False Friends in English-Spanish translations in computer science literature

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Abstract
False friends constitute a source of error for learners of a language and for translators. However, false friends are constantly created either as loan words or as words which share a common derivation. This article investigates the phenomenon of false friends from a positive perspective in order to establish a classification towards a descriptive study of computer-related translations of English into Spanish. Our immediate purpose is to show to what an extent false friends is a widespread phenomenon when a word is borrowed from another language or two culturally and historically-related languages such as English and Spanish come into play. Therefore our main task was to make the most of the semantic and pragmatic information provided by false friends and analyse actual occurrences of false-friendship in computer magazines as well as in computer science textbooks. As a result, different categories of false-friendship could be established (we illustrate each of them with several examples). During the analysis of this phenomenon we point out the reasons which may motivate occurrence of false friends in English-Spanish translations. We will also discuss why false-friendship should not be just seen as a “funny” feature in translations.

Introduction

This article will contribute to Descriptive Translation Studies by means of authentic translations from English into Spanish of computer magazine articles. The focus is on an analysis of the semantic and pragmatic implications of ‘false friends’ (i.e. words of similar form in two languages and which are usually thought of as reliable translation equivalents, or ‘contrastive deceptive cognates’ (Alcaraz, in Álvarez 1996) in computer-related texts. We expect to generate information about other linguistic, pragmatic and cultural areas so as to set up studies coming under issues in Descriptive Translation Studies.

One of our initial hypotheses was that translations of computer-related texts from English into Spanish display Anglo-Saxon influence and, consequently, certain regularities in terms of linguistic deviations already deeply ingrained will be well represented in this particular text type. In other words, linguistic anomalies are so familiar to computer readers and translators that they have become accepted norms in this text type to target readers. Our goal was to prove this hypothesis by identifying deviations at the level of the individual word and by establishing a theoretical framework for them from a descriptive point of view. We thoroughly agree with Toury’s (1995:28-29) suggestion that “it is not unusual for a certain amount of deviance to be regarded not only as justifiable, or even acceptable, but as actually preferable to complete normality” and that “it is only through studies into actual behaviour that hypotheses can be put to a real test” (Toury 1995:16)

We focus on translation from English into Spanish for several reasons: (i) like most translation theoreticians (Newmark 1988; Hatim&Mason 1990; Bell 1991; Neubert&Shreve 1992; Toury 1995) and practitioners, we believe that translation works better into one’s mother tongue (ii) false friends are often associated with historically or
culturally related languages such as English and Spanish, and (iii) English terminology is clearly influencing on Spanish computer-related documentation. This analysis of false friends will become obvious in the below samples of computer documentation, as well as some computer-science textbooks.

In the first section of the article, we present pertinent theoretical considerations and our criteria for classifying words in a source language computer lexicon. Section 2 discusses why Computer Science lends itself as an analysis of the false friends. Section 3 introduces the methodology for the study. In section 4 we present the results of our study, and classify various types of false friends. Finally, section 5 presents our conclusions.

Translating texts in Computer Science: words and semantic components

Words are undeniably important in verbal communication; yet no other language component has been more neglected by foreign language teachers and translators than lexis (Rudzka 1981:i). While a great deal of energy is spent on learning grammar, syntax and other source language and target language linguistic issues, scant attention is paid to the analysis of similarities and differences between look-alike source and target language words. Our project on word comparison is an attempt to tackle this linguistic deficiency. Therefore, we also identify the word as “the smallest unit of language that can be used by itself” (Bolinger and Sears 1968:43 as quoted by Baker 1992:11).

We acknowledge that, although meaning can be carried by units smaller than the words, the word is the basic element in meaningful language and worth analysing both from an intralingual and interlingual point of view. The scope of this study, which is based on the semantic components of some Spanish and English words, applies an interlingual approach.

Recently, the focus of linguistics has shifted from syntactic analysis\(^1\) to semantic and pragmatic analysis and lexicography. This development is also found in Translation Studies. Semantics and pragmatics, for example, influence the current generation of machine-assisted programmes and computer-related research and literature\(^2\). The growing importance of lexis, on the other hand, can be appreciated when paging through the English for Specific Purposes course syllabi. While teaching English for Specific Purposes does not exclusively involve teaching a specialized vocabulary, terminological sections and stock vocabulary learning occupy many pages in syllabi. Latinisms, internationalisms, neologisms and acronyms are just a few examples of lexical classifications which are part of English for Specific Purposes syllabi aimed at computer students.

