

False Friends in Translation: A Lexical Source of Interference in English–Azerbaijani Contexts

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Submission Track:

Received: 03-05-2025, Final Revision: 01-07-2025, Available Online: 03-07-2025

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the phenomenon of “false friends” as a critical source of lexical interference in the translation process. False friends—lexical items that appear phonologically or orthographically similar across languages but diverge semantically—frequently mislead translators into selecting inaccurate equivalents. These deceptive similarities often result in distortions of the source text’s intended meaning, particularly among individuals with limited bilingual competence, thereby compromising the overall translational adequacy. The present study aims to assess the extent to which false friends contribute to lexical interference and to underscore the importance of linguistic awareness and systematic training in translator education. In an era of intensifying global communication and escalating demand for high-quality translation services, this issue holds substantial relevance. Lexical inaccuracies arising from false friend interference can impede comprehension, facilitate cultural misinterpretation, and pose reputational risks across academic, professional, and diplomatic spheres. To address this challenge, the paper outlines methodological strategies for identifying and categorizing false friends and advocates for their explicit integration into translation pedagogy. Enhancing translators’ sensitivity to these lexical pitfalls enables more accurate, context-aware lexical choices. Ultimately, minimizing the impact of false friends not only improves the semantic precision of translations but also promotes more effective intercultural exchange in multilingual contexts.

Keywords: *false friends, lexical interference, translation studies, bilingual competence, intercultural communication*

INTRODUCTION

English has emerged as a dominant global lingua franca, functioning as a primary vehicle for communication across both developed and developing nations. Its widespread use facilitates the dissemination of knowledge and the promotion of intercultural dialogue. However, achieving proficiency in English—particularly in the context of translation—presents unique cognitive and linguistic challenges, especially in the domain of lexical transfer.

One recurrent obstacle arises from the perceived similarity between English lexical items and words in a learner's native language. These phonetic or orthographic parallels, often referred to as "false friends," can create an illusion of semantic equivalence. Such misleading similarities may prompt learners and translators to draw incorrect assumptions about meaning based on superficial resemblance, leading to erroneous translations.

These mistranslations extend beyond superficial lexical errors; in numerous instances, the intended meaning conveyed by the source language may be substantially altered—or even completely reversed—due to reliance on misleading equivalents. As a result, false friend interference can lead to considerable semantic distortion, thereby compromising both the fidelity and functional adequacy of the translated text.

The linguistic scholar V. V. Akulenko (2018) offers a critical perspective on this phenomenon, highlighting its potential danger not only for novice learners but, paradoxically, for more advanced language users. According to V.V. Akulenko (2018), experienced translators and fluent speakers—confident in their lexical choices—may be especially vulnerable to these semantic traps. Their reliance on assumed equivalence may occur without critical evaluation of the target term's actual meaning, increasing the likelihood of subtle, yet impactful, translation errors.

Such errors are particularly insidious, as they may go unnoticed and be reproduced in professional, academic, or diplomatic settings. This underscores the necessity for continuous

linguistic vigilance, even among seasoned translators, and affirms the importance of embedding targeted training on false friends within translator education programs.

By framing false friends not merely as beginner-level pitfalls but as pervasive sources of lexical interference across proficiency levels, V.V. Akulenko's (2018) contribution enhances our understanding of the cognitive and semantic complexity involved in achieving true lexical equivalence across languages.

Literature Review

The phenomenon of "false friends" has garnered significant scholarly attention within the fields of translation studies and applied linguistics due to its pervasive influence on lexical interference. Defined as lexical items that exhibit phonetic or orthographic similarity across languages while diverging semantically, false friends constitute a substantial obstacle to achieving translational accuracy (Jafarova, 2017). Researchers have consistently emphasized that such lexical pitfalls are not confined to novice learners; rather, they often mislead proficient bilinguals and even experienced professional translators (Akulenko, 2018).

