

ON “FALSE FRIENDS” IN THE FIELD OF ECONOMICS

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Abstract: *“False friends” or bilingual homophones/homographs are words existing in two or more languages, sounding alike but differing significantly in meaning. They present a language learning challenge due to the inevitable confusion resulting from word migrations and similarities in sound and meaning. Coined in 1928, the term continues to fuel linguistic research, addressing comprehension confusions in the process of language acquisition. The reciprocal influences of languages, especially through neological borrowings, lead to divergent meanings in the target language. Inexperienced users may misuse these words due to homonymy. In economics, initially influenced by French borrowings, there is a substantial influx of terms from British or American English, driven by the need for precise terminology for new extralinguistic realities. This paper, drawing from teaching practice, provides brief examples and suggests strategies to navigate confusions related to translating „false friends,” emphasizing specific learning techniques and the use of online bilingual dictionaries.*

Key words: *homophones, neologisms, linguistic borrowings, calque, false friends*

1. Introduction

Language, at its core, is in a constant state of evolution, and borrowings from other languages represent facets of linguistic creativity through which language continually reflects the ever-changing reality. Over time, Romanian has been subject to the influences of various languages, with each developmental period incorporating characteristic neologisms. These linguistic borrowings include Slavonic terms (mainly introduced through translations of church books), Greek and Turkish influences (during the Phanariot period), Hungarian contributions (particularly during the Austro-Hungarian rule in Transylvania), French influences (especially in the modern era), and more recent borrowings from English, and specifically, American English.

Romanian linguists underscore the significant impact of French on the Romanian language, underscoring its crucial role in reshaping the Neo-Latin physiognomy of Romanian and contributing to the overall modernization and westernization of

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Romanian culture (Mitrofan, 2012). Describing this influence as “providential”, Pompiliu Eliade contends that French “exerted its most profound effects, bringing substantial changes to the traditional state of affairs in the Danube Principalities. It has enduringly shaped Romanian thought and sensibility, leaving its imprint across various domains, including politics, legislation, literature, administration, and social life” (Eliade, 1982, p. 5). Theodor Hristea also noted in 1984 that “the French influence unquestionably remains the most potent among all modern influences on our language. Thanks to it, Romanian has been enriched by several thousand words, modernizing its vocabulary across all realms of material and spiritual life” (Hristea, 1984, p 59). The impact of the French language began during the Phanariot period and persisted consistently throughout the 20th century, particularly in specific sectors of activity such as social life, gastronomy, clothing, science, technology, economics, administration, etc. The process was further bolstered by Lovinescu’s theories advocating for cultural borrowing in order to synchronize Romanian culture with the ethos of the European era (Mitrofan, 2012). In the 21st century, the dominance of the French language has yielded to the ascendance of English, as observed by Rodica Zafiu, who notes that English “overshadows any other source of lexical borrowings, semantic, and phraseological loan translations” (Zafiu, 2001).

In recent decades, the global influence of the English language has surged, transcending European borders. While various factors contribute to this phenomenon, our focus is on the economic domain, particularly in English-speaking countries. In economics, a significant influx of borrowings from British or American English has proliferated rapidly and continues apace. This surge is fuelled by the need to label new extralinguistic realities with precise terms. These borrowings are deemed necessary, as the words, phrases, or phraseological units in question either lack Romanian equivalents or provide distinct advantages over local terms. Anglicisms, chosen for their precision and international accessibility, are driven by the novelty of the referent. In corporate settings, there is a notable preference for loan translations to express realities more succinctly and efficiently, especially where the Romanian language only offers reformulations. This gives rise to the creation of “hybrid” words, representing adaptations of English terms to Romanian grammatical paradigms (e.g., “a customiza”, “a prioritiza”, “a menegiu”, “a targheta”, etc.). Inevitable confusion stems from the migration of words between languages and their similarities. Moreover, specific instances arise where words overlap or mimic terms in the mother tongue. This creates what is commonly termed as false friends (“les faux amis” in French, “prieteni falşi” in Romanian). These encompass words that speakers assume to mean something due to their form and resemblance to other languages, but in reality, they hold entirely different meanings. Confusion arises for three reasons: the influence of the mother tongue, inaccurate translations due to linguistic similarities between Romanian and French/English, and the impact of another foreign language. The following briefly illustrates such scenarios, drawing from the teaching practice of French/English to Romanian students majoring in economics.

2. Risks and challenges

"False friends" or bilingual homophones/homographs are morphologically similar words existing in two or more languages but differing significantly in meaning. The term originates from an abbreviated version of the title of the book "Les faux amis ou Les trahisons du vocabulaire anglais (conseils aux traducteurs)" by linguists Maxime Kœssler and Jules Derocquigny. Published in Paris by Vuibert in 1928, the book, along with its sequel "Autres Mots anglais perfidies", was republished in 1975, creating a distinct branch of linguistic research. Today, the internet is replete with blogs, articles, courses, and online dictionaries dedicated to "translators' false friends," attracting users from various European language combinations such as Czech and Polish, Finnish and German/English, French and English, etc.

