

# Medical English and French international and pseudo-international words as a translation difficulty

## Palabras internacionales y pseudo-internacionales en idioma médico francés e inglés como dificultad de traducción al ruso

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#### ABSTRACT:

The article presents instructional techniques for teaching how to translate "false friends" and some training materials used in teaching foreign students who study the theory and practice of professionally oriented medical translation as part of the special course on translation fundamentals in English and French. The educational materials are designed to teach foreign students to correctly translate "false friends" in medical texts. The authors also show some sample training exercises to revitalise the educational material and speech tasks to introduce this material into speech.

**Keywords:** International and pseudo-international words, translation of "false friends" from English and French into Russian, translation fundamentals, English and French for medical purposes

#### RESUMEN:

El artículo presenta técnicas de instrucción para enseñar cómo traducir "falsos amigos" y algunos materiales de capacitación utilizados en la enseñanza de estudiantes extranjeros que estudian la teoría y la práctica de la traducción médica orientada profesionalmente como parte del curso especial sobre traducción en inglés y francés. Los materiales educativos están diseñados para enseñar a los estudiantes extranjeros a traducir correctamente "falsos amigos" en textos médicos. Los autores también muestran algunos ejercicios de entrenamiento de muestra para revitalizar el material educativo y las tareas del habla para introducir este material en el habla.

**Palabras clave:** Palabras internacionales y pseudo-internacionales, traducción de "falsos amigos" del inglés y francés al ruso, fundamentos de la traducción, inglés y francés para fines médicos.

# 1. Introduction

The category of words referred to as “false friends” in the translation literature is of particular interest to researchers and teachers of translation. This interest is not casual, since the number of errors made when these words are translated is extremely high.

When doing a translation, it is important to distinguish genuinely international words, i.e. which are similar in spelling and pronunciation in different languages and coinciding in meaning from words that, despite of their external similarity, have different meanings. Words of the second category are especially “dangerous” for translators, as they often deceive them and are the cause of gross semantic errors. They are called “pseudo-international words” or “false friends” (or “false cognates”).

The term “false friends” (tracing from the French *faux amis*) was introduced by M. Koessler and J. Derocquigny in 1928 in their book “Les faux amis ou Les pièges du vocabulaire anglais” [1] for designating lexical units that are similar in spelling and pronunciation in the source and target languages but different in their semantic content.

The very “openness” of this term is attractive: it seems to remind of traps awaiting everyone who deals with different languages. It should be noted that, by “literal translation of false friends”, M. Koessler and J. Derocquigny, meant translation only by the sound similarity of words in two languages. At present, the term “literal translation” is understood by some researchers much more broadly. In 1949, Ya.I. Retzker considered literalism as translation according to the external – graphic or phonetic – similarity and, in 1970, V.G. Gak already distinguishes between lexical, phraseological, grammatical and stylistic literalisms. (Varnikova 2007).

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## 2. Literature review

The problem of translating these lexical units from one language to another is not new: it was considered in the works of many authors, for example, V.V. Akulenko, T.S. Amiredzhibi, L.I. Borisova, V.N. Komissarov, V.L. Muravyov, D.V. Samoylov and others. Publications of English-Russian dictionaries of “false friends” are becoming more and more popular.

After analyzing the most popular works as a source, we used the work of V.V. Akulenko “About the false friends”: following this author, we define “false friends” as a pair of words in two languages, similar in spelling and/or pronunciation, often with a common origin, but different in meaning. For example, the English “*angina*” is “стенокардия”, “*genial*” is “добрый”, the French “*materiel*” is “оборудование”, “*tablette*” is “плитка”. Both English and French have the noun “*magazine*” that means “журнал”. At the same time, the French “*journal*” is the Russian “газета” or “дневник”. When comparing English and French with Russian, we can find a significant number of words that are spelt or pronounced similarly. These are mainly borrowings either by one language from another or – most often – by the three compared languages from a common source: as a rule, Latin or Greek. The number of borrowings from French in English (*parliament, method, theory, organization, tissue*, etc.) is quite significant. However, being borrowed by another language, a word often acquires new meanings, its semantic structure can completely change. Historically, “false friends” appear as a result of cross-language interaction or as random coincidences. (Akulenko 1969).

It should be noted that there is a considerable number of bilingual dictionaries dedicated to medical topics. However, dictionaries of “false friends” are much scarce. Besides that, little attention is given to medical topics in the dictionaries of “false friends”.

