

False friends: their origin and semantics in some selected languages

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Abstract

In this article we want to investigate the semantic (figurative) structures that underlie false friends, especially semantic false friends, in various European languages (Spanish, French, German and English). Chance false friends share the same form but have different etymologies and different meanings in different languages. They can be compared to homonyms in a single natural language. Semantic false friends, by contrast, have the same etymological origin, their meanings differ in different language, but one can still detect semantic relations between them. They can be considered to be cross-linguistic equivalents to polysemous words in a single natural language. The links between their meanings in different languages can be based on metaphor, metonymy and euphemism, but also on specialisation and generalisation. Semantic false friends are the semantic relics of pragmatic language use over time and space. Studying false friends is, however, more than an exercise in diachronic pragmatics. It has important implications for translation and cross-linguistic communication, where an awareness of false friends is important together with knowledge of certain pragmatic strategies, which help to avoid misunderstandings or mistranslations. The study of the underlying figurative links between false friends also adds a new dimension to cognitive semantics. © 2002 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. False friends and their relation to metaphor, metonymy, specialisation, and generalisation

Metaphor, metonymy and polysemy have been well explored in synchronic (cognitive) linguistics as underlying not only figures of speech but also thought itself. Metaphor, metonymy, generalisation, and specialisation have been studied exhaustively in diachronic linguistics as underlying major types of semantic change.¹ The same can be said about the phenomena of homonymy and polysemy. However, none of these cognitive and linguistic phenomena have as yet been examined cross-linguistically at any length.

Take for example the German word *Flanell* and the English word *flannel*. In German *Flanell* is used to refer to a certain type of cloth, in English to a certain type of cloth, but also to a cloth with a certain function (a wash-cloth for washing the body).² The metonymic link that is exploited is the one between material and function.³ Furthermore, *flannel* can be used metaphorically in English to mean ‘evasive talk’. As this example shows, the two languages seem to have exploited certain meaning potentials in different ways: whereas ‘the German language’ stayed with the ‘literal’ meaning of *flannel* and did not venture any further into semantic space, ‘the English language’ moved along a metonymically and metaphorically structured semantic path and produced a word with multiple meanings. Take another example: the English word *fork* and the German word *Forke*. Again we are dealing with a case of ‘false friends’, that is, words that seem to be the same, or at least very similar, in form and meaning, but, in reality, are not. In this case the false friends are not linked by metonymy (as in *Flanell* and *flannel*), but through specialisation, the English *fork* referring to a spiked instrument for eating, the German one to a spiked instrument for shovelling manure and other things on a farm. Another English–German pair of false friends linked in that way is English *hose* (a flexible tube for conveying liquid or gas) and German *Hose* (a tubular garment worn over the legs by men and women, but made from cloth falling away from the leg, not clinging to it). Although in 19th-century English *hose* could mean both ‘flexible tube’ and ‘female stockings’ [as still in American: *panty-hose*], the modern English *hose* only refers to the flexible tube, whereas the German *Hose* only refers to (fe)male tubular garments you put over your legs. The words have become false friends by specialisation.

¹ When speaking of the classification of diachronic semantic changes Geeraerts (1997) refers to the classical quartet of specialisation, generalisation, metonymy, and metaphor.

² English *flannel* derived from Welsh *gwlan*, *glwlanen* meaning ‘wool’, and was exported as such to the German language. It should be stressed that the case of loanwords (*flannel-Flanell*) differs somewhat from the semantic divergence of cognates (*fork/Forke*, *hose/Hose*), as loanwords are imported because a word is needed to express a certain meaning. But there is no simultaneous need to borrow the whole range of meanings possessed by the loanword in its original language. On this problem, see Section 8, below.

³ “Metaphor and metonymy are different kinds of processes. Metaphor is principally a way of conceiving of one thing in terms of another, and its primary function is understanding. Metonymy, on the other hand, has primarily a referential function, that is, it allows us to use one entity to stand for another. But metonymy is not merely a referential device. It also serves the function of providing understanding.” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 35)

In this article we want to investigate how various (related) languages, such as Spanish, French, German, and English, exploit the meaning potentials of words in different ways by looking at the metaphorical, metonymical, etc. structures that underlie false friends and structure diachronic changes over time which lead to false friends. This has implications not only for research into meaning and understanding, for comparative research into semantic and conceptual networks, but also for the teaching and translating of foreign languages, as we shall demonstrate with many examples.

