

# FALSE FRIENDS IN THE ROMANIAN AND ENGLISH LANGUAGES A COMPARATIVE SURVEY

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## Abstract

*False friends or false cognates, a linguistic phenomenon, are an important topic within the study of language, a living organism that is constantly changing and evolving. Even though the focus of analysis in this paper is the concept of false friends, it is very important to comprehend the difference between these and cognate words. False friends often confuse what people are trying to communicate, especially when context cannot help in resolving the confusion. Hence, to avoid possible misunderstandings that might arise, it is important for learners to know the most important false friends between two languages.*

**Key words:** *false friends, cognates, English, Romanian.*

Cognates are words that are similar in form or sound to words in another language but have a different meaning and are not etymologically related. Cognates are semantically, morphologically, phonologically (Amengual, 2012)<sup>268</sup>, pragmatically, and orthographically overlapping lexical items drawn from categorically different lexicons.

Lemhöfer, Dijkstra, and Michel (2004)<sup>269</sup> explain why cognates are oftentimes used when analyzing the mental lexicon, “Because they represent the lexical overlap between languages, they offer a straightforward way to tackle the question whether even in a language-exclusive setting, bilinguals are influenced by their other language” (p. 587). Undoubtedly, cognate words can ease the second language

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<sup>268</sup> Amengual, M. (2012). *Interlingual influence in bilingual speech: Cognate status effect in a continuum of bilingualism*. Bilingualism (Cambridge, England), p. 521, 15(3), 517-530. doi:10.1017/s1366728911000460

<sup>269</sup> Lemhöfer, K., Dijkstra, A. & Michel, M. (2004). *Three languages, one ECHO: Cognate effects in trilingual word recognition*. Language and Cognitive Processes, p.587



acquisition process due to the similarities between cognates in native and second language.

Linguist Leila Caid is of the opinion that “a true friend is a homophone/homograph word in two languages having a common origin, and which has remained similar in both languages in all its meanings.” It will be a partial true friend when the pair of words differs in meaning.

A pair of homophones/homographs that only retains a single common meaning will be considered a partial false friend. Finally, when they are only homophones/homographs and do not have any common meaning, even though they maintain a common etymology, we will talk about total false friends. According to this author, false cognates designate “friendly” words that differ in at least one sense or that have totally different meanings in both languages: “faux-amis totaux” (total or partial false friends).<sup>270</sup>

The phenomenon of false friends has several definitions and several viewpoints. The so-called ‘enemies’ of linguistics might as well be a source of misinterpretation between speakers of different dialects of the same language.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a false friend is a word that is often confused with a word in another language or dialect with a different meaning because the two words look or sound similar. Typically, false friends, an informal term in linguistics, is used in the plural and is a calque from the French term *faux amis*. This term, *faux amis*, comes from the longer phrase “false friends of the translator” coined in 1928 by French linguists Maxime Koessler and Jules Derocquigny in their book *Les faux amis; ou, Les trahisons du vocabulaire anglaise: conseils aux traducteurs* (False Friends, or, The Treacheries of English Vocabulary: Advice to Translators).

Another definition given by Larousse Dictionary in 2020 is: “terme d'une langue étrangère qui présente une ressemblance graphique ou phonique avec un terme de la langue maternelle, mais ne possède pas le même sens.” (term from a foreign language which presents a graphic or phonic resemblance to a term from the mother tongue, but does not have the same meaning).

In addition to the aforementioned definitions of false friends, the definition given to false cognates by the Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics is: a word which has the same or very similar form in two languages, but which has a different meaning in each.