There is also a close and productive relationship between Translation and Computer Studies. Figure 1 illustrates how, generally speaking, words in computer literature can be classified into: (i) computer-specific words, (ii) all-purpose words and (iii) linking words (see Fig. 1). One would take it for granted that it is precisely (i) which the professional translator has to struggle more with because one wrongly assumes that there is a lack of updated reference books available or simply because of the translator’s ignorance of computer topics and background. However, contrary to general belief, professional translators can now keep up their computer terminology (a) because new and reliable off-the-shelf technical and specialised on-line dictionaries and databases are available for look-
up, and (b) because translators themselves are becoming increasingly familiar with computer terminology.

Why then do articles about computers still tend to ‘sound like a translation’? Since availability and knowledge of computer-specific terminology are not the explanations for odd-sounding computer translations, we may well enquire about the real nature of the problem. It was our hypothesis that, provided translated sentences are grammatically, syntactically and morphologically correct and computer-specific terminology is adequately translated into Spanish, there may be a mismatch at pragmatic level between certain types of English and Spanish words.

Figure 1 illustrates which three categories of words we chose for our corpus.

![Diagram](Fig. 1 : Classification of words in a source language computer lexicon)

We have analysed a short passage from an article in Windows Magazine (p. 45, August 1994) in accordance with the figure and letters from the diagram. The words in normal type are linking words (C). Our main focus in the present study is the (A) word type as well as those (B) words which have been translated into a Spanish false friend:

This is a (A) great (B) application. Whether it’s (A) better or (A) worse than Excel 5 is largely (A) irrelevant; they’re both (A) great (B) applications. Without doubt, Lotus has added a (A) host of (B) user-friendly and (B) power (B) features to 1-2-3 that definitely (A) lift it up to the (A) ranks of the top two.

It is our hypothesis that lexical mismatch in the form of false friends’ may be a major area for translation problems between English and Spanish in computer texts. We focus on (a) establishing whether this is true, and if so (b) to what an extent it applies, and (c) whether there are regularities in the translation of false friends in translation of English into Spanish.

**Computer science as corpus**

English has long been a lingua franca in the world of technology, particularly in computer science: Most programming languages and literature related to software products and advanced technologies use English because of its current status as the natural vehicle for international communication.
The increasing interest in Computer Studies literature in Spanish-speaking countries, i.e.
Spain and Latin America has created a new type of translators, namely, translators
specialising in computer-related texts. In this article these translators include all sub-
categories who specialise in computer text types. Some of these are ‘online help’, instruction
leaflets, promotional material, off-the-shelf software, edutainment, client magazines, press
releases, user manuals and guides and software strings. Every sub-category has its own
translation requirements which the translator has to be familiar with.

The corpus of this study is mainly made up of computer magazines. There are several
reasons for this choice:
There was, first of all,
(i) common professional interest: we are both exposed to translated literature in
computer magazines. Individually, we have researched false friends and computer science
literature. Chesñevar (1994) discusses some typical examples of false-friendship in
computer science textbooks. In the center of the present study ‘false friends’ cause
mistranslation which is a problem for university students learning new technical issues with
computer science textbooks in Spanish.
Secondly, we had
(ii) easy access: since computer magazines translated from English into Spanish are
available. On the other hand, computer manuals and guides, textbooks and so on cannot
always be found in both countries due to different marketing circumstances and commercial
interests.
Thirdly, the corpus offers
(iii) prototypical examples of ‘anglicized Spanish’. Computer literature is more often than
not associated with ‘bad, odd-sounding, anglisized Spanish’ by the layman. We were
interested in finding out why.

Methodology

We set out by selecting the ‘All-Purpose Words (Figure 1), which we considered
‘odd/funny-sounding, anglisized’ in Spanish. We analysed their semantic components in both
English and Spanish in order to establish a comparative semantic elements chart.

We found that it is next to impossible to break down source and target language lexis into
components of meaning -pragmatic and referential. At a specific point in time it may be that
the lexical meaning of a word or lexical unit (Zgusta, 1971:67) is part of the specific value of
a word in a particular linguistic system and the ‘personality’ it acquires through usage within
that system (Baker 1992:12). Therefore, the semantic components provided by Spanish and
English dictionaries did not always match. The main problem was to find a compromise
solution which catered for our specific requirements.