Robert Hill has pointed out in his *Dictionary of False Friends* (1982: i) that false friends are particularly treacherous words when it comes to understanding what somebody speaking another language actually means:

Since the early 1960s, when I began teaching English as a foreign language, there has been a marked shift in emphasis in the way we teach, from detailed studies of texts, to methods which encourage the students to talk more. From the beginning, I remember noticing how the meaning of certain English words was repeatedly misunderstood: the context might offer no hint of the fact that words like sympathetic, smoking, or control meant something quite different in English from the similar word in other languages. I am ashamed too, when I think how many times I have used fastidious as a reasonable synonym for fussy before I discovered that the former was likely to be understood by all Latins (i.e. speakers of Portuguese, Spanish, French and Italian) as irritating, troublesome, or annoying.⁴

Since “the context might offer no hint”, a pragmatic strategy is needed to resolve this sometimes hidden semantic problem. This can be especially problematic when reading a (badly) translated text. Translations of false friends can lead to certain ambiguities which can, however, be exploited themselves in literature to achieve certain effects (cf. for example, Sender, 1994; Daninos, 1990). We can only savour passages that discuss or use false friends (see Section 3, below) if we are made aware of their existence when acquiring or learning a language, and if we are taught how to cope with them when we encounter them in conversation or text. Analysing this type of ambiguity can, therefore, not only contribute to pragmatics of conversations (and misunderstandings), but also to a pragmatics of literature, and to pragmatics of translation.

2. False friends and their relation to homonymy and polysemy

Although various classifications of false friends have been proposed in the past (Chamizo, 1999; Carroll, 1992: 101; Trup, 1998: 50–60), we shall concentrate on two

⁴ Hill is not the only person who has been deceived by *fastidious/fastidioso*. Similar to Hill's experience, the analysis of these and other false friends discussed in this article was provoked by incidents and accidents that actually happened to/or were observed by the main author or others: “Es cierto que a veces inclusive términos similares en dos lenguas no demasiado alejadas entre sí tienen sentidos diversos; recuérdese la alharaca que se armó, tiempo ha, en una reunión de la Sociedad de Naciones cuando un delegado británico dijo del discurso de un delegado de otra nación que era *fastidious*. *Fastidious* no quiere decir ‘fastidioso’, sino algo así como ‘muy detallado’ y ‘pormenorizado’.” (Ferrater Mora, 1970: 21). According to the *OED* ‘fastidious’ also meant ‘irritating’ in the past.

types for the purposes of our paper: 1, chance false friends; and 2, semantic false friends.

Chance false friends are those words that are similar or equivalent (graphically and/or phonetically) in two or more given languages, but without there being any semantic or etymological reason for this overlap. The Spanish word *misa* (holy mass) and the Slovakian one *misa* (dish) could be regarded as prototypical cases of that kind of false friends. Equally Spanish *burro* (ass, donkey) and Italian *burro* (butter) have the same phonetic and graphic shape due to a fortuitous diachronic process. Other examples are Spanish *auge* (acme, culmination, apogee), French *auge* (basin, bowl), and German *Auge* (eye). Similarly, Portuguese *chumbo* (lead) and Spanish *chumbo* (Indian fig, prickly pear) are not etymologically related at all.⁵ Spaniards are, therefore, sometimes surprised when they discover that two different kinds of petrol can be bought at Portuguese petrol stations: with and without *chumbo*. In fact, chance false friends could be considered to be equivalents, in two or more given languages, of homonymic words in a given single natural language.

Semantic false friends, by contrast, are words that are graphically and/or phonetically similar in various languages, but their meanings have diverged. In the case of European languages, many of them are derived from Latin or Greek, and it is from this group that we shall mainly draw our examples. Semantic false friends have the same etymological origin but different meanings in each of these languages. These different meanings are, however, related to each other by various figurative links. For that reason semantic false friends could be considered the equivalents, in two or more given languages, of polysemous words in a given single natural language.

Semantic false friends can in turn be divided into two groups: 1, full false friends, which are those words whose meanings in various languages diverge widely (are on brink of becoming equivalent to homonyms), such as *fastidious* and *fastidioso/fastidiosa*; and 2, partial false friends, which are those words that have several senses, some of which coincide in both languages while others do not.

To close this section we shall provide only one illustration for a well-known group of partial false friends: English *professor* and French *professeur* (to which one could add Spanish *profesor/profesora*, German *Professor/Professorin*, and so on). Exploiting a widespread knowledge about these false friends, at least amongst academics, Laurie Taylor, who writes a humorous column for the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, wrote the following in a comic rendering of a fictitious speech given by an English *professor* trying to address French students (exploiting some other false friends on the way: Engl. *replace* [French *remplacer*] and French *replacer* [Engl. *to put something back or on again*]; Engl. *course* [French: *leçon, cours*], French *course* [English: *race*, or as translation of *faire les courses: shopping*], and, finally, English *lecture* [French: *cours*] and French *lecteur* [English: *reader*]:

En France, vous avez beaucoup des *professeurs*, mais je suis un professeur propre à l'université de Pop-

⁵ The etymology of the Portuguese *chumbo* is clear; it derives from Latin *plumbeum* ('lead'). Unfortunately, the etymology of Spanish *chumbo* remains unclear (Corominas and Pascual, 1984–1987).

pleton et quand mon vice-chancellor avait entendu que je passais mes vacances dans le sud de France, il m'a dit: 'Quelle bonne chance! Voulez-vous me replace (sic) et donner *un lecteur* aux étudiants françaises (sic) sur le sujet des avantages d'étudier a (sic) l'université de Poppleton? [...] Nous avons quatre mille étudiants, presque cinquante *courses*, et un grand parc de science (Taylor, 2000: 44, italics ours).

