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Medical English and Spanish cognates: identification and classification

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Introduction

- 1 “False cognate” or “false friend” are metalinguistic terms used to name “a word which has the same or very similar form in two languages, but which has a different meaning in each”. (Platt, Richards & Weber 1985: 103). In a written text, it is the orthographical identity or similarity that can lead a second language learner to use the word wrongly, but when it comes to an oral text, a foreign word may sound familiar to us because of its phonological resemblance to a word in our mother tongue.
- 2 The expression *faux amis* was used for the first time by Maxime Koessler and Jules Derocquigny in their work *Les Faux Amis ou les trahisons du vocabulaire anglais* in 1928 (Mounin *et al.* 1974: 139). Robert and Collins (1990: 296a) refer to these pitfalls as “deceptive cognates”. Other coinages for this lexical phenomenon are *faux frères*, *mots sosies* and *falschen Freunde*, among others. Anglophone linguists frequently use the term “false friend”, a calque from French, and there are purists that refer to them as “false cognates”. In Spanish the expressions *falsos amigos* and *términos equívocos* (Cuenca 1987) or *palabras de traducción engañosa* (Navarro & Hernández 1992, 1994) are generally used indistinctly.
- 3 Several scholars have classified these word pairs differently (Larson 1989, Laufer 1990, Moss 1992, Gläser 1995, Maillot 1997), although a distinction between “total” false friends and “partial” ones has been made. In this regard, we adopted here the definitions and classification on semantic criteria offered by R. Gläser in 1995 that establishes three categories of deceptive cognates:

Total false friends are interlingual word pairs with morphological similarity or even identity, but with a completely different meaning [...].

Partial false friends usually cover two subgroups:

1. interlingual word pairs with identical [or similar, we believe] morphological structure, but only a partial correspondence of their meaning.
2. intralingual word pairs which share the same [or similar] morphological structure, but have different terminological meanings in different subject areas or even within the same subject area. The polysemy [...] is discarded in the textual environment [...]. (Gläser 1995: 17).

- 4 Examples of these different false friend types (with the misleading cognate capitalized) are given in Table A – Total false friends (hereafter T or TFF), Table B – Partial 1 false friends (hereafter P1 or P1FF) and Table C – Partial 2 false friends (hereafter P2 or P2FF).

Table A. Total false friends

English	Spanish	while Spanish	English
carbon	carbono	CARBÓN	coal
embarrassed	turbado, avergonzado	EMBARAZADA	pregnant
carbuncle	ántrax	CARBUNCO	anthrax

Table B. Partial 1 false friends

English	Spanish
drug	DROGA / fármaco
to retract	RETRACTARSE / retraer, retirar, replegar
to divert	DIVERTIR / desviar

Table C. Partial 2 false friends

English	Spanish
marked difference	NOTABLE ...
marked improvement	NOTORIA ...
marked accent	...FUERTE
marked contrast	... MAYOR, or ... MÁS ACUSADO
a marked man	... FICHADO

- 5 In Table C “marked” is likely to be translated as *marcado/a* by the inexperienced reader who does not know of the polysemy of the cognate; thus, the wide variety of lexical equivalences/ alternatives (capitalized in the examples) provided by the dictionary.
- 6 The same holds true for the term *control* (see Table 8). As so aptly stated by Navarro,

en el inglés médico se abusa hasta la saciedad del galicismo ‘control’ [...]. Si recurrimos a la traducción *control* cada vez que en inglés se utiliza esta palabra estaremos empobreciendo nuestro idioma hasta límites insospechados”. (2000: 110)
- 7 Most FF are of Greek or Latin origin and although these word pairs may share identical or very similar spelling in English and Spanish, for some reason, they have acquired different meanings in the two languages:

