MODOS Y FORMAS DE LA COMUNICACIÓN HUMANA

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WAYS AND MODES OF HUMAN COMMUNICATION

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A STUDY OF LEARNER LANGUAGE.
A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF THE USE OF
ENGLISH-SPANISH FALSE FRIENDS BY SPANISH
STUDENTS OF ENGLISH

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1. FALSE FRIENDS: DEFINITION AND CLASSIFICATION

1.1. False Friends: A working definition

False friends have been described in many different ways; Chalker and Weiner's (1996) conception of *false friend* as being «a word that has the same or a similar form in two [...] languages but different meanings in each» epitomizes all of them to some extent. However, viewed from **the** foreign language teaching perspective, two concepts should be added to this general definition: those of L2 and L1. From this standpoint, FFs could be defined as L2 lexical items whose forms are identical or similar to L1 words but whose meanings are different. This last definition will be the one adopted in this paper.

1.2. False Friends: Taxonomies

Despite the numerous individual attempts to group *false friends* into different sets, nobody has set a standard categorization of FF up to now. Álvarez Lugrís (1997: 30-38) provides a general overview of various classifications throughout history in his work in which four major taxonomies are distinguished: (I) those which are based on

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etymological aspects, (II) on semantic criteria, (III) on contextual factors and (IV) on different linguistic units, but, these are meant to be general categorizations which can be applied to any language. As regards specific classifications of *English-Spanish false friends*, it is worth mentioning here the one proposed by Chacón Beltrán (2006). This specialist takes into account two basic traits of FFs: form and meaning, as the basis of his classification. Considering the formal aspect, Chacón Beltrán ascertains that two aspects in English-Spanish word forms: spelling and pronunciation can produce two different types of FF; accordingly, we might find *orthographic* or *phonetic* false friends. The former category includes those words whose L2 spelling conjure up a L1 word even if L1 and L2 pronunciation is completely different (English *rape* vs Spanish *rape*); and, the latter refers to those words whose pronunciation hint at a word in the mother tongue (English *meeting* vs Spanish *mitin*). As far as the semantic component is concerned, *FFs* can be *total* or *partial*. Broadly speaking, *total FFs* (e.g. English *library* vs. Spanish *librería*) are similar words between L1 and L2 which have completely different meanings. By contrast, *partial FFs* (e.g. English *circulation* vs Spanish *circulación*) embrace L1 items which share certain denotations with L2 similar words in some but not in all contexts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Just in passing, for reasons of space, I will just allude to some relevant authors who have not been mentioned so far.

Interest in the issue of FF started around the end of the second decade of the 20th century with Koessler's and Derocquigny's work, *Les Faux Amis ou les Trahisons du Vocabulaire Anglais* published in 1928. Since then, FFs have been the focus of some studies all over the world.

Most studies concerning these lexical items tend to be of a lexicographical nature (Hill 1982; Prado 2001) or have a contrastive character (Scatori 1932) frequently displaying tables of reference or long lists of words included either in the body of the survey or in appendixes. Yet, corpus-based surveys on this issue are still scarce. This partially explains why this paper presents a corpus-based approach to the study of FFs; thus based on two learner corpora, this piece of research scrutinizes the use of false friends by Spanish students of English.

3. THE STUDY

3.1. Purpose

The main aim of this study is to examine, give an account and discuss the use and misuse of FFs by Spanish learners of English as shown by two learner corpora. In the end, the possible pedagogical implications of this analysis will be somehow explored.

3.2. Method

A total of 70 false friends have been previously selected for this study. In order to enter this analysis, the items had to comply with two main criteria: they should be *high-*

frequency items and *absolute false friends*. This means that the chosen words must be frequently-cited items in specialized sources and, on the other hand, they must prove a high percentage of semantic divergence between the L1 and L2.

For the selection of the FFs under analysis, four bibliographical sources have been used. These sources are of various kinds and belong to different fields of study approaching the subject from different perspectives: lexicography (a specialized and a learner's dictionary), language pedagogy (a student's book) and linguistics (glossary of terms in a linguistic survey). These are the 4 sources considered:

1) *False Friends and Semantic Shifts* by Samuel Walsh (2005) a student's book specifically devoted to the issue of false friends and semantic shifts. It contains a selection of the most frequent items prone to be confused by Spanish learners of English.

