

Criteria for determining the degree of 'danger' associated with false friends

False friends (also known as 'deceptive cognates', 'treacherous twins', etc.) are a source of lexicosemantic interference. They can be defined as lexemes in different languages with formal congruency (i.e. similarity or regular correspondence) that do not provide the best semantic equivalent for each other, e.g. R. *stol* 'table' vs. Bg. *stol* 'chair'. While some false friends cause a lot of trouble for almost all bilinguals, other pairs are hardly ever confused. What determines how 'dangerous' a pair of false friends is? The degree of 'danger' can be analyzed on the basis of two factors: the probability of confusion and the seriousness of the potential consequences. This paper shows that the former factor is much more important than the latter. Among the various items discussed, the risk of confusion is increased especially by an overlap of the aggregate denotations of the words in question and by a semantic connection (proximity or antonymity) between their individual definitions. With criteria like these at hand, the 'danger' of any pair of false friends can be estimated, and certain particularly nasty pairs can be singled out in order to compose effective 'false friends' exercises for learners or to mark them in bilingual dictionaries.

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Hayward & Moulin (1984: 190) define the concept of "false friends of the translator" using Saussure's terminology: they are two words in different languages whose *signifiers* (forms) are "more or less similar" ("mehr oder weniger ähnlich", Gauger 1989: 581), but whose *signifieds* (meanings) differ. Examples of this phenomenon include Russian *stol* 'table' vs. Bulgarian *stol* 'chair', Russian *gora* 'mountain' vs. Bulgarian *gora* 'forest', and Russian *strana* 'country' vs. Bulgarian *strana* 'country; side; cheek'.¹ Unfortunately, the term *false friends* is used by different authors with different meanings. This article uses a clear synchronic definition (see Bunčić 2000: 17) that refers to lexemes of the same part of speech and avoids defining semantic differences.²

¹ More examples from Slavic languages can be found in the wikibook *False Friends of the Slavist* (https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/False_Friends_of_the_Slavist). [The original article referred to my private website before it was turned into a wikibook.—D. B. 2026.]

² The original German article uses the term *pseudo-analognymy* introduced by Hengst (1977: 252). Since this term never caught on, I here translate it as *false friends*. (D. B. 2026)

However, even with such a clear definition, which excludes much of what is often interpreted as “false friends”,³ this turns out to be a very heterogeneous phenomenon. That applies, first of all, to the probability of errors associated with a given pair of words.

- (1) Russian *bulka* = Bulgarian *xlebče, bjal xljab, simid*
Bulgarian *bulka* = Russian *nevesta; devuška*
- (2) Russian *čitat'* = Serbian *čitati* ‘to read in a book, newspaper, etc.’
Russian *čitat'* = Serbian *recitovati* ‘to read aloud’

It is clear that among the examples given here, Russian *bulka* and Bulgarian *bulka* are fairly harmless false friends, while Russian *čitat'* and Serbian 2 *čitati* can easily be confused. Even a professional philologist made a mistake here when translating a conversation with Aleksandr Blok from Russian into Serbian (original: Aljanskij 1972: 109; translation: Aljanski 1971: 64). Although Marojević (1989: 23) sharply criticizes this mistake,⁴ this type of false friends is incomparably more complex than the one in (1).

What is the difference? What factors influence the varying degrees of ‘danger’ of false friends? It seems that formal similarity only provides *an opportunity* for error, but a greater or lesser degree of similarity probably does not affect the likelihood of confusion between two similar forms (after all, even the forms of ‘true friends’ can be more or less different, cf. Russian *vysyxat'* vs. Bulgarian *izsaxvam*, Russian *ot* vs. Ukrainian *vid*). Therefore, this article is limited to the *semantic* side of this issue.

Most words (both false friends and others) have several meanings. This is because *polysemy* is a linguistic universal, necessary for expressing an infinite number of possible situations with a limited number of signs (lexemes) that human mem-

³ The following phenomena are excluded, among others:

- formal interference, which Svobodová-Chemlová (1982) calls “presqu’amis” (“almost-friends”), e.g. Russian *svěkla* (feminine) vs. Bulgarian *cvekló* (neuter) ‘beetroot’, Russian *plóščad'* (feminine) vs. Bulgarian *ploštád* (masculine) ‘square, plaza’;
- “barbarisms”, also called “sans-amis” (“without-friends”, Svobodová-Chemlová 1982) or “mots-fantômes” (“phantom words”, Murav'ev 1985: 5f.), i.e. words that do not exist in a given language, e.g. Russian *teatr* vs. Serbian **teatar* ‘theater’ (which is *pozorište* in Serbian);
- word forms in different “grammatical positions” (Karpov 1998: 57), e.g. Russian *greška* (gen.sg. of *grešok* ‘trivial offense’) vs. Bulgarian *greška* (nom.sg.) ‘mistake’;
- words of different parts of speech, e.g. Russian *xotel* (verb, past tense) ‘wanted to’ vs. Bulgarian *xotel* (noun, nominative case) ‘hotel’.