“ability” means talent, faculty, power in English while
 “*habilidad*” means skill or cleverness in Spanish
 “sensible” means wise, aware, appreciative in English while
 “sensible” means sensitive in Spanish
- 8 On the other hand, certain words from extractions other than Greek or Latin have evolved to orthographical forms similar or very close to Spanish lexemes. For instance, the term *gripe* (Cuenca 1987) derived from Old English *gripan* (to hold) is likely to be translated into Spanish as *gripe* (influenza).
- 9 A number of researchers have approached the discussion of these word pairs in English and Spanish general language vocabulary from different aspects: Hill (1982) and Cuenca (1987) with reference to lexicography; Moss (1992) and Lerchundi & Moreno (1999) focused on the importance of cognate recognition in teaching ESP reading courses to Spanish speakers. Several authors have also dealt with this lexical phenomenon with regard to English for Medical Purposes (EMP): Mackin & Weinberger (1970), Smith Kline & French Sae (1979), Navarro & Hernández (1992, 1993), Congost (1994), Divasson (1997) and Navarro (2000), among others. The *Diccionario enciclopédico University de términos médicos* (1981) also offers a list of FF in medical contexts.
- 10 Nevertheless, research in contrastive studies so far has focused mainly on General English, one of the exceptions being Gläser’s in 1995 on false friends in English and German in LSP vocabulary with special reference to foreign language teaching. She stated that deceptive cognates are also important, “often more intriguing in LSP lexicology” (Gläser 1995: x-xi). But we do not know of any contrastive English-Spanish study dealing comprehensively and systematically with this lexical phenomenon in the field of ME. This paper is thus devoted to the study of deceptive cognates in today’s ME written discourse.

Corpus and objective

- 11 We gathered a sample that can be considered representative of current ME prose, consisting of twenty research papers, published between 1994 and 1996 in various leading medical journals (*The New England Journal of Medicine*, *The Lancet*, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, etc.), and pertaining to twenty major specialties (for the list of references, see Appendix 1). The corpus is made up of 89,688 running words. This research is part of a wider project carried out at the University of la Laguna, Tenerife, which studies FF in the four ME genres (Editorials, Review Papers, Articles, Research Papers and Case Reports).

The objectives of this paper are threefold:

- To identify the false friends present in the corpus.
 - To classify them as TFF or partial, and within the latter category as P1FF and P2FF.
 - To determine the word classes they belong to as well as their ranking.
- 12 Our final aim is to elaborate a list of deceptive cognates which could serve in EMP courses and in the training of translators.

Method

- 13 Our analysis is limited to the orthographical properties of the interlingual word pairs that cause interference. Over the years we have gathered an ever increasing list which we use as a Reference List of FF. Most of them became evident in the classroom situation with medical students and postgraduates in Medicine, or when correcting exams. Others have been collected from dictionaries of false cognates in General English (Hill 1982, Cuenca 1987), Medical English dictionaries (*Stedman Bilingüe* 1999), the above mentioned works of Mackin & Weinberger (1970), Navarro & Hernández (1992, 1994) and Navarro (2000), among others.
- 14 In this article every item of our compiled reference list of FF is considered a lexeme, that is, a word which has an entry in the dictionary. Their multiple inflected or case forms in the corpus are referred to as occurrences.
- 15 Every FF from our reference list has been identified by means of a contextual analysis. Their frequency was recorded and their percentages with regard to the total number of running words were computed. The deceptive cognates found were classified according to two groups of variables: the three FF types (T, P1 and P2) and the four main word classes (the so-called full, lexical or content words) – nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. TFF were easily identified. Conversely, P1/P2FF were difficult to differentiate and we have encountered many borderline cases which have not been included in our analysis.