Our methodology is based on componential analysis through grids in the fashion used by
Newmark and Rudzka (Rudzka 1981;Newmark 1988:114)4. This type of analysis
compares a source word with a target word which has a similar meaning, but which is not an
obvious true friend (‘cognate’) or one-to-one equivalent by breaking down words into first
their common and then their differing sense components. Newmark observes that normally the source word has a more specific meaning than the target word, and the translator has to add one or two target sense components to the corresponding target word in order to produce a closer approximation of meaning.

We used this methodology for two main reasons: (i) because the words serve as the basic element for analysis and (ii) because the methodology shows the different semantic components of a language in a clear way. Instead of the semantic grid format, we designed our own format by selecting semantic components not shared by both languages. In other words, we analysed non-equivalent rather than equivalent semantic and pragmatic features because we believe that these are exclusively found in false friends (whereas equivalent semantic and pragmatic features are also found in cognates or so-called ‘true-friends’).

**Results**

The examples analysed could be classified into three categories of false friends: *Semantic Loans, Loan Words* and *Transference*.

This categorization is thus a *a posteriori* classification based on the results obtained. There are borderline cases which defy a clear-cut taxonomy. This proves how difficult linguistic categorization may be. In the below discussion we try to explain the different categories in terms of the different translation procedures and we also include examples of Spanish translations from real texts.

**Semantic Loans**

This procedure involves the creation of target words based on source words. The target forms included in this group already exist in the target language but do not have any semantic contents in common with the source words, a feature illustrated in figure 2.

Semantic loans are exemplified in the two-column table: the left column shows the original source word, and the right column the Spanish translation in the corpus.

![Fig. 2 : An illustration of the situation prior to semantic loans](image-url)
Table 1: Examples of semantic loans

Loan words

In this procedure a source word is adapted to the target pronunciation and morphology, creating new words (Newmark 1988). This is illustrated in Figure 3, and exemplified in the table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ENGLISH SOURCE WORD</th>
<th>SPANISH TRANSLATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>apply for a scholarship</td>
<td>aplicar para una beca [instead of ‘solicitar una beca’]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>student chapter of the ACM</td>
<td>capítulo estudiantil de la ACM [instead of ‘rama estudiantil’]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Association for Computer Machinery).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Examples of loan words

Transference of English semantic components into Spanish words

Examples of this type were difficult to find. The reason is that such Spanish and English words share some but not all semantic components. Unlike the previous examples, the
words in this section need to be shown contextually and explained thoroughly in order to appreciate the errors.

In order to make our examples easier to understand, we used the pattern shown below for introducing all semantic components.

**English Word ⇒ Spanish Word:** ‘context’ [English back-translation of the context].

English semantic components: **English semantic component** (Spanish translation/meaning), **other English semantic components** (Spanish translation/meaning), ...

The suggested Spanish translations are shown in brackets. The examples may be subdivided into the following sections:

**Words obsolete in modern English**

**CONSISTENT⇒CONSISTENTE:** ‘Estructura de menús consistente’ [Consistent menu structure]. English semantic components: a) **idea or argument organized or presented so that each part of it agrees with all the other parts** (coherente); b) **(no meaning)** (consistente) (meaning when the particles of a mass are joined together; used in cookery).

Comment: In the past, the English word ‘consistent’ did include the Spanish semantic component of ‘stuck together’ but it has evolved and this extra semantic component has become obsolete in contemporary English.

**EVENTUAL⇒EVENTUAL:** ‘Eventualmente se termina de recorrer el archivo’ [“eventually, the end of file is reached”]. English semantic components: a) **at last** (finalmente); b) **from time to time** (ocasionalmente).

Comment: In the past, the English word ‘eventual’ did include the Spanish semantic component of ‘possible, contingent’ but it has evolved and this extra semantic component is considered an archaism in contemporary English.

**Spanish words used in a sense which is rare in Spanish**

**ATTRACTIVE⇒ATRACTIVA:** ‘es una atractiva versión de su impresora térmica’. [this is an attractive version of your thermal printer].

Comment: In English, the word ‘attractive’ has the following semantic components: a) **pretty** or handsome and b) likely to bring in advantages (e.g. attractive pay). The Spanish word ‘atractivo/a’ only contains the former semantic component and not the latter.

**CONVENTIONAL⇒CONVENCIONAL:** ‘impresoras convencionales’ [conventional printers]. English semantic components: a) **established by virtue of precedent or custom** (idem); b) **(no meaning)** (applies to people, attitudes or ideas which are unoriginal and accommodating); c) **method, product, accepted as normal because it has been used or produced for a long time** (neutral tone) (in Spanish it has negative undertones).

