ISSN 1799-2591 (print); ISSN 2053-0692 (online)
Theory and Practice in Language Studies, Vol. 16, No. 11, pp. 3688-3695, November 2026
DOI: https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1611.02

Familiar and False: A Study of English–Albanian False Friends Across Two Translation Directions

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***Abstract*—As false friends pose recurring challenges to vocabulary acquisition, this bidirectional study aims to analyze the correlation between the variables of translation direction and self-assessment with false-friend errors. For the purposes of this study, students performed a translation task in both translation directions. Additionally, students were asked to provide a self-evaluation after completing the task. The results highlighted that translation direction plays a minor role in the occurrence of false-friend errors and that performance inaccuracies are associated with high levels of self-reported confidence. Therefore, through presenting a list of 35 full false friends shared between Albanian and English, the study aims to emphasize the importance of targeted contrastive analysis in moderating the effects of deceptive surface similarity.**

***Index Terms*—false friends, translation direction, errors, accuracy, confidence**

I. Introduction

Mistranslations are considered a by-product of bilingualism. They are usually harmless, but in particular circumstances, they carry significant consequences. The following historical diplomatic misunderstanding in 1830 between the French and American governments is cited by the BBC as one of the greatest mistranslations ever. 'Le gouverenement français demande…' sparked controversy because it was translated as 'The French government demands' (Macdonald, 2015). This faulty translation prompted the US President to express indignation and pause negotiations.

The misunderstanding stemmed from the French verb *demander*, which actually corresponds to the English verb *to ask*. The instance depicts a typical example of a linguistic phenomenon known as false friends; a manifestation of interference, which happens when "two given words in two or more given natural languages are graphically and/or phonetically the same or very alike; yet, their meanings may be totally or partially different" (Chamizo-Dominguez, 2008, p. 1). The issue of false friends is deserving of attention, especially because false assumptions about their semantic meaning often go undetected and may ultimately lead to error fossilization.

Although studies on false friends are abundant, research has mainly focused on language pairs involving English and various languages such as French, German, and Spanish (Friel & Kennison, 2001; Frunza & Inkpen, 2008; Roca-Varela, 2015). However, in the context of Albanian-English pairs, such studies remain few in number.

Addressing the gap, the present study seeks to explore how false-friend interference manifests across both translation directions and examine students' abilities to assess their own performance. The study seeks to elaborate on the reasons for the persistence of false-friend errors among advanced learners.

II. Literature Review

A. Classification of False Friends

(a). Classification Based on Etymological Criteria

Based on etymological criteria, Chamizo-Domínguez (2008) distinguishes between chance and semantic false friends, noting that the occurrence of the first type is a result of mere coincidence. On the other hand, semantic false friends can be traced to one common etymological source, usually Greek or Latin. While English and Albanian differ vastly etymologically-Albanian belonging to the Indo-European group and English being a Germanic language–both their lexicons have borrowed from the abovementioned common sources, which has in turn led to shared lexical pairs that resemble in surface, but differ in semantic meaning.

This categorization provides important historical insights into the nature of false friends. However, a categorization based on etymological criteria falls out of the scope of this study, which centers on semantic gaps in student knowledge.

(b). Classification Based on Semantic Criteria

Based on semantic criteria, Chamizo-Domínguez (2008) differentiates full from partial false friends. While full false friends have diverged completely in their semantic meaning, partial false friends retain a degree of semantic overlap.

For instance, the lexical pair *argument–argument* may present difficulty to Albanian students, who are familiar with

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the shared meaning of '*a reason to support one's idea*', but do not consider the additional English meaning of '*to quarrel*'. Shaba and Selmani (2023) indicate that these instances are relatively harder to discern because lexical items in English are often polysemantic.

For this reason, only full false friends between English and Albanian were considered. This choice in study scope was made to ensure that the lexical items could be translated without contextual cues, and that the retrieved responses were either right or wrong.

