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Meeting on the Lexicographic Theory and Practice

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University of Athens

English-Greek False Friends: Propriety vs. Frequency of Use

Varvara Pyromali

1. False Friends

The French linguists Koessler and Derocquigny (1928) define as *false friends* (*faux amis*) the pairs of lexical items in two different languages which sound the same, but have different meanings. *False friends* come about as a result of cognates, loanwords or accidentally.

Carroll (1992: 94) designates as *false friends* the lexical units of different languages that are recognized by bilinguals as being “the same thing”. It seems that they facilitate learning, as it is easier for somebody to learn words in a second language, which look alike with lexical units of the language they already know. However, the cognate pairs seem to hamper long-term learning. The so-called *false cognates* or *false friends* cause false speech reproduction and may lead to wrong interpretation of the meaning.

Dominguez and Nerlich (2002) provide us with two essential definitions: *Chance false friends* share the same form, but have different meaning in different languages. *Semantic false friends*, on the contrary, have the same etymological descent, their meanings being different in different languages, but demonstrate semantic relations.

In the current study, we define as false friends the words that present phonetic or morphological similarities, but show semantic divergence between English and Greek. We won't deal with accidental similarities between false friends in these two languages. Furthermore, we won't persist with the study of the etymology of the false friends examined. The present study constitutes an initial effort to examine the use of 'false friends' in Greek. We will attempt to arrive at conclusions investigating the

frequency and the propriety of their use by native speakers of Greek. All the *false friends* selected are *loan-words* and constitute lemmas of the Dictionary of False Friends, a product of the Masters Programme “Theory of Lexicography and Applications”.

2. Methodological Framework of the Experimental Research

2.1. Questionnaire's Content

The research and its results are based on a questionnaire completed by one hundred ninety-two native speakers of Greek, residents of Attica municipalities. The questionnaire is written in Greek and is divided in two parts of equal importance. The first part consists of thirty example sentences and studies the false friends' propriety of use. In each sentence the subject has to fill in the blanks with one of three possible lexical options given in multiple choices form (a, b, c). One of the options is semantically and stylistically the most appropriate, the second one is less acceptable and the last one is the least pertinent or the wrong answer. The most appropriate choice is not always the false friend studied.

The second part of the questionnaire, like the first one, is also composed of thirty sentences and aims at the examination of the false friends' frequency of use. At this part the respondent is asked to fill in the blanks, having to choose between two synonymous or almost synonymous words, the first one being with Greek origin while the second one with foreign. In addition to the last five sentences in both parts, there are two questions of free type, where the respondents were asked if they found it difficult to make their choice and if so why.

Moreover, certain demographic data were set as control variables, such as gender, age, education, status, mother tongue and level of proficiency in English. Also, the respondents were asked about their opinion of the English language with respect to easiness, usefulness and level of interest. Finally, we inquired about the stance of the subjects towards the use of foreign words in the speech and the maintenance of contact with native speakers of English or with a country where English is the official language.

2.2. Word selection criteria

The present study deals only with false friends in the False Friends Dictionary derived from the English language. As they are quite many in number, we selected representative lexical units and classified them thematically in order to serve as a point of reference for the study of the propriety and the frequency of use of all the loan words in the dictionary.

The false friends used in the examples fulfill some requirements. The key criterion was the frequency of appearance. Additionally, all words are members of the grammatical category of nouns. Furthermore, they belong to the most representative thematic categories of the dictionary. Also, their adaptability to clear and understandable example sentences played an important role for the words' selection. Finally, the existence of corresponding Greek synonymous or almost synonymous words was an essential factor.

2.3. Classification

Because treating each word on its own doesn't lead to conclusions of general influence, we considered grouping the chosen false friends. The classification was based on their use in the example sentences of the questionnaire. In this way, some words are encountered in two different categories, because they are used in different context with different meanings.

