Sylviane Granger & Helen Swallow
Centre d'Etudes Anglaises. - U.C.L.

False friends:
a kaleidoscope of translation difficulties

There can be little doubt that for anyone in daily contact with two closely related languages such as English and French, the problem of false friends constitutes a veritable minefield. Given the notorious treacherousness of these deceptive pairs, one is surprised by the paucity of the tools available to assist the student, teacher or translator in dealing with them. The few existing specialized works on the subject, whether aimed at a relatively unadvanced readership, and thus restricted to the most obvious pairs of words, or more elaborate and wider in their scope, all suffer from the same defect: a failure to treat each pair of false friends exhaustively, i.e. give a systematic account of the similarities and differences between the words in all their meanings (1). When, quite naturally, one turns to a bilingual dictionary for help - even one in many respects as excellent as the **Collins-Robert French Dictionary** -, one is often misled or at best left puzzled, in any case let down (as we shall demonstrate in the course of this article). It was the consciousness of this widely acknowledged and deeply felt need which prompted a team based at the Catholic University of Louvain to undertake a detailed analysis of almost 1,000 pairs of false friends (2). It soon became apparent that the problem was far more complex than we had first imagined, with each pair of words focusing our attention on a different aspect of deceptiveness. The present article will set out some of the most striking translation difficulties which we encountered in the unravelling of this tangled web.

In view of the plethora of terms used by various linguists to cover deceptive words (see VAN ROEY (1985) for a detailed exposition of terminology), a definition of what we understand by «false friend» is called for at this point. We use the term in free alternation with «deceptive cognate» to designate those pairs of words which are etymologically related, similar in form but semantically divergent. It does not include cases of incidental homonymy, such as Fr. *pain* / Engl. *pain*.

The formal similarity displayed by false friends in fact conceals a whole array of differences at a variety of levels. First, there are semantic differences, on the one hand in conceptual or denotational meaning, on the other in what LEECH (1974, 20ff) calls «associative meaning», under which term we shall group collocative, connotative and stylistic differences. Secondly, there are differences of a syntactic nature.

On the **conceptual** level, there is a distinction to be made between totally and partially deceptive cognates. The former have no meaning in common. Into this category fall the oft-cited word-pairs *actuel/actual, déception/deception, éventuellement/eventually*. Rather than commenting on these well-known examples, it seems preferable to present a number of less obvious pairs by means of contrastive examples.

(1) *mystifier / mystify*
- Il n'est pas de ceux que l'on *mystifie* facilement. Tu ne lui feras jamais croire cela.
  He's not easily *taken in/fooled*. You'll never get him to believe that.
- She was quite *mystified* by the strange telephone call.
  Cet étrange coup de téléphone la *laissa perplexe*.

(2) *candide / candid*
- La question *candide* de la nouvelle recrue fit rire toute l'assemblée.
  The new recruit's *innocent/ingenous/naive* question made everyone laugh.
- I'm going to be absolutely *candid* with you.
  Je vais être tout à fait *franc* avec vous.

(3) *cargo / cargo*
– Les douaniers découvrirent une quantité énorme de marijuana dans la soute du *cargo*.
The customs officers discovered a huge quantity of marijuana in the hold of the *freighter*.
– It was not very far from here that the ship sank with its *cargo* of gold and precious stones.
Ce n'est pas très loin d'ici que le bateau a coulé avec toute sa *cargaison /* tout son *chargement* d'or et de pierres précieuses.

(4) *fastidieux / fastidious*
– Pour vous éviter des démarches *fastidieuses*, consultez d'abord notre catalogue.
By consulting our catalogue first you can avoid all that *tedious/boring/tiresome* to-ing and fro-ing.
– Surely you don't think that a *fastidious* old lady like my aunt would stay in this crummy hotel.
Tu ne t'imagines tout de même pas qu'une personne aussi *difficile* que ma tante accepterait de loger dans cet hôtel minable.

(5) *denture / denture*
– Ce présentateur de télévision a vraiment une *denture* étincelante!
Hasn't that television announcer got sparkling *teeth*/ a sparkling *set of teeth?*
– The dentist told me that I would most probably have to wear *dentures*/ a *denture* in a few years' time.
Le dentiste m'a dit que je devrais plus que probablement porter un *dentier/ une prothèse dentaire* dans quelques années.

(6) *énervant / enervating*
– Il n'y a rien de plus *énervant* que de devoir attendre.
There's nothing more *annoying/irritating* than having to wait.
– I find this climate very *enervating*.
Je trouve ce climat très *débilitant*.