⁴ “Није јасно како се преводилац није досетио да се не може читати «опирући се обема рукама о наслон столице» него само рецитовати, говорити.” (“It is unclear why it did not occur to the translator that one cannot read while ‘leaning both hands on the back of a chair’, but only recite from memory, speak.”)

ory can retain. Consequently, a language without polysemy would be a "linguistic hell" ("лингвистический ад", Budagov 1963: 242).⁵

Therefore, when it comes to the meaning of a word, a distinction should be made between *individual meanings* (at the level of *parole*), of which a single lexeme may have several depending on the context in which it is used, and *the aggregate meaning* (at the level of *langue*) as the sum of the individual meanings. For example, the Russian word *volja* has the aggregate meaning 'desire; power; freedom', but in a specific utterance, *volja* can only appear in one of the three separate meanings, viz. 'desire', 'power', or 'freedom'.⁶

Against the backdrop of the **aggregate meaning of a word-form** as the sum of all its individual meanings, homonymy turns out to be only a special case of polysemy, so that within this article it is quite possible to consider the relationship between the meanings of two false friends without focusing on the difference between homonymy and polysemy.

□3 At the level of the aggregate meaning, we can speak of *complete false friends* when the meanings of two lexemes are in *a relationship of exclusion*:

- (3) Russian *život* = Bulgarian *korem, tãrbux* 'belly'
Bulgarian *život* = Russian *žizn'* 'life'
- (4) Russian *majka* = Bulgarian *potnik, riza, košulja* 'undershirt, T-shirt, jersey'
Bulgarian *majka* = Russian *mat'* 'mother'; *matka* 'womb', *gajka* 'nut (for a bolt)'

Such false friends are easiest for language learners to remember, since the logical proposition that learners need to master is relatively simple: $A \neq B$, e.g. Bulgarian *život* \neq Russian *život*.

In the case of *partial false friends*, the language learner must additionally remember the conditions under which $A = B$ and the conditions under which $A \neq B$. The group of partial false friends can be further divided into subgroups of *inclusion* and *intersection*. In the case of *inclusion*, one of the lexemes covers all the meanings of the other, but the latter does not have all the meanings of the former:

- (5) Bulgarian *kraj* = Russian *kraj* 'boundary line; country, region'
Bulgarian *kraj* = Russian *konec* 'end'
- (6) Russian *brak* = Bulgarian *brak* 'marriage; scrap, waste'
Russian *brak* = Bulgarian *nedostatak, greška* 'flaw, defect'

⁵ Budagov attributes this expression to Otto Jespersen, but unfortunately without specific bibliographical data.

⁶ Of course, it is possible to distinguish even more individual meanings; for example, Ožegov & Švedova (1999: 96) give two lexemes, *volja*¹ and *volja*², with five and two meanings, respectively.

Here, difficulties arise only in one direction, namely when translating from a language in which the word has more meanings. For example, when translating the Bulgarian word *kraj* with the meaning ‘end’, there is a danger of mistranslating it with the Russian word *kraj*. In the opposite case, the Russian word *kraj* is always correctly translated with the Bulgarian word *kraj*, since it covers all the meanings of the Russian lexeme.

Even more complex is the *intersection* of meanings. In this group of false friends, *both* lexemes have meanings that are not found in the false equivalent:

- (7) Russian *isxod* = Bulgarian *izxod* ‘result; way out of a bad situation’
 Russian *isxod* = Bulgarian *kraj* ‘end’
 Bulgarian *izxod* = Russian *vyxod* ‘exit’

Thus, this type of false friends has disadvantages in terms of both exclusion and inclusion: because of the meanings common to both lexemes, they are difficult to distinguish, and mistakes can be made in translation in both directions.