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<sup>270</sup> Caid, Leila (2008). *Les cognates français/anglais*. Éla: études de linguistique appliquée, Revue de didactologie des langues-cultures et de lexiculturologie. <https://www.cairn.info/revue-ela-2008-1-page-65.htm>



However, false friends, despite being the most widely spread term used in reference to these deceptive words, have also been called deceptive words, treacherous twins, false cognates, false pairs, and belles infidèles. Their similarity may cause a second language learner to use the word wrongly. For instance, the Romanian word *librărie*, means *bookshop* (a store where books can be purchased) in English, while the English word *library* refers to a place for reading and borrowing books. However, there are far more examples of problems that can occur when the lexicons of two languages contain similar words than the one above.

As most languages of Europe share Latin and Greek roots, this is also the case for the Romanian and English languages. Romance languages are not the only ones to share a high number of graphically or phonetically identical or similar words with the same meaning. While it is true that the grammatical structure of the English language is Germanic, English has a large number of Latin and Greek loan-words. Despite the fact that both of them derive from different ancient languages, English borrowed many words directly from Latin.

Romanian is a Romance language with a predominantly Latin grammatical structure and a significant part of its vocabulary is still Latin-derived. Both Romanian and English have an extensive Greek and Latin or Latin and French vocabulary, but this vocabulary entered the two languages at various stages in their evolution. This is one of the reasons why they have different semantic properties. Thus, a word with a common origin in the two different languages undergoes, a process of transformation as, moreover, most of the vocabulary of the respective language, and this independent semantic evolution cannot always lead to identical results. We also encounter numerous 'pitfalls' when comparing the vocabulary of two foreign languages, this being a source of mistakes for those who proceed by analogy when learning a second foreign language.

In other words, regardless how much experience one has in speaking a language, if it is different from one's native language, there is a chance of being tricked by false friends. False friends often confuse what people are trying to communicate, especially when context cannot help in solving the confusion. Hence, to avoid possible misunderstandings that might arise, it is important for learners to know the most important false friends between two languages.

Researching the vocabulary of the English language from the point of view of the Romanian language speaker, we can distinguish numerous categories of words likely to become traps.

To sum up the above, the key to overcoming these misunderstandings is not to assume the meaning of new words in other



languages, no matter how similar they may sound or look. Only a good command of the second language and its vocabulary can prevent such mistakes, but even so, they can escape even the greatest expert.

We should consider the French word *avertissement* and the Romanian word *avertisment*, which resemble the English word *advertisement*, but possess different meanings: while the first two terms actually mean *warning*, the latter refers to a *paid notice* or *announcement*, as of goods for sale, in newspapers, magazines, on radio or television. All three words come from Latin, wherein *advertere*, which means 'turn towards', got adopted in Old French as *advertir* and later changed to *advertiss-*. While these three instances share the root meaning of wanting to call to attention something, the word in late Middle English took on a more positive connotation as a form of announcement.

**Antic** is a term which in English means *strange, unusual, or grotesque*, whereas in Romanian its meaning is that of *ancient and old-fashioned*.

The English word **attachment** has two meanings: *fondness* and *computer file that is sent together with an email message*, while the Romanian **ataşament** only refers to a *strong affection, fondness*.

**Ban** in English means *interdiction*, whereas in Romanian it refers to *a standard unit of value of a country's coinage- coin or a noble title held by a governor*.

While the English noun **bucket** (a container with an open top and a handle, often used for carrying liquids) refers to a *receptacle*, the Romanian noun **buchet** (English *bouquet*), refers to a *bunch of flowers* (an attractively arranged bunch of flowers, especially one presented as a gift or carried at a ceremony).

The English noun **camera** (*photo camera* = a device for recording visual images in the form of photographs, film, or video signals) and the Romanian noun **cameră** which in English means *room* (a part of the inside of a building that is separated from other parts by walls, floor, and ceiling), are other examples of false friends.

The English punctuation mark **comma** (the symbol, used in writing to separate parts of a sentence showing a slight pause, or to separate the single things in a list) can easily be confused with the Romanian noun **comă** (a prolonged state of deep unconsciousness, caused especially by severe injury or illness).

While **compass** in English means *scope* (a piece of equipment that shows you which direction you are going in), the Romanian **compas** refers to a *tool for measuring and drawing circles*.