**FLEXIBLE/FLEXIBILITY⇒FLEXIBLE/FLEXIBILIDAD:** ‘esta serie ofrece selecciones flexibles de procesadores de ejecución alta’ [this series offers flexible selections
of high-execution processors], ‘Potencia y flexibilidad de elección’ [power and flexibility of choice]. English semantic components: able to change and adapt to different conditions and circumstances as they occur.

In Spanish, flexible means “easy to accommodate to somebody’s will”, with negative undertones.

**MASSIVE** ⇒ **MASIVO**: ‘el masivo poder adquisitivo’. English semantic components: a) extremely large in size or quantity (idem); b) general usage (no equivalent meaning in Spanish).

Comment: In Spanish ‘masivo’ also means ‘related to human population’ (e.g. emigración masiva, ataque masivo, manifestación masiva); there is no equivalent meaning in English for massive.

**VERSATILE** ⇒ **VERSÁTIL**: ‘La nueva y versátil impresora de red’. [the new and versatile network printer]. English semantic components: having many skills and able to adapt to each skill easily.

Comment: This adjective in English denotes a positive idea. In Spanish, versátil may sometimes be applied to somebody who changes affection or opinions too easily, and therefore has negative undertones.

**Words whose mistranslation into Spanish has become institutionalized**

**CONCURRENT** ⇒ **CONCURRENTE**: ‘Transferencia concurrente hasta 120 Mb/min.’ [concurrent transfer up to 120 Mb/min]. English semantic components: happening at the same time (simultáneo), get together in the same place or time (idem).

Comment: Even though the semantic component of the Spanish ‘concurrente’ does not coincide with the English ‘concurrent’, the adjective ‘concurrente’ is already established in computer-related Spanish as an accepted term. It may be found in specialised dictionaries both as ‘transferencia concurrente’ or ‘transferencia de ejecución simultánea’. From the two choices given to the translator, he has chosen the one that is formally closer to the English word instead of taking the more risky but clearer second option.

**LINE** ⇒ **LÍNEA**: ‘los ordenadores personales IBM Value Point han sido la línea de PC más vendida’ [Personal computers IBM Value Point have been the line of PC most sold]. English semantic components: particular type of product that a company makes or sells (gama). Even in English this word seems to have some detractors. In Eric Partridge’s Usage and Abusage, ‘line’ is described as a word which ‘has been so over done that one would be wise to avoid it -in good writing, at least.’ (Partridge 1947:172)

**Spanish words which do not have a 100% match with English usage**

**ADDITIONAL** ⇒ **ADICIONAL**: ‘no precisa de ningún almacenamiento adicional de memoria’ [no additional memory is needed]. English semantic components: a) adjective (rarely used as an adjective); b) wider range of meanings (e.g. this is an additional reason for not leaving, this problem is additional to their major financial anxieties)
[esta es otra razón para no marcharnos, esta problema se añade a sus otros problemas económicos].

COMPETITORS⇒ COMPETIDORES: ‘Sea el primero en atender a sus clientes con Lotus Notes. Sus competidores serán siempre segundos’. [Be the first to serve your clients with Lotus Notes. Your competitors will be always the second ones]. English semantic components:a) sbd. who is trying to sell goods or service to the same people as you are (competencia); b) person who takes part in a competition or contest such as a sport (idem).

Words with completely different semantic components

REMOVABLE⇒ REMOVIBLE: ‘discos duros removibles’ [removable hard-disks]. English semantic components: you can move it easily from where it is (idem). In Spanish, the verb ‘remover’ means ‘to dig about’, ‘to turn over’, ‘to stir’, whereas ‘to remove’ does not have such a meaning in English. As applied to computer terminology, ‘extraíble’ would be an acceptable translation of removable.

Spanish words with English morphological adaptation

CONSUMABLES⇒ CONSUMIBLES: ‘estos son los consumibles de HP’. English semantic components: any material which can be used up, esp. in offices (material fungible).

