TOWARDS A TYPOLOGICAL CLASSIFICATION OF FALSE FRIENDS (SPANISH-ENGLISH)

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ABSTRACT. *Cognate words in two or more languages have a common origin because of their diachronic relationship and, as a result, they share some sort of formal and/or semantic affinity. Cognate words can facilitate the foreign language learning process; they have similar meanings and, therefore, they can support the acquisition and/or learning of a non-native language. However, these words can also have a deceptive meaning as a result of semantic change and dissimilar development in two languages, i.e., they may be deceptive cognate words or false friends. False friends are especially problematic for language learners as they tend to overgeneralize and assume they know the meaning of these words, which are actually misleading. In this paper a taxonomy of cognate words containing six different types is put forward. The classification is based on semantic and formal criteria (morphological and phonological) and aims at providing a common framework for the analysis of cognate words which will help in the development of specific teaching and learning strategies.*

KEYWORDS. *Vocabulary learning, crosslinguistic influence, false friends, cognate words.*

RESUMEN. *Las palabras cognadas en dos o más lenguas son aquellas que tienen un origen común dada su relación desde un punto de vista diacrónico y, como consecuencia de ello, comparten afinidades formales y/o semánticas. Los cognados pueden favorecer el proceso de aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera, pues tienen significados similares y así fomentan la adquisición y/o el aprendizaje de la lengua no nativa. Sin embargo, estas palabras también pueden tener significados ambiguos como resultado de un cambio semántico y una evolución diferente en ambas lenguas, esto es, pueden ser cognados engañosos o falsos amigos. Los falsos amigos resultan especialmente problemáticos para los aprendices de lenguas dado que éstos suelen generalizar y asumir que conocen el significado de estas palabras, que en realidad resultan falaces. En este artículo se presenta una taxonomía de palabras cognadas con seis categorías diferentes. La clasificación se fundamenta en criterios semánticos y formales (morfológicos y fonológicos) y pretende proporcionar un marco común para el análisis de palabras cognadas que contribuya al posterior desarrollo de estrategias específicas de enseñanza y aprendizaje.*

PALABRAS CLAVE. *Aprendizaje de vocabulario, influencia interlingüística, falsos amigos, cognados.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Cross-linguistic influence and its consequences for the teaching and learning of non-native languages has interested researchers in the last decades, who have concentrated mainly on the analysis of evidence of L1 traces in L2 phonetic, syntactic or morphological production. Nevertheless, as Odlin (2003: 437) states, "[…] anyone seeking to understand transfer itself in all its manifestations needs to try to become familiar with a wide range of linguistic research; neglecting to do so can result in making claims that do not square with the available evidence (as has happened fairly often)". More recently, studies have examined how cross-linguistic evidence affects most linguistic subsystems such as pragmatics, semantics, syntax, morphology, phonology, phonetics, orthography, etc., not only in the second but also in the third or subsequent language[1].

According to Cenoz (2001, 2003) and Kellerman (1983), cross-linguistic influence tends to be present in language learners' production when the mother tongue and the target language are typologically related. Spanish is a direct descendant of Latin. Even though English is a Germanic language it has been extensively influenced by Latin at various times, especially during the Middle English and Early Modern English periods. It can be said that one of the major sources of loanwords into English, together with French and Scandinavian, has been Latin. The relationship of English and Spanish with Latin has occasioned a non-parallel lexical development and thus we can find in both languages many words with a common Latin origin which nevertheless have evolved differently, giving rise to uneven correspondences. What is more, since English and Spanish are in contact in many parts of the world, false friends between these two languages continue to appear.

Cross-linguistic influence in second language acquisition has been related to language proficiency (Ringbom 1987; Möhle 1989; Poulisse 1990; Cenoz 2001); less proficient learners generally transfer more elements from their first language than those who have a high proficiency. This phenomenon can occur with Spanish learners of English but it should be noticed that the existence of false friends in specialised jargon is also frequent given the fact that English often incorporates technical words of Latin origin. Furthermore, the presence of false friends in proficient language users such as translators, language teachers, journalists, etc. is not to be underestimated because they are often difficult to identify.

In second language teaching, the historical relationship between the languages in contact, that is, the L1 (First language) and the L2 (Second language) has generally been analyzed from two main perspectives as far as the lexical component is concerned: first, as an element that favors or facilitates the language learning process, depending on the linguistic closeness (positive transfer) or, second, as a determining factor that hinders the course of learning, as a result of the interferences caused by the unwanted similarities or differences between the languages involved (negative transfer). Some studies have been carried out in order to analyze the facilitating effects of cognate words recognition when reading in an L2. Authors such as Moss (1992) point out that, in the cases where the L1 and the target language are historically related and share some helpful similarities, language

learners should be systematically trained to take advantage of cognate words and thereby enhance their reading skills and their global understanding of the text.

