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A Friend in Need Is a Friend Indeed. Beware of False Friends, Though!

Anca Sirbu¹, Camelia Alibec²

¹Senior lecturer, PhD, Department of Fundamental Sciences and Humanities, Constanta Maritime University, 104 Mircea cel Batran Street, Constanta, Romania, e-mail: ancasirbu@yahoo.com

²Senior lecturer, PhD, Department of Naval and Port Engineering and Management, "Mircea cel Batran" Naval Academy, 1 Fulgerului Street, Constanta, Romania, e-mail: cami_alibec@yahoo.com

Abstract. Have you ever been deceived by a friend? A very unpleasant feeling, indeed! This can happen with language learning - no, this does not mean that your fellow learners are malicious, but that sometimes a word means something completely different than you think it does based on your knowledge of other languages or of your mother tongue. When we learn a new language, we often encounter words that sound and/or look very similar to words of our own native language. If the languages are related, then it may even be that these words have a comparable meaning. Nevertheless, beware: even if a word sounds and/or looks like a word in your native language, it may mean something completely different. This article is meant as a follow-up piece of research on an adjacent aspect of the topic discussed about in the paper "*Just How Much Is Too Much in the Ever Global Use of English?*" [1] However, the topic is far too exhaustive to even hope it has been canvassed in one or two scientific papers. This is why the question posed in said article still remains: "*Have we actually enriched Romanian by taking over English words and using them as such or have we merely depleted it of the purport of its very existence?*"

1. Introduction

Have you ever been deceived by a friend? A very unpleasant feeling, indeed! This can happen with language learning - no, this does not mean that your fellow learners are malicious, but that sometimes a word means something completely different than you think it does based on your knowledge of other languages or of your mother tongue. When we learn a new language, we often encounter words that sound and/or look very similar to words of our own native language. If the languages are related, then it may even be that these words have a comparable meaning. Nevertheless, beware: even if a word sounds and/or looks like a word in your native language, it may mean something completely different.

Such words are referred to as "false friends". *False friend* is a term from interlinguistics. It refers to pairs of words from different languages, which are very similar externally, but have different meanings in their respective languages. Often, both terms have a common etymological or conceptual origin. False friends are among the translation difficulties and interference errors and can lead to a wrong translation. For instance, the word *actual* in English is sometimes mistakenly translated into Romanian by its homonym; the Romanian definition of *actual* is *care există sau se petrece în prezent, în momentul de față / which exists or occurs at present, at the time being*, while its meaning in English is something *existing in fact, real* (e.g. "The *actual price* is bigger than we have expected." does not mean "*Prețul actual* este mai mare decât ne-am așteptat.", but "*Adevăratul preț / Prețul real* este mai

mare decât ne-am așteptat.”). Likewise, the English term *library* means *biblioteca*, not *librărie*. And the list can carry on.

This article is meant as a follow-up piece of research on an adjacent aspect of the topic discussed about in the paper “*Just How Much Is Too Much in the Ever Global Use of English?*” [1]. However, the topic is far too exhaustive to even hope it has been canvassed in one or two scientific papers. This is why the question posed in said article still remains: “*Have we actually enriched Romanian by taking over English words and using them as such or have we merely depleted it of the purport of its very existence? [Because] when abused of, loan words may eventually affect the entire concept of enrichment.*”

2. False friends

Both English and Romanian have an extensive part of lexis of Roman, Greek and Latin origin, but this part of the vocabulary entered the two languages in different times and under different circumstances. This is one of the causes for semantic differences. Moreover, a word of common origin in the two languages may have undergone, in each of them separately, a process of transformation and this independent semantic evolution cannot always lead to identical results.

As Professor Bantaș highlighted in his book about the traps set by the English vocabulary, very many words broaden their meanings (*extension of meaning*), especially through metaphor; others experience the opposite phenomenon, i.e. the *narrowing of meaning*. Evolution sometimes brings about a refinement or the *elevation of meaning*, and, at times, a word, on the other hand, may reach a state of *degradation of meaning*. [2] In order to prevent us from falling into the trap, he suggests it would be advisable not to take for granted that we know all the meanings of a new word we learn. A word in a foreign language may be regarded as a quadrilateral whose dimensions remain unknown as long as it has not been measured by our own experience on all its four sides: spelling, pronunciation, meaning and grammatical features (countable/uncountable in the case of nouns, degrees of comparison in the case of adjectives, regular/irregular forms in the case of verbs etc.).

2.1. Categories

In this respect, these false friends prove a very versatile topic to tackle. There are certainly numerous criteria according to which false friends may be classified, hence an all-encompassing taxonomy thereof can simply not be compiled. Moreover, a large variety of subcategories fall in turn under said categories.