Partially deceptive cognates, which have at least one shared meaning, are certainly as numerous as totally deceptive cognates and undoubtedly more treacherous. The English and French cognates have developed different ranges of meaning which only partially coincide. Adopting the terminology of VINAY & DARBELNET (1977, 64), we may speak of «particularization» when the cognate in one language has a narrower denotational scope than the cognate in the other language, and of «generalization» when it has a wider one. Although there are some cases of generalization of the English cognate (for instance, *hutte/hut, décent/decent*), as a general rule it is the French cognate that has the wider denotational scope. We shall now focus on the latter phenomenon, which is such a frequent source of error.

In a large number of cases, the French cognate has developed several meanings, only one or two of which are rendered by the English cognate. The semantic divergence can often be described in terms of the distinction concrete vs abstract or literal vs figurative (see word-pairs 10-12).

(7) *fontaine / fountain*
– fontaine[1]: source d'eau vive (...) (DF)
Après quelques années, sans raison apparente, la *fontaine* s'est tarie et nous fûmes privés d'eau.
After a few years the *spring* dried up for no apparent reason and we were left without water.
– fontaine[2]: construction de pierre élevée à côté d'une source ou d'une arrivée d'eau (DF)
Sais-tu combien il y a de *fontaines* pour la seule ville de Rome?
Do you know how many *fountains* there are in Rome alone?

(8) *important / important*
  - important[1]: (sens qualitatif) (...) capital, essentiel (...) (PR)
    Cette question est trop *importante* pour qu'on la reporte à la réunion suivante.
    This question is too *important* to be postponed until the next meeting.
  - important[2]: (sens quantitatif) (...) grand (...) (PR)
    Ils ont dû payer une somme *importante* pour récupérer le tableau.
    They had to pay a *large/considerable* sum of money to get the picture back.

(9) *ignorer / ignore*
  - ignorer[1]: ne pas connaître, ne pas savoir (PR)
    Le gouvernement a dit qu'il *ignorait* ce qui s'était passé avec les otages.
    The government said that they *didn't know/were ignorant of/were unaware of* what had happened to the hostages.
  - ignorer[2]: traiter qqn comme si sa personne ne méritait aucune considération (PR)
    Il m'a *ignorée* pendant toute la soirée. Il ne m'a même pas dit bonjour.
    He *ignored* me all evening. He didn't even say «hello».

(10) *héritage / heritage*
  - héritage[1]: bien transmis par voie de succession (DF)
    Il a dilapidé tout son *héritage* en moins d'un an.
    He squandered all his *inheritance* in less than a year.
  - héritage[2]: ce qui est transmis comme par succession (PR)
    Nous avons le devoir de sauvegarder cet *héritage* spirituel et culturel.
    It is our duty to preserve this spiritual and cultural *heritage*.

(11) *obscur / obscure*
  - obscur[1]: mal éclairé, privé de lumière (DF)
    Ils jetèrent le prisonnier dans une pièce humide et *obscure*.
    They threw the prisoner into a damp, *dark* room.
  - obscur[2]: qu'on comprend difficilement (DF)
    C'est un texte assez *obscur,* incompréhensible pour les non-initiés.
    It's rather an *obscure* text, which is incomprehensible to the layman.
  - obscur[3]: qui rest inconnu, peu célèbre (DF)
    L'auteur est un romancier *obscur* du début du XIXe siècle.
    The author is an *obscure* early-19th-century novelist.

(12) *vernis / varnish*
  - vernis[1]: solution résineuse (...) (PR)
    Après cela, le peintre mettra une couche de *vernis* pour protéger les couleurs.
    After that the painter will put on a coat of *varnish* to protect the colours.
  - vernis[2]: aspect séduisant et superficiel (PR)
    Il a beau avoir acquis un *vernis* d'éducation, il n'en est pas moins vulgaire.
    In spite of having acquired a *veneer* of good manners he is a vulgar man.

Cases of the type cited above involve semantic differences which are felt by the native speaker of French to be distinct and separate meanings of the word and which are thus recorded as such in French monolingual dictionaries. They are clear cases of polysemy. If the likelihood of a student or translator drawing mistaken analogies is in such cases already considerable, it is all the greater in cases where what is felt by French speakers to be one single meaning has to be subdivided to account for lexical diversity in English arising from a different classification of experience. A case in point would be the French word *bouquet* (of flowers), which only corresponds to Engl. *bouquet* when it refers to a carefully arranged bunch of flowers such as one bought from a florist; in other cases, the word *bunch* is used. The difference between the two sets of cases exemplified respectively by *fontaine* and *bouquet* can be diagrammatically represented as follows:

French	English
fontaine[1]	*spring*
fontaine[2]	*fountain*

II

French	English	
bouquet	*bouquet*	
	bunch	

The following examples provide further illustration of the splitting of meaning which is characteristic of Category II.

(13) **bal / ball**
- Pour son premier *bal*, la princesse portait une robe de satin blanc.
  For her first *ball* the princess wore a white satin dress.
- La fête se termina par un *bal* populaire dans la salle paroissiale.
  The festivities ended with a *dance* in the village hall.

