

FALSE FRIENDS IN BUSINESS ENGLISH

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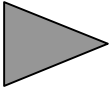
Abstract

The present article aims to identify various classes of deceptive cognates (false friends) within the context of the Business English vocabulary, in an attempt to raise students' awareness of the correct use of this lexis.



Foreword

This article looks at an area that learners of a foreign language are almost inevitably confronted with, often impairing their ability to get the message through clearly and accurately: the so-called *false friends*, whose resemblance to words in the mother tongue is not only misleading, but may result in downright miscommunication. It is thus an attempt to improve students' communication skills by raising their awareness of a correct and appropriate use of the business vocabulary, as correct communication can have a direct impact on the economic and commercial activities they will be involved in, in their future careers.

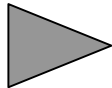


Semantic relations between words

The semantic relations between the words of one and the same language or between the words of different languages are highly complex, but for practical reasons they can be simplified by considering three fundamental types:

- A. words different both in form and in meaning
- B. words identical or similar in form but different in meaning
- C. words different in form but identical or related in meaning

From my teaching experience I have noticed that the most difficult problems are raised by words and terms in group B which contains the so-called *false friends* or *deceptive cognates*. First of all the present study will attempt a clearer identification of such false friends in business English starting from the thorough and competent classification put forward by Bantaş and Rădulescu (1992: 7-9).



Classes of false friends

1. *Greek / Latin words* whose meanings differ in the two languages, although they derive from a common source. They are also called *external false friends*. Their meanings have followed parallel though partially or totally different paths (because of partial selection, extension, or narrowing of meaning) in one of the two languages or in an intermediate language.

In certain instances Romanian took over from Latin or from French more parts of speech represented by one and the same polyfunctional word than English (or English fewer than Romanian). For instance, the Romanian *filial* (adj.) is translated into English by *filial* but the Romanian *filială* is a noun translated by *subsidiary*.

2. Some English words display similarities due to *polysemy*, *paronymy*, *polyfunctionalism*, *composition*, *differences between British and American English*. They are also called internal false friends as they occurred through an independent evolution of the language.

In their turn they can be subdivided into:

- a) polysemantic words usually forming separate entries in dictionaries;
- b) compound words whose meanings is not the sum total of their components (e.g. *sweet oil* – “ulei de măsline”, *logwood* – “lemn de băcan”, *man-of-war* – “vas de război”, *blackleg* - “spărgător de grevă”, *charter party* – “contract de navlosire”, *blue chips* - “acțiuni extrem de sigure”);
- c) polysemants with one or several meanings that preclude their use in certain contexts;
- d) semantic differences between *American* and *British English* also generate false friends.
 - e. g. billion
 - corn
 - depot
 - stock
 - subway

3. Further false friends are generated by the *relations between English and Romanian*, sometimes influenced – directly or indirectly – by a *third language*.

a) English borrowings into Romanian

e.g. *trust, score, ring, pool*

b) English words accidentally similar to some Romanian words.

4. *English words which may resemble words in other languages*

e.g. *mist, gift, kind, etc.*

If we confine ourselves to considering false friends only from the point of view of the similarities between Romanian and English we can advance a more simplified classification of these pitfalls. Examining them from the degree of jeopardy for the Romanian learners of business English we can identify:

a) words with a single meaning, different from that of the similar words in the other language:

e.g. *advertisement, alternation, agreement*

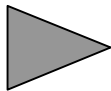
b) words with several meanings, most of them similar and only one different from their counterparts

c) words with several meanings, some of which are different in the two languages

e.g. *record, operation*

d) polysemantic words with all meanings different from those of their counterparts in the other language.

To investigate the phenomenon of such false friends in business English, I have examined a sample of 2700 terms from the dictionaries listed in the Bibliography. I have found that over 270 words (therefore approximately 10%) would go into one or other of the above classes of false friends being susceptible of wrong uses.



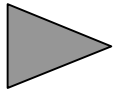
Typical mistakes made by Romanian students

In order to identify the difficulties encountered by Romanian students in the use of these terms, I have collected a series of typical mistakes made in test papers by 3rd and 4th year students of economics. The observations I made by analysing the errors in the students' tests have entirely validated the preliminary findings made by studying the entries in the specialist dictionaries.

Most of the mistakes consist in a wrong enlargement of the meaning of the word under the influence of the Romanian term. Thus the word *advertisement* (= Rom. reclamă, anunț publicitar) has been translated by “avertisement” (= Engl. warning), the word *account* (= Rom. cont) was wrongly interpreted as “aconț” (= Engl. advance payment); the word *furniture* (= Rom. mobilă, mobilier) was interpreted as “furnitură” (= Engl.); *manufacture* (= Rom. fabricare, prelucrare industrială, produse finite) was used for “manufactură”; *petrol* (= Rom. benzină) was translated as “petrol” (= Engl. oil); the word *rate* (= Rom. ritm, rată, tarif, preț), was also given the meaning “rată, tranșă a unui împrumut” (= Engl. installment); *reclamation* (= Rom. recuperare, revendicare) was interpreted as “reclamație” (= Engl. claim, complaint); the word *magazine*

(= Rom. arsenal, depozit; revistă ilustrată) was used with the meaning of “magazin” (= Engl. shop/store); the term *defalcation* (= Rom. delapidare) was translated as “eșalonare” (influenced by the Rom. “defalcare”); the word *scope* (= Rom. sferă de activitate, domeniu, competență) was wrongly given the meaning of “scop”, “obiectiv”; *tax* (= Rom. impozit) was interpreted as “taxă”.

I have also noticed the reverse phenomenon: the narrowing of the semantic field of the English terms under the influence of the Romanian correspondents. The phenomenon is known as “*hidden interference*”. For example, the word *balance* (=echilibru, bilanț, balanță, sold) was used only with the meanings “balanță” and “bilanț” and not with the meaning “sold”; *equity* (=echitate; moștenire liberă de creanță; capital social; averea acționarilor) was mostly used with the first two meanings; *enterprise* (=inițiativă, îndrăzneală, proiect, antrepriză, fabrică, întreprindere) was used only with the meaning “întreprindere”.



Conclusion

After this evaluation of the groups and subgroups of possible pitfalls in the Business English vocabulary, as seen from the point of view of Romanian students I have concluded that the actual false friends are a matter of bipartite or tripartite linguistic relations and occasionally of socio-linguistic implications.

To avoid such pitfalls students of English should be taught to analyze the context in which the words occur, to consult specialist dictionaries and specialist literature.

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