Results

Table 1. Results: Final number of FF (lexemes and occurrences)

	TOTAL NUMBER OF FALSE FRIENDS (FF)	TOTAL NUMBER OF THEIR OCCURRENCES (OCC.)
TOTAL (T)	73 (18.86%)	982 (20.50%)
PARTIAL 1 (P1)	62 (16.02%)	730 (15.24%)
PARTIAL 2 (P2)	252 (65.11%)	3,077 (64.25%)
FINAL NUMBER	387 (100%)	4,789 (100%)

Figure 1. Final number of FF (lexemes and occurrences) distributed in types

Table 2. Results: Final number of FF (lexemes and occurrences) distributed in word classes

	TOTAL NUMBER OF FALSE FRIENDS (FF)	TOTAL NUMBER OF THEIR OCCURRENCES (OCC.)
NOUNS	92 (23.77%)	814 (16.99%)
ADJECTIVES	182 (47.02%)	2,873 (59.99%)
VERBS	96 (24.80%)	1,053 (21.98%)
ADVERBS	17 (4.39%)	49 (1.02%)
FINAL NUMBER	387 (100%)	4,789 (100%)

Figure 2. Final number of FF (lexemes and occurrences) distributed in word classes

- 16 There were three times as many P2FF as TFF, and four times as many P2FF as P1FF (see Table 1 and Figure 1). Besides, the total number of noun occurrences was three times more than that of adjectives and verbs and almost 60 times more than that of adverbs (see Table 2 and Figure 2).

Table 3. Overall percentage of T, P1 and P2 FF occurrences with respect to the total number of running words in the corpus

CORPUS SIZE (running words)	FALSE FRIENDS (occurrences)
89,688	4,789
100%	5.339%

Figure 3. Overall percentage of T, P1 and P2 FF occurrences with respect to the total number of running words in the corpus

- 17 Table 3 and Figure 3 illustrate that the 387 FF lexemes gave 4,789 occurrences in the 89,688 running words. The proportion of those occurrences in the biomedical corpus then reached 5.3%. One can thus infer that in a 6,000-word-research paper (the length of about half of those analysed in our corpus), a reader may encounter about 318 FF forms, or an average of 159 if the article were 3,000 words long, which means more than five deceptive cognates in every 100 running words of text). This may imply a considerable risk of misinterpretation of the original article.

Table 4. Distribution of FF types in word classes (number of lexemes)

FF	Nouns	Adjectives	Verbs	Adverbs
T	44 (24.17%)	17 (18.47%)	8 (8.33%)	4 (23.52%)
P1	33 (18.13%)	14 (15.21%)	13 (13.54%)	2 (11.76%)
P2	105 (57.69%)	61 (66.30%)	75 (78.12%)	11 (6470 %)
FINAL NUMBER	182 (100%)	92 (100%)	96 (100%)	17 (100%)

Figure 4. Distribution of FF types in word classes (number of lexemes)

- 18 As we can see in Table 4 and Figure 4, among the 387 FF lexemes identified in the corpus, the number of adjectives and verbs was similar, while there were about twice as many nouns, and only a few adverbs. With regard to the three types of FF, nouns accounted for roughly a 60% of the total number of FF lexemes.

Table 5. Distribution of FF types in word classes (number of occurrences)

FF	Nouns occ.	Adjectives occ.	Verbs occ.	Adverbs occ.
T	764 (26.59%)	149 (18.30%)	48 (4.55%)	21 (42.85%)
P1	322 (11.20%)	214 (26.28%)	190 (18.04%)	4 (8.16%)
P2	1787 (62.19%)	451 (55.40%)	815 (77.39%)	24 (48.97%)
FINAL NUMBER	2,873 (100%)	814 (100%)	1,053 (100%)	49 (100%)

Figure 5. Distribution of FF types in word classes (number of occurrences)

- 19 As can be seen in Table 5 and Graph 5, among the 4,789 FF occurrences found in the corpus, the number of adjectives and verbs was similar, while there were almost three times as many nouns, and again only a few adverbs. Considering the different types of FF, nouns accounted for almost a 60% of the total number of FF occurrences. A list of some examples of T, P1, and P2FF, including the four word classes analysed in this research, is provided below. Appendix 2 presents all the data in detail (Distribution of FF types in word classes in relation to the number of lexemes and occurrences).