Whilst *bal* can denote any social event at which dancing takes place, *ball* refers only to a formal event of this kind.

(14) **professeur / professor**
- Il est *professeur* d'anglais à l'Université d'Edimbourg depuis dix ans.
  He's been *Professor* of English at Edinburgh University for ten years.
- Ma fille ne se plaît pas à l'école. Elle n'aime pas du tout son nouveau *professeur.*
  My daughter isn't happy at school. She doesn't like her new *teacher* at all.

Whilst *professeur* denotes anyone who teaches, *professor* refers exclusively to a teacher of the highest rank in a university. *Lecturer* is used for university teachers of lower rank.

(15) **interroger / interrogate**
- La police a *interrogé* les suspects pendant plus de trois heures.
  The police *interrogated* the suspects for more than three hours.
- Notre journaliste sur place a *interrogé* le leader du mouvement.
  Our local correspondent has *asked* the leader of the movement *some questions*.

Whilst *interroger* has the general meaning of «ask questions of», *interrogate* is only used when a person (prisoner, suspect...) is subjected to a long and intensive series of questions, possibly accompanied by the use of force.

(16) **franc / frank**
- Je vais être *franc* avec vous: vous n'avez pas la moindre chance d'être promu.
  To be *frank* with you, you haven't got the slightest chance of being promoted.
- J'aime les personnes *franches* et sans détours.
  I like *straightforward* people who don't beat about the bush.

Whilst *franc* can refer either to a general characteristic or to the displaying of the quality on a particular occasion, *frank* can only be used in the latter case.

(17) **nerveux / nervous**

- Elle est très *nerveuse* de nature.
  She's very *nervous* by nature.
- Ma femme est très *nerveuse* ces temps-ci. Je ne sais pas ce qu'elle a.
  My wife's very *jumpy/on edge/*(Brit.) *nervy* at the moment. I don't know what's the matter with her.

Whilst *nerveux* can denote either a permanent characteristic or a temporary state, *nervous* is only used in the former case. (Compare 16 where the reverse situation pertains).

The difficulties inherent in false friends are not restricted to the denotational level. Two cognates can have the same referential meaning and yet differ from a collocative point of view, showing a greater predilection for certain words or groups of words than for others, from a connotative point of view, that is to say in the associations which they call up, and from a stylistic point of view, in that they belong to different registers of language.

Quoting KOROSADOWICZ-STUZYNSKA (1980, 111), we may say that «the notion of collocation is connected with word distribution and its probability of occurrence in certain contexts». At one end of the collocational spectrum are free word combinations, the elements of which can commute freely with other lexical items, at the other, idioms, which are completely frozen expressions, whose meaning cannot be predicted from the meaning of their constituents. Between these two extremes are «restricted collocations» (RCs), which AISENSTADT (1979, 71) defines in the following way: «RCs thus can be defined as combinations of two or more words used in one of their regular, non-idiomatic meanings, following certain structural patterns, and restricted in their commutability not only by grammatical and semantic valency (like the components of so-called free word-combinations), but also by usage».

As regards false friends, **collocational** restrictions constitute an additional source of error over and above the conceptual differences discussed above (3). They give rise to two distinct situations. Either there is equivalence between the two cognates in a particular meaning, except in the case of certain restricted collocations in either or both of the languages, where the cognate is not used (Set A), or the equivalence is limited to a number of restricted collocations (Set B). The following examples will illustrate and clarify these two categories.

A. (18) *maintenir / maintain*

   maintenir: conserver dans le même état; faire ou laisser durer (PR)
   maintain: to continue or retain; keep in existence (Coll.)
   Ex.: *maintenir* des prix, coutumes, privilèges...
        to *maintain* prices, customs, privileges...
   but: *maintenir* une décision: to *stand by* a decision
        maintenir sa candidature: *not withdraw* one's application

   (19) *saisir / seize*

   saisir: s'emparer brusquement de la conscience, des sens, de l'esprit de (qqn) (PR) (often passive)
   seize: (of a feeling, illness, etc.) to overcome (a person) (Ch.) (often passive)
   Ex.: être *saisi* de peur, de panique, de douleurs à la poitrine...
        to be *seized* with fear, panic, chest pains...
   but: être *saisi* de joie, de pitié: to be *overcome* by joy, pity

   (20) *fraude / fraud*

   fraude: tromperie ou falsification punie par la loi (PR)
   fraud: deliberate deception, trickery or cheating intended to gain an advantage (Coll.)
   Ex.: Ce banquier a été reconnu coupable de *fraude*
        The banker was found guilty of *fraud*
   but: *fraude* fiscale: tax *evasion*

