# The problem of *false friends* in learner language: Evidence from two learner corpora[1].

*False friends are a real problem for language learners. Even so, little research has been done on the identification of the difficulties learners have when it comes to the use of these words. The aim of this paper is to analyze false friends in the interlanguage of Spanish learners of English. Two learner corpora: the Santiago University Learner of English Corpus (SULEC) and the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE), representative of the students´ interlanguage, will allow us to identify the extent of the problem. The conclusions of this study will provide new insights into the linguistic and the communication problems derived from a misuse of these lexical items.*
*Key words: false friends, learner corpora, language learning.*

*Los falsos amigos constituyen un problema real para los estudiantes de lenguas. Aún así, se ha invertido poco tiempo en la identificación de las dificultades que los estudiantes presentan al utilizar estas palabras. Esta comunicación tiene como objetivo analizar los falsos amigos en la interlengua de los estudiantes españoles de inglés. Dos corpus de aprendices: el Santiago University Learner of English Corpus (SULEC) y el International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE), representativos de la interlengua de los estudiantes, nos permitirán identificar la dimensión del problema. Las conclusiones extraídas nos ayudarán a entender los problemas lingüísticos y de comunicación derivados de un mal uso de estos elementos léxicos.*
*Palabras clave: falsos amigos, corpus de aprendices, aprendizaje de lenguas.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

False friends have become a real problem for language learners. This paper focuses on false friends and on their role in the interlanguage of Spanish learners of English. Two learner corpora have been used to determine the difficulties these units produce, from two different viewpoints: from the learners´ standpoint, that is to say, the linguistic problems students should face to achieve a complete command of the English lexicon and from the point of view of the recipients, that is, the communication problems that may arise from the misuse of false friends on the hearer´s/reader´s side. The present study will hopefully provide teachers with some evidence of the student´s use of these lexical items, which may be helpful for their actual teaching in the classroom.

Before going into the study and its results, I will look at the concept of false friends and their classification.

2. THE CONCEPT OF FALSE FRIENDS

False friends have been extensively studied in different language areas: translation studies, language teaching, lexicography or contrastive linguistics. This expression goes back to 1928, when Koessler and Derocquigny used the term *faux amis* in their well-known book *Les Faux Amis, ou les Trahisons du Vocabulaire Anglais*. Here is the origin of this metaphor which is widely used in language teaching all over the world.

From an EFL context, a false friend could be defined as an L2 word that is formally similar to an L1 word in spelling and/or pronunciation but whose meanings are totally or partially different in both languages. In this case, the students´ L1 or mother tongue is Spanish/Galician and the foreign language English.

3. GENERIC CLASSIFICATION OF FALSE FRIENDS

This section deals with the generally accepted classification of false friends: the semantic classification. This categorization focuses on the semantic differences existing between two similar word pairs in two different languages. According to this, false friends can be divided into two types: total and partial.

*Total false friends* imply a conspicuous semantic difference between the L2 and the L1: English and Spanish in this case (e.g. English *vase* vs. Spanish *vaso,* English *avocado* vs. Spanish *abogado,* English *robe* vs. Spanish *robo*). This group could be represented in two separate circles which lay emphasis on the semantic divergence existing in both languages:
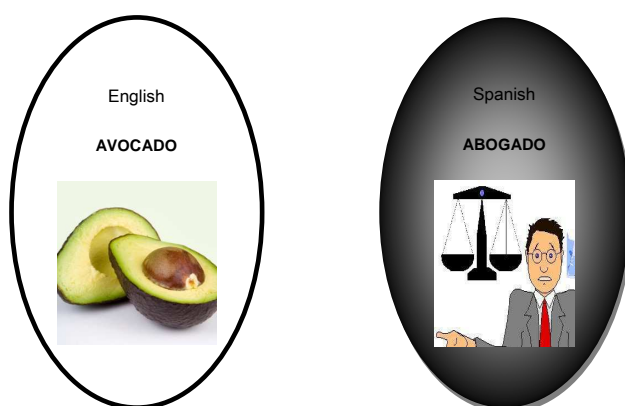


Figure 1: Semantic Divergence/Contrast

As regards *partial false friends*, they show a certain semantic *overlap* (figure 2, below)*. This semantic overlap occurs when two similar words have at least one shared meaning and at least one different meaning. One factor which triggers off this type of false friends is the polysemic nature of words.
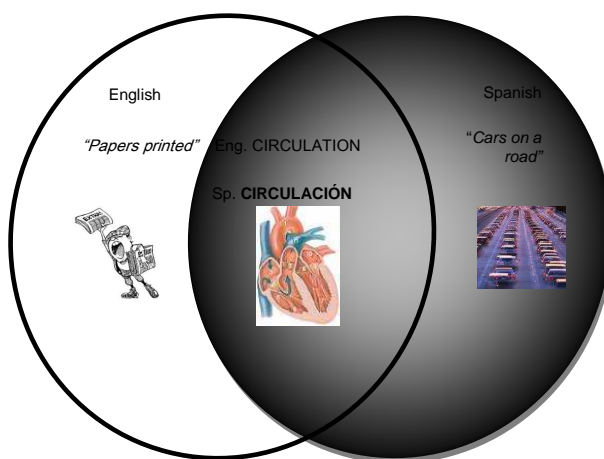


