

A review of English/Spanish cognates and false cognates

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False cognates, also referred to in the research and classroom as “false friends”, are words that appear to be cognates but in reality do not share the same meaning, which can cause serious miscommunication cross-culturally. This paper will examine common educational resources such as dictionary definitions and Colorado ELL Content Standards, as well as a variety of published academic articles to explore what cognates and false cognates are, discuss theories about why they are likely to have developed, and provide some explanations for why false cognates are difficult for learners. The rationale for this paper stems from my background as an elementary and TESL/TEFL teacher. Understanding and being able to effectively teach about cognates and false cognates is a priority in most ESL curriculums, certainly in public schools in the United States. English and Spanish false cognates have been specifically targeted because it seems context-appropriate: frequent interaction with native Spanish-speaking students is common in Colorado public schools.

### **A definition of cognates and false cognates**

In order to explain what a “false” cognate is, it is first necessary to understand what a cognate is. The Oxford New Desk Dictionary and Thesaurus defines *cognate* as two or more words that have the same derivation (Penguin Group, 2009, p. 144). The Longman Advanced American Dictionary expands this more by describing a cognate (n.) as “a word in one language that has the same origin as a word in another language, or different words in the same language that have the same origin: *Classic, classical, and class are cognates*” (Bullon, 2007, p. 295). An example of this is the English noun *class* and Spanish noun *clase*. The origin of these two words is from Latin’s *classis* (Penguin Group, 2009). In fact, Latin is often the origin of many English and Spanish cognates and false cognates (Orts-Llopis, 2007, p. 17). Because of the shared origin, these two words are written and spoken similarly, despite being from two different languages. Both even share a primary meaning of ‘a group of students’. It is interesting to note that neither dictionary defines a cognate as words

which share the same meaning. Meaning, in fact, is entirely absent from the formal definition.

However, this conflicts with the use of cognates in the context of educational teaching, and even in the peer-reviewed research studies this paper examined. For example, Orts-Llopis (2007) describes cognates as words in two languages that are “very similar” at a “lexical level”, meaning that they are synonymous semantically (p. 20). Similarly, according to Colorado WIDA Performance Standards for ELLs K-12, cognates are referred to as vocabulary words that have similar meaning “across content areas” (WIDA, 2011). In addition, WIDA also describes cognates as “Words in different languages that have the same origins, sound similar, and mean the same thing” (WIDA, 2012). Because both researchers and educators include meaning as part of the definition of a cognate, this paper will define cognates as words in two different languages that share a like form and are fully synonymous. The purpose of this paper is to examine how cognates that share a similar form between languages often lead people to the assumption that the same meaning is shared. The paper also explores some of the consequences of this assumption.

Since cognates are words that are similar, “false” cognates are words that appear to be cognates because they share a related form, but do not have the same meaning. The term “meaning” in this paper refers to “the definition of an expression or the information potentially communicated by it” (Delahunty & Garvey, 2010, p. 86). Because two words in different languages look similar, they can give the illusion of corresponding meaning cross-linguistically. “False friends” are referred to as such by researchers and educators because of their high potential for causing cross-cultural confusion to ELLs. A former editor of the *Hispanic Research Journal* explains that “Words that seem to mean the same in two languages...but do not, are a fruitful source of difficulties, embarrassment, and hilarity” (Deyermond, 2001, p. 77). Two classic examples of false cognates between English and Spanish are ‘constipated’/‘constipado’ and ‘embarrassed’/‘embarazada’. In

Spanish *constipado* means *congested*, rather than *constipated*. Therefore, L1 Spanish speakers are likely to say *I am very constipated today* when they really mean *My nose is very congested today*.

Likewise, *embarazada* means *pregnant* instead of *embarrassed*. L2 Spanish speakers frequently say *Estoy embarazada (I am pregnant)*, when they intend to say *I feel embarrassed*.

Even though these English/Spanish false cognates are classic surprises to students of both languages, they are well-known to language teachers to the point of “near-mythic status” (Deyermund, 2001, p. 77). One reason is because of the high degree to which the meanings are dissimilar. When working with these false cognates, often in a classroom context, the cross-cultural miscommunication will most likely be limited to Deyermund’s analysis of “difficulties, embarrassment, and hilarity” (2001, p. 77). However, there are other false cognates whose meanings differ on a more subtle scale, which has the potential for more serious consequences. Examples of this will be addressed later on in the paper.