Milan (1989: 399), who conducts a similar semantic analysis of false friends, points out that Ivir (1968: 152–154) also mentions the relationship of equivalence, in which the semantics of the lexemes are the same. Such “false friends” differ, for example, in frequency of use. However, different frequencies of lexemes are always associated with stylistic, pragmatic, or minor semantic differences (unless the words refer to realities that occur with different frequencies in the compared language communities), so [□4](#) it seems insufficient to call this phenomenon (semantic) equivalence. Instead, the existing differences should be explored in more detail.

The specific meaning that a word has in *parole* is closely related to the situation in which the word is used. This means that in a specific situation, the danger of confusing the meaning of one word with the meaning of another exists only if both lexemes can semantically be used in the same situation. Therefore, many pairs of words that formally are false friends are unlikely to ever lead to errors due to inappropriate context. This applies primarily to those false friends whose members have accidentally converged (or become almost identical) in the course of the history of the language:

- (8) Bulgarian *krik* = Russian *domkrat* ‘car jack’
 Russian *krik* = Bulgarian *vik* ‘shout, cry’
- (9) Bulgarian *razboj* = Russian *tkackij stanok* ‘loom’
 Russian *razboj* = Bulgarian *obir* ‘robbery’

However, there are also randomly merged false friends with a high probability of error, and etymologically related words can diverge semantically so far that misunderstanding is almost impossible. The latter occurred with the following lexemes, which go back to the verbal root **dum-* ‘to think’:

- (10) Bulgarian *duma* = Russian *slovo* 'word'
 Russian *duma* = Bulgarian (*Narodno*) *sābranie* '(national) parliament'; *misāl* 'thought'; *iztočnoslavjanska narodna pesen* 'East Slavic folk song'

It should be noted that when analyzing the risk of errors, we can only talk about probabilities. Since the number of possible situations is infinite, we can never rule out a situation in which two words are in a paradigmatic relationship that could cause confusion. Thus, "a 'false friend' does not exist objectively between two languages but always affects an individual speaker" ("besteht ein 'faux ami' nicht objektiv zwischen zwei Sprachen, sondern es ist immer ein individueller Sprecher davon betroffen", Haschka 1989: 149), for whom some false friends pose no problem, while others that seem obvious lead them astray. Since false friends are a concept of comparative lexicology, not only didactics, it covers all pairs of words that formally meet its criteria. However, some particularly difficult cases can be identified among them.

□5 The risk of confusion exists, first of all, when false friends belong to the same lexicosemantic field, e.g. the field of entertainment activities:

- (11) Russian *ignat'* = Bulgarian *igraja* 'to play, have fun; to play a game; to play a role'
 Russian *ignat'* = Bulgarian *svirja* 'to play music'
 Bulgarian *igraja* = Russian *tancevat'*, *pljasat'* 'to dance'

Often, though not always, it is possible to find a specific generic concept for false friends, so that the words being compared are cohyponyms:

- (12) Russian *dynja* = Bulgarian *pāpeš* 'cantaloupe, muskmelon, *Cucumis melo*'
 Bulgarian *dinja* = Russian *arbutz* 'watermelon, *Citrullus lanatus*'
 (13) Russian *godina* (poetic) = Bulgarian *vreme*, *moment* 'time, period, moment'
 Bulgarian *godina* = Russian *god* 'year'

The generic concepts in (12) and (13) are, respectively, 'soft-fleshed sweet-flavored fruit of the gourd family' and 'time'.

It is worth noting that words with opposite meanings also belong to the same lexicosemantic field; for example, both of the following false friends can denote human qualities:

- (14) Russian *vrednyj* = Bulgarian *vreden* 'harmful, dangerous'
 Russian *vrednyj* = Bulgarian *neprijaznen* 'hostile'
 Bulgarian *vreden* = Russian *lovkij*, *umelyj* 'neat, skillful, capable'

Furthermore, one of the false friends can be a hypernym of the other.