We append in detail the discrete thematic categories and the list of false friends we classified. The thematic categories are: Mass Media & Advertisement, Technology, People, Transport, Aesthetics & Entertainment, Athletics, and Business.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive statistics variable control

The research sample consists of sixty percent women and forty percent men.

Regarding the age of the respondents in this research, forty six percent were under twenty years old, twenty eight percent were between twenty and thirty, eleven percent - between thirty and forty, whereas the rest (fifteen percent) were above forty years old.

By the time of the research twenty four percent of the subjects declared junior high-school (Gymnasium) students, twenty two percent - senior high-school (Lyceum) students, ten percent studied in university, while the rest forty four percent were employees.

The grand majority of the sample (ninety five percent) has the Greek language as a mother tongue. In addition, the majority (ninety six percent) claimed having a knowledge of the English language. The levels of familiarization varied from elementary to fluent use of English (in 5-grade Likert scale).

Because of the fact that English is the main language of the false friends chosen, it was important to know how difficult, useful and interesting the participants find it. From the point of easiness of use we found out that forty one percent characterised the language to be of moderate difficulty, thirty five percent found it easy, eighteen percent very easy, the rest grades following. Referring to the usefulness, the majority of the answers accumulates on the first two choices (especially useful and useful) with a number of forty six percent and thirty seven percent respectively. Finally, on the aspect of how pleasant the respondents found the English language, thirty seven percent considered it to be rather pleasant, while thirty six percent were neutral towards it.

Forty three percent of the participants answered that they avoid the usage of loan words in their speech, while, on the other hand, forty two percent preferred them. The rest were neutral in their response.

Lastly, sixty three percent claimed they had no contact with native speakers of English abroad, in contradiction with the rest thirty seven percent.

3.2. Descriptive Statistics of Main Variables

To most of the questions in the first part of the study, the majority of the respondents made the most accurate choice. On the contrary, in the second part we observe a tendency for equal distribution of the answers between Greek and English. The greatest propriety of the false friends' use is found in the categories "People" & "Aesthetics & Entertainment". Less appropriate are the answers in the categories "Athletics", "Technology" and "Media & Advertisement", while the most unsuitable choices were made in "Business" & "Transport".

As far as the second part of the questionnaire is concerned, we notice that the responses cover the whole range of the answers. With regards to individual categories, the choices closest to Greek are observed in the category “Aesthetics & Entertainment”, followed by “Business” and “Technology”. On the other hand, the answers in the divisions “Media & Advertisement”, “Transport”, “People” and “Athletics” show no specific inclination, the latter two slightly tending to the use of English.

3.3. Hypothesis control

The most important aspect of our analysis consists of (inter-)layer comparison of the answers given by the subjects.

3.3.1. Gender control

In connection with the significance of the respondents’ gender for their choice, we should notice that men tend to give more accurate answers than women having to do with the use of false friends. Related to the categories above, this tendency is noticed in “Technology”, in “Transport” and in “Athletics”. At the second part of the study, the conclusion is that gender plays no role for the preference of the Greek or the English word.

3.3.2. Age control

Furthermore, the role of the factor “age” in the use of false friends was examined. As of the first part, which concerns the propriety of use, statistically important differences were noticed in all the divisions except “Aesthetics & Entertainment”. More specifically, we found out that the best responses (by mean value) were given by the subjects aged twenty-one-thirty and forty-one above. Next are the ages thirty-one-forty and below twenty. Respective results come out from the analysis in the separate categories, so that generally the twenty-one-thirty-aged provide the most appropriate answers, while, on the other hand, the below twenty the most inaccurate.

Regarding the choice of Greek or English words usage, statistically important differences were detected in the categories “People”, “Aesthetics & Entertainment” and “Business”. In the “People” division, the thirty-one-forty-aged show affinity towards Greek, as opposed to the ones of age twenty-one-thirty and under twenty. In the category “Aesthetics & Entertainment”, the under twenty show apparent

preference for English in contrast to all the other groups, whereas something similar happens in the “Business” category. It’s rather obvious that the generation under twenty are slightly favorable to English, contrary to the older part of the sample. Oppositely to what we possibly expected, no greater use of Greek was perceived among the people aged forty and above.