If language A borrows a word from language B, or both languages share it from a common source, leading to meaning changes in at least one language, it can result in "false friends" for speakers of either language when learning/speaking the other. In some instances, both meanings may have been present in the etymology of the word in question, in the common ancestral meaning. However, over time, these meanings may evolve independently in each language. False friends can be partial or total based on the equivalence of meanings or their etymology. Interferential errors, a significant language error category, arise from loan translations or "false friends". Native speakers and foreign language users make these errors. While not claiming to be exhaustive, this discussion explores the misleading words commonly encountered by Romanian students studying foreign languages (English/French) in economics at the university level.

Loan translations are at the confluence of loanwords and neologisms. In many such instances, the position of the French language is intermediary between English and Romanian. For example, the verb „to realise” means „comprendre” in French and „a înțelege” in Romanian. For instance, the verb “to realise” translates to „comprendre” in French and “a înțelege” in Romanian. As French has shifted to using “réaliser” instead of “comprendre,” Romanian has also adopted “a realiza,” signifying “to understand.” In such cases, language enrichment occurs through a natural and universal process present in any language. During the learning process, learners involuntarily resort to loan translations due to their limited knowledge of word formation or sentence structure. For example, while consolidating the French verbs, a Romanian learner may adopt the structure of the Romanian verb. This involves retaining the Romanian root and appending a verb ending from the first conjugation, as seen in the example of „exploder” (“a exploda”), a form used for “exploser”, its French equivalent. At the intersection of loan translations and “false friends,” students render the phrase “a avea grijă de copii” with “avoir soin des enfants”; they use „a face angajări” to translate “faire des engagements” (Alic, 2011). This represents a case of misinterpreting the meaning of the word from the source language into the target language.

The emergence of false friends is primarily attributed to the similarity between the signifiers of signs in two distinct languages, often existing in a relationship of homonymy or paronymy (Ballard, 1999, p. 9). Homonymy poses a significant challenge for native speakers learning French or English. Homonyms do not completely overlap, leading to

partially explainable confusion. Illustrative examples when translating phrases from French to Romanian include: « un accroissement sensible du chiffre d'affaires ». In French, “sensible” does not translate directly into Romanian as „sensibil,” which is a loanword from French, but lacking the same range of meaning in Romanian. It should thus be translated: „o creştere simţitoare a cifrei de afaceri”. Another example is the French phrase „la progression inquiétante du taux de chômage”, where „la progression” does not translate into Romanian as „progresie” because the term does not have the meaning of „progression thématique”, as in textual linguistics. The phrase must be translated as “creşterea îngrijorătoare a ratei şomajului”. A further example is „faire évoluer notre mobilité”. In this case, “mobilité” refers to the ability to move for work (as in 'labour mobility'), not in the sense of “mobilitate”, which in Romanian refers mainly to patient mobility. Moreover, in the case of “l'usage officiel exige”, “l'usage” should not be translated as „uzaj” in Romanian, as it means “usage”. Additionally, in the case of „un conflit de taille”, „taille” is unrelated to the Romanian term “talie” meaning only size of clothes, but with the figurative meaning of „anvergure”, akin to the French „envergure” (Alic, 2011). These examples address the issue of loanwords from French into Romanian. The terms in question have undergone various semantic evolutions over time, resulting in a distinct meaning from the original French word. A common trend in the evolution of neologisms is that they acquire different meanings in the target language than in the source language, and inexperienced users may misuse them due to homonymy.

The influence of the native Romanian language can give rise to spontaneously invented words, confusion with existing words in French, or the creation of words derived from similar words in the lexical family. Some students may engage in 'Frenchifying' Romanian words, leveraging the linguistic similarity between the two languages that share a common Latin origin. A few illustrative examples include: (ro.) “profesionist” -> “professioniste” instead of “professionnel” (fr.); (ro.) “diferit” -> “différit” instead of “différent” (fr.); (ro.) “a ajuta” -> “ajouter” (= to add) instead of “aider” (fr.); (ro.) “a acţiona” -> “actionner” (which exists but means to set in motion a mechanism or machine tool, or to take legal action) instead of “agir” (fr.); (ro.) „parolă” -> “parole” (which exists but means the faculty to express oneself in articulated language) instead of “mot de passe” (fr.). Common mistakes often arise from paronymy (Lupaşcu, 2023). For instance, confusion may occur between pairs of words expressing reduction or cancellation/elimination: “abrègement” (in Romanian: the action of making something shorter)/ “abréviation” (in Romanian: graphic reduction of a word or a sequence of words; word resulting from this reduction)/ “abrogation” (cancellation of a law, etc.). Similar confusion can arise in pairs of words referring to accommodation or arrangement: (fr) “accommodation” -> (ro) “cazare”/ (fr) “accommodement” -> (ro) „aranjament”; and words referring to interest or receipt: (fr) „acquis” -> (en) “advantage, privilege acquired”/ (fr) “acquit” -> (en) “written confirmation of payment mentioned at the bottom of invoices,” (fr) „allocution”/ „allocation”/ „elocution” -> (en) „allocation”/ “allocution”/ “elocution.” Instances also occur in words whose initial is marked by letters at the end of the alphabet.