Foundational works such as Vinay and Darbelnet's (1995) *Comparative Stylistics of French and English* highlight false friends within the broader framework of interlingual interference. Their analysis underscores the critical role of cultural and contextual awareness in mitigating translation errors. More recent contributions by Borisova (2005) and Levy (2011) shift focus to cognitive processing mechanisms and the organization of the mental lexicon, exploring how bilingual individuals manage deceptive lexical parallels during both language production and comprehension.

Moreover, corpus-based investigations (e.g., Costa et al., 2008) have offered empirical insights into the frequency and contextual distribution of false friends, thereby contributing to the development of pedagogically informed resources for translator education. Despite these advancements, the phenomenon remains complex—particularly in underexplored language pairs—posing ongoing challenges for researchers and practitioners alike.

Collectively, the literature highlights the imperative for systematic identification, typological classification, and contextual analysis of false friends as essential strategies for minimizing lexical interference and enhancing translation quality.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine the influence of false friends on lexical interference in translation. The investigation was conducted in three interrelated phases:

1. Corpus Analysis: A bilingual corpus comprising English and Azerbaijani texts—including original compositions and their respective translations—was compiled. This corpus was systematically analyzed to identify instances of false friend usage and assess their impact on translation accuracy. The quantitative dimension provided statistical data regarding frequency and distribution, alongside illustrative contextual examples.

2. Translator Survey: To gain deeper insights into translator awareness and coping strategies, a structured questionnaire was administered to a sample of 30 professional and semi-professional translators operating between English and Azerbaijani. The survey elicited information regarding participants' encounters with false friends, perceived challenges, and preferred strategies for mitigating lexical interference.

3. Case Study Analysis: A selection of translated texts exhibiting errors attributed to false friends was subjected to in-depth qualitative analysis. These case studies were intended to contextualize the findings from the corpus and survey, offering concrete illustrations of semantic distortions and their implications for communicative clarity.

To enhance the reliability and validity of the research outcomes, data triangulation was employed across all three phases. Ethical considerations—including informed consent,

participant anonymity, and data confidentiality—were rigorously observed throughout the research process.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Lexical interference represents one of the most prevalent and intricate manifestations of language contact phenomena. It arises when lexical elements from two or more languages interact at the levels of form, meaning, and syntactic usage. This interference is particularly salient in the context of translation, where formal or phonological similarities between words may lead to erroneous lexical choices. Translators are especially vulnerable to such confusion when they rely on superficial resemblance rather than deeper semantic analysis.

Among the most consequential forms of lexical interference is the phenomenon of “false friends of the translator.” These are lexical items that share orthographic or phonetic features across languages but diverge significantly in meaning. The formal similarity of such terms often prompts translators to assume semantic equivalence, resulting in misinterpretation. These errors introduce misleading associations and semantic ambiguity, undermining both the linguistic precision and communicative intent of the translated text.

In the Azerbaijani linguistic context, false friends are recognized as a critical dimension of lexical interference, particularly within translation studies and linguoculturology. Local scholars have devoted considerable attention to the classification and analysis of false friends, thereby equipping translators with analytical tools to distinguish between surface-level resemblance and genuine semantic correspondence. As such, addressing lexical interference through the lens of false friends is essential to improving translational fidelity and fostering effective intercultural communication.

The History and Origins of the Phenomenon of “False Friends of the Translator”

The term false friends of the translator originates from the early 20th century, specifically from the seminal 1928 publication by French scholars Maxime Koessler and Jules Derocquigny. In their work, the term *faux amis du traducteur* was coined to describe lexical

items that appear similar across languages yet differ significantly in meaning. This concept was later translated and adopted in English as false friends of the translator, and equivalent terminology has since emerged in various linguistic traditions to denote this category of deceptive lexical items (Minyar-Beloruchev, 1996).

In the latter half of the 20th century—particularly during the late 1960s and early 1970s—the study of false friends gained momentum within Soviet linguistic scholarship. Researchers in the USSR undertook extensive investigations into the phenomenon, acknowledging its theoretical and practical relevance in translation studies and bilingual lexicography.