Ringbom (1986) did some research on the overall proficiency level attained by Swedish speaking and Finish-speaking EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students in Finland, where both languages coexist in some parts of the country. These two languages belong to rather dissimilar language families: Germanic and Finno-Ugric. Ringbom found a marked tendency on the part of Swedish L1 speakers to outperform Finish L1 speakers in EFL, both groups having received similar instruction. It was perceived that Swedish-speaking learners showed a certain tendency to make interlingual identifications probably because of the similar psycholinguistic routines available in English and Swedish. As far as reading comprehension is concerned, Ringbom (*ibid.*) indicates that if the L2 is closely related to the L1, the language learner will benefit from the existence of cognate words, given the fact that both, recognition and understanding of these words is less demanding than completely alien words. In fact, many of these words are not eventually learned but the formal similarity, especially in writing, helps the language learner to understand the text and to accomplish a smooth reading but, conversely, there is little psycholinguistic processing. Rather, unconsciously, the language learner tends to consider cognate words as a help for his reading which do not require special attention. So, Ringbom (1992) introduces the idea of *potential knowledge* to refer to the learners' knowledge or familiarity with a word or grammar construction which, in fact, has not been seen before in the L2. It goes without saying that the closer the typological proximity between languages, the more chances the language learner has to find instances of this *potential knowledge*, at least as far as receptive skills are concerned, i.e., listening and, especially, reading. Whereas the absence of cognate words between the L1 and the L2 considerably reduces the amount of 'familiar' vocabulary that the language learner has access to, and the range between 'active' and 'passive' vocabulary diminishes considerably (Ringbom, 1992). Ringbom's research centers on two languages which are rather close from a morpho-syntactic point of view, i.e. English and French.

Ringbom (2001) divides various types of lexical transfer into two main blocks, *transfer of form* and *transfer of meaning*. The former type comprises mainly complete language switches and the use of deceptive cognates, which may be partially or totally deceptive. The latter refers to other instances of lexical transfer like calques and semantic extension on the basis of patterns in other languages (Ringbom, 2001). So, as we can see in Ringbom's classification, deceptive cognate words are broadly classified into partial and total without further detail. Furthermore, this classification defines false friends, or deceptive cognates, as form-based transfer instead of as meaning-based transfer as suggested in Postigo Pinazo (1997).

2. FALSE FRIENDS IN EFL

In the same way as cognate words, or rather true cognates, bring about undeniable help in the development of some linguistic abilities in learners with specific linguistic

backgrounds, there are also cognate words with a deceptive meaning, often known as deceptive cognates or false friends, and which may entail a learning difficulty. False friends are not exceedingly common in Spanish-English but in some contexts[2] they represent a true learning problem as they become rather frequent. So, although their occurrence is not too high, it is not so scarce either as not to require special attention on the part of researchers and language teachers. Arnold (1992) confirmed that not knowing the meaning of some false friends in reading activities is potentially more dangerous that not knowing the meaning of unfamiliar words, because in the former case students usually try to infer the meanings of those familiar words without checking them. It should also be taken into consideration that when a language learner misunderstands a false friend, it is very improbable that s/he will realise the mistake unless negative evidence is provided by means of explicit information (Lightbown and Spada 1993).

In relation to the degree of difficulty in learning false friends, this may be determined by two inherent features, that is, if they are total false friends or if they are only partially deceptive. The first group comprises those false friends which have an utterly different meaning in both languages (e.g.: Engl. 'terrific'; Span. *estupendo*), whereas the second group, partial false friends, refers to polysemous words, one of whose meanings is a false friend while another (or others) is a true cognate word (e.g.: Engl. 'approve' means *dar el visto bueno* or *dar su aprobación*, whereas Span. *aprobar* also means *pasar una prueba o examen*). It is precisely this last type of false friends that can be most confusing for EFL students.

Following this pedagogic perspective, Frantzen (1998) distinguishes two factors that may determine the degree of false friends' difficulty: intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Intrinsic factors emerge from the confusing character of false friends *per se*, for example the fact that some of them have a deceptive meaning in all circumstances whereas some others may not be deceptive in certain contexts. This fact leads EFL students to a situation of considerable uncertainty because, in some cases they are not confident if their meaning is misleading in all instances (reliably false) (e.g.: Span. *carpeta* ≠ Engl. 'carpet', Span. *fábrica* ≠ Engl. 'fabric') or if, on the contrary, in some cases they can be, in fact, true cognates (unreliable false) (Span. introducir ≠ English 'to introduce s.o. to s.o. else', but it also means 'bring up a topic'). Another intrinsic factor lies in the fact that the semantic field in which they tend to appear may also overlap; so, false friends may have meanings in both languages which are within the same semantic field (e.g.: English 'constipated' and Span. *constipado*, these words are both within the semantic field of 'health'). The third intrinsic factor that Frantzen points out is that students may show a tendency to overgeneralize as a result of the large number of cognate words (true friends) that they may come across, perhaps induced by the teacher or the teaching methodology.