Table 6. Example of list of false friends

English	Spanish	while Spanish	English
Nouns			
influenza	gripe	INFLUENCIA	influence
injury	lesión herida, traumatismo, daño	INJURIA	insult, offence, slanderous allegation
parent	progenitor	PARIENTE	relative
physician	médico	FÍSICO	physicist
Adjectives			
actual	real, verdadero, efectivo, concreto, propiamente dicho	ACTUAL	present, current
major	importante, principal, grave, serio	MAYOR	greater, larger, bigger, older
consistent	constante, coherente, indicativo	CONSISTENTE	solid, sound, firm
eventual	final, definitivo, permanente	EVENTUAL	possible, casual, temporary
Verbs			
to remove	extirpar, quitar, sacar, extraer	REMOVER	to stir, bring up again
to stretch	extender, estirar, forzar	ESTRECHAR	to make (...) narrower
to rest	descansar	RESTAR	to subtract, deduct
to record	anotar, registrar	RECORDAR	to remember, remind
Adverbs			
ultimately	en última instancia, finalmente, llegado el momento, en el fondo	ULTIMAMENTE	recently, lately
currently	actualmente, hoy en día	CORRIENTEMENTE	ordinarily

Table 7. Examples of P1FF collected in the sample

- 20 We present in capital letters the Spanish cognate that the inexperienced translator is most likely to use instead of the correct word in a particular context.

English	Spanish
Nouns	
canal	CANAL/ conducto (<i>tubular structure</i>)
catheter	CATÉTER / sonda / drena
condition	CONDICIÓN / afección, enfermedad, proceso
disorder	DESORDEN / enfermedad, trastorno
lens	LENTE / cristalino
relative	RELATIVO / pariente, familiar
Adjectives	
adequate	ADECUADO / suficiente
clinical	CLÍNICO / frío or aséptico (<i>unemotional</i>)
domestic	DOMÉSTICO / local or nacional
dramatic	DRAMÁTICO / espectacular / drástico
aggressive	AGRESIVO / dinámico, audaz / traumático
apparent	APARENTE / claro, notorio, evidente
Verbs	
to alter	ALTERAR, cambiar / castrar
to compose	COMPONER / calmarse, sosegar, tranquilizarse
to discharge	DESCARGAR / dar de alta (<i>from hospital</i>) / supurar / despedir
to prevent	PREVENIR / impedir, evitar
Adverbs	
adequately	ADECUADAMENTE / suficientemente
evidently	EVIDENTEMENTE / al parecer, por lo visto

- 21 We present in capital letters the word that the inexperienced translator is most likely to use to the detriment of other terms (also capitalized in our examples and taken from Navarro 2000) which would be more appropriate.

Table 8. Examples of P2FF identified in the corpus

English	Spanish
Nouns	
test	TEST
Apgar test	ÍNDICE de...
blood test	ANÁLISIS de...
diagnostic test	PRUEBA de...
vaginal smear test	CITOLOGÍA...
control	CONTROL
birth control	ANTICONCEPCIÓN
malaria control	LUCHA...
self-control	AUTODOMINIO
control of symptoms	SUPRESIÓN ...
control visit	DE REVISIÓN
control of an epidemic	CONTENCIÓN ...
control group	... DE REFERENCIA
tract	TRACTO
digestive tract	TUBO...
auditory tract	VÍAS...
genital male tract	APARATO...
olfactory tract	CINTILLA or PÉNDULO...
outflow tract	...INFUNDÍBULO (<i>of left ventricle</i>)
posterior tracts	CORDONES...
rubrospinal tract	HAZ...
Adjectives	
established	ESTABLECIDO
established custom	...ARRAIGADA