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## 3. Specifics of translating “False friends”

When dealing with “false friends”, a translator can be misled by occurring false identifications, since interlingual analogisms (Gottlieb 1985) have some graphic (or phonetic), grammatical, and often semantic commonness. The cross-language interference (Kuznetsova 1990: 43–45) arising in this case is often caused by true or false semantic similarities of words.

Historically, “false friends” appear as a result of cross-language interaction; in a limited

number of cases, they may be random coincidences; and, in closely related languages, they are based on related words that go back to common prototypes in the ancestor language. Their total number and the role of each of the possible sources in their appearance are different for each specific pair of languages, determined by the genetic and historical links between the languages.

As the researchers of this lexical category point out, the majority of “false friends” (with the exception of a few, the most obvious cases, related to homonymy) is “dangerous” specially for people who confidently and practically satisfactorily use the language, although they do not reach the level of adequate unmixed bilingualism and, therefore, are apt to make false identification of individual elements of foreign- and native-language systems.

The main sources of such errors are the similarity or apparent identity of the material of both languages in terms of pronunciation or function. In particular, in the field of lexis, it is “false friends” that not only especially often disorient translators but can sometimes mislead even professional philologists (e.g. lexicographers, professional translator or teachers of translation), which, due to the exclusivity of such facts, does not give any reason to consider these specialists as insufficiently knowing the language.

The authors share the opinion of L.I. Borisova (Borisova 2005) that the problem of “false friends” is of particular relevance when it comes to translations of special texts which abound with internationalisms. Especially important is the category of “false friends” for teaching medical translation, since medical vocabulary in English, French and Russian was formed under a strong influence of Latin and Greek.

In the literature on translation teaching methods, one can find both general approaches to teaching (Gavrilenko 2008) and the classification of errors (Buzadzhi 2009), techniques and exercises developed to avoid errors in translations (Latyshev 2005). The authors of the last work emphasize that it is necessary to draw students’ attention to the danger of “false friends”. V.L. Muravyov was one of the first to propose a system of exercises focused on this group of words using the French and Russian language material (Muravyov 1985). In addition, tests were developed to verify the formation of the basic and special components of the translator’s competence (Kobiakova 2014: 43 – 45) and an attempt was made to examine “false friends” when three non-closely related languages are in contact (Kurbanova 2012), but this was done not on the medical material which is of interest to the authors of the present study.

The “false friends” in English and French make up a large group of words, which pose rather a complex problem that becomes even more complicated as the differences in the meanings of compared words become thinner. When translating words of this category, it is necessary to refer to the dictionary, paying special attention to their ambiguity; it is not recommended to rely only on the similarity of their form or pronunciation.

An English or French word sometimes may have many different meanings; therefore, one should carefully search and select an appropriate equivalent. Translators should be attentive and make sure that the meaning of a given word also matches the style of a given text. Once “false friends” are found, they should be learnt.

Very useful for translators can be the English-Russian and Russian-English Dictionary of “False Friends” by V.V. Akulenko and others. The dictionary contains a detailed analysis of more than 1000 English words, in the vast majority with abstract meanings, that have Russian equivalents. Unfortunately, there is no similar large French-Russian and Russian-French dictionary of “false friends”. The existing dictionary by Muravyov V.L. has a limited vocabulary and is not focused on medicine.

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## 4. Methods

We conducted an experiment at the Russian Language Department of the RUDN Medical Institute in groups attending a special course on the theory and practice of translation. The experiment involved four groups of foreign students trained in professional (medical) translation: two of them (experimental and control) studied French-Russian and Russian-French translation and the other two (also experimental and control) studied English-Russian

and Russian English translation. Each group consisted of 15 students from different countries (Nigeria, Jamaica, South Africa, Ecuador, Israel, Morocco, Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, Algeria, Tunisia, etc.). The students of the two experimental groups trained in the special course on translation fundamentals in English and French studied the basics and difficulties of translating "false friends". In these groups, we introduced training exercises on translations of international and pseudo-international words. Examples of these exercises are presented further in the article. We believe that, when performing these exercises, students should fix some of them graphically, that is, write them down. This can be formalized as homework or students' individual work.