3. False friends and pragmatic strategies

Mistakes, misunderstandings, and the humorous exploitation of false friends are ubiquitous when learning a second language. False friends are ever present semantic traps into which the unwary speaker can fall, but they can also offer semantic opportunities. The semantic and pragmatic affordances of false friends can, for example, be successfully exploited in literary texts. However, in both cases, in ordinary and literary language use, we need pragmatic strategies to make sense of either text or conversation, as both reading and talking are what Jacob Mey calls 'pragmatic acts' (Mey, 1999).

Let us consider two literary texts in which the writers deal with false friends:

[3] "Mrs Towle pushes the dog with her foot. It looks beatifically at her.

... *must make you aware of the French verb raper (sic), to grate...*

Mrs Towle turns it [the television] up further.

... *are you sure you didn't mean 'to rape' in a French accent?*

'No no, that would be 'violier'...' (Glyde, 2000: 107–108).⁶

[4] "Dès la première ligne, une discussion a opposé le Major à son collaborateur français. Celui-ci ayant voulu traduire le titre: 'Puis-je me présenter?' le Major a insisté pour obtenir une traduction plus littérale. '*M'introduire*, me paraît plus exact. —On ne dirait pas cela en français, dit le Français.—Alors laissez les choses en anglais, dit le Major. Elles disent mieux ce que je veux dire.' Le traducteur, ne voulant pas compromettre, dès l'entrée en matière, l'ensemble de l'entreprise, n'a pas insisté, mais fait remarquer que tous les autres titres, de même que la majeure partie de la traduction, sont rédigés en français. (*Note du Traducteur*).'" (Daninos, 1990: 9)

In [3] the writer is playing with two codes, but both are explicitly and meta-linguistically shown. So, no particular effort is required on the part of the reader in order to understand the false friends alluded to and used here. By contrast, in [4] two codes are being used in quite a different way. The intended reader must be acquainted with the two codes so as to understand exactly what is being said and the reasons for what has been written. If the real reader smiles when reading Daninos' text, this is only possible because Daninos is playing with French and English codes, and the reader knows that *present/présenter* and *introduce/introduire* are partial false

⁶ *Râper* and other similar false friends can be quite dangerous. See for example the case of the Spanish word *rape* in the sentence "Rape a la marinera" (Literally, "Angler fish sailor's style"), that, Santoyo (1989: 55) found translated into English as "Rape sailor's style".

friends. The discussion between Le Major and his supposed translator is possible because *introduce* in the title of this chapter, “May I introduce myself?”, can be understood both as *présenter* and *introduire*. In our opinion, Daninos must have counted on the complicity of his readers and their command of both codes. Daninos would probably not achieve the cognitive and humorous goals he wanted to achieve as a writer if the readers did not know both codes. This has implications not only for the understanding of this paragraph, but also for the novel as a whole, as this apparently innocent starting point allows the reader to make some implicatures that will be needed in order to understand the rest of the novel. For instance: 1, Le Major is proud of his own language; and 2, He thinks his own language is better than any other language.

The subject of false friends becomes, however, particularly interesting when dealing with texts/utterances that occur naturally in everyday language or in real translations. For instance: the sentence from John L. Austin’s *Philosophical Essays* “I may very easily ruin him, and I shall if I am extravagant” has been translated into Spanish as “Puedo muy fácilmente arruinarlo, y lo haré si soy extravagante” (Austin, 1989: 198). This sentence does not make any sense in Spanish because *extravagante* never means ‘prodigal’ in Spanish; it means ‘odd’, ‘rare’, ‘eccentric’, ‘outlandish’, or ‘strange’ instead. The Spanish adjectives that should have been used to translate *extravagant* in Austin’s sentence are: *manirroto/manirrota*, *derrochador/derrochadora*, or *despilfarrador/despilfarradora*.

There are three situations in everyday language where false friends can lead us astray. Take the case of a foreign speaker who has not yet got a good command of the other language and, being deceived by the meaning of a particular word in his/her own language, uses the word in question erroneously. Once a foreign speaker has used such a word, the hearer can adopt two different attitudes. If s/he knows the speaker’s native language and the context shows that the used word is odd or quite infrequent, s/he could substitute it for the right word. However, if s/he does not know the speaker’s native language and/or the context makes sense, the misunderstanding will remain invisible, so to speak. This case is especially frequent when the speaker uses partial false friends, because the speaker’s utterance could make sense in context. By contrast, when the hearer senses that there is something odd about the text/utterance, s/he can calculate the possible meanings of the speaker’s utterance according to the following steps: 1, it is highly improbable that the speaker would mean what his/her utterance means in my language; 2, since s/he has not got a good command of my language s/he probably means something else; 3, perhaps s/he uses the word in question incongruously/oddly because s/he has in mind a similar word in his/her own language; 4, since I know/suppose that the word in question is a false friend, s/he probably would mean that other thing; and 5, I’ll try to verify this by asking the speaker for a further explanation.