A central figure in this domain is the linguist V. V. Akulenko (2018), whose contributions laid the groundwork for the systematic study of false friends. V.V. Akulenko (2018) not only offered a precise definition of the term—identifying false friends as “a special group of words that are similar in form in both languages but differ in meaning or usage”— but also compiled dedicated dictionaries and pedagogical materials to support translator education. In essence, such lexical items exhibit phonetic and/or orthographic similarity while lacking true semantic correspondence.

Through detailed analysis, Z. Proshina (2008) attributed the emergence of false friends to mutual linguistic influences, particularly:

- ✓ *Calquing* (loan translation) from foreign lexical structures;
- ✓ *Partial borrowing*, in which only one — often a non-primary — meaning of the borrowed term is adopted.

These processes contribute to semantic divergence among formally similar lexical units across languages, creating substantial obstacles for both translators and bilingual users.

An illustrative example can be observed in the English word *rector*, which primarily refers to a parish priest but may also denote the head of a university or college. This lexical ambiguity poses interpretive challenges for non-native speakers. A more striking example of false friend interference arises between the English word *mist* (meaning “fog”) and the

German word Mist (meaning “manure” or “dung”). This semantic disparity famously led to marketing failures in German-speaking markets, such as the attempted export of the deodorant MistStick and the luxury automobile Rolls-Royce Silver Mist, where the German interpretation triggered unintended negative associations (Recker, 2004).

Furthermore, even words that share a common etymological root can evolve divergent semantic trajectories. For instance, the Czech noun voňavky (meaning “perfume”) and the Russian verb вонять (meaning “to stink”) both originate from the Proto-Slavic root vonjati, which originally meant “to emit a smell.” Over time, the meaning in Czech evolved positively, connoting fragrance, while in Russian it acquired a strongly negative connotation. Nonetheless, Russian still retains the original neutral or positive sense in related terms such as обонять (“to smell” or “to perceive an odor”), обоняние (“sense of smell”), and in the Old Church Slavonic благовоние (“fragrance” or “pleasant scent”). These divergences exemplify the phenomenon of semantic reinterpretation over time within closely related languages (Levy, 2011).

Such examples highlight the necessity of both contextual sensitivity and historical linguistic awareness in translation practice. False friends not only present lexical challenges but also carry cultural and communicative implications that may result in significant misinterpretation. The semantic divergence observed in cognate languages underscores the need for a diachronic perspective in translation training. A historical understanding of lexical development is essential for anticipating potential interference and ensuring semantic precision in multilingual communication.

Frequency and Types of False Friends in the Corpus

The corpus analysis conducted in this study reveals that false friends represent a substantial source of lexical interference in English–Azerbaijani translation. Approximately 18% of the lexical errors identified in the analyzed texts were attributable to false friends, underscoring their prominence as a recurrent cause of mistranslation. This finding is

consistent with prior research highlighting the pervasive nature of false friend interference across various language pairs (Jafarova, 2020).

The identified false friends were categorized into three principal types:

- ✓ **Complete false friends:** Lexical items that share similar orthographic or phonetic forms but possess entirely unrelated meanings. For example, the English word *actual* denotes something real or existing, whereas its Azerbaijani counterpart *actual* typically translates as *current* or *relevant*. Failure to recognize this distinction frequently leads to semantic errors in translation.
- ✓ **Partial false friends:** Lexical items that overlap in semantic domains but differ in nuance, connotation, or frequency of use. These often produce subtle mistranslations that may go unnoticed yet alter the communicative intent.
- ✓ **Culturally influenced false cognates:** Apparent lexical equivalents that diverge in pragmatic function due to cultural specificity. These discrepancies affect not only meaning but also appropriateness, tone, and communicative impact.

