FALSE FRIENDS: AMONG THE NIGHTMARES OF A TRANSLATOR or HOW TO BEFRIEND FALSE FRIENDS

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Abstract

In the present article we aim to underline the necessity to master the vocabulary of a foreign language to the extent to which it does not backfire, due to uninspired usage of words that might appear, at first sight to be friendly but, which are, actually not just that. They are the well-known' false friends', to be handled with care. Therefore, we intend to understand the strategies used by translators in order to cope with them in a translation. However, we are going to briefly present a succinct overview of the matter, just enough to draw a general outline intended to support our concern.

Keywords: deceptive cognates, (miss)communication, language traps, lexical awareness.

The purpose of this article is not to describe or discuss what 'false friends' or, to use a more sophisticated term, 'deceptive cognates' are, but rather to try to understand the strategies or methods used by translators in order to cope with them in a translation. However, we are going to briefly present a succinct overview of the matter, just enough to draw a general outline intended to support our concern. Therefore, according to a Cambridge dictionary, a false friend is "a word that is often confused with another word in a different language with a different meaning because the two words look or sound similar".[2]

Therefore, these false friends are words that may sound similar in two or more languages but actually mean different things. It all seems to be a matter of mere phonetics, since we deal with various items, different in meaning yet similar in sound. If it had not been in different languages, we would be talking about homonyms. Thus, this is a sort of trans-linguistic homonymy.

An interesting instance caught our attention in Bantaș and Rădulescu[3], where the following translation of the Romanian sentence: *Azi sunt veselă** into the English *Today I am dishes** might be frowned upon or even laughed at, since the term *veselă* was rendered inappropriately, due to its dual meaning and intonation: where *veselă* with stress on the first syllable means happy, joyful (the meaning intended by the speaker, but missed by the translator) while stress on the second syllable means dishes. We should admit this to be a rather easy trap, since here, intonation should have helped the unfortunate translator. But in a different example, free from intonation-aid, things seem gloomier. The Romanian sentence: *Pentru a deschide uşa, trebuie să învârţi cheia în broască** should not be rendered as *To open the door, you must turn the key in the frog** unless that is a line in some magic fairy tale.

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[2] http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/false-friend

[3] A. Bantaș And Mihai Rădulescu, *Essential English, Capcanele Limbii Engleze, False Friends*, Ed. Teora, 1992, Bucuresti, p. 11

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As we can thus understand, a false friend could turn out to be among the worst enemies of a translator, according to a professional linguist German/English translator working for DCU Language Services[4]: "*Falscher Freund, faux ami,* false friend – whatever the language, the mistake is universal and can lead, at best, to embarrassment, but in the event of an international marketing campaign has the potential to cost serious money, time and loss of confidence in the product or service. In this era of cross-pollination and, purists may declaim, cross-pollution between world languages, exposure to other cultures through the media and more widespread travel and interaction, has led to an increasing acceptance and adoption of words and phrases from foreign climes."

Therefore, the phenomenon is fairly common and well acknowledged by language users yet, it still generates linguistic instances prone to misunderstanding, as awareness of the matter is not enough unless the users of a language do not render the language cautiously, especially in the case of translators, as they are dealing with the matter from a dual perspective. Useless to say, this implies, knowledge of the languages involved in communication, awareness of the possible controversial linguistic aspects that might appear, using the adequate strategies to deal with them.

Awareness of such vexed linguistic issue proves to be twofold: on the one hand, regarding the awareness of the possible sources of confusion that may generate false friends and, on the other hand, awareness of the idea that all words, especially the new one(s) we come in contact with, ought to be given the right statute from the beginning, i.e., we shouldn't implicitly consider we know the meaning of the word(s) prior to researching for it, just based on how familiar it sounds or looks like.

Regarding the sources of confusion, Ioana Horea[5]considers that there are some clear sources of confusion when it comes to the issue of false friends. One category concerns sources related to behavioural aspects of the speaker while the other one concerns the linguistic approach. "Thus, in what the human element is implied, it is first of all a question of wrong choice of words due to directness and spontaneity of conversations. It occurs because of the normal tendency to use the most familiar words that come to one's mind when talking, as an unconscious and uncontrolled means of producing fluent communication. Regarding the linguistic issue, etymology is the first responsible. These words may have a common root, from an original language that both languages in question derive from or have borrowed and assimilated the particular word from. Some similar meanings can be still preserved, more or less, in both languages, as main senses or, onthe contrary, as figurative or secondary. But new meanings can develop and there are restricted or enlarged senses that influence the future development of the word in one language as distinct from the other. Distinct alterations of meanings, the development of a polysemy, in certain circumstances, or of a simply different particularization would bring about such confusions with these words. There might,

[4] Caroline Handschuh, posted on 04/19/13 In *Culture, Industry News, Language, Translation,* http://dculs.dcu.ie/dcu-language-services-news/false-friends-a-translators-worst-enemy/

[5]IoanaHorea, *The Threat Of "False Friends" In Learning English* http://www.intranslations.com/admin/files/falsefriends.pdf

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

This discourse only proves once more that translation may be considered as a matter of behavioural linguistics, since the two aspects are strictly related to each other and both to the context in which communication among language users occurs.

According to Caroline Handschuh, we ought to pay attention to the translator's *danger zone*, which is "where words have been imported and have kept their original spelling and even pronunciation. (…) The language partners of German and English in particular, the latter heavily influenced over centuries and, in part, derived from the former, offer numerous potential quicksand situations for the hapless or inexperienced translator. *Gift*– the German noun – is an offering most people would not welcome to mark any festive occasion, as it does not mean *present* but rather *poison*, useful to note perhaps when translating a text concerning a suspected homicide."

On the other hand, there is the issue of interference, which is, according to Christoph Gutknecht,[6] "the phenomenon that we experience when linguistic structures that we have already learnt interfere with our learning new structures. Interference exists in all areas-for example, in pronunciation and spelling. Incidentally, interference exists not only between two languages, but also within one language. In semantics, one therefore refers to *intralingual* and *interlingual false friends*. Since a word may change its meaning in the course of time, this problem cannot be viewed only in the light of the current (i.e., synchronic) situation. Because the historical (i.e., diachronic) development must also be taken into consideration, there are altogether four types of false friends."

In order to prevent falling in the traps of false friends, we are offered some hints as ways of avoiding the tricky linguistic terms. First and foremost, we ought to count more on dictionaries than on our intuition, especially when it comes to new words; on the other hand, raising our awareness to the matter might prove to be healthy. Nevertheless, absorbing as many lexical items as possible, thus, lobbying for synonyms might turn out to be rather helpful.

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[6]Christoph Gutknecht, "Translation." *The Handbook of Linguistics,* ed. by Mark Aronoff and Janie Rees-Miller. Blackwell, 2003, http://grammar.about.com/od/fh/g/falsefriendterm.htm

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