Nevertheless, there are cases in which the text/utterance makes sense in both languages but in which both sentences can’t be true at the same time. This is nicely illustrated by the contents description on a packet of a well-known brand of Spanish gazpacho (Alvalle). The content is described in English, German and Spanish:

[5] “Ingredients: tomato, cucumber, pepper, onion, water, olive oil, wine vinegar, salt, garlic, and *eventually* [finally] lemon” (italics ours).

[6] “Zutaten: Tomaten, Gurken, Paprika, Zwiebeln, Wasser, Olivenöl, Weinessig, Salz, Knoblauch, *eventuell* [perhaps] Zitrone” (italics ours).

[7] “Ingredientes: tomate, pepino, pimiento, cebolla, agua, aceite de oliva virgen, vinagre de vino, sal, ajo y *eventualmente* [perhaps] zumo de limón” (italics ours).

If what is said in English is true, what is said in German and Spanish is radically false. And if, by contrast, what is said in German and Spanish is true, then what is said in English is false. This means that in cases like [5], [6] and [7] no pragmatic strategy can allow us to discover if the lemon has been “finally” or “perhaps” added.

4. Metaphors and false friends

Animals’ names are frequently used metaphorically in order to refer to persons because we think every animal has a particular characteristic. So, when we use the name of an animal for a person, it is used in a metaphorical or euphemistic way. When these metaphorical or euphemistic uses do not coincide in two or more natural languages, false friends arise. A paradigmatic example is the one of ‘camel’. The different words for ‘camel’ in the different European languages (Spanish, *camello*; French, *chameau*; German, *Kamel*; Portuguese, *camelo*)⁷ are etymologically related and mean literally the same animal. For that reason those names are not false friends at all when they are used literally. Nevertheless, when those names are used metaphorically, they become actual false friends. Namely, when the German word *Kamel* is used to refer to a human being (particularly in the idiom *Ich Kamel!*) it means ‘stupid’ or ‘silly’, probably because camels are the paradigm of stupidity in the German *Weltanschauung*. By contrast, the Spanish word *camello*, originally used metaphorically and now lexicalized (*DRAE*), means ‘drug pusher’. In English and French the role of traffickers of small quantities of drugs is typically not played by camels or *chameaux*, respectively, but by mules. As a result of the criss-crossing metaphorical roles played by these two different kinds of beasts camels and mules have gained negative connotations, but quite different ones. To close this section, it should be pointed out that the metaphorical role that is played by a German *Kamel*, is typically played by a Spanish *burro*, a French *âne*, and a British ‘ass’.⁸

⁷ The Portuguese word *camelo* is an example of a chance false friend with regard to the Spanish word *camelo* (hoax).

⁸ We disregard the other figurative, bawdy meanings of that word in English, particularly in American English.

Another complex chain of figures of speech can be found in the English words *seminary* and *seminar*, and the Spanish one *seminario*. All three words derive from Latin *semen* (semen, seed).⁹ Thus *seminary* meant literally and originally ‘seedbed’ (a meaning which, in English, can be said to have partly been taken over by *nursery*, used metaphorically the other way round). From that standard meaning the following meanings of *seminary* evolved: 1, school, by means of a metaphor; 2, school for the ministry, by means of a specialisation; 3, school for girls, by means of a second order specification; 4, brothel, by means of a euphemism; and 5, the female genitals, by means of both a metonymy and a euphemism.¹⁰ The chain of figures for Spanish *seminario* is quite different: 1, school, by means of a metaphor; 2, school for the ministry, by means of a specialisation; 3, a special kind of meeting or class in the universities (seminar); 4, the classroom where these meetings occur; and 5, the team of teachers who teach a specific subject in a high school. In other words, *seminary*, *seminar*, and *seminario* are partial false friends as a result of the different chains of figures that changed the meanings of these words in different ways in the two languages.

5. Metonymies and false friends

Just like metaphors, metonymies are a frequent source of false friends. Let us consider one paradigmatic case in which diachronic and synchronic aspects are intermingled. This is the case of the Spanish word *baño* and the French word *bagne*. Both derive from Latin *balneum* (bath, bath house), but *baño* means ‘bath’ or ‘bath house’, while *bagne* has the standard meanings of ‘prison’, ‘dungeon’, and ‘hard labour’, as well as the slang or familiar meaning of ‘work’ or ‘the site where a person works’ and is also used in the exclamation *Quel bagne!* - What a burden! What a cross!. However, in the past the Spanish word *baño* also meant ‘prison’ or ‘dungeon’, as illustrated by the title of the well-known work by Miguel de Cervantes, *Los baños de Argel* (The dungeons of Algiers). It has to be said however that few Spaniards know this old-fashioned meaning of *baño*, and this includes most scholars.