established diagnosis	... DE CERTEZA
established fact	...ADMITIDO <i>or</i> DEMOSTRADO
established staff	...FIJO <i>or</i> DE PLANTILLA
established use	...CONSAGRADO
established name	...OFICIAL
mental	MENTAL
mental ability / work	...INTELECTUAL
mental clarity	GRADO DE DE LUCIDEZ <i>or</i> CONSCIENCIA
mental stress	...PSÍQUICA, NERVIOSA
mental hospital	...PSIQUIÁTRICO, MANICOMIO
mental medicine	PSIQUIATRÍA
systemic	SISTÉMICO
systemic circulation	...GENERAL <i>or</i> MAYOR
systemic disease	...GENERALIZADA
systemic infection	...DISEMINADA
systemic vascular resistance	...PERIFÉRICA
Verbs	
to check	CHEQUEAR
to check a hemorrhage	DETENER...
to check an epidemic	CONTENER...
to check blood	ANALIZAR...
to check the results	VERIFICAR, COMPROBAR...
to control	CONTROLAR
to control a hemorrhage	DETENER, RESTAÑAR...
to control the blood pressure	MEDIR, VIGILAR, ESTABILIZAR...
to control the effects of an overdose	NEUTRALIZAR...

to control the temperature	REGULAR...
to control the anemia	CORREGIR...
to control a crisis	YUGULAR...
Adverbs	
entirely	ENTERAMENTE, totalmente, exclusivamente, unicamente
precisely	PRECISAMENTE, con precisión, exactamente, minuciosamente

Discussion and conclusion

- 22 As was expected, some FF are also found in General English. Differentiation of deceptive cognates into P1 and P2 categories has not been an easy task, and we found many borderline instances, a conclusion also reached by other researchers (Gläser 1995). From the previously detailed data one can draw general conclusions about the importance of the different FF types and their relevance according to the word classes. Firstly, FF of the T and P1 types can be expected to be the least common in the biomedical research written discourse (in our corpus, 982 and 730 occurrences respectively of the 4,789 instances found). However, students' or readers' overlooking them may have serious consequences for the correct interpretation of the source language text (they usually consist in meaning transgressions). Secondly, although the kind of mistake caused by the misunderstanding of P2FF instances may be much more a kind of inaccuracy (generally misunderstanding of very subtle nuances), its effect may cause a progressive erosion and impoverishment of the target language, and much more so if we consider their much greater frequency (3,077 occurrences in the sample). Therefore, we need to be on the alert for misleading collocations. Thirdly, nouns ranked first in all the frequency lists (close to 60% of the total number of FF occurrences were nouns), followed by adjectives and verbs with a similar distribution, except for the cases of P2 (in which verbs considerably outnumbered adjectives) and T lexemes (in which the opposite holds true). Therefore, regarding word classes, a representative FF reference list for pedagogical purposes should only include a very limited number of adverbs (just 49 occurrences in 89,688 running words), its major goal being the noun class.
- 23 Our findings differ slightly from those of the technical texts analyzed by Lerchundi & Moreno (1999), for whom the most frequent kind of FF was the P1 type (in their work, *falsos amigos* 2), closely followed by TFF (*falsos amigos* 1). On the other hand, in their study, P2FF (*falsos amigos* 3) were the least frequent ones, while in ours the opposite held true. The results of Gläser's analysis (1995), based on a corpus of ESP text-books from a variety of fields, show a word class distribution quite similar to ours: nouns ranked first, with little difference in the number of verbs and adjectives.
- 24 The results of our analysis lead us to believe that deceptive cognates deserve careful consideration in the teaching of EMP to postgraduates and medical students as well as in the training of technical translators. This is of paramount importance in the Spanish

scientist's case if we take into account that for the last thirty years a great proportion of biomedical Spanish literature has been the product of translations from English, frequently considered quite inadequate (Herranz 1984, Tapia 1991, Navarro & Hernández 1992), false cognates being one of the most common kinds of mistake. Although it is practically impossible to indicate every single source of error, we suggest that more attention should be paid to them in academic syllabi.