1. Scrutinizing the English lexis from the point of view of a Romanian native, the first category of English words that are most likely to evolve into false friends are those of **Greek and/or Latin origin** which have either not retained their primary meaning or have gained additional meanings throughout the time in either language: e.g. the English term *gymnasium* is derived from the Greek word *gimnasion* and as defined by Merriam-Webster Dictionary its primary meaning is that of a large room used for various indoor sports (such as basketball or boxing) and usually equipped with gymnastic apparatus and only as a second and less frequent meaning does it mean the same as its Romanian similar “relative” *gimnaziu*, i.e. a [European] secondary school that prepares students for the university. [3] Another example of polysemy is the word *sympathy* which entered English from Greek via Latin in the late 16th century (basically expressing feelings of pity and sorrow for someone else’s misfortune) and which instead of *milă*, *compătimire*, *compasiune* or even *condoleanțe* is sometimes translated as *simpatie* which only covers one of the secondary meanings of the English word, that of attraction, inclination, affinity that someone feels about a person. [4]

2. The second most significant category is actually the topic of this paper and is for the most part covered by **syntactic and semantic calques** resulting in “barbarisms” as mentioned in the article “*Just How Much Is Too Much in the Ever Global Use of English?*” Sadly, attention must be drawn upon the fact that under the infelicitous influence of English/American globalization, a sum of false friends have been taken over as such into Romanian and under the unwitting umbrella of the ignorant mass-media they have made up the so-cold *Romglish*, a much feared phenomenon among linguists. As such,

the word *expertise* (meaning a high level of knowledge or skill), instead of the correct translation *experiență (profesională)* has often been mistaken for the Romanian equivalent of (*expert*) *assessment* because it resembles the Romanian *expertiză*. The benighted minds in the Romanian mass-media have left their footprint on other, even more strikingly erroneous, pairs such as *infatuation* (strong but not usually lasting feelings of love or attraction) - *infatuare* (self-importance, self-satisfaction) or *deputy* (a person who is given the power to act instead of, or to help do the work of, another person) - *deputat* (a person chosen to be part of a representative state body for a certain period of time). This section is the most common in Romanian and it is indeed a pity that the 21st-century-generation fail to take their time to do a little research and ponder over their discourse before they produce it. We shall enlarge on these aspects after we discuss the other significant categories of false friends.

3. Apart from the words of Greek or Latin origin, **polysemy** may generally pose a challenge for non-native speakers of English and this is how hilarious situations arise. The words *club* or *bar*, irrespective of their origin, are homonyms of the Romanian words *club* and *bar* referring to a place where one can sit and have a drink or maybe even dance and enjoy themselves with friends, but they also mean a heavy stick with a thick end, used as a weapon / a long, thin stick used in golf to hit the ball / one of the four suits in a conventional pack of playing cards, denoted by a black trefoil (*club*) or a long, thin, straight piece of metal or wood / a substance that has been made into a solid rectangular shape e.g. *a bar of soap* / lawyers who are allowed to argue a case in a higher court (usually capitalised and preceded by the definite article, i.e. *the Bar*) / one of the small equal parts into which a piece of music is divided, containing a fixed number of beats. [5]

4. In the constellation of amusing situations occurring as a result of over-confidence in translation we also need to consider words such as *resort* or *commodity* or *map* which, even though they may have a remote root in common with the Romanian, have lost that particular meaning and nowadays do not quite share any equivalence with the Romanian similar words synonyms of *arc elicoidal* or *confort, tihnă* or *servietă, plic* because they mean either the fact of doing something in a particular situation because there is no other way of achieving something / a place where many people go for rest, sport, or another stated purpose (*resort*) or a substance or product that can be traded, bought, or sold / a financial product that can be traded / a thing or a quality that is useful (*commodity*) or a drawing of the earth's surface, or part of that surface, showing the shape and position of different countries, political borders, natural features such as rivers and mountains, and artificial features such as roads and buildings / a drawing that gives you a particular type of information about a particular area / something that shows the position of stars in the sky or the features on the surface of planets (*map*).

5. This list, as previously specified, comprehensive as it may be, may not account for all possible varieties of false friends. Another class of false friends is the one setting a trap for native speakers of English themselves: **British English versus American English**. One of the best known false friend is the word *pants* which in British English refers to underwear while Americans use this term to refer to trousers. Other examples include the words *coach* (British English for a comfortably equipped single-decker bus used for longer journeys versus the American meaning of instructor or trainer in sports), *jumper* (which in Britain refers to a long sleeved thick top while in America it names a person, more specifically someone who commits suicide by jumping off a tall structure.)

6. Another group of false friends are English words that **only by accident look exactly the same** as words in Romanian: *pod* is where pea or bean seeds are kept before they are ripe while the Romanian word *pod* (despite the identical pronunciation) means a *bridge* or an *attic* in English; *drum* in English is a musical percussion instrument or a cylindrical container or receptacle whereas the Romanian *drum* (which is pronounced differently than the English *drum*) is translated into English as *road*. Probably this category may prove to be deceitful especially for very young learners who are not yet familiar with the intricacy of the process of learning a foreign language.