- (15) Russian *jagoda* = Bulgarian *sočen zārnest plod ot xrastovi rastenija* 'berry'
 Bulgarian *jagoda* = Russian *klubnika* 'strawberry'
 (16) Russian *palec* = Bulgarian *prāst* 'finger; toe'
 Bulgarian *palec* = Russian *bol'soj palec* 'thumb; big toe'

Čongarova (1992: 77) refers to this as *inclusion* of one lexeme by another. However, this term should not be confused with the aforementioned *relationship of inclusion*, which refers to the range of meanings in the sense of polysemy, whereas this *inclusion* is related to the “breadth of meaning” (“Bedeutungsbreite”, Hengst 1977: 257; “širokoznačnost”, Čongarova 1992: 78). Čongarova also cites the following false friends as examples of *inclusion*:

- (17) Russian *nedelja* = Bulgarian *sedmica* ‘week’
 Bulgarian *nedelja* = Russian *voskresen’e* ‘Sunday’
- (18) Russian *bor* = Bulgarian *borova gora* ‘pine grove, pine forest’
 Bulgarian *bor* = Russian *sosna* ‘pine tree’

Indeed, the phenomenon here is similar, but not the same. After all, in (15)–(16), we are dealing with generic and specific concepts (i.e. *hyponymy*), so it is always logically true that ‘a strawberry is a berry’, ‘a thumb is a finger’, etc. In (17)–(18), however, such identification (*‘Sunday is a week’, *‘a pinetree is a pine grove’) is impossible because they are in a part-whole relationship (i.e. **▣6** *paronymy*). Therefore, it would be more accurate to distinguish between *hyponymic inclusion* and *paronymic inclusion*.

Sometimes the semantic difference between false friends consists only in a small nuance, for example, in the degree of coldness in (19).

- (19) Russian *xolod* = Serbian *hladnoća, studen, zima* ‘cold’
 Serbian *hlad* = Russian *prohlada* ‘coolness’; *ten’* ‘shade’

Here, it can be clearly determined that these words, which are similar in meaning, are nevertheless not equivalent.

So far, we have only discussed *semantic* differences. However, words that are completely identical in meaning can also be false friends, differing from each other, for example, stylistically. Thus, the Russian words *dlan’* ‘hand, palm’ and *usta* ‘mouth’ are considered obsolete in Russian and therefore have an archaic or poetic connotation when they appear in modern texts. By contrast, in Bulgarian, *dlan* ‘hand, palm’ and *usta* ‘mouth’ are neutral words corresponding to the Russian *ladon’* and *rot*, respectively.

While the *probability* of error is influenced by the relationship between the meanings of two words, it is largely **the meaning itself** that determines the consequences of the error. For example, false friends containing a precise definition of time or place can result in people not arriving on time for a meeting or not finding the right road.

- (20) Russian: *napravo* = Bulgarian: *na djasno* ‘to the right’
 Bulgarian *na pravo* = Russian *prjamo* ‘straight on’

- (21) Russian: *sutra* = Serbian: *ujutro* 'in the morning'
 Serbian: *sutra* = Russian: *zavtra* 'tomorrow'

The danger of awkward situations arises when the word used turns out to denote a concept from a specific sphere of usage:

- (22) Bulgarian *kal* = Russian *grjaz'* 'dirt'
 Russian *kal* = Bulgarian *ekskrementi* 'excrements'

The Russian verb *pisat'* is a special case: with the stress on the second syllable, it has the same harmless meaning as its Bulgarian counterpart *piša*. However, in the latter, the stress is placed on the first syllable, and with this accentuation in Russian, the word takes on a different meaning and a colloquial tone:

- (23) Rus. *pisát'* = Bulg. *piša* 'to write'
 Russian *pisat'* (colloquial) = Bulgarian *pikája* 'to pee'

However, the factor of the meaning of the two words is modified by the relationship between their meanings, as seen in (24).

- (24) Russian *grudastyj* = Serbian *grudast* 'grainy, granular'
 Russian *grudastyj* = Serbian *sa velikim grudima* 'big-breasted'

Here, due to the relationship of inclusion between these words, a mistake can only be made when translating from Russian into Serbian. This means that the only possible mistake is that a Russian speaker who wants to describe a woman with large breasts in Serbian uses a technical term with the meaning 'grainy'. False friends that are swearwords in both languages are also relatively safe.

- (25) Russian *prostak* = Serbian *glupak* 'simpleton'
 Serbian *prostač* = Russian *grubijan, neveža* 'rude person'

Thus, to determine the 'danger' of false friends, we can say that the meanings of the two words being compared in themselves, which may influence the consequences of a potential error, are of secondary importance. More important is the type of relationship between the meanings, which affects the probability of error. Pairs of false friends pose a particular danger when the meanings of polysemous words overlap or when there is a semantic connection (proximity or antonymy) between their individual meanings.

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