B. Bilingual Lexical Access and the Revised Hierarchical Model: A Theoretical Framework for Contextualizing False-Friend Errors

Various theories have emerged to explain how the bilingual brain processes language. The most prominent are the language-selective and language-nonselective access hypotheses. The first theory claims that the bilingual brain activates lexical items from the target language only, keeping lexicons separate when performing linguistic tasks (Gerard & Scarborough, 1989). On the other hand, the second theory claims that it is difficult for bilinguals to retain a clear distinction between the two linguistic systems when performing a linguistic task (De Groot, 2011).

Indeed, various studies have demonstrated that lexical items that are visually similar tend to activate semantic meanings from both lexicons irrespective of the language in which the task is being conducted (Van Assche et al., 2020). For instance, Poort et al. (2016) observed that encountering a homograph in one language was enough to influence processing of a corresponding homograph in another language. Similarly, false-friend visual similarities urge the bilingual brain to store both lexical items under the same semantic meaning, a process that later manifests as erroneous utterances, unless the bilingual is made aware of the difference in semantic meaning.

However, in reality, bilinguals often lack such a heightened sense of linguistic awareness, which is why they often seek reassurance in familiar spellings and/or pronunciations. From a theoretical viewpoint, the Revised Hierarchical Model argues that L2 novel concepts are acquired through L1 mediation (Kroll & Stewart, 1994). Consequently, translation into the mother tongue (L2→L1) is regarded as relatively much easier compared to translation from the mother tongue (L1→L2). However, this assumption is rightfully questioned, since false friends constitute a particular vocabulary segment that is highly susceptible to error production.

C. Deceptive Surface Similarity and Misleading Confidence

Research indicates that improper use of false friends leads to the creation of inappropriate lexical associations. Consequently, once these inappropriate associations are formed, 'it may become more difficult for the language learner to form the correct association than it would be with translations that differ in sound and appearance' (Friel & Kennison, 2001, p. 253). The main issue lies in surface similarity, which fosters a strong sense of conviction in one's lexical knowledge. It is this deceptive surface similarity that leads students to believe that they possess the correct semantic information. This, in turn, prevents them from questioning what they deem common knowledge. Therefore, the study focuses on confidence as an important variable to be examined.

D. Research Questions

For the aforementioned reasons, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

- What is the relationship between inaccuracy and translation direction? Is there a translation direction that is more vulnerable to false-friend errors?
- What behavioral patterns do students exhibit when they translate false friends? Do they experience overconfidence/underconfidence, or is their confidence realistic?
- Is there a linear relationship between confidence and performance? Do students who report higher confidence perform better or worse individually?

III. Methodology

A. Sample

The study was conducted at the Faculty of Foreign Languages at the University of Tirana. A total of 90 undergraduate English majors participated in the study. All students were native Albanian speakers. They were in their first year of their Bachelor's studies and were expected to have reached B2 proficiency because they had been studying English since third grade and they were majoring in the field. Participants were divided into two groups of 45 students each. The first group was asked to perform the translation task from English to Albanian, while the second group was asked to complete it from Albanian to English. Students were informed beforehand that the data was confidential and would be used for research purposes only.

B. Instrument

A translation task consisting of 35 lexical items was used. All the lexical items are full false friends shared between English and Albanian. They were selected as representations of words that are often confusing for Albanian students, and presented in isolation rather than within a sentence to ensure that students' lexical knowledge was tested directly without the aid of contextual cues. The list of English-Albanian full false friends is presented below. The list was administered to

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both groups, with the only distinction being the translation direction. The shared etymology and divergence in meaning are provided for each pair of false friends.