(21) **faux / false**

faux: qui n'est pas vraiment, réellement ce qu'il paraît être (PR)
false: (...) not real or genuine, but (...) intended to seem real (Cobuild)
Ex.: *fausse* barbe, *fausses* dents, *faux* plafond, *fausse* porte...
false beard, teeth, ceiling, door...
but: *fausse* fenêtre: *blind* window
false bottom: *double* fond

(22) **fin / fine**

fin: dont les éléments sont très petits (PR)
fine: consisting of relatively small particles (Peng.)
Ex.: sable *fin*, pluie *fine*
fine sand, rain
but: sucre *fin*, sel *fin*: *caster* sugar, *table* salt (4)

B. (23) **assurance / assurance**

(Fr.) assurance: convention par laquelle on s'assure (DF)
= (Eng) insurance
Ex.: police d'*assurance*: *insurance* policy
assurance incendie: fire *insurance*
but: *assurance*-vie: life *assurance* (aussi: *insurance*)

(24) **gains / gains**

– (Fr.) gains: profit pécuniaire et matériel (PR)
= (Eng) profits, (jeu, courses) winnings
Ex.: Certaines personnes parviennent à réaliser des *gains* importants à la Bourse
Some people make large *profits* on the Stock Exchange
but: *gains* et pertes: losses and *gains*
gains illicites: illicit *gains*

(25) **pièce / piece**

pièce: morceau de métal plat servant de monnaie (DF)
= (Eng.) coin
Ex.: des *pièces* d'or, d'argent: gold, silver *coins*
but: *pièce* de 5 francs: 5-franc *piece* (*piece* is used when the value of the coin is specified)

(26) **capital / capital**

(Fr.) capital: qui est le plus important, le premier par l'importance (= essentiel, fondamental, suprême) (PR)
= (Eng). vital, crucial, fundamental, major
Ex.: Le témoignage de cette femme est *capital*
This woman's evicence is *vital/crucial*
but: d'une importance *capitale*: of *capital* importance

(27) **tissu / tissue**

tissu: suite ininterrompue (de choses regrettables ou désagréables) (PR)
= (Eng.) mass, string
Ex.: Son allocution n'était qu'un *tissu* de contradictions, d'obscénités
His speech was a *mass* of contradictions, a *string* of obscenities
but: un *tissu* de mensonges: *a tissue* of lies (aussi: *pack*)

(28) **délai / delay**

delay: (something which causes) keeping back or slowing down (Ch.)
= (Fr.) retard, ralentissement
Ex.: Please excuse the *delay*. We were held up.
Veuillez nous excuser du *retard*. Nous avons été retenus.
but: without *delay*: sans *délai*

It is the task of the bilingual dictionary, to which the non-native speaker quite naturally turns for guidance, to make clear the extremely restricted nature of these combinations. AISENSTADT (ibid., 74) sums up the problem neatly when he says: «RCs should be treated systematically in general dictionaries. They should not just be mentioned along with free phrases, but should be accorded a special place like idioms». This problem is rendered all the more acute in the case of RCs involving cognates by the natural tendency of the non-native speaker - and indeed of the lexicographer - to «go for the cognate», especially in these cases where the meaning exists, in however limited a form, in both languages. This temptation must be resisted above all in the case of Set B, where the use of the cognate is severely restricted. The best way to deal with this set is to introduce the cognate in headphrases (e.g. *gains illicites: illicit gains*) or to make explicit mention of the words with which it collocates (e.g. (Fr.) capital: (rôle) *cardinal, major* (épith.), *fundamental;* (importance) *cardinal* (épith.), *capital* (épith.)). These two devices are used most effectively by the excellent **Collins-Robert French Dictionary** (CR). What must be avoided at all costs is to mention the cognate as one of the basic translations of the headword or, worse still, the first. This is a trap into which dictionaries, even the best of them, regularly fall, as the following examples will demonstrate.

(Fr.) assurance: insurance, <u>assurance</u> (Harrap's)
(Fr.) gain: <u>gain</u>, profit (Harrap's)
(Engl.) delay: <u>délai</u>, retard (CR)
           sursis, <u>délai</u>, retard (Harrap's)

The fatal attraction of the cognate is probably what lies behind the incorrect treatment of the following two words, which are ascribed a meaning they do not have at all, even in a single restricted collocation.

(Eng.) tissue: (cloth) <u>tissu</u>, étoffe (CR)
           <u>tissu</u> (de soie, coton) (Harrap's)
(Eng.) genial: (having genius) <u>génial</u> (CR)
           (of talent) <u>génial</u>, de génie (Harrap's)

The extremely rare and limited use of *tissue* in the meaning «a fine gauzy often sheer fabric» (Peng.) and the now extinct use of *genial* in the meaning «of genius» are not sufficient to justify their being translated respectively by *tissu* and *génial*.