2) Marcial Prado's dictionary on English-Spanish false friends (2001), completely dedicated to the phenomenon of false friendship, listing a total of about 4200 entries;

3) The glossary in the work *Os falsos amigos da Traducción* by Álvarez Lugrís (1997), which is the result of this author's examination into the topic; and,

4) *The Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (1995: 435), perhaps the most important learner's dictionary which includes a page explaining some English-Spanish false friends.

After an in-depth analysis of the entries in these sources, I came up with an inventory of 70 FFs, which keep to the criteria of *high-frequency* FFs with a *total* semantic divergence: *actual, advertise, assist, assume, attend, career, carpet, casual, character, cigar, collar, college, complexion, compliment, comprehensive, conductor, conference, constipated, crime, deception, discuss, disgrace, disgust, diversion, embarrassed, eventually, fabric, indignant, inhabitable, insane, intend, lecture, library, mascara, mayor, misery, molest, motorist, notice, parent, physician, policy, preservative, presume, pretend, professor, qualification, quiet, realise, recollect, remark, remove, resume, rude, salvage, sane, scholar, sensible, stranger, suburb, succeed, support, sympathetic, topic, traduce, tremendous, ultimate, vase, vicious, voluble.*

This initial stage was followed by a search in two learner corpora. In fact, I looked for these 70 FFs in SULEC[2] and ICLE[3] and I made an individual analysis of the use of each of these items.

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2   The SULEC Corpus is a project managed by Ignacio M. Palacios Martínez from the Department of English Philology at the University of Santiago de Compostela financed by the Galician Ministry of Education. It is an online corpus of approximately 480,000 words which assembles spoken and written data produced by Spanish learners of English with two levels of linguistic competence: intermediate and advanced. Website: http://www.usc.es/ia303/SULEC/sulecpage.htm

3. The ICLE corpus was launched in 1990 by Professor Sylviane Granger at the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium. It is a computerised corpus of argumentative essays written by advanced EFL learners with widely different L1 backgrounds including Spanish. The Spanish national subcorpus contains 200,376 words consisting of 500/1000-word-argumentative essays written by advanced EFL learners.

3.3. Results and Discussion

The analyses carried out provide clear evidence that Spanish students of English as a foreign language have problems with *false friends* and reveal the importance of paying special attention to these lexical units in EFL classrooms. The information we obtain from the overall results is that 27 out of our 70 candidates show more incorrect uses than correct ones, 22 items are accurately used more times than incorrectly (although most of these items are inappropriately used on some occasions), 19 items do not appear in neither of the two corpora and 2 false friends show the same number of correct and incorrect uses. The figure below illustrates those results in percentages. The incidence of inaccuracies rises to a 39 % of the overall results.
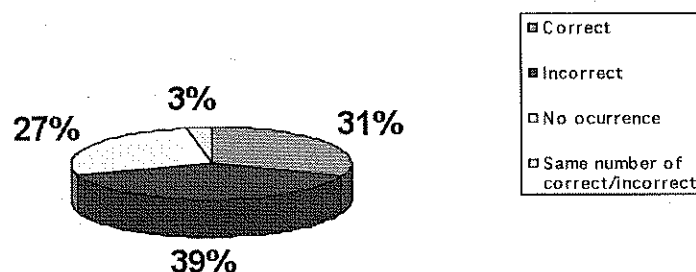

FIGURE 1. Overall results in percentages.

The table below presents more detailed information with indications of the tokens of each item, and the number of inaccurate uses and right uses of the items analysed.

	TOKENS	INACCURATE	ACCURATE
ACTUAL	38	35	3
ADVERTISE	7	2	5
ASSIST	4	2	2
ASSUME	16	16	0
ATTEND	29	16	13
CAREER	72	69	3
CARPET	3	0	3
CASUAL	2	2	0
CHARACTER	17	12	5
CIGAR	4	4	0
COLLAR	-	-	-
COLLEGE	10	7	3
COMPLEXION	-	-	-
COMPLIMENT	7	4	3
COMPREHENSIVE	4	4	0
CONDUCTOR	-	-	-