TABLE 1
LIST OF ABSOLUTE FALSE FRIENDS SHARED BETWEEN ALBANIAN AND ENGLISH

#	Albanian word	English word	Shared etymology	Meaning in Albanian	Meaning in English
1.	Akademia	Academia	Latin Academe	an institution of higher education	life, community, world of teachers and education
2.	Aktual	Actual	Latin Actualis	happening now	real, factual
3.	Distinktiv	Distinctive	French. Distinctif	a visible badge (police, military)	special, noticeable
4.	Dispozicion	Disposition	Latin Disposition	at someone's disposal	temperament, legal transfer of property
5.	I Edukuar	Educated	Latin Educatus	concerning good manners	referring to training and knowledge received at school/university
6.	Emergjent	Emergent	Latin Emergens	urgent	coming into existence
7.	Fabrikë	Fabric	Latin Faber	a factory	textile, cloth
8.	Faktikisht	Factually	Latin Factum	actually, in fact	relating to facts
9.	Fizikan	Physicist	No shared etymology	a scientist in physics	a medical doctor
10.	Gjenial	Genial	Latin Genialis	brilliant, ingenious	friendly, cheerful, pleasant
11.	Ilustrues	Illustrious	Latin Illustrāre (illuminate) Latin Illustris (distinguished)	serving to illustrate	famous, well respected, admired
12.	Impresionues	Impressionable	Latin Impression	impressive, leaving a strong impact	easily influenced, esp. emotionally or mentally
13.	Injorant	Ignorant	Latin Ignorare	rude and uncultured	lacking knowledge
14.	Instancë	Instance	Latin Instantia	a formal authority level	a specific case, an example
15.	Komoditet	Commodity	Latin Commoditas	comfort	referring to raw material
16.	Kondicioner	Conditioner	Latin Conditio	air conditioner	hair conditioner, fabric softener
17.	Krudo	Crude	Latin Crudus	raw, uncooked food	broader sense; unrefined, vulgar, harsh
18.	Librari	Library	Latin Librarium	a bookstore	a place where books are read
19.	Magazinë	Magazine	French magasin	a storehouse	a print periodical
20.	Mimikë	Mimic	Greek. Mimikos	facial expressions	a person who imitates
21.	Miting	Meeting	English borrowing	a political rally, a protest	any kind of gathering
22.	Mizor	Miser	Latin Miser	describing a state of poverty	describing a stingy person
23.	Moderator	Moderator	Latin Moderator	a TV/radio host, show presenter	debate facilitator, online forum manager
24.	Novelë	Novel	Latin Novella	a short story	a long fictional narrative
25.	Ordiner	Ordinary	Latin Ordinarius	a rude, vulgar, low-class person (derogatory)	usual, common, not special (neutral)
26.	Pamflet	Pamphlet	Latin Pamphilus	a short satirical piece	a brochure
27.	Pedagog	Pedagogue	Greek. Paidagogos	a university professor	a strict, pedantic teacher
28.	Pretendoj	Pretend	Latin Praetendo	to lay claim	to give a false appearance of being/possessing
29.	Prokuror	Procurer	Latin Procurare	a public prosecuter	referring to a pimp
30.	Relacion	Relation	Latin Relation	a formal written report	connection; family member
31.	Replikë	Replica	Latin. Replicare	a verbal reply, retort	a physical copy, reproduction
32.	Sensibël	Sensible	Latin Sensibilis	sensitive	practical, reasonable
33.	Simpatik	Sympathetic	In Albanian: from French sympathique In English from Latin sympathia	likeable, pleasant, attractive	showing compassion and understanding
34.	Tekstualisht	Textually	Latin Textus	verbatim	in a way that relates to the text at hand
35.	Xhentil	Gentle	Latin Gentilis	referring to a gentleman	soft, mild, kind

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C. Procedure and Data Analysis

Students were divided into two groups and were requested to work independently without the help of physical or online dictionaries. They were given a 50-minute time limit. At the end, they were asked to rate how confident they felt throughout the task on a 10-point Likert scale (1 = least confident; 10 = most confident).

The study considered only correct responses and inaccuracies attributed to false-friend interference, since they constituted the essence of the study, and ignored unrelated errors and missing translations. After categorizing each translation, JASP was used to provide a statistical analysis of the data by conducting a Chi-square test of independence and a Pearson's correlation test.

