FALSE FRIENDS IN ENGLISH FOR SPANISH-SPEAKING STUDENTS OF ENGLISH: MORPHOLOGY, SYNTAX AND LEXIS AS SOURCES OF FALSE FRIENDSHIP.

Autor
Salvador Insa Sales
INTRODUCTION
False friends are words in a target language (L2) whose signifier is similar to (or identical with) the signifier of one or more words in the student’s native language (L1) because they derive from a common etymon. Students normally take it for granted that these similarities also occur at the plane of the signified but, unfortunately, this is not always so. The result of all this process is that semantic features from one word in L1 are ascribed to its cognate in L2.

Some of the reasons why natives of a given language establish a wrong identification between words in L1 and L2 escape all sort of scientific analysis, as Holmes et al (1993) have shown; others, however, can be explained on linguistic grounds. Among the former we can mention the context or the personal mental associations of SSE, bearing as high a degree of arbitrariness as the nature of the linguistic sign itself. This paper deals mainly with the latter, which are the result of morphological, syntactic and lexical processes.

All throughout this paper, Spanish is L1 and English, L2. The subjects taking part in the learning process are supposed to be Spanish-speaking students of English (SSE, henceforth). Likewise, it should be stated that the communication aimed at is the written level.

In the following lines I shall intend to study how morphology, syntax and lexis start the process of false friendship. Each discipline is devoted a whole section.

1. MORPHOLOGY
From the above lines it can be deduced that a false friend is, primarily, a misidentification of two words. This misidentification may have different sources as far as morphology is concerned:

1.1. CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN WORDS.
Although the usual is the identification of one word in L2 with one word in L1 (1=1 type), occasionally we may encounter more than one word at either end: English in front is very often translated by Spanish enfrente (2 = 1).

Taking for granted that (1 = 1), or word-to-word correspondence is the most usual, I shall focus now on the correspondence that is established between the morphemes inside the word. Here, several possibilities can occur:

i) Full correspondence. Each morpheme in the English word, no matter how many it may have, has its match in the Spanish cognate. Such is the case of English camera vs. Spanish cámara (i = i) and English library (libr + ary) vs. Spanish librería (libr + ería) (ii = ii).

ii) Incomplete correspondence. Here we may find one loose morpheme at either end:
  a) One morpheme in English has no match in Spanish (i = 0): the prefix in in English inhabitant, inherit, invigorate has no equivalent in Spanish cognates habitante, heredar, vigorizar.
  b) One morpheme in Spanish has no match in English (0 = i): Spanish desnudo vs. English nude.
  c) One morpheme in English is interpreted as two in Spanish
     (i = ii): English alms vs. Spanish almas (alma + s). Etc.
1.2. WHAT MORPHEME BRINGS ABOUT FALSE FRIENDSHIP:
In the case of full correspondence studied in 1.1.i, the only morpheme is fully responsible for divergences in meaning but in cases where more than one morpheme is involved, like 1.1.ii, it is useful to study the behaviour of the different morphemes and see which of them brings about semantic diversion. This can be:

i) The root of the word. In English eventual, (paired to Spanish eventual*) both suffixes -ual can be said to match semantically; it is English event that does not ‘fit’ Spanish evento.

ii) An affix in the word. This can be:
   a) Derivational. If we accept that English jewelry and collar are frequent false friends for wrong identifications with Spanish joyería and collar, then, we have to admit that it is not due to their roots, which match each other (jewel = joy; coll = coll); Rather, it is the suffixes -ry and -ar that do not correspond to the ‘expected’ Spanish suffixes -ria and -ar, thus creating false friendship in the English cognate words.
   b) Inflectional: Not a very common type, but still occurring at times: -s in English series can be interpreted as plural (and then identified with Spanish serie instead of serie)

2. SYNTAX
Syntax can be a source of false friendship, too. Different syntactic behaviour in cognates may trigger off a divert meaning. Here are some of the most usual differences in behaviour that result in false friendship:

2.1 TRANSITIVITY/INTRANSITIVITY.
Considering an intransitive verb as transitive can determine a divert meaning: English enter (usually intransitive) would bring about an important change in meaning if thought of as transitive in the sentence:

(1) Julia entered the car at last,
translated wrongly as
(2) Julia entró el coche por fin*
instead of
(3) Julia entró en el coche por fin

2.2. CHANGE OF WORD CATEGORY
One word may prove safe as a given word category but a false friend as another: English private is ‘safe’ as an adjective in the noun phrase

(4) private affairs
but may become a ‘dangerous’ false friend as a noun in:
(5) a private soldier

2.3. PRONOMINALIZATION
The so-called usos pronominales of some verbs in Spanish usually imply slight, unimportant variations in meaning sometimes (ir/irse). On other occasions, though, semantic differences may be more relevant, as it can be seen in the ocurrir/ocurrirse couple. In addition, this may suppose a
new source of ambiguity, since the English cognate verb can be associated to two Spanish cognates instead of just one. The duality *ocurrir/ocurrirse* (for the English *occur*) in the example below would create false friendship if

(6) It had never occurred to me were interpreted as
(7) Nunca me había ocurrido*

instead of
(8) Nunca se me había ocurrido.