The meaning of ‘prison’ for *baño* and *bagne* originated in a metonymy based on the fact that the Turks used to imprison their captives inside Constantinople bath houses (Corominas and Pascual, 1984–1987). From these initial conditions the following metonymic chain of semantic changes arose (on serial metonymy, see Nerlich and Clarke, 2001b): 1, French has lexicalised the meaning of ‘prison’ for *bagne*; 2, by

⁹ This is probably why the *British Sociological Association*, in an effort to be politically correct, has recently ‘banned’ the use of ‘seminal’. Their advice is to replace it by ‘classical’ or ‘formative’. This shows that many seemingly archaic meanings can come into competition with newer meanings. The revival of these older meanings depends on the social and discursive situation. Word-plays, double entendres, etc. would be impossible if we were not able to exploit the full range of synchronic and diachronic meanings of a word.

¹⁰ The meaning of ‘female genitals’ for ‘seminary’ is old fashioned nowadays, but the one of ‘brothel’ is still current and can be found from time to time. For instance, in the following fragment of a rugby song: “My aunt keeps a girls’ seminary, /Teaching young girls to begin, /She doesn’t say where they finish..” (quoted by Sánchez Benedito, 1998: 371).

means of a second order metonymy the meaning ‘hard work’ has become lexicalised for *bagne*; and 3, by means of a third order (and perhaps humorous) metonymy the meaning of ‘work’ has been added. As a result of these diverging chains of metonymies the words *baño* and *bagne* have now become false fiends. Both words are false friends with regard to the English word *bagnio* that was borrowed from Italian *bagno* (bath, bathing house) with the euphemistic meaning of ‘brothel’ (Chamizo Domínguez and Sánchez Benedito, 2000: 144), which was in use in English from the 17th to the 19th century and probably beyond.

A word which is present in almost all the Romance languages is the word used to mean ‘white’, both as a noun and as an adjective (Spanish, *blanco/blanca*; French, *blanc/blanche*; Portuguese, *branco/branca*; Italian, *bianco/bianca*; or Catalan *blanc/blanca*). This word is so common in the Romance languages that one might think it had been a typical Latin word. But surprisingly it is a Germanic word present nowadays in English, German and Dutch. It was borrowed by various Romance languages which changed its original Germanic meaning of ‘bright’ to the Romance one of ‘white’ by means of another metonymy. And, since the commonest meaning of the English word *blank* is nowadays ‘empty’, a new false friend has arisen with regard to its relatives in Romance languages. This means that while “a blank cheque” is understood by English speakers as a literal expression, “un cheque en blanco” is understood by Spanish speakers as a metonymic expression. Similarly, “a blank sheet” literally means “an empty sheet” and not “a white sheet”, but “una hoja blanca” means only “a white sheet”, while “an empty sheet” would have to be translated as “una hoja vacía o sin rellenar”. And what has been said about ‘blank’ as an adjective could be said, *mutatis mutandis*, about *blanco* as a noun. Dutch *blank* is also used to mean ‘white’ in some contexts. In fact, although there is a word *wit* (white) in Dutch, *blank* is both an adjective (for example: *Het blanke ras*, ‘the white race’, or *Blanke slavinnen* ‘white slave trade’) and a noun used to refer to white people (for example: *Hillary is een blanke*, ‘Hillary is a white woman’, or *Verboden voor blanken*, ‘forbidden for white people’). And curiously enough, *een blanco* (sic) *cheque* means “a blank cheque”, while *een witte cheque* means “a white cheque”.¹¹ The same is the case in German, where one can use the expressions *der Blankoscheck* or *eine Blankovollmacht* (Engl.: *carte blanche*). You can also use *blanko* alone when referring to plain paper. However, you cannot say *ein blanker Scheck* which would mean a brightly polished one - something more appropriate for a shiny coin than a cheque! You can however say metaphorically “Das ist eine blanke Lüge” (this is a bare-faced lie), a use of *blank* which might puzzle some translators.

6. Inferences and false friends

Sometimes false friends are based on tiny semantic details that can be easily overlooked. These fine semantic details can be seen as the semantic residue of older

¹¹ Dutch *blank* also has, among other rarer meanings, the colloquial one of ‘flooded’ (for example: *De straat staat blank* ‘the street is flooded’), a metaphorical meaning that is not present in the other languages. We thank our colleague Jos Hallebeek (Universiteit van Nijmegen) for his information concerning the Dutch language.

pragmatic inferences, which have arisen from the interactional negotiation of discourse. Let us look at some examples:

