Intralingual False Friends: British English and American English as a case in point*

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Traditionally speaking, false friends are commonly seen as an *interlinguistic* phenomenon affecting different languages (Koessler and Derocquigny, 1928; Hill, 1982; Prado, 2001; Chamizo Domínguez and Nerlich, 2002; Shlesinger and Malkiel, 2005). However, we can identify false friends between different varieties of the same language, as is the case of British and American English. Lexical items, such as *biscuit*, *fag, pants*, *rubber* or *suspenders* are used both in British and American English but their meanings differ quite a lot. In this paper, I will analyze the semantic differences of these items in both varieties supporting my arguments with data extracted from two main different online dictionaries (the *Cambridge Dictionary Online* or the *Oxford Dictionary Online*) and from two corpora (the *British National Corpus* and the *Corpus of Contemporary American English*). The semantic analysis together with a reflection on the pragmatic use of those items, will pave the way for the identification of different situations that these intralingual false friends might produce: 1) funny situations (e.g. *Your pants and suspenders are really cool!!* or *I love my girlfriend's buns),* 2) serious blunders (e.g. *If you are stressed, grab a fag*) and 3) neutral but different referents (e.g. *Buy some biscuits, chips and jelly, please)*. As a final remark, I will mention some of the reasons for the existence of false friends between American and British English. Undoubtedly, factors, such as the geographical distance, the cultural idiosyncrasy and the separate evolution of the language in both countries will have a say in this matter.

INTRODUCTION

The metaphorical phrase *false friends* is frequently used in the field of linguistics in order to indicate the existence of some lexical items in two languages which are similar in form but different in meaning (Hill, 1982; Prado, 2001; Chamizo Domínguez and Nerlich, 2002; Shlesinger and Malkiel, 2005). They are called false friends because they appear to be easy to grasp, learn and understand at first sight but unfortunately, their formal appearance is not really indicative of the word's truth value to non-native speakers.

The phenomenon of false friendship is normally identified as an *interlingual* phenomenon occurring between lexical items of two different languages: either cognate languages (e.g German *Gift* "poison" vs English *gift* "present") or non-cognate (e.g. English *rope* "string" vs Spanish *ropa* "clothing"), but *intralingual* false friends do exist as well. In

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fact, false friends can be found within the same language when analysing different geographical variants. That is the case of British and American English (Rollings, 2001: 909).

The present paper deals precisely with "false friends" between these two standard varieties of English. Some of the most interesting pairs of intralingual false friends will be presented and discussed. The prototypical contexts of use of these lexical items, together with the semantic relations with other words (synonymy, semantic prosody, etc) will be analysed. Special emphasis will be placed on false friends which could provoke hilarious situations, serious blunders and curious pragmatic differences.

1. THE EXISTENCE OF FALSE FRIENDS WITHIN THE SAME LANGUAGE

Many linguists have pointed out the differences between British and American English, being the lexical differences between both geographical variants the most outstanding. Most research on the subject concerning that interesting area of research focuses on registering everyday words which are different in British and American English (e.g. U.K. *lift* vs U.S. *elevator;* U.K. *flat* vs. U.S. *apartment*). However, few people went further into these lexical differences between both varieties in order to identify words which exist in both varieties but with different meanings, such as *pants* or *faggots.* Rollings (2001) and Nicholls (2006) deal with this topic in their respective studies but they do not delve deeply into it. Considering this, the present paper aims at contributing to this amazing field of research by analysing some of the most interesting false friends within the "so-considered" main standard varieties of English: British and American English.

It is undeniable that intralingual false friends exist. Words like *biscuit*, *suspenders* or *faggots* are used both in British and American English but their meanings differ quite a lot. When used in Britain, a *biscuit* is a sweet and dry flat cake, *suspenders* are used by women to hold their stockings up and *faggots* are meatballs. However, when in America, things change. A *biscuit* is a small airy roll, not necessarily sweet, s*uspenders* are straps traditionally used by men to hold their trousers up, and a *faggot* is a pejorative slang term for homosexual. As seen in these examples, it would be convenient to become aware of the existence of these words and try to interpret and use them correctly according to the context and the person we are talking to. With this in mind, I will start by referring to some of the most attention-grabbing cases of false friends between these two varieties and I will present them ordered by categories depending on the effects they may produce. Therefore, I will divide them into false friends which may cause hilarious situations, serious blunders and amazing divergences. In this last group, I will include words belonging to different semantic fields which are worthy of note.