## **Now let us see some *sample exercises on translation of "false friends" from English into Russian.***

### **Assignment 1. Translate "false friends" into Russian or find their English equivalents:**

1. Cystic fibrosis – \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_ – флегмона
3. Potent pathogen (of bacteria) – \_\_\_\_\_
4. Symptomatic – \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_ – в медицинском контексте чаще всего не «формула», а «состав лекарственного средства» или «питательная смесь»
6. \_\_\_\_\_ – плановая операция
7. Glands (ед.ч. gland) – \_\_\_\_\_
8. Angina – \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_ – брюшная жаба (хроническая ишемия кишечника)
10. \_\_\_\_\_ – любое заболевание молочных желез
11. Medicalpatients – \_\_\_\_\_
12. Purpuric – \_\_\_\_\_
13. \_\_\_\_\_ – не только гидрофобия (водобоязнь), но и бешенство.
14. Invalid – \_\_\_\_\_
15. \_\_\_\_\_ – цвет кожи (особ. цвет лица); никогда: комплекция
16. \_\_\_\_\_ – оскорбление, оскорбить; редко: спец. травма; никогда: инсульт, удар
17. Respirator – \_\_\_\_\_
18. Presentation – \_\_\_\_\_

### **Assignment 2. Translate the selected "false friends" in highly-specialised medical texts.**

1. The doctor made the diagnosis of angina pectoris with sever course.
2. Endoscopy documents esophageal and/or tracheobronchial candidiasis.
3. Among children with severe anemia 76.8 % had malaria parasitemia, of whom 93.1 % received transfusion. Malaria associated mortality was 0.6 %.
4. Young physicians, nurses are abandoning poor countries for richer ones.
5. Chronic ulcers and cellulitis constitute frequent causes of death.
6. Methods: Patients referred for cystic fibrosis screening from January 2005 through December 2010 were tested using either a 32-mutation panel (n = 1,601,308 individuals) or a 69-mutation panel (n = 109,830). Results: The carrier frequencies observed for the 69-mutation panel study population (1/36) and Caucasian (1/27) and African-American individuals (1/79) agree well with published cystic fibrosis carrier frequencies; however, a higher carrier frequency was observed for Hispanic-American individuals (1/48) using the 69-mutation panel as compared with the 32-mutation panel (1/69). The 69-mutation panel detected ~20 % more mutations than the 32-mutation panel for both African-American and Hispanic-American individuals. Conclusion: Expanded panels using race-specific variants can improve cystic fibrosis carrier detection rates within specific populations. However, it is important that the pathogenicity and the relative frequency of these variants are confirmed.
7. Pancytopenia can rarely complicate Grave's disease. It can be due to uncontrolled thyrotoxicosis or as a result of rare side effect of antithyroid medication. Pernicious anemia leading to Vitamin B12 deficiency is another rare associated cause. We report a case of a patient with Grave's disease and undiagnosed pernicious anemia whom was assumed to have antithyroid drug

induced pancytopenia. Failure to recognize this rare association of pernicious anemia as a cause of pancytopenia had resulted in delay in treatment and neurological complication in our patient.

**Assignment 3. Translate the text in writing using a dictionary. Pay special attention to the words *model, condition, collection, aspects*.**

ILLNESS

Illness and sickness are generally used as synonyms for disease. However, this term is occasionally used to refer specifically to the patient's personal experience of his or her disease. In this model, it is possible for a person to be diseased without being ill, (to have an objectively definable, but asymptomatic, medical condition), and to be ill without being diseased (such as when a person perceives a normal experience as a medical condition, or medicalizes a non-disease situation in his or her life). Illness is often not due to infection but a collection of evolved responses, sickness behavior, by the body aids the clearing of infection. Such aspects of illness can include lethargy, depression, anorexia, sleepiness, hyperalgesia, and inability to concentrate.

**Let us see *sample exercises on translation of "false friends" from French into Russian***

**Assignment 1. Determine which sentences have "faux amis".**

1. Эта программа выйдет в эфир в 14 часов. В комнате сильно пахло эфиром.
2. L'attaque cérébrale peut survenir dans deux cas.
3. Où y a-t-il eu le plus d'attaques de requins en 2016?
4. Il a bien passé son examen d'anglais.
5. L'examen radiologique l'IRM ne nécessite aucune préparation partielle.