Idioms, which constitute the most extreme case of collocational restriction, will be touched on only briefly in this article since the foreign learner is made aware at an early stage of the learning process that idioms rarely admit of a literal translation. Thus, books like **Sky my husband!** (CHIFLET, 1985), which give literal English translations of French idioms, while having an undeniable humorous value, serve no real pedagogical end, since they illustrate traps into which no real-life learner is likely to fall. There is very little chance that the non-native speaker confronted with the following idioms will be tempted to use the cognate.

(29) sage comme une *image*
      as good as gold

(30) être dans les petits *papiers* de qqn
      to be in sb's good books

(31) reprendre le *collier*
      to get back into harness

(32) passer l'*arme* à gauche (fam.)
      to kick the bucket (fam.)

(33) mettre qqn au *parfum* (fam.)
      to put sb in the picture (fam.)

While not representing a major stumbling block, **connotative** differences between cognates, which by their very nature are so elusive, constitute an additional source of difficulty. Adopting LEECH's definition (ibid., 14), we mean by connotation «the communicative value an expression has by virtue of what it refers to, over and above its purely conceptual

content». So, for example, the difference between (Eng.) *face* and (Fr.) *face* in the meaning «front part of the head» is primarily of a connotative nature; while the English word carries no special connotation, (Fr.) *face*, except in its medical use, usually has a pejorative connotation. In the pair (Eng.) *régime* / (Fr.) *régime* it is the English word that has a pejorative connotation, generally referring as it does to a system of government of which the speaker disapproves and not, like the French, to any type of government. Also of a connotative order is the difference between (Eng.) *client* (= «customer») and (Fr.) *client*, the former having a distinctly high-class aura while the latter is completely neutral. The pair *gai / gay* illustrates a different phenomenon, namely the virtual loss of a meaning as a result of a connotation. Since *gay* came to be used in the meaning «homosexual», it has become so loaded with sexual associations that it has become almost impossible to use it in its original meaning (= «bright, cheerful, lively»). ALLAN (1986, 206) describes the phenomenon as follows: «Euphemistic uses of lexemes for various kinds of taboo topics have led to their being narrowed in meaning to the taboo topic alone». One wonders whether *gai*, which has recently begun to be used in the meaning «homosexual» - undoubtedly because of the appeal of its euphemistic connotation -, will undergo a similar narrowing of its denotational scope.

Unlike connotative factors, which play only a marginal role, the **stylistic** element is of crucial importance in many cases of English-French false friends. Following LEECH (ibid., 16), we may define stylistic meaning as «that which a piece of language conveys about the social circumstances of its use». The stylistic features which are most relevant are: the degree of formality obtaining between language users, the field of discourse and the temporal and geographical setting of the language event. For well-known historical reasons English has developed a whole series of quasi-synonymous doublets, consisting of one word of Latin or French origin, another of Germanic origin, the former being generally more formal or technical than the latter. The French native speaker, who is naturally tempted to use the cognate in such cases, should be aware that this often leads to a stylistic incongruity likely to cause surprise, if not mirth, among English speakers. The following pairs illustrate the formal/informal contrast:

aide(r)	aid/help
descendre	descend/go down
désordre	disorder/untidiness
avare	avaricious/mean
améliorer	ameliorate/improve (5)
obtenir	obtain/get
signifier	signify/mean
se conduire	conduct oneself/behave oneself

In the following pairs the English cognate is restricted to a particular technical field while its French counterpart belongs to the common core language:

microbe	(Med.) microbe/germ
domicile	(Admin.) domicile/home
inspirer	(Med.) inspire/breathe in
antenne	(Techn.) antenna/aerial

In another set of cases the English cognate is either dated or obsolete (but still encountered in a literary context):

membre	member/limb
accès (de rage, désespoir...)	access/fit
délivrer (de prison...)	deliver/free, release

At times the picture is further complicated by geographical considerations. The following examples involve the geographical varieties American English (US) and Belgian French (Belg.):

(Fr.) bagages	(US) baggage / (Brit.) luggage
appartement	(US) apartment / (Brit.) flat
présentement	(US) presently / (Brit.) at present
chips	(US) chips / (Brit.) crisps
(Eng.) (telephone) extension	(Fr.) poste / (Belg.) extension, poste
hall	(Fr.) entrée, vestibule / (Belg.) hall, entrée, vestibule

The task of the bilingual dictionary in cases such as these is to alert the user to the stylistic restrictions attached to the cognate by means of an adequate system of labelling. The following examples show that this is, unfortunately, not always the case.

membre	limb; <u>member</u> (Harrap's)
descendre	<u>to descend</u>; to come down, go down (Harrap's)
microbe	<u>microbe</u>; germ (Harrap's)
aider	to help, assist, <u>aid</u> (Harrap's)
eventual	(Harrap's) 1. <u>éventuel</u>
	2. <u>définitif</u>
	(CR) 1. (resulting) qui s'ensuit
	2. (possibly resulting) <u>éventuel</u>, possible
evidently	(Harrap's) <u>évidemment</u>, manifestement
	(CR) 1. (obviously) <u>évidemment</u>, manifestement
	2. (apparently) à ce qu'il paraît

Evidemment, being old or literary in the meaning of «obviously», should certainly not figure as the first translation of *evidently* and should in any case be adequately labelled. As for *eventual*, it is so totally obsolete in the meaning of «possible» that its translation by *éventuel* is quite unjustified and certainly extremely misleading.