### **The development of false cognates**

Why do languages have cognates, and why are some of them false? Usually it is because the words can be traced back to the same origin, but at some point diverge semantically and develop within the languages differently. This concept applies both cross-linguistically, and in a polysemous context such as the English word *man*, which can mean 1) a male human 2) all humans (man-kind) or 3) an adult male (as opposed to a boy). Defour et al. (2010) conducted an empirical study to discover how one word can diverge into different meanings. Researchers conducted a corpus-based study focusing on the English word *actually* and the French false cognate *actuellement*. The corpora used were four historical English collections, and a variety of French texts from the early fourteenth century to the present. While the focus of this paper is Spanish, French is also a Romance language so the empirical data still has some inferential relevance to the topic.

The purpose of the study was to trace the development of one specific set of cognates from their origins to present day. By using monolingual and translation corpus data, Defour et al. (2010) tracked *actually/actuellement* from a non-temporal to temporal use. They found that the English *actually* has “very diverse functions” from its false cognate *actuellement* (Defour et al., 2010, p. 166). The English word is used as an intensifying adverb, or as a discourse marker for text structuring, yet the French meaning is primarily temporal, meaning “currently” (Defour et al., 2010, p.166). The researchers describe the non-temporal category as a general classification of “in reality, in fact”, or an “active, practical” sense (Defour et al., 2010, p. 182, 185). The study states that the history of *actuellement* showed that the French word was borrowed from the Latin word *actualis*, which “had a non-temporal meaning” (Defour et al., 2010, p. 175). It found that the French adjective *actuel* was not turned into an adverb until the fourteenth century, and as late as the sixteenth century *actuellement* was still non-temporal, as was its Latin root. In a very interesting example of a common fifteenth century use of *actuellement*, a physician in 1450 notes writes that the first symptom of a fever is that “external phenomena inflame the pores *actuellement* (virtually) like the sun’s heat” (Defour et al., 2010, p. 175). This example shows how the French cognate still matched the non-temporal use of the Latin origination during the fifteenth century, but had diverged from its original French adjective form and meaning to act as an adverb.

The reason for this divergence in form may have been because the English borrowed the French adjective *actuel* in the fourteenth century and created an adverbial use meaning “actively”, or “effectively” (Traugott & Dasher, 2002, p. 169.) This meant that originally both the English and French cognates were not false; initially they both shared a “non-temporal” sense. Then, in the seventeenth century, their senses diverged. One theory as to why the senses divided at that point is that the Latin word *actualiter*, meaning a non-temporal *in reality*, might have influenced the French form (Defour et

al., 2010, p. 182). There is a definite overlap period in the seventeenth century. Researchers found that both the non-temporal and temporal senses of *actuellement* were being used in French, demonstrating that sense divergence happens over a period of time. Then, from 1700-1800 there appear 411 out of 500 occurrences of *actuellement* being used in the temporal sense (Defour et al., 2010, p. 183). Interestingly, researchers found no data indicating the English *actually* had a temporal meaning during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Defour et al., 2010). From the eighteenth century to present day, our English *actually* developed steadily into an epistemic adverb, or a way to emphasize the speaker's subjective position (Defour et al., 2010, p. 184). Despite both French and English starting with the same French word, *actuellement* and *actually* changed within their respective languages to emerge as false cognates.

Etymologists have many theories about what factors contribute to this divergent process, as do linguists. One theory that can explain why one language might develop a certain aspect of meaning and another language a different aspect for the same word is what Beeching (2010) refers to as "the existence of competing terms" (2010, p. 140). Defour et al. (2010) describe this concept within the context of their study. They argued that the English word *actually* was able to develop into its epistemic sense because strong temporal words like "now" already existed in English during the seventeenth century, but temporal forms in French during the same time period were not as stable, which invited *actuellement* to embrace a temporal use. It is important for teachers and language learners to realize that language is dynamic, as shown in the above examples, and that often false cognates are a result of this.

### **Why cognates are difficult for learners**

Adverbs of degree serve as a good example for why cognates are a difficult concept for ELLs. One of the main functions of an adverb is that it can modify a verb (Delahunty & Garvey, 2010, p. 78).