Extrinsic factors arise from the different types of contradictory input that students may be exposed to. On some occasions, and as can be seen in other research articles cited above, language learners are sometimes encouraged to make use and take advantage of true cognates, without being warned of the existence of false friends. This practice may give rise to a situation of frustration on the part of the language learners as they may

perceive that it is a problem-inducing and confusing strategy. As a result of this circumstance, it is likely that students develop a feeling of dissatisfaction as they perceive that this 'inferring' strategy sometimes works and sometimes does not. Students may avoid cognate words (true friends) because they suspect that they do not really mean what they look. Frantzen indicates another extrinsic factor which is less representative in EFL contexts but rather plausible in an L2 learning context. Some false friends have become commonplace in certain Spanish-speaking communities within the US, (e.g.: marqueta ≈ market ≈ *mercado*). She also refers to the number of potential mistakes within the EFL classroom context, the lack of systematicity in media translations, and the oversimplification of lexicographers when writing dictionaries.

3. TOWARDS A TYPOLOGICAL CLASSIFICATION OF FALSE FRIENDS

As regards the classification of true cognate words and false friends, not many far-reaching advances have been attempted so far. Nevertheless, some individual research projects have tried to organize them, with different purposes in mind, but there is not a standardized typology comprising formal and semantic criteria at the same level of analysis.

Moss (1992) classified a written corpus of false friends according to the following criteria: (a) word length (number of letters); (b) number of differences between English and Spanish words; (c) the proportional difference (i.e., the proportion of differences with respect to word length); (d) part of speech; (e) whether the initial and final letters are the same or different; (f) the number of vowel differences (these are divided into addition, deletion and change); (g) the number of consonant differences (divided into addition, deletion, and change); and, (h) specific letter differences.

Postigo Pinazo (1997) collected a corpus of over 1,800 potentially misleading words (Spanish-English) and classified them into the following four categories: (a) phonetic false friends; (b) graphic false friends; (c) false friends derived from loanwords; and, (d) semantic false friends, which could be subdivided into total or partial. This classification seems rather imprecise because it does not attempt to find connections between three basic levels of analysis, the semantic, morpho-syntactic and phonological ones, which certainly overlap. In addition to this, no implications for language learning, or for any other applied aspect of language use like, for instance, translation, can be drawn from this classification. Postigo Pinazo (1997) gathered a number of Spanish-English false friends and made reference to their linguistic form, their origin and their meaning but dealt with these three categories as mutually exclusive, when they are, in fact, interrelated since all false friends regardless of their form or origin are semantic.

The present study adopts a pedagogic perspective as false friends are considered a psycholinguistic learning problem that requires special consideration within the language learning classroom. So, false friends are not analyzed with regards to a historical perspective, their diachronic background, or their evolution through time, but simply as potential learning problems regardless of their origin.

Given the lack of conclusive research and broad categorizations of cognate words, with either reliable or unreliable similarities, the classification below has been developed. The CCVF (*Clasificación de Cognados Verdaderos y Falsos*) intends to help in the taxonomy of certain groups of cognate words in the hope that this typology can facilitate and pave the way for future research in the fields of Foreign Language Teaching and Learning. However, it should be explained that the following graphic describes a complicated linguistic feature and whenever such an attempt given the complexity of the linguistic system is made, some other linguistic aspects are inevitably simplified. For instance, the fact that false friends may vary depending on the language variety (British and American English) is not taken into account in the present classification. It should also be borne in mind that cognate words are language specific for each pair of languages, and on this occasion it is only valid for English and Spanish.