IV. Results

A. Student Performance in Both Translation Directions: Relationship Between Translation Direction and Accuracy

The results indicated that students of the Albanian → English group performed relatively better. Respectively, the error rates were 61.92% for the English → Albanian direction and 56.09% for the Albanian → English direction. A Chi-square test of independence was conducted to determine whether there was a relationship between error rates and translation direction. Indeed, an association between the variables was found, as indicated by $p=0.03$. The p-value ($p<0.05$) shows that translation direction influenced error frequency, and that the higher error frequency in the English → Albanian direction was not a mere coincidence. Therefore, this translation direction was more vulnerable to false-friend errors.

Even though there is an existing association between the two variables, Cramer's $V = 0.059$ indicated that the strength of said association was weak, which means that translation direction affected accuracy, but only slightly so. Therefore, false-friend interference between Albanian and English cannot be attributed solely to translation direction. This means that there are additional factors that condition its occurrence.

B. Perceived Versus Actual Performance: Assessment of Confidence Patterns

Students from both groups were asked to rate their overall confidence in performing the translations, as it was a necessary step in assessing students' metacognition, which has been linked to mitigating the effects of language interference. Haukås (2018) argues that an important part of metacognition is strengthening the ability to differentiate between known and unknown information. In the context of the study, students were largely unaware of their semantic knowledge gaps.

Indeed, the results in Table 2 indicate incongruity between confidence and performance. Specifically, the wide gaps between mean accuracy and mean confidence in both groups suggest patterns of overconfidence. That is to say, students believe that they are performing markedly better than their actual performance suggests.

Although both groups displayed overconfidence, students in the Albanian → English group exercised greater caution when translating from their mother tongue, taking additional time to consider semantic meaning prior to proceeding with the translation. The figures in Table 2 indicate that they were generally better calibrated than the English → Albanian group, as indicated by higher accuracy and lower overconfidence.

Table 2
Evidence of Overconfidence Patterns Among Students

Translation Direction	Accuracy (Mean)	Confidence (Mean)	Difference	Overconfidence
English→Albanian	38.03%	70.67%	+32.64	Yes
Albanian→English	44.00%	69.33%	+25.33	Yes

C. Confidence and Accuracy: Is There a Linear Relationship?

Although the results have already established that students exhibit tendencies toward overconfidence, it was important to examine confidence as a student's individual attribute. Therefore, a Pearson's correlation test was conducted to determine whether students who reported higher confidence tended to perform proportionally better or worse.

The Pearson's correlation test, displayed in Table 3 and Table 4, which is numerically very close to zero in both cases, indicated that there was neither a positive nor a negative correlation between accuracy and confidence. While overconfidence was a consistent trend within the group, accuracy varied significantly among students; it did not increase or decrease following a consistent pattern. Therefore, the findings suggest that self-reported confidence cannot be used as a predictor of accuracy. It is evident that students exhibit an inability to judge their performance realistically, which, coupled with patterns of overconfidence, discourages them from questioning their knowledge and reinforces their tendency to seek reassurance from visually similar lexical items.

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TABLE 3
PEARSON'S CORRELATION TEST FOR THE ENGLISH → ALBANIAN DIRECTION

Pearson's Correlations ▼

			Pearson's r	p
Accuracy (%)	-	Confidence.	−0.001	.993

TABLE 4
PEARSON'S CORRELATION TEST FOR THE ALBANIAN → ENGLISH DIRECTION

Pearson's Correlations

			Pearson's r	p
Accuracy (%)	-	Confidence.	0.017	.910

V. DISCUSSIONS

A. Overall Findings

In accordance with the language-nonselective access hypothesis, high error rates in both groups indicate that students were activating items from both mental lexicons simultaneously. The errors, in fact, reflect fossilized inappropriate lexical associations.