For example, in the sentence *She quickly (adv.) walked (v.) to the window*, the adverb *quickly* modifies the verb *walked*. While adverbs modify the verb, an adverb of degree will more specifically intensify or lessen the degree of the action of the verb. Biber et al. (1999) explains, “adverbs of degree describe the extent to which a characteristic holds” (p. 554). For example:

1. He *greatly* exaggerates his ability to play tennis.
2. I *highly* recommend studying for the test.
3. She *hardly* ate any lunch.

Because ‘degree’ can be on a continuum from negative to absolute (Ramon & Labrador, 2008, p. 276), these studies of adverbs using corpora are a good opportunity to see how meaning between assumed cognates also has varying degrees. For example, in a corpus-based study between British English *absolutely* and Peninsular Spanish *absolutamente*, the two adverbs of degree were compared in order to determine to what extent they are cognates. The quantitative data found that in both English and Spanish *absolutely/absolutamente* were used more commonly in spoken, rather than written, language (Carretero, 2010, p. 218), meaning that they share similarities in usage in a general sense. However, the study found evidence showing how they differ in meaning according to context. *Absolutely* was used more frequently than *absolutamente* in both oral and written language, and only English’s “*absolutely* was found as a response to expressing agreement to perform an action” (Carretero, 2010, p. 219):

1. Q: Are you coming to the restaurant, Martha?
2. A: *Absolutely* I am.

These differences suggest that *absolutely/absolutamente* is not fully synonymous between languages, they are only partially synonymous. Does this mean *absolutely/absolutamente* should therefore be regarded as a false cognate? For the purposes of teaching and learning, it is important to think of

words not as *cognates* and *false cognates*, but rather recognize that they have varying degrees of similarity, depending on context and usage.

### Consequences of false cognates

Cognates and their varying degrees of falseness affect not just the oral and written context, but professional, academic translations as well. Another corpus-based study determined the eight most common high-degree *-mente* (-ly) adverbs in Spanish and their English cognates, and then studied where on the cognate continuum the adverbs fell. Ramon and Labrador (2008, p. 290) determined, by comparing corpora, that the eight most common Spanish/English high degree adverbs are:

1. *absolutamente/absolutely*
2. *ampliamente/amply*
3. *completamente/completely*
4. *extremadamente/extremely*
5. *practicamente/practically*
6. *profundamente/profoundly*
7. *relativeamente/relatively*
8. *totalmente/totally*

Researchers statistically compared L1 native speaker (NS) Spanish writing with writing translated from English to Spanish by non-native Speakers (NNS), and found “a general trend of overuse of these *-mente* adverbs in translated Spanish” (Ramon & Labrador, 2008, p. 290). They attributed this to the translators’ L1 interference and assumption that all *-mente* adverbs are cognates of *-ly* adverbs (Ramon & Labrador, 2008, p. 289). Interestingly, they also found that “there are different degrees of overuse depending on each individual *-mente* adverb”, the most significant NNS overuse being 1)



*completamente* (completely) 2) *practicamente* (practically) and 3) *profundamente* (profoundly) (Ramon & Labrador, 2008, p. 290-291). The study showed that “the link between *-ly* adverbs of degree and their corresponding Spanish cognates in *-mente* is not so strong” (Ramon & Labrador, 2008, p. 291), suggesting that the meaning of these words does not transfer from English to Spanish as the NNS expected, perhaps due to their belief that the words are fully cognates. Instead, it is again apparent that some cognates can serve as cognates in some contexts and false cognates in others. For example, in English “I felt the loss of my car *profoundly*” is correct because in English we can use *profoundly* to mean *deeply* or *seriously*, referring to an emotional state. However, in Spanish this is not semantically correct because this sense is absent when looked up in a Spanish dictionary (*profundamente*, n.d.). Interestingly, in other contexts unrelated to emotion the meaning between *profoundly/profundamente* is similar:

1. The answer is *profoundly* wrong.
2. La respuesta es *profundamente* falso. (The answer is profoundly wrong.)

This continuum scale of adverbs of degree demonstrates how cognates may be cognates in some senses, but false cognates in others.