A representation of the cognate words' mental lexicon in the L1 and the L2.
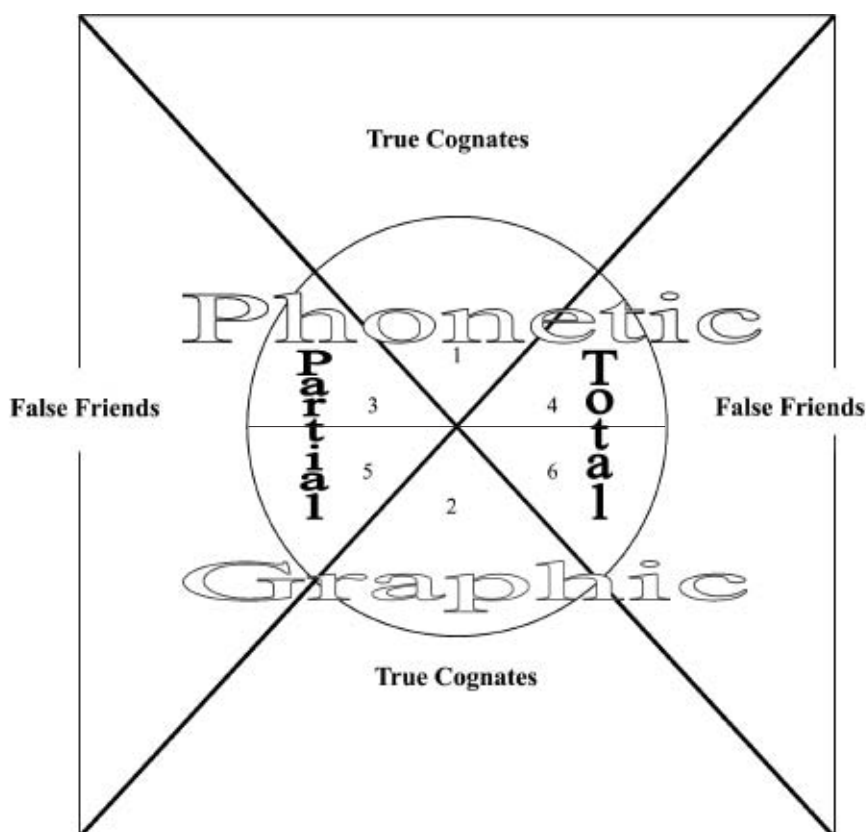
Graphic 1. *A typology of Spanish-English true cognates and false friends (CCVF)*

1 = True Cognates: Phonetic.
2 = True Cognates: Graphic.
3 = Partial False Friends: Phonetic.
4 = Total False Friends: Phonetic.
5 = Partial False Friends: Graphic.
6 = Total False Friends: Graphic.

The graphic above represents a schematization that may help to classify cognate words according to three variables. Firstly, if they are true cognates or false cognates (false friends). Secondly, if they are graphic or phonetic cognate words, that is, if their pronunciation evokes the pronunciation of a word in the L1 (phonetic) (e.g.: Engl. *television* /ˈtelɪvɪʒən/ and Spa. *televisión* /teleβɪˈsjon/), or if their written form recalls a word in the L1 even though the pronunciation may differ utterly in both languages (graphic) (Engl. *arena* /əˈriːnə/; Span. *arena* /aˈɾena/). Thirdly, in the case of false friends, if they are partial or total from a semantic point of view, i.e, total false friends entail the univocal relationship between a meaning A in the L1, and a meaning B in the L2, whereas partial false friends involve a meaning A in the L1 but some other meanings in the L2 (A, B, C, D, etc.). See table 1 for a detailed analysis of cognate word difficulty.

	Meaning	Spelling	Pronunciation	Degree of difficulty
Type 1	+	+	+	Nil
Type 2	+	+	−	Low
Type 3	+ / −	+	+	High
Type 4	−	+	+	Medium
Type 5	+ / −	+	−	Very high
Type 6	−	+	−	Medium

Table 1

According to the *CCVF* there are six possible types of cognate words; two of them qualify as true cognates and the remaining four as false friends.

A. TRUE COGNATES: PHONETIC

E.g.: Engl. laboratory /ləˈbɒrətri/ = Span. *laboratorio* /laβoɾaˈtoɾjo/
    vocabulary /vəˈkæbjʊləri/ = Span. *vocabulario* /bokaβuˈlaɾjo/.

These cognate words may make a valuable contribution to the process of learning a non-native language because they can aid EFL learners given the semantic, orthographic and phonological similarities with the L1. Whenever a language learner

hears a word included in this category, s/he can easily identify the word given the pronunciation similarities with the L1 (See table 2 for further examples). It would need to be specified that these words showing a similarity in their oral form, additionally exhibit useful analogy in the written form.

	Examples
Type 1	Effective, consonant, perfect, interesting.
Type 2	Isle, horizon, ocean, triangle.
Type 3	Fabric, suspend, support, faculty (AmE), disorder, involve.
Type 4	Abrupt, relevant, evidence, sympathy, sensible, pamphlet, edit.
Type 5	Coincide, decent, education, spade, enroll, err.
Type 6	Audacious, signature, vegetables, journal, scholar, lantern, vacation.