	TOKENS	INACCURATE	ACCURATE
CONFERENCE	3	2	1
CONSTIPATED	-	-	-
CRIME	137	28	109
DECEPTION	1	0	1
DISCUSS	18	5	13
DISGRACE	-	-	-
DISGUST	2	2	0
DIVERSION	-	-	-
EMBARRASSED	5	0	5
EVENTUALLY	14	1	13
FABRIC	-	-	-
INDIGNANT	1	1	0
INHABITABLE	-	-	-
INSANE	7	2	5
INTEND	4	0	4
LECTURE	6	3	3
LIBRARY	5	3	2
MASCARA	-	-	-
MAYOR	3	1	2
MISERY	5	5	0
MOLEST	9	9	0
MOTORIST	-	-	-
NOTICE	14	12	2
PARENTS	172	0	172
PHYSICIAN	-	-	-
POLICY	24	3	21
PRESERVATIVE	-	-	-
PRESUME	-	-	-
PRETEND	12	11	1
PROFESSOR	12	12	0
QUALIFICATION	4	2	2
QUIET	12	9	3
REALISE	124	16	108
RECOLLECT	-	-	-
REMARK	4	4	0
REMOVE	4	0	4
RESUME	3	2	1
RUDE	9	1	8
SALVAGE	-	-	-
SANE	1	0	1
SCHOLAR	-	-	-
SENSIBLE	8	5	3
STRANGER	1	1	0

	TOKENS	INACCURATE	ACCURATE
SUBURB	-	-	-
SUCCEED	4	0	4
SUPPORT	68	23	45
SYMPATHETIC	1	0	1
TOPIC	182	1	181
TRADUCE	1	1	0
TREMENDOUS	1	1	0
ULTIMATE	2	0	2
VASE	-	-	-
VICIOUS	11	6	5
VOLUBLE	-	-	-

TABLE 1. Overall results in figures.

Some important points can be gathered from the examination of this data. The adjective *actual* and the noun *career* produce the highest number of problems to Spanish students. These words are mostly used in the sense of «current» and «degree», respectively. On most occasions, language transfer is perceptible. That means that inaccuracies are very likely the result of an automatic association between English words and the seemingly corresponding Spanish terms. Students make an interlingual identification between L1 *actual* and *carrera* and L2 words similar items *actual* and *career*, which appears to be deeply rooted in their minds and prevents them from using the appropriate L2 word form.

Figures in Table 1 also indicate that although *actual* and *career* are the words that produce the highest number of incorrect uses among our 70 items, the most frequently used false friends are *topic* with 182 occurrences followed by the noun *parent(s)* with 172 occurrences being the striking thing here the almost absolute absence of L1 interference with the exception of this example from ICLE: *Today there aren't slaves –like the topic of black people with chains [...].* The reason why there is no confusion between these English units and the Spanish words may be due to the fact that these English terms are introduced in learners' vocabulary at very early stages and they appear constantly in English textbooks and in the academic context of the classroom. The word *topic* probably comes up in the English class everyday since it is the easiest way to bring up a subject for discussion; and, besides that, the issue of the family is very commonly used as a way of making pupils talk and express themselves about a reality that is very close to them; and, when talking about our family, it is almost inevitable not to talk about our *parents*. Undoubtedly, what data shows us is that these two lexemes have been interiorized with the English meanings in the students' L2 mental lexicons and that language teachers are of great importance in this sense.

As regards those nineteen items which do not occur in our corpora (marked with a -), everything indicates that the topics and the contexts students are required to deal with in their essays by the corpora compilers are not the most appropriate to use words like the following: *complexion, mascara, constipated, diversion,* or *preservative.*

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3.4. Conclusions and questions for further research

Taking the previous results into account, we can conclude that:

- Language transfer is in operation, and most of the times learners seem to be unaware of the semantic divergence existing between English words and their mother tongue lookalikes.
- Spanish students of English are influenced by their mother tongue and have difficulties with false friends. This means that FFs deserve particular attention in English language teaching and learning.
- An early introduction and a constant exposure to similar L1 and L2 words with semantic differences appear to be important and effective when teaching English. Hence lexical items such as *parents* or *topic* are correctly used.

Apart from that, there are some false friends are not confused in their meanings but in their uses (as the qualitative analysis preceding the quantitative results presented above indicates). This might point towards the fact that teachers draw attention on meaning disregarding other peculiarities of word usage, such as register, typical collocations or morphological features of these lexical items. All this reveals important implications for the teaching of English vocabulary and, more particularly, for the treatment of false friends in the EFL classrooms.

I would like to finish by saying that this is a preliminary study which needs to be further developed in future studies. It would be very interesting to see the importance teachers give to FFs and the extent to which learners are aware of their problems with FFs by getting them to participate in empirical experiments.

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