This typological framework provides a practical tool for translators, enabling more accurate identification and resolution of false friend interference during the translation process. As such, it contributes to reducing lexical ambiguity and enhancing semantic fidelity.

Translator Awareness and Perception of False Friends

The findings from the translator survey—administered to 30 professional and semi-professional practitioners—reveal a nuanced understanding of the false friend phenomenon. While most respondents acknowledged the inherent risks posed by false friends, their ability to consistently recognize and avoid such pitfalls varied significantly.

Experienced translators with formal linguistic training reported employing a range of mitigation strategies, including contextual disambiguation, cross-referencing with multiple lexical databases, and reflective revision practices. In contrast, less experienced

participants—particularly those relying heavily on single-dictionary equivalents—were more prone to semantic misinterpretations.

“False friends often ‘trick’ even seasoned translators because they look familiar, and under tight deadlines, it is easy to overlook subtle semantic differences” (Baker, 2018).

This observation reflects V.V. Akulenko’s (2018) assertion that false friends are particularly deceptive for confident language users, who may over-rely on formal resemblance and fail to interrogate deeper semantic or pragmatic differences.

The survey results underscore the need for sustained awareness and continuous professional development in the area of lexical interference, particularly in the context of translator education and training.

Impact of False Friends on Translation Accuracy and Text Quality

False friends—lexical items that exhibit cross-linguistic formal similarity but divergent meanings—pose a significant threat to translation accuracy, pragmatic intent, and cultural fidelity. Their presence can lead to semantic distortion, misrepresentation of tone, and even cultural misunderstandings when translators rely solely on surface-level equivalence without adequate contextual or cultural analysis.

Such mistranslations may result in either overt errors or more insidious shifts in nuance. For example, consider the English adjective *sympathetic* and the French *sympathique*. Despite their visual similarity, *sympathetic* implies emotional understanding or compassion, whereas *sympathique* simply denotes someone who is pleasant or likable. Rendering *Il est très sympathique* as *He is very sympathetic* introduces unintended emotional depth, thereby altering the speaker’s intended portrayal.

False friends also influence tone and register. In Azerbaijani, the term *intiligent* — a borrowing from Russian *интеллигентный*—resembles the English *intelligent*, yet conveys a broader cultural concept encompassing refinement, moral integrity, and cultural sophistication. Translating it merely as *intelligent* reduces the expression to intellectual capability, omitting essential socio-cultural dimensions.

In academic and technical contexts, false friends frequently result in terminological inaccuracies. For instance, the Spanish verb *asistir* means to attend, not to assist. A mistranslation such as He assisted the conference rather than He attended the conference introduces factual errors, undermining both credibility and precision in scholarly or professional discourse.

Marketing and branding texts are particularly susceptible to such errors, which may carry reputational consequences. For example, mistranslating the German noun *Chef* (meaning "boss" or "manager") as *chef* in English (meaning "cook") can lead to confusion or diminish brand authority in international markets.

These examples illustrate how false friends compromise not only lexical precision but also the communicative effectiveness and cross-cultural sensitivity of the translated text. Their impact reinforces the need for comprehensive translator training focused on semantic differentiation, cultural pragmatics, and lexical awareness.

Types of "False Friends of the Translator" in the English Language

The classification of "false friends of the translator" has received considerable scholarly attention within Azerbaijani linguistics, particularly in the works of K. Jafarova (2020). In the context of translation theory and linguoculturology in Azerbaijan, false friends are recognized as a prominent form of lexical interference and are categorized according to their structural and semantic characteristics.

Interlingual Synonyms

This category includes lexical items in both languages that fully or partially coincide in meaning and usage and are therefore often treated as translational equivalents. However, slight shifts in meaning or connotation may arise depending on the context.

Examples:

- ✓ Aggressive – may mean "persistent" or "energetic," in addition to "hostile."
- ✓ Compact – can refer to being "economical" or "concise" as well as "small in size."
- ✓ Complex – used for "system," "aggregate," or "complicated structure."