2.4. THE USE OF PREPOSITIONS AND ADVERBS

Sometimes a divert meaning arises when students expect that a word in English will take the same preposition or adverb as its cognate in Spanish. Of course, sometimes, a change in these particles amounts to a complete change in the meaning of the word it goes with. See what happens with English *dispense*, cognate with Spanish *dispensar*, with which it has a match sense (*prepare and distribute medicine*). But if the English cognate is followed by *with*, as in

(9) Are all countries ready to dispense with nuclear weapons?

then, no match meaning is found in its Spanish cognate and, hence, false friendship arises. It can be said that it is *with* the element bringing forth diversion in meaning.

2.5. COLLOCATIONS

This is a very frequent source of false friendship and offers, in my opinion, a vast field for research still unexplored. Frequently, words that are not considered ambiguous -and, therefore, do not receive any extra attention on the part of the teachers- vary their meanings in a relevant way under the influence of words they collocate with. English *servant* usually does SSE a good turn in many contexts if linked with Spanish *sirviente*. Both words, however, lose much of its semantic likeness when the English cognate occurs in the noun phrase

(10) Civil servant

2.6. THE TYPE OF SENTENCE.

Cognates apparently safe in a given type of sentence (say, affirmative) can become false friends if the sentence is changed into interrogative or negative. The English adverb *possibly* shows what is meant here: a good match with Spanish half-cognate *posiblemente* in an affirmative sentence like

(11) Possibly, the house is empty now
it would require a new word or phrase far in meaning from *posiblemente* in:
(12) You can’t possibly come to work without a tie

3. LEXIS

Lexis can be a source of false friendship too. I intend to present below just a few situations in which lexis brings ambiguity to the text:
3.1. ONOMASIOLOGICAL MULTIPLICATION

In this case, etymological reasons have provided more than one cognate in either language; then, in a process similar to the one described for (2.3), SSEs simply take the wrong one. Onomasiological multiplicity may occur either in Spanish, such as in

(1) Vacación and vacante for English vacation
or (more frequently) in English:
(2) Estate and state for Spanish estado
(3) Personal and personnel for Spanish personal
(4) Costume, custom, and customs for Spanish costumbre
etc.

3.2. LOAN WORDS AND ‘FALSE’ LOAN WORDS

Very often an English word (such as clip) enters the Spanish language and settles as a loan (Spanish clip). On other occasions, though, it is not accepted by the Real Academia de la Lengua Española (as in the case of pub); I shall refer to the latter phenomenon as ‘false loans’ henceforth. Anyway, false or not, the fact is that, very often, these loans are accepted by a large part of speakers and they are, therefore, known to many SSEs. This implies that teachers of English are faced with a peculiar situation in the classroom, namely that a link has been established by SSEs between an English word ‘A’ and the Spanish loan ‘B’ that comes from it.

The reason why this situation is studied here is that the referred link, very often, causes false friendship. Here is a thorough revision of the whole process:

i) As a preliminary step, the English word ‘A’ and the Spanish loan (or false loan) ‘B’ are to be considered as two different words since ‘B’ usually does not keep all the meanings of ‘A’ (indeed, it sometimes keeps none). This is evident in Spanish clip, which keeps just one of the meanings of its English cognate, namely

(10) object for holding sheets of paper together
but not others, such as:
(11) pointed flange on a horseshoe that secures it to the front part of the roof

ii) SSEs get acquainted with those meanings shared by both cognates, like (10) above, but not with the rest (11).

iii) Whenever ‘A’ occurs with the meaning (11) SSEs are naturally inclined to ascribe it the meaning (10) with the subsequent diversion in meaning.

3.3. LEXICAL GAPS

The fact that either language involved in the learning process may fail to provide an equivalent for the cognate in the other language can produce wrong, inadequate identifications. An example will show what is meant here: Latin implicare has resulted in English employee and employer (among others) but these can only be identified with one cognate in Spanish (empleado). It could be said that in Spanish there is a lexical gap, or, if preferred, an absence of an equivalent for employer. The ‘expected’ word empleador, is hardly used and speakers prefer patrono, empresario, jefe, etc. The result of this lexical gap in L1 is that both employee and employer are liable to be
identified with empleado. Needless to say, identifications of the type empleado = employer will bring about false friendship.

4. CONCLUSION
Along this paper, I have tried to demonstrate that, although, false friends always suppose a lexical interference of L1 in L2, its origin can be other than lexis. I have presented three sources, namely morphology, syntax and lexis itself. For each of the above sources, I have provided a number of linguistic facts that may result in false friendship. These do not try to be a closed set in any way, since the number is continuously growing due to the unpredictable development of languages and, especially, the growing interference of languages with each other in bilingual communities, such as Blas (1999) has demonstrated.

BIBLIOGRAPHY