**Assignment 2. Translate "false friends" into Russian or find their French equivalents:**

1. J'ai une ampoule qui me fait du mal \_\_\_\_\_
2. examen de sang \_\_\_\_\_
3. бюллетень (больничный лист) \_\_\_\_\_
4. bulletin de santé \_\_\_\_\_
5. être au régime \_\_\_\_\_
6. лечебная диета \_\_\_\_\_
7. L'attaque cérébrale \_\_\_\_\_
8. Crise cardiaque \_\_\_\_\_
9. Кризисная фаза болезни \_\_\_\_\_
10. intervention (chirurgicale) \_\_\_\_\_ (в других контекстах: вмешательство, интервенция, выступление, посредничество);
11. invalide, прил. \_\_\_\_\_ (о документе),  
\_\_\_\_\_ (о человеке);
12. handicapé \_\_\_\_\_
13. molécule \_а\_\_\_\_\_ б\_\_\_\_\_

**Assignment 3. Translate the sentences containing "false friends" into Russian**

1. En laboratoire, les cellules résistantes à la chimiothérapie perdent généralement leur résistance quand on enlève les molécules anticancéreuses.
2. QU'EST-CE QUE NERISONE, pommade ET DANS QUELS CAS EST-IL UTILISE ?
3. Un ordinateur rassemble et analyse les données obtenues sur un écran.
4. L'ambition de faire du Samu social gabonais un organisme efficace dans la satisfaction des besoins sanitaires des populations gabonaises devient de plus en plus difficile au regard du manque des moyens financiers considérables que connaît cette structure sociale aux perspectives immédiates très prometteuses.

**Assignment 4. Translate the text in writing using a dictionary. Pay attention to the words *rééducation, molécule*.**

1. AVC: la rééducation monte en gamme  
Du sport et de la musique pour se remettre d'un AVC, c'est ce que propose à Paris une structure unique en France. Ce complément aux techniques de rééducation classiques tente, grâce à des

activités ludiques, de stimuler les zones lésées du cerveau afin que les patients retrouvent une plus grande motricité. Dans ce centre, il n'est pas question de médecine, mais plutôt de coaching. Du coaching pour se faire plaisir dans la rééducation.