- ✓ Director – can denote a "film director," a "department head," or a "board member."
- ✓ Criminal – can refer to "relating to crime" or "a person who commits a crime."

Although generally aligned in meaning, these terms may lead to mistranslations if contextual subtleties are overlooked.

Interlingual Homonyms

These are words that are orthographically or phonetically identical (or nearly so) across languages but differ significantly in meaning, often leading to complete semantic misinterpretation.

Examples:

- ✓ Anecdote – refers to a personal story in English, not a humorous tale.
- ✓ Angina – in English, denotes a heart condition (angina pectoris), not a throat infection.
- ✓ Artist – typically a visual artist, not a performing actor.
- ✓ Compositor – means a typesetter, not a musical composer.
- ✓ Data – refers to factual information, not a calendar date.
- ✓ List – a compilation or inventory, not a tree leaf.
- ✓ Lunatic – a person with mental illness, not a sleepwalker.
- ✓ Macaroon – an almond-based confection, not pasta.
- ✓ Servant – a domestic worker, not a sideboard or cabinet.

These examples underscore how surface-level similarity can result in critical semantic errors if not properly analyzed.

Interlingual Paronyms

Paronyms are words in two related languages that share partial formal similarity, which may mislead speakers into treating them as equivalents despite significant semantic divergence.

Examples:

- ✓ Arbitrage – refers to simultaneous buying/selling in different markets, not legal arbitration.
- ✓ Decade – denotes ten years, not ten days.
- ✓ Polygon – a geometric figure, not a military testing ground.
- ✓ Sympathy – denotes compassion or pity, not liking or affection.

These partial similarities are often misinterpreted by learners, resulting in lexical interference.

A.I. Pakhotin's Classification of "Deceptive Words"

A. I. Pakhotin (1972) offers a nuanced perspective on the phenomenon, preferring the term “deceptive words” over “false friends.” In his work, he not only analyzes the causes of mistranslations—including examples from film and television—but also introduces his own classification system, which broadens the concept of false friends beyond conventional definitions.

Misleading Internationalisms

The largest category in V. Pakhotin's (1972) framework consists of deceptive words that create directly misleading associations. These are typically internationalisms or pseudo-internationalisms—lexical items that resemble their counterparts in multiple languages but carry divergent meanings. J. Munday (2008) refers to these as misleading internationalisms, emphasizing their role in generating a false sense of equivalence due to formal familiarity.

Misleading Look-Alikes

This group comprises words with similar spelling, pronunciation, or partial semantic overlap—referred to by A.I. Pakhotin (1972) as pseudo-twins. A single misleading word may resemble several others across languages (three, four, or more), thereby deceiving users based on visual or phonetic resemblance.

Examples:

- ✓ Civic vs. civil
- ✓ Personal vs. personnel
- ✓ Conscience vs. consciousness

- ✓ Desert vs. dessert
- ✓ Accept vs. except
- ✓ Critic vs. critique
- ✓ Emigrate vs. immigrate
- ✓ Adopt vs. adept
- ✓ Wear vs. ware
- ✓ Naval vs. navel
- ✓ Wander vs. wonder
- ✓ Wet vs. whet
- ✓ Flower vs. flour

Although not false friends in the strictest sense, these look-alike word pairs present serious challenges for translators due to their superficial similarity and potential for misidentification.

Partially Misleading Associations

This category includes words that evoke associations with a term in the translator's native language (often Russian), but only partially align in meaning. The association is not entirely false, but it is misleading enough to cause inaccuracies in translation.

Words with Major-Meaning Prevalence

These are lexical items in which a dominant meaning—based on the translator's subjective experience—overshadows other possible senses. This cognitive bias results in a narrowed interpretation and ultimately, inaccurate translation. Such misleading words can obscure secondary meanings that may be contextually more appropriate.