3.3.3. Status control

The next check-point in the research was the respondents’ identity. In regard to the propriety of use, as a general rule, it is noticed that university students and employees tend to answer more appropriately than junior and senior high-school (Gymnasium & Lyceum) students. This inclination varies in “Media & Advertisement”, in “Aesthetics & Entertainment” and in “Athletics”, where the university students prevail over all the other; while the opposite happens in the “Transport” category, where the employees come first.

Correspondingly studying the use or avoidance of false friends, statistically important differences were found out in the divisions “People”, “Aesthetics & Entertainment” and “Business”. At these three categories, employees show greater preference for Greek than junior high-school (Gymnasium) students, something that comes in accordance with the previous ascertainment about increased use of loan words by persons under twenty (years old). The only other conclusion we can come to is that in the category of “People” the senior high-school (Lyceum) students also make more use of Greek than junior high-school (Gymnasium) students.

3.3.4. English Language Relation Control

Subsequently, we examined possible divergences coming from the level of proficiency in English. All those that declared excellent knowledge of English answered more accurately than all the other groups. In the individual categories the specific group’s supremacy over the other ones is confirmed too. At the second section of our research no statistically important differences were noticed regarding the knowledge and the level of proficiency in English.

Moreover, we checked if the frequency and the propriety of false friends’ use can be influenced by the opinion of the subjects about the use of the English language (easiness, usefulness, interest of the language). The perceived easiness of English didn’t affect either the frequency of their use or the correctness. With regards to

propriety, statistically important differences were observed in the total of questions and especially in the category “Aesthetics & Entertainment”. The perceivable level of usefulness of the English language seems to influence the propriety of false friends’ use. Those who do not find English particularly useful, tend to use false friends less appropriately than the others. In respect to how interesting English was for the respondents, we ascertained that those who characterised it as indifferent, are prone to answer more accurately than those who find it (very) pleasant and than those who find it (very) unlikable. In the category “Aesthetics & Entertainment”, those, for whom English was unlikable or very unlikable, give less suitable answers than the neutral or positively inclined towards it. Concerning the frequency of use of English, the subjects that characterise it very pleasant have tendency towards using it. We remark this in the categories “Aesthetics & Entertainment” and “Business”.

3.3.5 Control regarding the inclination to use loan words

In relation with the false friends’ propriety of use we didn’t notice any statistically important difference between those who declare to avoid, prefer or are neutral towards the use of English words. On the other hand, the frequency of the false friends’ use is related to the preference or avoidance of English in one’s speech.

3.3.6 Control regarding the contact with native speakers of English

To sum up, it can be claimed that maintaining contacts with native speakers of English doesn’t influence the frequency neither the propriety of false friends’ use.

4. Implications

Based on the results of the research, we point out the need for systematic and methodical teaching of False Friends. The clarification and learning of false friends could be introduced in the teaching of Greek as mother tongue, as well as of English as first foreign language.

It would be useful to lay emphasis on the meaning of these pairs of lexical items in Greek school books. Also, their semantic differentiation from the synonymous or almost synonymous to them Greek words should be explicated. Moreover, the use of false friends could be systematically described in Greek dictionaries. At the same time, particular care should be taken in the teaching of

English in the early phases of education. Thus, wrong interpretation of meanings could be avoided, whereas learning would be facilitated.

The present research constitutes an initial attempt to approach English-Greek False Friends through their use by native speakers of Greek. From this point of view, there are quite a few issues that we consider important to carry out a further research on. It would be particularly important to investigate the frequency and the propriety of use of false friends by various social classes, in various professional fields and various geographic areas in Greece. In a further study, the use of false friends considering speech varieties as well as their use in spoken language could be examined too. It's also worth to explore extensively the speakers' attitude towards false friends and to what extent it affects them to use these words right or wrong.

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