The results indicated that the English → Albanian direction, however, was more susceptible to false-friend errors. Apparently, translation into the mother tongue led students to feel more confident and disregard further semantic analysis. Indeed, the study's findings indicated that backward translation, which is generally associated with few difficulties and higher accuracy, proved to be a greater challenge for Albanian students. Although a relationship between direction and inaccuracy was identified, the correlation was relatively weak, indicating that error occurrence was only partially influenced by translation direction.

In addition to direction, the study examined the variable of self-reported confidence to draw conclusions on students' actual and perceived performance. The results point to patterns of overconfidence in both groups. Therefore, the results suggest that false-friend errors are largely associated with overconfidence tendencies.

Lastly, although it is highly recommended that students foster the ability to self-evaluate, self-assessment in these circumstances proves highly unreliable, as correlation testing indicated no linear relationship between confidence and accuracy.

B. Individual Examination of False-Friend Pairs

Although the overall findings suggest that in the context of false-friend interference between Albanian and English, the English → Albanian direction was more susceptible to student errors, individual variation was observed within the pairs. That is to say that the two items within the same pair did not necessarily elicit the same number of errors in a predictable pattern. Conversely, there were instances in which the results indicated stark asymmetry in error rates within pairs. For the purposes of this study, this variation warrants a discussion to frame the quantitative findings.

Komoditet and *commodity* is the first example that the study considers. It seems that students encountered greater difficulty translating the lexical item *commodity* than its false friend *komoditet.* As an Italian borrowing into Albanian, students were able to associate *komoditet* with a sense of ease and comfort, leading them to opt for the correct translation at a rate of 60%. However, the strong lexical associations formed by surface similarity and students' unfamiliarity with the meaning of *commodity,* referring to raw materials, resulted in an error rate of approximately 80% in the English → Albanian translation direction.

However, the contrary pattern manifests in the *pretendoj-pretend* pair. A higher error rate is observed in translation from the mother tongue than in translation from English. Indeed, the error rate when translating from Albanian to English was substantial, reaching 84%. On the other hand, the error rate when translating the lexical item *pretend* was significantly lower, although nearly 50% of translations in this direction fell into false-friend interference category. It appears that students were more familiar with the semantic meaning of *pretend,* which is a lexical concept that they frequently encounter in day-to-day communication, as opposed to the meaning of *claim,* which actually corresponds to the Albanian lexical item *pretendoj.* Although both *pretend* and *claim* are classified at B1 proficiency, it appears that the frequency of exposure plays an important role in imprinting semantic meaning on one's mental lexicon.

By contrast, there are false friends that are equally problematic across both translation directions. Typical examples of this phenomenon include the *aktual–actual* and the *librari–library* false-friend pairs. Evidently, there is enough semantic vicinity between the corresponding semantic meanings of 'current' and 'real' to suggest that *aktual* and *actual* are each other's translation equivalents. Similarly, the point of convergence between *librari* and *library* is book possession. Consequently, this converging point is sufficient to blur the lines between the meanings of 'a place where books are bought' and 'a place where books are borrowed'.

Additionally, interesting findings were observed in cases where lexical items are imbued with differences in stylistic

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nuances. The *ordiner–ordinary* pair posed great difficulties because the faulty semantic association within this pair is strengthened by means of the derogatory connotation that the Albanian lexical item carries. While the English lexical item *ordinary* belongs to a neutral diction, the Albanian false friend conveys a negative connotation. It is this negative connotation that overrides the English item's neutral tone.

A similar confusion on account of differing lexical connotations was observed in the case of the *pedagog–pedagogue* pair. However, it is the English lexical item that carries the pejorative meaning in this case. While the Albanian language assigns a neutral meaning to *pedagog,* referring to a university professor, the English language imbues *pedagogue* with a slightly negative connotation of a strict teacher who adheres to formal rules and trivial matters.