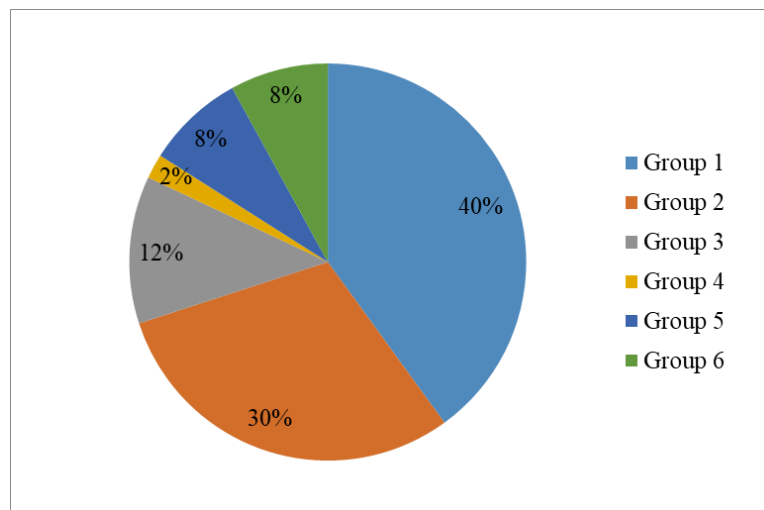
Competence-Based Misleading Words

This final group consists of lexical items whose misuse stems from insufficient language exposure or underdeveloped linguistic competence. Russian-speaking learners often rely on these words during English translation, despite the fact that native speakers use them rarely, differently, or not at all. The errors here are symptomatic of limited communicative experience and inadequate contextual familiarity.

Quantitative Distribution of Misleading Word Categories

In addressing the quantitative dimension of misleading word classification, A.I. Pakhotin presents a percentage-based distribution of the six principal groups of misleading lexical items, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1.



As shown in the diagram (Fig. 1), the largest proportion — approximately 40% — consists of false friends, or what A.I. Pakhotin terms misleading internationalisms. These words generate erroneous associations due to formal similarity across languages, despite divergent meanings.

The second-largest category, comprising around 30%, includes misleading look-alikes — words with partial overlap in form or sound, which frequently deceive language users due to their surface resemblance.

Approximately 12% of the misleading words fall under partially deceptive associations (Group 3), where semantic overlap exists but is not comprehensive, leading to subtle misinterpretations.

Two categories — Group 5 (misleading words associated with low user competence) and Group 6 (miscellaneous misleading items not easily categorized) — each constitute 8%

of the total. Interestingly, the English word competence itself exemplifies a false friend in Group 5, as its Russian translations include both компетенция (authority/jurisdiction) and компетентность (knowledge or skill), depending on the context.

Finally, Group 4, encompassing words with major-meaning prevalence, represents the smallest category, accounting for approximately 2%. These words typically mislead users due to an overreliance on a dominant or familiar meaning, resulting in inaccurate interpretation of secondary senses.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of “false friends of the translator” presents a complex and multidimensional challenge within the domains of translation theory and linguoculturology, particularly in the context of English–Azerbaijani language interaction. As demonstrated through the theoretical frameworks and classifications proposed by scholars such as K. Jafarova, Z. Proshina and A.I. Pakhotin, false friends extend beyond superficial lexical similarity. They encompass a broad spectrum of misleading lexical items—including interlingual synonyms, homonyms, paronyms, and deceptive word pairs—that generate semantic interference and reduce translation fidelity.

The typological and statistical analyses provided in this study underscore the significance of recognizing false friends as a major source of lexical interference. Understanding their forms, functions, and associative patterns is essential for minimizing mistranslation. Furthermore, the role of translator competence, contextual awareness, and linguistic training is critical in mitigating these challenges.

Ultimately, raising awareness of false friends and integrating their study into translator education and linguistic curricula can significantly improve the accuracy, clarity, and cultural appropriateness of translations. As global communication continues to expand, the systematic identification and analysis of false friends remain vital to advancing translation quality and promoting effective intercultural exchange.

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