Another pair of confusing words is the one of the English noun **chin** which refers to a *body part* (the part of a person's face below their mouth) and the Romanian noun **chin** which refers to an *intense physical suffering*.

An additional example of confusing words is the English informal noun **cutie** (pretty, attractive) and the Romanian noun **cutie** which means *box*.

A commonly mistranslated word is the noun **deception**, whose meaning in Romanian is that of *betrayal, deceit or lie*. Lately, the word started to be translated as *deceptie*, which is totally wrong. As for the word *deceptie*, his English counterpart is *disappointment*, which can also be translated by *delusion*. Another thing worth mentioning is that the English word *disappointment* is not the antonym of *appointment* which means either *consultation, designation or nomination*.

The Romanian word **desert** refers to a *sweet food served after the main part of a meal*, whereas the English term **desert** refers to an *area, often covered with sand or rocks, where is little rain and not many plants*. There is, however, a very similar term in English, "dessert", which has the same meaning as the Romanian "desert". This one is an example of partial false friend.

Another pair of confusing words is the one of the English adjective **eventual** (happening at the end of a period of time or of a process) and the Romanian **eventual** (refers to a thing that might happen at some point in the future), which have the same form but a different meaning.

Another frequent confusion is that between the English noun **expertise** (expert skill or knowledge in a particular field) and the Romanian term **expertiză** (an expert's report/ an expert's appraisalment/ a survey).

The English adverb **far** means *at distance* in English, whereas in Romanian the noun **far** is translated into English by *lighthouse, headlight, and bulb*.

The English word **genial** retains from the Latin language the meanings *friendly, pleasant, sympathetic*, absent in the Romanian language; the Romanian word **genial** has as English equivalents the words *brilliant or of genius*.

The ancient Greek "gymnasion" (or Gymnasium), English **gymnasium** is a *room or building equipped for gymnastics, games, and other physical exercise*. In Romanian, **gimnaziu** refers to a *grammar school* (middle school in American English).

Another example is the English **glass** versus the Romanian **glas**. The English noun **glass** refers to :1. a hard, transparent material, used to make windows, bottles, and other objects; 2. a small container for drinks made



of glass or similar material, with a flat base and usually with no handle. In Romanian, the noun **glas** means *voice*.

**Magazine** in English refers to a *publication* (a type of thin book with large pages and a paper cover that contains articles and photographs and is published every week or month), whilst the Romanian noun **magazin** is translated into English by *shop, store*.

**Parcel** is another confusing word in the English and Romanian languages. While the English noun **parcel** means *pack/package*, the Romanian **parcelă** is translated into English by *plot/allotment*.

An additional English term is **physician** (a medical doctor, especially one who has general skill and is not a surgeon) which resembles the Romanian **fizician** (a person who studies physics or whose job is connected with physics).

The Romanian word **pregnant** has as English equivalents the words “noticeable” or “clear”, while the English adjective **pregnant** (woman and some female animals) has a completely different meaning, *referring to having a baby or babies developing in the womb*.

The verb **sever** in English has two meanings: 1. to break or separate, especially by cutting; 2. to end a connection with someone or something. In Romanian, the adjective **sever** means *drastic* and *strict*.

**Sympathy** in English has the meaning of understanding, as well as the meaning of *pity* and even *condolence*, while the Romanian word **simpatie**, having the same origin, is correctly translated into English by *liking*.

In English, the noun **rest** (a period of time in which you relax, do not do anything active, or sleep) is used to refer to a state of relaxation, while the Romanian term **rest** translates into English by *remnant* or *change*.

To review, words across languages may often share only a partial overlap in meaning, and this complicates attempts at comprehending a word. Anyone who wants to learn a language will sooner or later be confronted with false friends and cognates. Regardless of the origin of these word pairs, an important issue is that false friends in principle might affect the learners’ lexical and communicative competences in English.

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