This kaleidoscope of difficulties is completed by **syntactic** differences between cognates, that is, differences obtaining at the general level of grammar and involving, among other things, variations in verb patterns and contrasts such as countable vs uncountable, attributive vs predicative. The following examples illustrate differences in verb patterning, the last three representing a recurring phenomenon, namely the greater frequency of the absolute use of the verb in French.

(34) – Je ne puis *accepter* un tel cadeau, votre proposition...
  I can't *accept* a gift like that, your offer...
  – Il a *accepté* de venir nous aider demain
  He has *agreed* to come and help us tomorrow

(35) – Pour *obtenir* un brevet de pilote, il faut être en parfaite santé
  To *obtain* a pilot's licence one must be in perfect health
  – Il a *obtenu* de remettre l'examen à une date ultérieure
  He *got permission* to postpone the examination

(36) – Je *propose* de partir tôt pour éviter les embouteillages
  I *propose* leaving early to avoid the traffic jams
  – Je <u>lui</u> ai *proposé* de partir tôt pour éviter les embouteillages
  I *suggested* to him that we should leave early to avoid the traffic jams

(37) – Ils n'arrêtent pas de *discuter* de politique
  They do nothing but *discuss* politics
  – Ils *discutèrent* âprement jusqu'à trois heures du matin
  They *had a* heated *discussion* until three in the morning

(38) – Cet arbre a *produit* deux fois plus de pommes que l'an passé
  This tree *produced* twice as many apples as last year
  – Cet arbre ne *produit* plus
  This tree no longer *bears fruit*

(39) – Nos troupes n'ont pas pu *résister* à l'attaque ennemie
  Our troops were unable to *resist* the enemy attack
  – La ville a *résisté* pendant dix jours
  The town *held out* for ten days

In other cases the English noun or adjective is subject to syntactic restrictions which do not apply to its French counterpart: *addition* (= «calculation») and *information* are uncountables, *arms* (= «weapons») exists only in the plural form and *delicate* (= «sensitive, tricky») is used only attributively.

(40) – Il est bon en *additions* mais les multiplications, c'est une autre affaire!
He is good at *addition* but multiplication is another matter!
– J'ai presque fini mon devoir. Je dois juste encore vérifier mes *additions*.
I've nearly finished my homework. I've just got to check my *sums*.

(41) – Pourriez-vous me donner des *informations* plus complètes sur cette question?
Could you give me some more detailed *information* on this matter?
– C'est une *information* très surprenante.
It's a very surprising *piece of information*.

(42) – Je ne pense pas que l'ennemi ait assez d'*armes* pour soutenir le siège.
I don't think the enemy has enough *arms* to withstand the siege.
– On n'a jamais retrouvé l'*arme* du crime.
The murder *weapon* was never found.

(43) – Depuis que la majorité est de droite, le Président est dans une situation *délicate*.
The change to a right-wing majority has put the President in a very *delicate* situation.
– Sa situation est très *délicate*.
His situation is very *tricky.*

It goes without saying that the translation difficulties inherent in false friends, which, as has been amply demonstrated, are numerous and varied, are not exclusive to pairs of cognates. Almost as treacherous are pairs of words such as *lit/bed, vivre/live, lumière/light*, etc., which, although they are frequently translational equivalents, are nevertheless subject to the entire gamut of restrictions discussed above, However, false friends are set apart by the fatal attraction of the cognate which, as we have seen, can ensnare even those who might be expected to be proof against such hazards, the lexicographers.

