pp. 141-158).
- Postigo Pinazo, E. (1997). *Estudio contrastivo de los falsos amigos en inglés y en español*. Málaga: Servicio de Publicaciones Universidad de Málaga. [Microficha].
- Ringbom, H. (2001). Lexical transfer in L₃ production. *Cross-linguistic Influence in Third Language Acquisition*. In J. Cenoz/ B. Hufeisen/ U. Jessner (eds.). *Multilingual Matters* (pp. 59-68). Clevedon.
- Sabino, Marilei A. (2006). Falsos cognatos, falsos amigos ou cognatos enganos? Desfazendo a confusão teórica através da prática. In *ALFA Revista de Lingüística* (pp. 251-263). [online]. [Cited 27 March 2011]. Available from: <<http://www.alfa.ibilce.unesp.br/download/v50-2/15-Sabino.pdf>>.

*Communication becomes
successful if the hearer recognizes
the speaker's communicative
intention.*