In addition to adverbial degree false cognates affecting translations, research (Deyermond, 2001) has found that false cognates can also be a challenge in professional contexts like publishing. In publishing, English/Spanish *edit/editar* are false cognates because *editar* means *to publish* in Spanish, as opposed to the English “to remove mistakes or inappropriate parts from a book, article, television program, etc.” (Longman, 2007, p. 509). Deyermond (2001) explains that these false cognates hinder scholarly communications because most of the literature about Spanish language and culture is written in either Spanish or English. There is currently no equivalent for the words *edit* and *editor* in Spanish (Deyermond, 2001). Spanish publishers use *edición de*, but there is no way to turn this

phrase into a verb. Similarly, there is still no single word for the noun *publisher* (Deyermond, 2001). Deyermond (2001) reports that some L1 Spanish speakers in the field of publishing feel that these false cognates necessitate a linguistic change. He states, “It is worth making an effort to ensure that these pairs of words do indeed have the equivalence in meaning that they have always appeared to have” (Deyermond, 2001, p. 78). While this is an interesting point to consider, because of socio-cultural considerations, as well as a lack of any formal international publishing laws, this does not seem feasible. Instead, it is worth the effort of teachers to be aware of false cognates, and to teach context-specific ones, such as *edit/editar* for an English for Specific Purposes course.

On the false cognate continuum, a greater degree of difficulty than *edit/editar* is that of *edition/edición*. These cognates are so false that they are described by Deyermond (2001) as “unethical” (p. 79), the argument being that within the context of English publishing, a second edition is a book that has been reprinted with some change in content from its first edition. However, in a Spanish context, *edición 2<sup>a</sup>* is only a reprinting, or what is known in English as a *2<sup>nd</sup> impression*, with absolutely no new changes at all (Deyermond, 2001, p. 79). Deyermond (2001) explains that this causes scholars and students to needlessly spend money on the same resource book, an unethical tactic for Spanish publishers to use, and the fault of false cognates.

There are also serious ethical considerations to take into account in regards to false cognate usage and the law. Examining false cognate usage in this context serves to further illustrate to ESL teachers the complexity of cognates. Orts-Llopis (2007) explains that English has become the international “working language” in the European Union, and thus international litigation and legal practice is also conducted in English (p. 18). This means that the potential for serious misunderstanding brought on by false cognates during Spanish/English translations is high, as are the stakes. In an effort to account for the different legal semantics, Orts-Llopis (2007) conducted peer-

reviewed research on American English and Peninsular Spanish semi-technical legal terms. She explains that her rationale for comparing American English instead of British English is that American contract law, “because of the USA’s global commercial power, has a deep influence on how international trade agreements are drafted” (Orts-Llopis, 2007, p. 18). For example, she identified *causa contractual* as a false cognate for *cause*, and *fraude* for *fraud*. In Spanish contract law *causa contractual* has several meanings:

1. the offer or promise of a thing of service
2. the payment for a thing or service
3. a gift

(Orts-Llopis, 2007, p. 21)

However, *consideration* in English does not include meaning number three. What is more, the Spanish meaning of number three does not include *quid pro quo*, or an unofficial mutually beneficial exchange, but *quid pro quo* is included in the English “equivalent” (Orts-Llopis, 2007, p. 21).

In the same vein, *fraud/fraude* is again problematic. Orts-Llopis (2007) explains that the Spanish definition of *fraude* in a legal context is 1) an act that institutes an attack on someone or something 2) a crime committed by a contract supervisor (p. 27). However, as compared to an English translation, Spanish *fraude* was found to be more accurately translated as *dole* as opposed to *fraud* (Orts-Llopis, 2007; Whincup, 1996). Orts-Llopis’ (2007) research found that these context-specific translation difficulties did not stem from the lexicon of technical terms, so much as from the fact that they are false cognates. These tended to result in more mistranslation “because of their *apparent* similarity” (Orts-Llopis, 2007, p. 26). This theory matches Ramon and Labrador’s (2008) findings in which professional NNS translators misused high-degree Spanish/English words because they assumed they were true cognates.

False cognates are a frequent source of difficulty for ELLs and their teachers because of their

complex usage and multiple senses. Both students and professionals find false cognates misleading, often because of the polysemous nature of some words, such as adverbs and nouns specific to scholarly writing and law. There are many peer reviewed studies on the topic that use corpora and are written by researchers with both L1 English and L1 Spanish backgrounds. From these studies, teachers can understand that distinguishing between cognates and false cognates is more difficult than may be assumed, and that they therefore should be mindful of how cognate senses can change between languages, depending on usage and context.

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