The concepts of accomplishment (achievement) and perfection (flawlessness) are so closely related that many languages use a single word in order to express both concepts. In fact, the first order meaning of the Latin adjective *perfectus* was ‘finished’ or ‘accomplished’. Now, since what is finished could usually be considered “perfect”, *perfectus* acquired the second order meaning of ‘impeccable’, and both main meanings survived in English ‘perfect’, French *parfait/parfaite*, and Portuguese *perfeito/perfeita* (and what is said about these words could be said, *mutatis mutandis*, about ‘imperfect’, *imparfait/imparfaite*, and *imperfeito/imperfeita*, respectively). However, nowadays the Spanish adjective *perfecto/perfecta* only means ‘impeccable’ and never ‘finished’. For this reason, when a Spaniard travelling to Portugal discovers the Monastery of Batalha (a memorial erected in honour of Aljubarrota Battle, a battle between Castilians and Portuguese in Medieval Ages in which the Portuguese were the winners), s/he is surprised to find the *Capelas Imperfeitas* (Unfinished Chapels), those chapels being considered as an impeccable example of the best Portuguese Gothic style. Spaniards, unacquainted with this Portuguese meaning, will, however, think that these chapels are “imperfect” and not “unfinished”.

Similarly, the French *parfait/parfaite* can have the meaning of ‘finished’ or ‘adult’, at least in some contexts. Namely, when a French speaker says “l’homme parfait” (or “la femme parfaite”), as opposed to a child or a foetus, it will probably mean “the accomplished man/woman” or “the adult man/woman”,¹² and not “the impeccable man/woman”. Nevertheless, the concepts of accomplishment and flawlessness could and should be clearly distinguished.

7. Euphemisms and false friends

When a word is frequently used as a euphemism in a given natural language the euphemistic meaning of that word can become lexicalised and (Chamizo Domínguez and Sánchez Benedito, 2000: 39–45), as a result of that process, the word might become a false friend with regard to the same word in another language in which this process did not occur. Let us consider the adjective ‘regular’ and its Spanish and French cognates *regular* and *régulier/régulière*, respectively. These three terms have their origin in Latin *regularis*, which meant firstly “according to the ruler”, and secondly “according to the rule”.¹³ However, ‘regular’ could also mean ‘exact’ (for example: regular clock). Furthermore, ‘regular’ could mean ‘normal’ (for example: regular army as opposed to guerrilla), and finally, ‘periodic’ (for example: regular

¹² Nevertheless, that meaning must be quite infrequent in French because *The Michelin Guide to Portugal* translates *Capelas Imperfeitas* into French as *Chapelles Inachevées*. By the way, *The Michelin Guide to Portugal* grants two stars to the *Capelas Imperfeitas*.

¹³ That meaning continues to be present when we speak of “a regular friar” (a friar who lives according to the rule of a regular, monastic order).

flight as opposed to charter flight; or regular rhythm as opposed to irregular rhythm). So far the adjective ‘regular’ has experienced similar processes of change in all three languages, but there are also differences. Firstly, because *regular* and *régulier* are also nouns in Spanish and French, meaning a special kind of soldiers in the former Spanish and French armies in Africa.¹⁴ And secondly because the French adjective also means metaphorically and familiarly ‘loyal’ or ‘faithful’. As a result of that process the French sentence

[8] “Pierre est un ami régulier”

does not mean

[9] “Pierre is a regular (standard) friend”,¹⁵

but

[10] “Pierre is a faithful (loyal) friend”.

And the literal translation of [8] into Spanish as

[11] “Pierre es un amigo regular”

would mean

[12] “Pierre is an unfaithful friend”.

The reason for this reversal in semantic fortunes is that the Spanish adjective *regular* is frequently used as a euphemism which means ‘so-so’ or ‘quite bad’. This euphemistic use of *regular* has nowadays become so firmly entrenched that it has become perhaps the most common meaning of that adjective, especially when used with reference to topics such as health, food, exams marks, and so on. For that reason, Spaniards travelling to the United States are sometimes surprised when they discover that the good old British petrol has become “regular” American gasoline.¹⁶ In fact, the Spanish sentence

¹⁴ As a feminine noun, *la régulière*, is also used in French for ‘my better half’. By contrast, the Spanish noun *regular* has no feminine form at all.

¹⁵ In American English *Pierre is a regular guy* by contrast means ‘Pierre is a nice guy’. *Regular* has developed slightly different meanings in British English and in American English. In British English it predominantly means ‘evenly periodic’, as in “a regular heartbeat”, whereas in American English it has come to mean ‘standard’, as in “a regular coke”. This can lead to some interesting ambiguities. One could for example say: “He is going out for his regular beer” and mean either that ‘he is going out for his habitual beer’ or that ‘he is going out for his beer of a standard measure’. In both cases, the person going for his or her ‘regular’ would him/herself be a ‘regular’ in the sense of ‘a regular customer’.

¹⁶ ‘Petrol’ is a false friend with regard to Spanish *petróleo* (petroleum), French *pétrole* (petroleum), and German *Petroleum* (as in *Petroleumlampe*, paraffin lamp) (petrol itself would be *Benzin*).