Finally, the sensibël-*sensible* pair presented a very interesting case. As shown by the translations, although students seemed aware that both lexical items were adjectives describing human behavior, they presumably failed to take into account the contrastive semantic meanings. Albanian students associate *sensibël* with sensitivity. In their mother tongue, this lexical item typically depicts a person whose decision-making process is guided by personal feelings. Therefore, this lexical representation undermines the acquisition of the correct meaning of the English *sensible*, which refers to a person who appeals to reason rather than feelings.

The abovementioned examples aim to illustrate that the difficulty in differentiating between false friends lies not only in misleading surface structure, but also in identifying the ties that bind them together. Sometimes, the tie is merely surface structure or common etymology, as in the case of *commodity* and *komoditet.* However, at other times, the tie is solidified by additional factors, including semantic meanings that:

- stand in complete opposition (*sensibël* and *sensible*),
- denote variance in stylistic nuances (*ordiner* and *ordinary*),
- or share a converging point (*librari–library*).

Although the examples elaborated on above are simply a few of the false-friend pairs examined in this study, their qualitative analysis provides further insights into the causes underlying error production.

VI. Suggestions and Conclusions

The study intentionally sampled students who had received extensive English exposure over the years to portray false-friend errors as a dormant issue. Their manifestation is not immediate; it is usually noticed after inappropriate lexical associations have already formed.

Indeed, patterns of overconfidence suggest that students rarely question their preconceived knowledge because they overestimate the reliability of lexical surface similarity. Overconfidence patterns in both sampled groups indicate that students generally believe that they are performing significantly better than their performance suggests, which means that they are not aware of the semantic and connotative differences that permeate false friends. Additionally, the absence of a linear correlation between confidence and accuracy further underpins the fact that self-judgment is often fallible, and may easily hinder students' initiative to monitor their lexical knowledge.

The evident discrepancy between confidence and performance, which stems from students not being made aware of individual semantic differences, necessitates an item-level analysis that further explains the issue of false-friend error production. Consequently, the discussion section considered several examples of false-friend pairs to highlight that error distribution does not follow a predictable pattern, although a statistical relationship between translation direction and inaccuracy can be established.

In conclusion, the production of false-friend errors in the Albanian students' context is a summation of multiple factors that are inextricably intertwined, such as translation direction, the presence of overconfidence, and unfamiliarity with lexical-item-specific characteristics. For the abovementioned reasons, the study advocates targeted contrastive analysis rather than independent inference of the semantic meaning on the students' part. Although it is traditionally believed that contextual cues eventually help students decode semantic meaning, the assumption does not always hold true, because "the contexts in which false friends occur can sometimes be ambiguous enough to 'accept' both the real and the apparent but false meaning" (Frantzen, 1998, p. 250). Indeed, the sentence '*I read a very interesting novel last night'* does not provide substantial clarity as to help Albanian students disambiguate between '*a long fictional narrative'* and '*a short story',* the latter semantic meaning being activated by the Albanian *novelë.*

Therefore, explicit instruction is essential to draw students' attention to false-friend pairs. For example, an explicit explanation juxtaposing the semantic differences between English and Albanian lexical items that share orthographic and phonetic resemblance would be useful to bilinguals (Shaba & Selmani, 2023). Drawing attention to semantic opposition, connotative nuances, and etymological variation may help mitigate students' dependence on formal similarity, which, when taken at face value, ultimately leads to error fossilization.

Overall, the quantitative findings suggest that translation direction affects student performance on false-friend errors. Although the relationship between the variables exists, the strength of said association is weak, as false friends present intricate individual characteristics, which, coupled with the presence of excessive confidence in one's abilities, prompt students to create false lexical associations that linger–sometimes indefinitely–in their bilingual mental lexicon. However, it is important to acknowledge that although the occurrence of false-friend errors is a bidirectional phenomenon, the English → Albanian direction is more susceptible to errors because students tend to be more confident when translating into their mother tongue, thereby exerting less caution in semantic processing. In addition, by highlighting the

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unpredictable nature of false friends, the study points to the need to address them in a straightforward manner, so as to help students improve their performance and their ability to self-monitor their lexical knowledge.

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