2. INTRALINGUAL FALSE FRIENDS CAUSING HILARIOUS SITUATIONS[1]

Among those intralingual false friends which may lead to hilarious situations, there are two words referring to articles of clothing (*pants*, *suspenders*) and one related to food (*buns*) which are worth analysing in this section.

Pants and *suspenders* are two nouns that may cause funny situations when used in Britain since these lexical items make reference to two different pieces of underwear in British English. As illustrated in the cartoon on the left, any American asking for pants and suspenders in Britain would receive underpants and straps to hold stockings up. This may produce a quite funny situation as represented in figure 1. The American meaning of these words is different, *pants* are trousers, and *suspenders* are used for holding the trousers up. The picture on the right illustrates the American meaning of these words.

British English American English

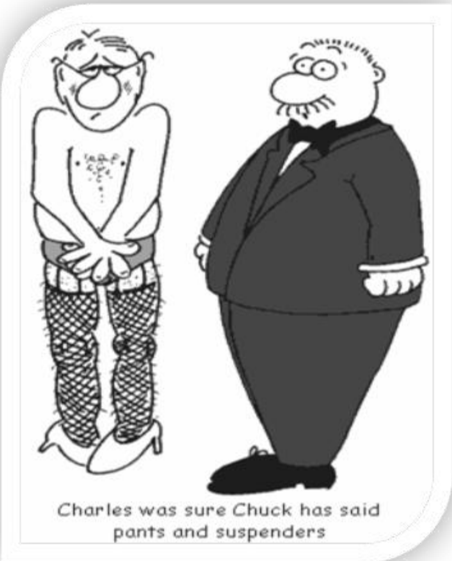

FIGURE 1: *Pants* & *suspenders* in British and American English, respectively

The plural form of *bun*, that is, *buns* is another interesting lexical item to comment on. The word *buns* is generally used to denote a small round sweet cake in England; for this reason an utterance, like *Charles couldn´t take his eyes off Grandma´s buns* might be considered as flattering to the eyes of a British person. However, when uttered in America, the sentence could have a quite different meaning. The American word *buns* in its plural form is a synonym for "buttocks", that is, the fleshy part of the body on which a person sits. In this

[1] "The Best of British. The American's guide to speaking British" is the name of an interesting website which lists over 1000 words that vary between the US and the UK. Although it does not mean to be scientific,- as its designers explain "this site started as a simple list to amuse our friends when we moved to the USA"-, it explains

case, the hilarious situation takes place when a British person ignores the meaning of the word in America and uses it in an innocent way. Any American could take advantage of the situation and make a joke out of it. It is also necessary to remark that apart from that denotation, the Americans also use the word *bun,* either in singular or in plural, to make reference to that the round type of bread which is eaten with hamburgers.

In this section, we have seen that plural nouns, such as *pants, suspenders* and *buns* are three interesting cases of false friends which might provoke hilarious situations and they are highly unlikely to be considered as offensive, except for the noun *buns.* The next section deals precisely with lexical items which could be neutral in one of the two varieties of English but offensive in the other.

3. INTRALINGUAL FALSE FRIENDS PROVOKING SERIOUS BLUNDERS

By serious blunders, I mean using terms that could be offensive in either of these two varieties of English. The focus here is on two British terms, *fag* and *faggot,* which are equivalent to one American slang word *fag(got)* and the adjective *pissed* which means a different thing in both places.

Regarding *fag,* it is a slang term in both countries and its meaning and use is completely different in both varieties of English. In UK, *fag* is the colloquial term for cigarette, while in US it is an offensive word for a homosexual. Thus, sentences like: *Charles casually asks if he can bum a fag* or *If you are stressed, grab a fag,* could bring about serious blunders and misinterpretations especially when used in America. With these utterances you are suggesting that you should make use of homosexuals either to satisfy your sexual needs or to avoid being stressed.