[13] “He comprado una gasolina regular”

will always mean

[14] “I bought so-so (or bad) petrol”

and never a standard one. By contrast, an example like

[15] “Llegué en un vuelo regular”

could mean:

[16] “I arrived on a regular flight”

[17] “I arrived on a so-so flight” (meiosis use now lexicalised);
or

[18] “I arrived on a bad flight” (euphemistic use now lexicalised).

In cases like that a pragmatic strategy is needed. Firstly in order to arrive at the exact meaning of the utterance in each particular context; and secondly in order to translate [15] in any other language. As the euphemistic use of *regular* has become lexicalised in Spanish, the following word plays are possible, using the different meanings of *regular*. So, for instance,

[19] “Los vuelos regulares de Málaga a Madrid son sólo regulares”

is not at all a truism or tautology in Spanish, but an assertion (true or false) about reality and it means:

[20] “Regular flights from Malaga to Madrid are only so-so (or pretty bad)”.

Similarly, when a Spanish doctor informs his/her patient that his/her health is *regular*, the patient will not understand this as meaning that his/her health is ‘normal’, but infer that s/he is suffering from a serious disease or had a bad injury.

8. Borrowings and false friends

Borrowings are also a frequent source of partial or full false friends, and this in three ways: 1, in the target language borrowed words can be restricted to only one of the various, possible meanings of a polysemous word in the source language (cf. the example of Engl. *flannel* and Germ. *Flanell* in Section 1) (specialisation); 2, the borrowed words can develop polysemies which were absent in the original language; 3, the meaning of borrowed words can deviate from the meaning (or meanings) of the

source language because they have been used figuratively. One could argue that all semantic false friends are cases of (figurative) borrowing (say from Latin and Greek onwards). However, in this section we shall only look at borrowings between synchronically coexisting language (we would like to stress however that in this case ‘synchrony’ refers to a rather large span of linguistic time).

Examples of the first process are the French words *chef* and *maître*, which have been borrowed by almost all European languages, but their original meanings have been restricted to the field of restaurants and kitchens. Similarly, the French word *madame* has been borrowed everywhere, but mainly according to its euphemistic second order meaning in the field of prostitution. So, they become partial false friends.

The second process can be illustrated by the English meaning of the Spanish word *guerrilla*,¹⁷ both the guerrilla war and the guerrilla word being well known Spanish export products. *Guerrilla* means both ‘guerrilla individual’ and ‘guerrilla group’ in English.¹⁸ By contrast, the Spanish word always means ‘guerrilla group’ and never ‘guerrilla individual’ (*guerrillero/guerrillera*). For that reason the English borrowing is a partial false friend with regard to the meaning of the original Spanish word.

The third process can be illustrated with the example of the Spanish word *mitin*, which has been borrowed from the English ‘meeting’, but which has two peculiar characteristics. Firstly, the standard English meaning of (any) ‘gathering’ has been reduced in Spanish to “an assembly where people gather to discuss political or social subjects in public” (*DRAE*). And secondly, Spanish (at least colloquial Spanish) has added another metaphoric third order meaning that makes *mitin* synonymous with *bronca* (scolding or telling off). Another interesting example of this kind of false friends might be the one of the Spanish word *micelín* (which means ‘spare tires’, the special kind of ‘flab’, and is more frequently used in the plural, *micelines*). Now, *micelín* has been borrowed from the well-known French trademark of tires. In fact, the puppet, which is the symbol of the brand *Michelin*, is made from pneumatic tires, but the Spaniards “saw” spare tires where there were actual pneumatic tires and the word *micelín* has become a common noun in Spanish. And curiously enough, *micelín* has to be translated as *poignées d’amour* in French (a wording that has been imported into English as *love handles*), while the French word *miceline* means “railway motor coach”.

9. Idioms and false friends

Usually false friends are analysed as isolated words, but many terms only become false friends in the context in which they are used. In fact, there are numerous words, which are not false friends at all when they are considered in isolation, but which become false friends when they are part of an idiom. Most idioms can be understood both according to the literal meaning of their component words and

¹⁷ Although now lexicalised, *guerrilla* was in fact a diminutive form of *guerra* (war).

¹⁸ For a fuller analysis of that case, see (Chamizo Domínguez and Klyukanov, 2001).

according to any figurative interpretation. This figurative meaning becomes the most common one when idioms are fully lexicalised.

The concept of “groundless rumours” is present everywhere because the reality of groundless rumours is perhaps as old as that of human speakers themselves. But this reality has been conceptualised in a different way in each language, using for that purpose words that had a literal meaning already. The French idiom for ‘groundless rumours’ is *téléphone arabe*. Now, neither *téléphone* nor *arabe* are false friends with regard to the analogous words in English, Spanish, or German. And also a French sentence like

[21] “Il y a beaucoup de téléphones arabes à Paris”

could mean both

[22] “There are many telephones made in an Arabic country in Paris”

or

[23] “There are many grapevines in Paris”.