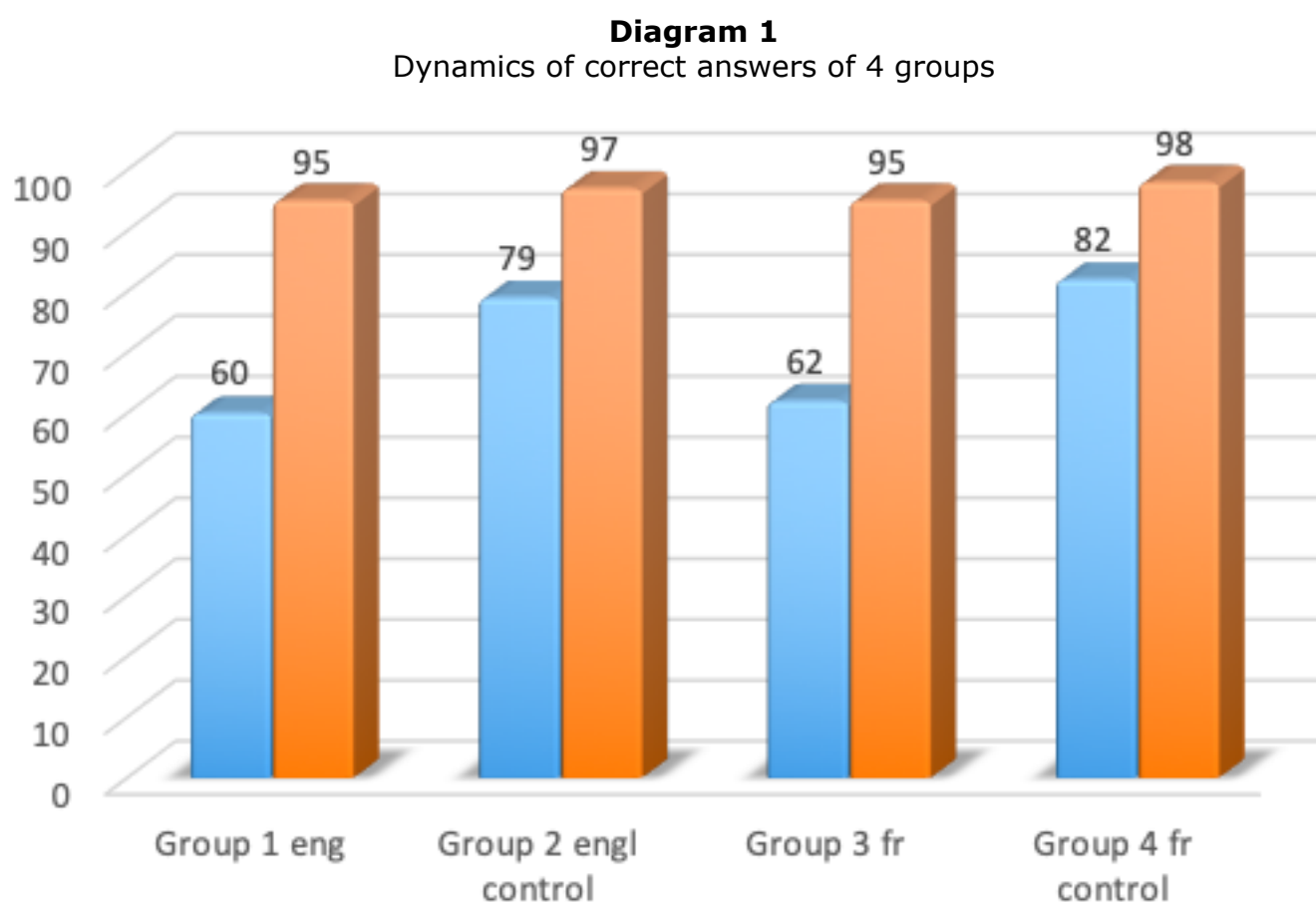
## 2. Les médicaments génériques

Quand un laboratoire pharmaceutique découvre une nouvelle molécule (encore appelée médicament ou spécialité pharmaceutique), il dépose un brevet qui lui assure l'exclusivité de sa fabrication et de sa commercialisation pendant 20 ans. A l'expiration du brevet, la molécule tombe dans le domaine public, ce qui autorise d'autres laboratoires à en produire une copie conforme et à le vendre sous un no, commercial différent de celui du médicament de référence. On parle alors de médicament générique. Génériques et médicaments de référence sont donc identiques par leur composition en principes actifs, ainsi que par leurs formes pharmaceutiques (ou galéniques).

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## 5. Results

After the translation of the exercises, we tested all the four groups. All the students were offered medical texts containing international and pseudo-international words in English and French. Their task was to translate these texts without a dictionary. Observations during the experiment showed that the students did not hesitate to write translations of words and completed the task very quickly. However, after seeing the correct answers, the students were surprised. It was evident that many of them had not even expected how different the translations of words might be. Thus, after the first test on "false friends" was completed, the results in the experimental groups were low: 40% of words were misunderstood by the students. In the control groups, the results were high (79% and 82%, respectively). After we developed additional exercises for training "false friends", the students were offered a test similar to the first one. As a result, as Diagram 1 shows, the number of errors was significantly reduced: the final test recorded 95% and 96% of correct answers, respectively (Diagram 1):



As the experiment showed, the knowledge of the specifics of the phenomenon of "false friends" helps to avoid "hidden pitfalls" when translating a text. For example, after checking student translations of medical texts from English and French into Russian, we found that the quality of translation increased by at least 35%.

After conducting the experiment and demonstrating the correct answers, we gave the students the following tips and recommendations:

1. One should not rely on one's own intuition but always check the translation and the

meaning of a word in the dictionary.

2. In English and French, words may have many different meanings; therefore, one should carefully search and find their correct equivalents.

3. One should be attentive and make sure that the meaning of a given word matches the style of a given text.

4. If "false friends" are found, they should be learnt once and forever; one can also keep a personal dictionary of "dangerous words".

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## 6. Conclusions

Summing up, it should be noted that the cross-language phenomenon being studied requires special attention from both linguists and translators, since ignorance of the lexical meanings of "false friends" can lead to a distortion of meanings in the process of communication and translation; therefore, it would be unreasonable to translate them, relying on one's own intuition and on their native language.

Students' familiarization with pseudo-international vocabulary and consistent work with this category of words in translations from English and French into Russian can significantly reduce the number of translation errors.

For teachers who teach Russian to foreign students, it is very important to have on-hand materials for practical applications.

Based on the above examples, we can conclude that medical translation requires of a translator a full understanding of a source text and long and hard work with dictionaries. In this area, it is unacceptable to deviate from the text content, arbitrarily add or remove words from the context, since correct translation is often critically important not only for effective treatment but also for the patient's life.

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