Table 2

B. TRUE COGNATES: GRAPHIC

E.g.: Engl. horizon /həˈraɪzən/ = Span. *horizonte* /oɾiˈθon̪te/
Engl. ocean /ˈəʊʃən/ = Span. *océano* /oˈθeano/.

Words included in this category are very helpful for the language learner from a semantic point of view, too. In this case, the similarity embraces the written form of the word but not so much the pronunciation and, therefore, the language learner may fail to identify the word in listening and will probably be unsuccessful in pronouncing it appropriately if a model is not provided (See table 2 for further examples).

C. PARTIAL FALSE FRIENDS: PHONETIC

E.g.: Engl. (to) attend /əˈtend/ = Span. *asistir a* (to be present)
Span. *prestar atención* (to listen carefully)
≠ Span. *atender* /ateṇdeɾ/ (to pay attention)
(to) attend to = Span. *ocuparse de*
Span. *atender* (a shop-assistant)

At this level of analysis, the semantic component is introduced as a component in the classification of cognate words, and the partial/total variable refers to that characteristic. Partial false friends have a main meaning in one of the languages but may represent a number of different meanings in the other language. Total false friends, however, show a clear semantic difference in both languages while marinating a correspondence between one word and one meaning. At the phonetic level, the affinity between the languages is strong enough to let the language learner perceive the aural similarity. (See table 2 for further examples).

D. Total false friends: Phonetic

E.g.: Engl. (to) assist /əˈsɪst/ = Span. *ayudar*
Span. *asistir* /asisˈtiɾ/ (help)
≠ Span. asistir (*to attend*)

Total false friends cause a learning problem given the lack of semantic correspondence. In any case, this absence of equivalence is one-to-one in the L1 and the L2, and that determines that these words do not become excessively difficult for the language learner. In this case the cognitive processing in learning the word requires that the language learner assign a new meaning to a word that seems to have another meaning. Pronunciation does not present any difficulty to the language learner. (See table 2 for further examples)

E. Partial false friends: Graphic

E.g.: Engl. career /kəˈrɪə/ = Span. *carrera profesional* (E.g.: *carrera judicial*)
Span. *trayectoria profesional*
≠ Span. *carrera* /kaˈreɾa/ (*universitaria*)
Engl. agenda /əˈdʒendə/ = Span. *orden del día*
Span. *agenda* /aˈxenda/ (*programa*)
≠ Span. *libreta* (diary)

Just as in type 3, words included within this category present a hindrance related to the lack of semantic equivalence between the L1 and the L2. What is more, while there is no major difficulty in the written recognition of the word, a serious problem arises in the aural identification and oral production of the word. (See table 2 for further examples).

F. Total false friends: Graphic

E.g.: Engl. qualifications /ˈkwɔlɪfɪˈkeɪʃənz/ = Span. *requisito, antecedentes laborales*
≠ Span. *calificación* /kalifikaˈθjon/
(grades)
Engl. lecture /ˈlektʃə/ = Span. *charla, conferencia, clase universitaria*
≠ Span. *lectura* /lekˈtuɾa/

Parallel to type 4, type 6 false friends present an unequivocal dissimilarity in meaning between the L1 and the L2. In relation to their formal written identification they are not exceedingly complex but their pronunciation is often not so obvious to the language learner. (See table 2 for further examples).

4. CONCLUSIONS

The taxonomy described above may have a practical application in the learning of foreign languages, particularly in the learning of English as a Foreign Language. Once this framework for the classification of cognate words has been developed, the next step –which is beyond the aims of this paper– would be to classify most frequent cognate words (Spanish-English) according to this common framework (see table 2 for an instance). Arising out of this taxonomy different teaching/learning tasks and exercises can be developed according to the word type within the *CCVF* and their perceived degree of difficulty, which would certainly suggest that it would be wise to introduce different types of false friends at different proficiency levels. Later, different teaching techniques and methodologies could be elaborated for the teaching of false friends following various types of focus on form which have proven to be remarkably effective in teaching false friends (Chacón Beltrán, 2001) in a classroom context. A further implication of this study is that the *CCVF* could be applied to other pairs of languages, taking into account that it will prove more efficient in historically related languages which have evolved differently.

Odlin (2003: 478) points out that "[…] there does not yet exist any comprehensive theory of language transfer - and the appearance of one any time soon seems unlikely". In the meantime domain-specific studies such as the one presented here seem to be the only way to research crosslinguistic influence.

NOTES

1. See Cenoz, Hufeisen, and Jessner (2001).
2. In academic English, for instance, many false friends are to be found.

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