Figure 2: Semantic overlap

The present study examines word pairs belonging to both categories and shows the challenges these different types of false friends pose to language learners.

4. THE STUDY

*4.1. Motivation*

Surveys on the false friendship phenomenon are relatively scarce (Chacón, 2005; Holmes and Guerra Ramos, 1993) and corpus-based studies on this very same issue are even less common. This study presents a corpus-based approach to the analysis of false friends in the interlanguage of Spanish students. It explores the use Spanish students of English make of false friends as revealed in two learner corpora, the Santiago University Learner of English Corpus (SULEC) and the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE). As shown by these corpora, it is not unusual to find sentences like *Smoking in public places should be illegal because those people that smoke in these places **molest** the rest.* (SULEC-WP-IL-DOC 1149)

in the interlanguage of our students[2]. From the point of view of language teaching, the misuse of false friends has two types of "side effects". On the one hand, it reveals the students´ incomplete lexical competence and, on the other hand, it leads to the communication of unintentional meanings (see example above). These reasons clearly justify the need for discussing and identifying these problems in order to alleviate them.

## 4.2. Aims of the study

The aims of this study might be expressed in the following research questions:
- Do students have real difficulties with false friends?
- What type of problems can be identified from the data in the learner corpora?
- Are there any possible solutions to these problems?

## 4.3. Methodology

As stated in the introduction, I propose a corpus-based approach for the identification of these problems. The actual procedure involved three main stages:

a) *First stage: item-selection.* As a starting point, I made a pre-selection of FFs to limit the number of items under investigation. Four main sources played a key role in this stage:
- o *False Friends and Semantic Shifts* by Samuel Walsh (2005).
- o Marcial Prado's dictionary on English/Spanish false friends (2001)
- o The glossary in *Os falsos amigos da Traducción* by Álvarez Lugrís (1997).
- o *The Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (Procter, 1995: 435).

All these sources include an extensive record of *false friends* which allowed me to determine those high frequency items which were worthy of attention.

b) *Second stage: decision on two learner corpora.* Two learner corpora: SULEC and ICLE. Both of them contain samples of Spanish students of English. These two corpora were selected because they complement each other very well. ICLE mainly focuses on written

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[2] The examples from the learner corpora are in bold type, and they are followed by a code in brackets. Documents extracted from SULEC have the following notation: the source (SULEC) + the text type : written (WP) or oral (SP) + the students' level of English: intermediate (IL) or advanced (AL) + the document number. E.g. (SULEC-WP-IL-DOCUMENT 814). The code used with examples from ICLE makes reference to the name of the corpus (ICLE) followed by the students' native language (Spanish), the place where the corpus was collected (UCM=Universidad Complutense de Madrid) and finally, the document number. E.g. <ICLE-SP-UCM-0017.5>

samples of advanced students while SULEC adds two interesting elements: it incorporates spoken data and language produced by students of two different levels of linguistic competence: intermediate and advanced.

*c) Third stage: qualitative data analysis***.** The aims of this study require a qualitative analysis since it seeks to understand students' problems in the use of FF. Data were processed with the SULEC lexical search query and with the concordance program ConCApp3 for ICLE**.** On some occasions, an interpretation was necessary to understand learners´ use of certain items. Some monolingual dictionaries, such as the Collins English Dictionary and native speakers were consulted in order to confirm the natural use of some false friends and to compare it with native language models.

*4.4. Qualitative analysis: Results*

In the list of selected false friends, well-known instances of FF between English and Spanish such as *actual, career* or *attend* are included. In this section- and for reasons of space-, I will discuss some of the most problematic items for Spanish EFL students and examples which could be enlightening for language teachers.

*Actual:* The first false friend to be analysed is one of the most well-known examples of false friends: *actual*. This adjectival false friend is mostly used meaning "current" under the influence of the Spanish term *actual*. In fact, typical commonplace Spanish phrases are adopted and literally transferred into English. Thus, "collocations" such as *in the *actual* society, *in the *actual* world, *the *actual* government, *the *actual* law, *actual* life, *the *actual* moment, *the *actual* social situation and *the *actual* society instead of using *present-day* or *current*. Examples 1 and 2 illustrate this.