In [22] *téléphone arabe* has been understood according to its literal meaning, and obviously it is not a false friend with regard to, say, ‘Arabic telephone’, *teléfono árabe*, or *arabisches Telefon*. By contrast, in [23] *téléphone arabe* has been understood as an idiom, having a metaphoric meaning and being used according to that second order meaning. On the other hand, English speakers have conceptualised “groundless rumours” as a grapevine, or as a bush telegraph. Again ‘telegraph’ is not a false friend at all with regard to its French, German, or Spanish cognates, but it becomes a false one when it is used in conjunction with ‘bush’.

It should be pointed out that the French and English languages have conceptualised the phenomenon of “groundless rumours” by dipping into the jargon of telecommunications, whereas the German language has conceptualised the same phenomenon by borrowing from barrack room jargon. In fact, the German language has lexicalised *Latrinengerüchte* (literally “latrine rumours”) and *Latrinensparolen* (literally “latrine sayings”) as words for “groundless rumours”. Again, *Latrine* is not a false friend with regard to its English, French, and Spanish cognates when it is considered in isolation, but it turns into one when used in the context of rumours. To express the concept of groundless rumours, the Spanish language has used words from the fields of both the barrack room and telecommunications. This means that the concept of “groundless rumours” can be expressed in two ways in Spanish: *macutazo* and *radio macuto*. *Macutazo* is an augmentative and derogatory form of *macuto* (knapsack, the sack typically used by soldiers), which means both ‘big knapsack’ and ‘a blow given with a knapsack’. So *macutazo* evokes automatically the barrack room field to any Spanish speaker, particularly to someone who has served in the army. And both conceptual fields, the barrackroom and the telecommunications one, are intermingled in *radio macuto* (literally, radio

knapsack). Again, although *radio*¹⁹ is not a false friend with regard to its English, French, and German cognates, it becomes one when it is used in conjunction with *macuto*. These few notes show that co-textual and contextual pressure can switch the semantic potential of the words used, turning some words into false friends which hadn't been false friends before.

Finally, let us look at one more example: the French word *café*. It is not a false friend with regard to Spanish *café*, English 'coffee', or German *Kaffee* when they mean the beverage, but it becomes a false friend when it is used in some idioms. Namely in *grain de café* (literally 'coffee bean' and euphemistically 'clitoris') (Caradec, 1989; Colin and Mével, 1994)²⁰ and *(prendre) le café du pauvre* (literally 'to have pauper's coffee' and euphemistically 'to coit', especially after lunch) (Caradec, 1989; Colin & Mével, 1994). Again we are dealing with two peculiar false friends,²¹ whose literal translation into Spanish, English, or German would be meaningless, as is the case with most idioms. The reason is that these languages usually conceptualise coition euphemistically in very different ways. And *(prendre) le café du pauvre* has another characteristic. We can see a clear social criticism behind this idiom, which emerged when coffee was such an expensive beverage that it was prohibitive for poor people to afford it. And since coffee was a prohibitive beverage to poor people, coition became its most pleasurable substitute. So: beware of false friends disguised as idioms!

10. Conclusion

Although a cross-linguistic examination of false friends should be of interest in itself to anyone interested in linguistics, the philosophy of language, the sociology of language, and the psychology of language, we think that such an analysis has wider implications for other fields of language study. Especially

- for translations studies: since false friends are perhaps the main enemy of translators, they must know their enemies thoroughly so as to be able to beat them;
- for language teaching, and this in two ways: knowledge about false friends is obviously necessary when teaching a foreign language, but it is also necessary

¹⁹ To be exact, *radio* is a polysemous word. Its feminine form (*la radio*) means 'radio', but its masculine one (*el radio*) means both 'radium' and 'radius' (but not in Latin America).

²⁰ That meaning could be very old: "**Grain**, **grain de café* (1902), clitoris. *Semen humanum*, la graine des hommes; Plaute (eunuque), léger de deux grains au trébuchet d'amour (Blondeau). Les prêtres de la déesse Isis portaient dans les cérémonies le van mystique qui reçoit le grain et le son, mais qui ne garde que le premier en rejetant le second; les prêtres du dieu (Osiris) portaient le tau sacré ou la clef, qui ouvre les serrures les mieux fermées. Ce tau figurait l'organe de l'homme; ce van l'organe de la femme (P. Dufour, *Histoire de la prostitution*).'" (Chautard, 1931: 356).

²¹ And since most idioms can be understood according to the literal and figurative meanings, both meanings can compete in several contexts (See, Nerlich and Chamizo Domínguez, 1999; and Nerlich and Clarke, 2001a).

when teaching their own language to native speakers, so that native speakers become aware of the different aspects and nuances of their own language;

- for analysing the many ways in which speakers of different languages and societies conceptualise reality by means of words that had the same meaning in the past;
- for analysing the various figurative networks and chains (most of them completely unpredictable a priori) used by the speakers of different languages (even the most related ones) to conceptualise reality; and finally:
- for a pragmatics of cross-linguistic understanding and misunderstanding.

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