In view of the complex and subtle nature of the contrasts between cognates, it is inevitable that general dictionaries are unable, in the limited space that is available, to do them full justice. Glosses, such as (Fr.) *bouquet: bunch*; (soigneusement composé) *bouquet*, while undeniably useful, are by their very nature so brief and compressed that the user may find them difficult to decipher. Only a person already in the know (and thus, to quote CARPENTER & LATIRI (1986, 6), «un lecteur dont l'acquis linguistique est tel qu'il aura peu recours au dictionnaire»!) would be capable of interpreting easily the following gloss: *cimetière*: (ville) *cemetery*; (église) *graveyard, churchyard* (CR). It would seem therefore that cognates are best treated in a specialized dictionary which has the space to be far more explicit and detailed. The dictionary of false friends being prepared at the Catholic University of Louvain clarifies the areas of divergence and overlap between cognates by means of abundant examples and copious notes, as the following extracts from the dictionary show (6):

BENEFICE / BENEFIT

1. – En faisant cela, elle perd tout le **bénéfice** de ses efforts
By doing that she will lose all the **benefit** she had gained from her efforts[a]
– Ils lui ont laissé le **bénéfice** du doute
They gave him the **benefit** of the doubt

2. – Grâce à cette machine, nos **bénéfices** se sont considérablement accrus
Thank to this machine our **profits** have risen considerably

3. – She draws unemployment (maternity) **benefit** (nd)
Elle touche une **allocation** de chô-mage (de maternité)

4. – The **benefit** for handicapped children raised £ 5,000
La **représentation de bienfaisance** au profit des enfants handicapés a rapporté 40 000 francs

Notes

a. Bien que le sens d'«avantage», «profit» existe dans les deux langues, il est important de faire remarquer que les deux noms sont rarement traduisibles l'un par l'autre car les expressions idiomatiques dans lesquelles on retrouve ces mots ne sont pas les mêmes dans les deux langues.
Exemples: au **bénéfice** des aveugles: in aid of the blind; un divorce à son **bénéfice**: a divorce in her favour; to have the **benefit** of sth: bénéficier de qqch; for your/his **benefit**: pour vous/lui.

AVENTURE / ADVENTURE

Pendant plus d'une heure, l'explorateur nous raconta ses **aventures** dans la jungle amazonienne

For more than an hour the explorer told us about his **adventures** in the Amazonian jungle

Pour ma mère, prendre le train, c'est toute une **aventure**!

Going by train is quite an **adventure** for my mother[a]

⚠ voir 3

2. – Son esprit d'**aventure** lui faisait prendre des risques de plus en plus grands

His spirit of **adventure** (nd) prompted him to take ever greater risks[b]

3. – Je ferais tout pour oublier cette fâcheuse **aventure**

I'd do anything to forget that unfortunate **experience**

– Il m'est arrivé une drôle d'**aventure** ce matin

A funny **thing** happened to me this morning

4. – Il a récemment eu une **aventure** avec l'institutrice de son fils

He's recently had an **affair** with his son's teacher

Notes

a. – Le mot **adventure** a un sens plus restreint qu'**aventure**. Il désigne toujours une entreprise audacieuse, risquée alors qu'**aventure** peut tout simplement désigner un événement (souvent surprenant) concernant une personne (voir 3).

   – Roman, film d'**aventures**: **adventure** story, film

b. Tenter l'**aventure**: to try one's luck

§ – Marcher à l'**aventure**: to walk aimlessly; si d'**aventure**: if by any chance

   – Dire la bonne **aventure** (à qqn): to tell fortunes/to tell sb's fortune; diseur, diseuse de bonne **aventure**: fortune-teller

BRUTAL / BRUTAL

– Le gardien était un homme **brutal** et sans pitié

The guard was a **brutal** man who showed no pity[a]

⚠ voir 2

2. – Il est très **brutal** avec ses camarades de classe (avec ses enfants)

He's very **rough** with his schoolfriends (**violent** with his children)

– Le rugby est un jeu très **brutal**

Rugby is a very **rough** game

3. – Il a été très **brutal** dans sa réponse

He was very **blunt** in his reply

– La franchise **brutale** de cet homme nous a tous choqués

The **blunt** frankness of the man shocked us all[b]

4. – Cet arrêt **brutal** nous fit tous plonger en avant

This **sudden** stop hurled us all forward

– Une chute **brutale** des prix pétroliers aurait des conséquences néfastes pour l'économie du pays

A **sudden** fall in oil prices would have disastrous consequences for the economy of the country

Notes

a. L'adjectif anglais **brutal** a toujours un sens très fort. Il implique nécessairement de la cruauté, de la méchanceté.
   Notez également que «être **brutal** avec qqn» ne se traduit pas au moyen de l'adjectif **brutal** (voir 2). On peut éventuellement avoir recours à l'adverbe **brutally** . Ex: to treat sb **brutally**.

b. L'adjectif anglais **brutal** est possible mais il implique, comme dans le sens 1, de la cruauté, de la méchanceté.

Many users of English would undoubtedly go along with PERKINS (1985, 63) when he says: «The most frequently occurring *faux amis* should be listed, categorized and explained by means of contrastive comparisons. It is only by this sort of analysis that advanced learners can be sensitized to the difficulty of translating such innocuous-looking pairs of similar words and be helped to avoid some of the more frequent lexical errors caused by false L1/L2 analogy». It is our hope that our dictionary will go some way towards meeting this deeply felt need.