1) (…) our *actual government* is trying to modify the law to make homosexual marriage possible. (SULEC-WP-IL-DOCUMENT 671)

2) *Actual society* is extremely violent, television has undoubtedly influenced in this increase of violence.<ICLE-SP-UCM-0005.5>

*Advertise:* The verb *advertise* is a false friend with Spanish *advertir* "warn" due to their noticeable formal resemblance. Data shows us that learners are not aware of this distinction.

3) Smoke is bad for the health and many organizations and a lot of doctors *advertise* this problem. (SULEC-WP-IL-DOCUMENT 651)

By contrast, an accurate use of the word is found in example 4. The linguistic form *advertise* has the same connotation as a native speaker of English would give to it ("announce a product in order to induce people to buy it"):

4) The clothes: If you want to be in fashion you will dress the clothes which are *advertised* on television; there are fashion shows every day. <ICLE-SP-UCM-0018.7>

Despite the fact that there is not a high incidence of this word, evidence suggests that even advanced students of English show some difficulties with this verb.

*Attend:* This verb comes out in conventional English collocations produced by Spanish students, such as *attend university, classes, conferences* and *schools.*

5) Some people prefer to do short courses, *attend conferences* etcetera instead of doing a degree. (SULEC-WP-IL-DOCUMENT 1341)

However, there are instances in which Spanish learners get the message of the English verb but with some traces of Spanish transfer since *attend* is frequently followed by *to.*

6) University degrees are theoretical, they doesn't prepare people for the real world. You go to the university, *attend to classes* but you don't learn anything about real world. <ICLE-SP-UCM-0001.4>

Language transfer can also be seen in example 7. In this case, the student uses the word *attend* instead of *treat.* This is the result of the influence of the Spanish collocation "atender a un paciente".

7) It is very expensive to *attend*  the smokers in the hospitals, hundreds of people are *attended* every year in the hospital for this bad habit, and lots of people die for smoke (SULEC-WP-IL-DOCUMENT 986)

*Career:* English *career* implies "having an occupation." However, this noun is used for a "university degree" in 99% of the cases. The most prevalent uses in learners' interlanguage are illustrated in examples 8 and 9:

8) When a person decides to go to university to study a *career*. (SULEC-WP-AL-DOCUMENT)

9) When you choose to study a university *career*, you expect you may get a job within the branch you have chosen; but in the majority of the cases, that is not so.  <ICLE-SP-UCM-0030.4>

There are few examples that show a correct use of the word *career.*

10) Men and women [can] develop a military *career*. <ICLE-SP-UCM-0046.3>

*Comprehensive:* Under the influence of Spanish *comprensivo*, students use the English adjective *comprehensive* with the meaning of "understanding." Students seem to ignore the actual sense of the English item ("thorough").

11) Smokers must be more *comprehensive* and they have to understand that other people who are in the same restaurant or in the same pub with them may feel uncomfortable breathing the smoke of a cigarette. (SULEC-WP-IL-DOCUMENT 593)

*Library:* This item seems to be *one of the most frequently mentioned instances of false friends* in the classroom which apparently shows no traces of the Spanish influence. Consider the following:

12) Today each prisoner have access to a gym, to a video and television room, to a *library...* <ICLE-SP-UCM-0057.4>

*Molest:* English *molest* differs from the Spanish term *molestar* quite considerably in meaning. The Spanish word does not have any connotations of sexual abuse. The Spanish idea of "molestar" rarely involves violence and can be translated into English as *bother.* Conversely, English *molest* means "attack someone with the intention of assaulting this person sexually," it implies the idea of "sexual harassment." Spanish learners might be seriously misunderstood when they resort to *molest* to express the Spanish idea of *molestar* "bother or disturb." Thus the use of *molest* in the examples below would produce serious misinterpretations to such an extent that any English person would understand that these speakers are considering smokers as rapists.

13) If anyone is smoking in a public place he should try don't *molest* around him. (SULEC-WP-IL-DOCUMENT 906)

14) For example would be a good idea separated in others places persons who smoke for that way they don't *molest* persons who don't like smoke. (SULEC-WP-IL-DOCUMENT 913)

These texts have been produced by intermediate students and we might assert that these problems have their origin in language transfer since these learners have the Spanish verb *molestar* in mind.

*Pretend:* Examples of the verb *pretend* and its related forms: *pretends* for the present and *pretended* for the past, are found in both corpora. English *pretend* whose meaning is "feign" has nothing to do with Spanish *pretender* "try to get something" and even "woo." However, when analysing the examples where this item occurs, we notice that the Spanish meaning is transferred to the English word. There is evidence for this in both corpora: SULEC and ICLE.