A similar example is the word *faggot*, the long form of *fag* in US and it continues to be an offensive word to refer to homosexual people. On the contrary, a *faggot* is a meatball in the UK. *I like faggots* could mean *I like gays or I like meatballs* depending on where we are.

The adjective *pissed* (when used without *off*) is an insult and another term for *drunk* in Britain, as clearly shown in the following examples extracted from the British National Corpus (BNC):[2]

(1) *He'll never tell you he loves you unless he's* ***pissed.***
(2) *Totally* ***pissed!*** *We were in no fit state,* or
(3) *I know her dramas, her traumas, and her fiascos I know her sober (but I know her better* ***pissed****).*

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and illustrates some of the false friends that I am going to refer to with cartoons. In fact, the drawing on this page has been extracted from this website http://www.effingpot.com/index.shtml, last accessed on February 5th, 2011.

2 *British National Corpus* accessed through Mark Davies website http://davies-linguistics.byu.edu/personal/

On the other hand, in American English we have *pissed* or *pissed off* with no difference meaning “annoyed”, the same as British *pissed off.* See the following examples extracted from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA):[3]

(4) *And, just like that, I was angry again. I was **pissed** at the cancer for giving me such a warped sense of what was OK in life,*

(5) *"I wasn't mad because he dropped the ball," Tomlin said later. " That kind of mistake can happen to anyone. I was **pissed** that he'd lay on the ground, fake an injury and cost us our last timeout. My point was, Be a man! Grow up!"*

4. INTRALINGUAL FALSE FRIENDS AND CONSPICUOUS DIVERGENCES

Intralingual false friends might not only produce serious misunderstandings or hilarious comments, but they may just denote different things or have different referents. In this section, I will analyse words of primary concern, mostly associated with food, items of clothing and other cultural elements, such as sports, road works or money-related matters.

Concerning the lexical items related to food, I will allude to the “fish and chips” traditional British dish. As is well-known, “fish and chips” are really popular in UK and Americans are also very fond of this dish; however, and surprisingly, in American English, it is referred to as “fish and fries.” The second term in the set phrase varies and this happens because the word “chips” does not mean the same in both cultures. It is another example of a false friend between varieties of the same language. American *chips* are crunchy potatoes (“crisps” in British English), while British *chips a*re long-shaped strips of potatoes. The American term for that is “French fries.” Hence the change in the American label from “fish and chips” to “fish and fries.”

Still, in the field of food-related terms, we have two nouns that are worth mentioning: the words *biscuit* and *jelly* which refer to quite different realities in British and American English. Concerning the noun *biscuit,* English speakers refer to “flat sweet cakes” as *biscuits* (US *cookies*) while in America, a *biscuit* is a “small round flaky bread”. As for *jelly,* this is the name for a coloured sweet food made from sugar in Britain while in US, this means jam, that is, a sweet soft food made by cooking fruit with sugar to preserve it. It is eaten on bread or cakes. In America, the trademark *jello* gives the name to this coloured sweet.

As regards terms connected with the issue of *clothing,* and besides words, such as *pants or suspenders* which have already been mentioned, there is another term that is worth mentioning: the noun *vest.* It denotes a different thing in America than in Britain. In the UK, a *vest is a type of underwear for extra warmth or a cotton shirt for sport* (as in *the official team*

[3] *Corpus of Contemporary American English* accessed through Mark Davies’ free online interface at http://www.americancorpus.org/

vest). However, in the US, a vest is a waistcoat, that is, a piece of clothing that covers the upper body but not the arms worn over a shirt.

Regarding interlingual false friends in sports and in cultural issues, the words *football* or *pavement* denote different events and things in the UK and in the US. In both countries, *football* is a game played between two teams of eleven people. However, American football is played with an oval ball moved along the field by running with it or throwing it while European football consists of kicking a ball into the other team's goal. As regards *pavement*, in British English, *pavement* is the surface on one or both sides of a road, where people walk on, while in America, the *pavement* is the surface of roads when covered with concrete or tarmac.