Additional challenges in learning French for Romanian economics students (and others) stem from inaccurate translations due to linguistic similarities between Romanian and

French. For instance, mistranslations may occur by mimicry of Romanian expressions like "il est chaud"/ "il est froid" instead of "il fait chaud"/ "il fait froid." Another example is the translation of „être désolé” as „a fi dezolat” instead of „a-i părea rău.” Students learning French, influenced by their exposure to English or to another Romance language, often misunderstand and misuse various terms. For example, the word (fr) "blesser" -> (ro) "to hurt" is sometimes erroneously translated, influenced by the English "to bless," as "a binecuvânta." Similarly, "surnom" is translated as "surname" under the influence of the English term "surname", though in French "surnom" means „nickname.” There is also the use of the French verb "rester" ("to remain") with the meaning of the English "to rest" – "a se odihni" (in French: "se reposer"). Another example is „passer un examen,” which in French means „to take an exam” (Ro: „a da un examen”). The influence again comes from English, where „to pass an exam” means „to succeed in an exam”, i.e. (fr) "réussir un examen" -> (ro) "a lua un examen.” Similar examples can be found on the "1000 de falși prieteni ai limbii franceze" website (referenced in the bibliography).

3. Conclusions and suggestions

As we have seen, linguistic false friends pose a dual role – on one hand, they hinder the accurate reception or expression of a message, and on the other hand, they serve as a source of vocabulary enrichment when their use and acceptance broaden. The significant challenge of loanwords, particularly from British or American English, has led to the emergence of what is known as parallel languages, such as 'Frenghish' and 'Romghish'. In these cases, the merging of sounds and words between the two languages occurs due to a lack of proper training in transferring terms from the source language into the target language. This is often a result of the speaker's unrefined language awareness or the absence of an unambiguous equivalent in the target language. In recent years, the phenomenon of more or less justified linguistic borrowings from English has been on the rise; in response, European countries have made efforts to protect the integrity of their languages through legislation (Giurgeanu, 2023). In Italy, a proposed bill aims to reduce or even eliminate foreign-origin words in all official documents and communications. While the legislation refers to words from all languages, English is explicitly singled out since, according to the initiators, „Anglomania has repercussions for the whole of society.” France implemented the Toubon Law in 1994, mandating the use of the French language in official government publications, advertisements, workplaces, commercial contracts, state-funded schools, and broadcast audio-visual programmes. The French Academy also cautions against the threat of anglicisms and underscores the distinction in its rationale: English condenses expressions, whereas French elaborates on them. German places verbs (and consequently, actions) at the end of sentences. As a result, the line of reasoning is never identical, and achieving a perfect translation is rarely possible. In Germany, the German Language Society (GfdS) promptly dismissed the idea of legal protection for the German language when the language debate escalated to the political realm in 2012, stating that nonsensical anglicisms should be countered by education rather than legislation. In Romania, linguist George Pruteanu proposed a bill in 1997, later known as the „Pruteanu Law,” which mandated that all public texts (including

advertisements) in foreign languages must include a Romanian translation. The law was promulgated and adopted by the parliament in 2004 in a modified version that omitted the penalties outlined in the original draft (Law 500/2004).

Addressing challenges in language learning, confusions arising from words with misleading meanings or forms can give rise to non-existent expressions. It is crucial to carefully attend to these 'migrating' words, as their form does not always guarantee accurate content. Ideally, when students encounter uncertainty, they should consult a dictionary, with online versions just a click away. To overcome these difficulties in learning a foreign language, where the natural tendency is to seek similarities with one's mother tongue, students are advised to: focus on foreign language courses in college for correct use and pronunciation; utilise bilingual dictionaries; employ flashcards as valuable tools for term memorisation and revision. Technology has simplified information access through apps providing instant translations, sample sentences, and pronunciations. It is crucial to discern accurate answers, highlighting the importance of a reputable app that identifies 'false friends.' Lastly, we recommend students to engage in oral practice through discussions with native speakers of the foreign language (e.g., Erasmus mobilities or interactions with fellow foreign students, native speakers of French or English) to continually learn and refine language skills.

In conclusion, we contend that the problem of false friends is multifaceted, encompassing intellectual, generational, and social dimensions. Education and culture emerge as crucial factors shaping linguistic skills, which evolve through conscious efforts in response to the linguistic environment. The impact of mimetic adoption, whether positive or negative, is contingent upon the quality of societal models provided.

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