15) I don't *pretend* that everybody stop to smoke, but I *pretend* that they do it when they were alone xx or with others smokers. (SULEC-WP-IL-DOCUMENT 889)

16) Since people live together, there has always been someone who *pretends* to dominate the others, so I guess that society means unequality. <ICLE-SP-UCM-0013.5>

*I don't pretend that* and *I pretend that* ....are word-for-word translations of the Spanish expressions *no pretendo que* y *pretendo que...*

*Sensible:* English *sensible* and the adjective *rational* can be considered as synonyms. However, *sensible* is identical to the Spanish adjective *sensible* "emotionally responsive." The conspicuous coincidences in spelling and in word class (both are adjectives) between these items often bring about problems leading to misunderstandings. In fact, in most cases, students draw a direct connection between the English term *sensible* and the Spanish word *sensible*.

17) The dictatorial period imposed by Franco is not very far; we must be *sensible* and try to be in their feet. (SULEC-WP-IL-DOCUMENT 249)

18) Uncultivated people that are more *sensible* and accessible to external influences;....<ICLE-SP-UCM-0007.4>

Thus, the English adjective *sensible* poses serious problems for students because they wrongly assume that this term is the translation equivalent of Spanish *sensible*, and they use it as such.

*Tremendous:* Unlike Spanish *tremendo,* the English item *tremendous* has positive connotations: "marvellous, wonderful" (e.g He *had a tremendous time at the theatre last night*). The example below shows the use of *tremendous* with a negative sense "terrible, horrific"; it collocates with the adjective *hard,* also denoting a rather negative quality of something.

19) From my point of view the prison and the Justice System are outdated. But we should not rehabilitate criminals at all, because they are the scum of the humanity. They must be punished in a *tremendous* harder way. <ICLE-SP-UCM-0025.7>

Thus, an influence of the Spanish similar sounding and looking word *tremendo,* meaning "terrible," on the English term *tremendous*, meaning "wonderful," is clearly observed in the example from ICLE.

*4.5. Conclusions*

On the basis of the data provided by the two learner corpora, a number of conclusions can be drawn. The purpose of this section is to give an answer to the initial research questions presented above:

- Do students have real difficulties with false friends?

Yes, they do. The problem of false friends is evident from the learner data considered. This well-known language learning problem is not an invention on the teachers' part but a real problem for EFL students.

- What type of problems can be identified from the learner corpora?

Linguistically speaking, language learners are victims of three main problems: semantic transfer, syntactic transfer or problems of usage.

Concerning semantic transfer, Spanish students use some English terms as translation equivalents for some Spanish items as in *actual, advertise, career* or *pretend*. The influence of the L1 is, therefore, perceived and it could be highly reduced if teachers presented false friends periodically so that students can fully interiorize the semantic properties of these lexical items. The lack of problems in the word *library* suggests that students have been presented to this item in the classroom. Thus, an introduction to meaning differences between the L1 and the L2 could be effective.

Regarding syntactic transfer and problems of usage, it is clear that although students may know the meaning of a given lexical item, they are not always familiar with its particular uses. The preposition *to* in *attend to classes "regularly"* is an example of the application of L1 syntactic patterns to English even when students are acquainted with the meaning and the collocation of English *attend*. Typical Spanish expressions involving false friends, such as *no pretendo que* are literally transferred into English I don't *pretend* that (example 15).

Pragmatically speaking, the misuse of these words can easily cause serious communication problems as exemplified by *molest*. The use of *molest* in the example given would produce misinterpretations. Any native English speaker would understand the use of *molest* as "sexual harass". This is one of the main reasons why we must be careful. There are other words that can be really confusing, and even funny: the misuse of the word *preservative* or *constipation* with the meaning of the Spanish counterparts *preservativo* "prophylactic" or *constipado* "have a cold" could make us laugh in some situations.

- Are there any possible solutions to these problems?

All these problems should be mitigated by the teachers' action in the classroom. The next section offers some clues for the teaching of false friends.

*4.6. Implications for the EFL classroom*

As suggested by the present study, students´ problems with false friends could be greatly reduced if teachers paid more attention to a meaningful teaching of these lexical items. One way of doing this is by teaching false friends in context. The use of audiovisual materials (pictures, videos, cartoons) in the classroom might be useful and could promote students' reflection on the potential misunderstandings caused by those problematic words in naturally occurring situations.



Figure 3: Teaching false friends through pictures

Apart from using audiovisual materials, teachers might encourage students to use of ICTs so that they can expand their knowledge and obtain a better command of the English language.

To summarize, this study shows that there is room for teachers' action concerning false friends. EFL learners have serious problems when using these lexical items and teachers should deal with this issue so that learners´ lexical competence expands and potential misunderstandings can be avoided.

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