- 25 It is thus our contention that some reference tables with the most frequent word pairs and their equivalent, together with well-chosen exercises to practise them, could be of great help if offered at early stages of reading comprehension and translation courses. They may increase the trainees' – and their teachers' – awareness of this complex and pervasive problem. The results obtained with some exercises we have designed consisting of identification and translation of contextualized FF are encouraging. In conclusion, similar studies based on other Romance languages could be of interest for the subsequent comparison of results.

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APPENDIXES

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Appendix 2

Final Data of the Study – Table 1

FF	Nouns	Nouns occ.	Adjectives	Adjectives occ.	Verbs	Verbs occ.	Adverbs	Adverbs occ.	Total FF	Total occ.
T	44	764	17	149	8	48	4	21	73	982
P1	33	322	14	214	13	190	2	4	62	730
P2	105	1,787	61	451	75	815	11	24	252	3,077
Lexemes	182	2,873	92	814	96	1,053	17	49	387	4,789

Final Data of the Study – Table 2

WORD CLASS	TFF followed by OCC	P1FF followed by OCC	P2FF followed by OCC	FF followed by OCC
Nouns	44	33	102	182
Nouns. Occ	764	322	1,787	2,873
Adjectives	17	14	61	92
Adjectives occ.	149	214	451	814
Verbs	8	13	75	96
Verbs occ.	48	190	815	1,053
Adverbs	4	2	11	17
Adverbs occ.	21	4	24	49
Total FF	73	62	252	387
Total occ.	982	730	3,077	4,789

ABSTRACTS

“Faux amis” or “false friends” (abbreviated hereafter as FF) are metalinguistic terms used to name word pairs that look alike in two languages, but that do not have the same meaning. The purpose of this paper is to identify and classify FF in a corpus of medical English prose. Our source material consists of twenty research papers randomly chosen and published between 1994 and 1996 in various leading medical journals. Every FF was identified by means of a contextual analysis. The deceptive cognates recorded were classified according to two groups of variables: FF types and word classes. The proportion of FF found in the corpus reached 5.3% of the number of total running words. This leads us to believe that they deserve special attention since it is well known that they represent an important problem for terminologists and are frequently misinterpreted by medical doctors and students. We thus believe that the elaboration of tables containing word pairs (English-Spanish, in our case) most frequently encountered, along with well designed exercises, could prove most helpful if presented at an early stage of reading comprehension and translation courses.

L'expression « faux amis » (abrégée ci-dessous comme FA) est le terme métalinguistique utilisé pour se référer à des paires de mots qui s'écrivent presque de la même façon dans deux langues différentes mais qui ont un sens différent dans ces deux langues. Le but de cet article est d'identifier et de classer les FA dans un corpus de vingt articles médicaux écrits en anglais, publiés entre 1994 et 1996 dans de prestigieuses revues médicales. Les FA ont été identifiés par une minutieuse analyse contextuelle, et ont été classifiés selon les deux variables suivantes : types et classes de FA. La fréquence de FA atteint 5,3 % du total de mots de notre corpus, ce qui nous conduit à penser qu'ils méritent une attention spéciale puisqu'il est reconnu qu'ils constituent un problème important pour les terminologues et sont très souvent mal interprétés par les médecins et les étudiants en médecine. Nous pensons donc qu'il serait très utile d'élaborer des tableaux de paires de FA (anglais-espagnol, dans notre cas) les plus fréquemment utilisés dans la littérature médicale de même que des exercices appropriés afin de les présenter aux étudiants au début des cours de lecture et/ou traduction scientifique.

INDEX

Mots-clés: analyse du discours, anglais de spécialité, anglais médical, faux ami (anglais-espagnol)

Keywords: deceptive cognate, discourse analysis, ESP, false friend (English-Spanish), medical English

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