NOTES

(1) For a full list of English-French dictionaries of false friends, see Bibliography. One book which stands out is **Faux Amis and Key Words** by P. THODY & H. EVANS which, with a particularly succesful combination of wit and erudition, uses the medium of false friends to give insights into French culture and society. However, the authors themselves acknowledge that they have not attempted to give all the meanings of the words discussed, and refer (p. 209) those readers wishing to discover other meanings «to a good dictionary»!

(2) The project was subsidized by the Ministère de l'Education Nationale, The results of the work will be published in the form of a **Dictionnaire des Faux Amis Français-Anglais**, J. VAN ROEY, S. GRANGER & H. SWALLOW, Duculot, Gembloux (to appear in August 1988).

(3) The distinction between conceptual and collocational differences is far from clear-cut. A superficial analysis of the combinations *car accident/crash* and *plane crash* (translating Fr. *accident de voiture/d'avion*) might suggest a difference of a purely collocational nature. In fact, the combination of *crash* (rather than *accident*) with *plane* reflects the meaning of *crash*: «a violent accident» (accidents involving planes generally being violent in character).

(4) *Fine* can be used in a sentence such as «You need really *fine* sugar for this recipe», but is not used to describe a type or category of sugar or salt.

(5) Note that in this case the non-cognate is also of Latin origin. This is also true of the pairs *microbe/germ, antenna/aerial*.

(6) In order to facilitate comprehension of the extracts the following conventions need to be explained:
   – Section I covers the area of overlap (the cognate is used in both languages)
   – Section II covers cases where the French cognate is translated into English by a word (or words) other than the cognate
   – Section III covers cases where the English cognate is translated into French by a word (or words) other than the cognate
   – nd (= non dénombrable) designates uncountable nouns
   – épith. (= épithète) designates adjectives which can only be used attributively.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

– AISENSTADT E. (1979), *Collocability restrictions in dictionaries*, in: HARTMANN R.R.K. (ed.): *Dictionaries and their Users*, Exeter Linguistic Studies, 71-74.
– ALLAN K. (1986), *Linguistic Meaning - Volume One*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London & New York.
– BOUSCAREN C. & A. DAVOUST (1977), *Les mots anglais qu'on croit connaître - 2: Les mots-sosies*, Hachette, Paris.
– CARPENTER E. & D. LATIRI (1986), *Mystères et démystification du dictionnaire bilingue*, Euralex Bulletin, Vol. 3, Number 1, 1-8.
– CHIFLET J.-L. (1985), *Sky my husband! Ciel mon mari!*, Hermé, Paris.
– HILL R.J. (1982), *A Dictionary of False Friends*, Macmillan Press, London.
– KIRK-GREEN C.W.E. (1981), *French False Friends*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, Boston & Henley.
– KOESSLER M. (1975), *Les faux amis des vocabulaires anglais et américain*, Vuibert, Paris.
– KOROSADOWICZ-STRUZYNSKA M. (1980), *Word collocations in FL vocabulary instruction*, Studia Anglica Posnaniensia, Vol. 12, 109-120.
– LEECH G. (1974), *Semantics*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth.
– PERKINS C. (1985), *Sensitizing advanced learners to problems of L1-L2 translation*, in: TITFORD C. & A.E. HIEKE (eds.): *Translation in Foreign Language Teaching and Testing*, Gunter Narr Verlag, Tübingen, 51-72.

- THODY P. & H. EVANS (1985), *Faux Amis and Key Words*, Athlone Press, London.
- VAN ROEY J. (1985), *Deceptive Terminology for Deceptive Cognates* in: VAN NOPPEN J.-P. & G. DEBUSSCHER (eds.): *Communiquer et Traduire - Hommages à Jean Dierickx*, Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres, XCVI, 159-164.
- VINAY J.-P. & J. DARBELNET (1977), *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais - Méthode de traduction*, Didier, Paris.

DICTIONARIES (and abbreviated titles used in this article)

- *Chamber's Universal Learners' Dictionary (Ch.)*, Chambers, Edinburgh, 1980.
- *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary (Cobuild)*, Collins, London & Glasgow, 1987.
- *Collins Dictionary of the English Language (Coll.)*, Collins, London & Glasgow, 1985.
- *Collins-Robert French Dictionary French-English/English-French (CR)*, Collins, London, Glasgow & Toronto and Le Robert, Paris, 1987.
- *Dictionnaire du Français (DF)*, Larousse, Paris, 1986.
- *Harrap's Shorter French and English Dictionary (Harrap's)*, Harrap, London, 1982.
- *The Penguin Reference Dictionary (Peng.)*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1985.
- *Le Petit Robert (PR)*, par P. ROBERT, Le Robert, Paris, 1983.