Another interesting noun is *bill*. It can be said that this false friend is produced by a semantic extension in the US use of the word, since *bill* is also used to refer to a piece of paper money, as in *a ten-dollar bill.* It is also necessary to point out that American people use the word *check* instead of *bill* in the context of restaurants. These differences must be taken into account while teaching English, and while learning it. Being awareness of this semantic divergence between these two varieties is important for everyone who is interested in and/or working with language, such as language learners, language teachers and even professional translators.

5. SEMANTIC LINKS OF THESE INTRALINGUAL FALSE FRIENDS

It is obvious that the semantic characteristics of these intralingual false friends differ in both countries but we can establish semantic links between these words. I will summarize the most basic semantic differences between both varieties concerning the items analysed above.

As for the field of clothing, it is quite interesting to see how there is a shift in perspective in the use of some plural nouns in both varieties. Plural forms such as *pants* and *suspenders* as well as the singular noun *vest* move from referring to *"*underwear pieces" of clothing in British English to "outerwear articles of clothing" in American English.

Regarding food-related terms, the semantic difference alludes either to the way this food is cooked, see, *chips*, for instance, or to the food substances they refer to, note, for instance, words like *biscuit* or *jelly*.

Another attention-grabbing move is the one represented by the words *fag* and *faggot.* In British English, they are two different words. *Fag* is an informal word for cigarette and *faggot* is the name given to meatrolls. However, in America, they are the same word *fag* is the short for *faggot,* and they are pejorative terms defining a type of sexual orientation in American slang.

As regards foodstuff, the plural noun *buns* relates to a sweet bread roll in Britain, but the American term has undergone a different connotation and it might be used to denote a specific part of the body.

Other semantic changes are illustrated by the adjective *pissed* which denotes two different states, from a state of drunkenness in Britain to a state of annoyance in America; or by the noun *football* which means different sports to British and Americans.

Finally, *pavement* and *bill* have different referents in both varieties. On the one hand, *pavement* is where pedestrians walk on, while in America it denotes the surface of a road where vehicles move on; and, on the other hand, *bill* has shifted its meaning in American English from the *quantity that you owe in a restaurant* to a *banknote*.

6. THE EXISTENCE OF INTERLINGUAL FALSE FRIENDS: REASONS

At this point, I will look into some of the reasons for the existence of false friends between American and British English. The main cause for the differences between both varieties of English can be explained through the theories of language change. The English language has "landed" in America with the first British settlers and from that moment onwards, the language had the need to adapt to its new environment and respond to the new people´s needs. Changes began to be perceived from the very beginning of the American history, which marked a different evolution of both varieties. Thus, the language of immigrants and the geographical distance between Britain and America also determined the evolution of the language. Hence, American English preserved some words (*gotten*) that died out in Britain, and the Americans coined new words for new inventions and social changes (for instance, in the automobile industry). The separate socio-cultural development and history of both countries have undoubtedly given way to the different meanings of these intralingual false friends. But I would not like to end this section without saying that both varieties have influenced each other throughout the years, especially now that we are in the era of the Internet and in the era of globalization. In fact, British English has adopted many Americanisms into everyday language and, some British terms are used in America. This can be justified by the influence of TV programmes, the Hollywood industry and the information and communication technologies. For this reason, I do not firmly state that these interlingual false friends are going to be always so, it is likely that the meanings of these words will once merge and become equivalent terms as a result of the different processes of semantic and language change. What I can definitely say is that now, in the first quarter of the 21st century, there is evidence that these words have different meanings in both varieties. The mutual influence of one variety into the other, and particularly, the "Americanization" of British English is not restricted to the lexical component of the language, in fact, the influence of

American English also affects English syntax to a lesser extent, as is the case of modal auxiliaries (Leech, 2003), and these intralingual false friends are not exclusive of different varieties of English. It can also be perceived in different varieties of Spanish, such as Latin-American Spanish and Iberian Spanish (e.g. *concha* or *coger* have completely different meanings in both varieties of the language).[4]

To finish with, it is necessary to bear in mind that the existence of these semantic differences has implications in language teaching and learning. Teachers and students of English must know that there are particular items which have different meanings in both varieties and that they must be careful and act in accordance with the context of situation and with the variety of English they are using and/or learning.

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[4] The dictionary of the Royal Academy of the Spanish language (RAE) points these differences out in their respective entries. http://www.rae.es/rae.html

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