7. At the other end of this intricate line of foreign languages, that may even be mastered wonderfully, stands the risk of mistaking words that we know in **a language closely related to English (such as German)** yet we sometimes, most likely out of negligence, misplace in our

discourse in the one or the other language. The English word *gift* is something that brings someone a sense of joy or satisfaction, but if we use it in German it is highly unlikely to be received with a smile, because the German noun *Gift* means *poison*. The English *billion* is 10^9 while the German *Billion* is 10^{12} . One of the most common mistakes of speakers of German and English as foreign languages is to mistakenly use in either language the verb pair *to become* - *bekommen* which look similar but have different meanings: *to become* means *to start to be* and should be translated into German as *werden* and vice versa the German verb *bekommen* is correctly translated into English as *to receive*.

The inventory of false friends and the categories they fall under according to various criteria is far from being exhausted. The aim of this paper has been stated in category number 2 and consequently we have drawn up a table which represents an overview of the most common English false friends for Romanian natives:

English false friend	Mistaken for the Romanian word:	Correct translation into Romanian:
accommodation	acomodare	cazare, spațiu de locuit
actual	actual	real, concret
appropriate	apropiat	corespunzător
axe	ax, axă	topor
barracks	barăci	cazarmă
billion	bilion (a word that does not exist in Romanian)	miliard
cabinet	cabinet	dulap
cannon	canon	tun
carnation	carnație	garoafă
chef	șef	bucătar șef (profesionist)
cold	cald	rece
collateral (noun)	colateral (adj.)	garanție, gaj
commissary	comisar	popotă; magazin (prăvălie)
complexion	complexitate	ten
combustible (adj.)	combustibil (noun)	inflamabil
concurrent (adj.)	concurrent (noun)	paralel; concomitent
criminal	criminal	delincvent
decent	decent	cuviincios; cum se cuvine; bun
director	director	regizor
domestic	domestic	național, intern
educated	educat	cult, cu pregătire (universitară)
expertise	expertiză	experiență profesională
eventually	eventual	în cele din urmă
fabric	fabrică	material textil
fabricate	a fabrica	a născoci; a falsifica (dovezi etc.)
facilities	facilități (which actually in Romanian means <i>înlesniri</i>)	dotări
gymnasium	gimnaziu	sală de sport
lentil	lentilă	lințe
liquor	lichior	băutură alcoolică tare
magazine	magazin	încărcător, arsenal; revistă
map	mapă	hartă
marmalade	marmeladă (din orice fructe)	dulceață de citrice
ordnance	ordonanță	artilerie

pathetic	patetic (plin de patos)	jalnic
patron	patron	client obișnuit (al unui local, al unui magazin); susținător
petrol	petrol	benzină
photograph	fotograf	fotografie
phrase	frază	locuțiune, expresie
physician	fizician	medic
preservative	prezervativ	conservant
probe	probă	sondă
scenery	scenariu	peisaj; decor
sensible	sensibil	înțelept, rezonabil
syndicate	sindicat	mafie
traduce	a traduce	a defăima
tribute	tribut	omagiu
ultimate	ultim	suprem

Perusing the table above one can easily become aware of the extent to which ignorance and more often than not sheer lack of interest in the end product of our speech act may affect a language. As Constantin Manea points out, this type of blunders are a proof of insufficient empathy with the context in which a message is delivered or of a clear insight into the source language and regrettably they may betray “*poor knowledge of both English and Romanian, or blatant lack of nuance in thinking and expression.*” [6] One of the most striking faux-pas resides in users’ failure to notice the difference in grammatical category of specific words in English as opposed to Romanian. This is the reason for which we suspect either poor knowledge of English and/or Romanian or utter disinterest in whatever they convey. Just as indicated above in the case of the English adjective *concurrent* being translated as the Romanian noun *concurrent*, and, although not mentioned in the list, the authors have encountered many a time instances where the verb *to defect* (Romanian *a dezerta*) was neglectfully translated through the Romanian adjective *defect*. Similarly, with no consideration of the actual meaning of a particular context, notwithstanding the grammatical category that may even be the same in both languages, some users simply forsake any sort of judgement before translating words such as *complexion* through *complexitate* whereas the respective sentence or text clearly is about cosmetics or skin care or correction, so it has probably nothing to do with *complexity*.

3. Conclusions

This article has focused on the so-called false friends, which are absolute howlers when it comes to translations of words from English into Romanian by simply adapting what we see / read / hear to what we (think) we know. This is how gaffes occur and we may find ourselves in risible situations. In order to prevent such mishaps, we really need to be sure that, when learning a foreign language or a new word in that language, we actually do look it up in the dictionary and see the correct translation thereof. As stated above, words may be regarded as a polygon and one can never be sure of the result unless all dimensions of said geometrical shape have been thoroughly measured and studied.

The authors have offered a (limited) taxonomy of English false friends while the focal point of this paper has been one particular category, the one related to semantic and syntactic calques in Romanian.

The aspects of this topic are manifold and this paper is merely a stop on the multi-lane road to a more comprehensive study of English false friends in several languages.

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