IMPORTANT⇒ IMPORTANTE: ‘pequeñas diferencias importantes’, ‘importantes paquetes de software’. English semantic components: significant, valuable, necessary when dealing with a particular topic. In Spanish the main meaning is convenient or interesting, which may have wide-ranging consequences
Conclusions

The lexical items in the Spanish translations selected yield much information about the influence of English over Spanish. Broadly speaking, the analysis and semantic/pragmatic-based classification of the examples sheds some light on the following issues:

1) Although the corpus is not sufficiently large to allow for major statistics, we are sure that qualifying adjectives (e.g. ‘consistent’, ‘attractive’, ‘conventional’, ‘efficient’, ‘flexible’, ‘global’, etc.) show the highest occurrence of pragmatic ‘false friends’ of all linguistic categories analysed. The reason may be that Latin-rooted English and Spanish words have evolved differently. This is corroborated by a comparison of the English and Spanish semantic and pragmatic components discussed above.

The results of our research may be summarized in the diagram shown on Figure 4. It depicts the different ‘semantic and pragmatic sets’ involved in translating English words into Spanish ones.

![Fig. 4: Semantic and pragmatic features in English-Spanish word translation](image)

2) This study was conceived as a preliminary contribution to Descriptive Translation Studies focusing on the description of computer-related translations from English into Spanish. Apart from false friends, one feature characterizing computer texts in Spanish is the creation of new derivational paradigmatic forms (Bauer 1983:11) such as ‘compartición’, ‘portabilidad’, ‘expansible’, ‘grabables’ and ‘encriptación’. Thanks to a small-scale but intensive diachronical follow-up involving several computer-related texts, we conclude that most forms are now deeply ingrained in the Spanish computer-related texts, widely accepted and have become institutionalized by translators and readers alike. For example, ‘soporte’, ‘compartición de datos’ and ‘grabable’ have become part of the Spanish in computer-related texts. This conclusion proves Steinmetz’s statement that “most communicative actions are conventionalized and text producers almost always proceed according to a given pattern” (Steinmetz 1978:19, as quoted by Nord 1991:84). Unfamiliar usage combined with non-standard word formation make up the majority of the ‘poor Spanish’ words which characterize computer-related texts.

3) Spanish words whose primary semantic components do not coincide with the English primary semantic components but rather with English secondary semantic components, such
as ‘efficient’, ‘global’ and ‘sophisticated’, the Spanish counterparts have upgraded their semantic components and acquired new values in translated texts. These examples show that some words which are similarly spelled in two languages involve a network of semantic relations, which may be enriching for the receptor language.

4) However, language purists regard this phenomenon as intrusion and label it an error. We agree that in some cases they may be considered as errors on the grounds that they cannot be found even in specialised dictionaries. In this respect, this article intends to warn professional translators about the dangers of what has been described as the “mesmerising effect of the SL” (Newmark 1991:82) which leads to the “carry over of source language structures into the receptor language” (Gutt 1991:175).

5) In any case, we hope to have shown this traditionally notorious aspect of translation (i.e. false friends) from a much positive perspective and made true Susan Bassnett’s words to offer an assertive perspective on translation which may become “a welcome change after a long period during which translation has been seen in a more negative light.” (Bassnet, as quoted in Álvarez, Román & Vidal, Mª Carmen-África 1996:12)

Within the field of translation of computer texts, which are probably going to increase prodigiously in the future and will often only be found in an electronic form, our study may serve for more studies on pragmatic equivalence with special reference to ‘false friends’. As such it explores a field which is particularly sensitive to English and American influence in today’s world, but the findings and the procedures we have used may be equally applied to other disciplines and other language pairs, in order to show the impact a major language has on the languages of receptor cultures.

Works Cited

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Nord, C. 1991. Text Analysis in Translation. Theory, Methodology and Didactic Application of a Model for Translation-Oriented Text Analysis, Amsterdam: Rodopi, B.V.
1 In 1957 Chomsky presented his formal model of linguistic description providing a basis for new research techniques for syntactic analysis.

2 The semantic information of words is a feature which has an increasing importance in the making of bilingual lexicons.

3 Corpus: We have analyzed a wide range of computer magazines which have been translated from English into Spanish from 1991 to 1997 (e.g. Publish December 1991, PC World No. 98, April 1994, and Binary No. 65, October 1994, BYTE Argentina April 1995, Computer World (España) April 1997 and PC World June 1997. We have also included well-known computer-science textbooks to demonstrate to what an extent the problem of false friends encompasses many if not all types of computer documentation. These textbooks are Terrence Pratt’s Lenguajes de Programación: Diseño e Implementación (1986) and Peter Grogono’s Programación en Pascal (1986).

4 Rudzka et al. acknowledge the inspiration from their book came directly from the work on semantic fields and lexical structure of Adrienne Lehrer from the University of Arizona.