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How Long Will You Love Being "Upright"? The Danger of False Friends in Translation

KEN ADAMS
Translation Consultant, SIL International, Asia
theconsultinglinguist@gmail.com

Abstract: Working in related languages can be beneficial in that knowledge of one language can be applied to another without having to learn each one individually. Unfortunately, assumed equivalence often leads to mistakes and misunderstandings caused by false friends—often referred to as "false cognates"—that is, words that appear similar across language boundaries and are therefore assumed to have the same meaning. While the issue of false friends has been discussed with regards to language learning for decades, false friends are not always obvious and can single-handedly render translations inaccurate, unacceptable, or both. The goal of this paper is to apply insights from existing studies on false friends to translation among related languages and Bible translation in particular. To clarify the nature of the issue, relevant terminology is discussed alongside examples from Bible translation in South Asia. Finally, the paper proposes potential steps forward for Bible translation practitioners to avoid the potential pitfalls of false friends.

1 An introduction to false friends

Working with languages is a fun and often humbling experience, rich with humor and at times, frustration. In translation, a common source of confusion—and if one can keep a light attitude, a source of laughter—is false friends. Anyone who has accidentally asked for "soup" (Spanish: *sopa*) instead of "soap" (Spanish: *jabón*) in the restroom knows precisely the feeling. Or perhaps after making such a linguistic blunder, you may have inadvertently announced being "pregnant" (Spanish: *embarazada*) instead of simply admitting that you were "embarrassed" (Spanish: *avergonzado(a)*). The ensuing embarrassment is the epitome of irony. These are examples of false friends.

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Nicholls (2002) gives a very basic definition, stating false friends are: "Pairs or groups of words[1] occurring in two or more languages which look and/or sound very similar to each other but differ to varying degrees in meaning". So the problem is that the words look or sound as though they should have the same meaning, but in fact they do not. However, this concept is more nuanced than it might seem at face value. Additionally, it presents a challenge that often goes unnoticed even by experienced translators and consultants. In fact, the more comfortable someone is with one of the cognate languages, often the more likely they are to be deceived by a false friend.

The majority of research on this topic pertains to the challenges false friends pose for language learners. There is also some attention in the literature given to this concept in technical translation. However, applications for Bible translation have been very few. Yet, the issue of false friends presents a challenge that must be addressed, as it has significant implications on the accuracy of a translation and yet is often unrecognized or quickly dismissed. This paper seeks to demonstrate the impact of false friends on Bible translation through a literature study and examples from translation in South Asia, and then propose some practical solutions to the issue.

1.1 Defining the terms

Before we can begin to address the recognition and treatment of false friends in Bible translation, we must clarify the usage of words across the literature in general. The term "false friends" is usually credited to Kœssler and Derocquigny (1928), who coined the French term "*faux amis*".

There is a wide range of vocabulary involved in the discussion of false friends, and the definitions and categorizations vary considerably for any given term. Even the term "false friends" itself is often used interchangeably with other phrases, adding to the complexity of the conversation. For example, the term "false friends" has often been used interchangeably with the term "false cognates" and, for some authors, "deceptive cognates". The appendices contain three tables that demonstrate how these three terms have been discussed in the literature in relation to two variables: etymology and meaning. As noted in the Nicholls definition above, these terms all assume words with some kind of formal equivalence whether written or spoken; however, their usages differ slightly from author to author depending on whether the two words in question share a common etymology or not and to what extent their meanings overlap.

[1] While "false friends" can apply at an idiomatic, pragmatic, or syntactic level (Hayward and Moulin 1984), the current paper will focus on those at the word level.

There are a number of other terms used to refer to words across languages that resemble each other whether orthographically or phonetically. Based on the extant literature, I have attempted to develop a rough consensus and summary chart in order to move forward with consistent categories and terminology, essential for a productive discussion on the topic.

Before presenting a summary chart, the terms "cognate" and "friend"[2] will need to be clarified. These represent the variables mentioned above: etymology and meaning. Unfortunately, the term "cognate" is not used consistently across all the literature. The generally accepted usage is that it refers to words or other linguistic forms with common etymologies (Chacón Beltrán 2006:29; Crystal 2008:83; Nicholls 2002). Meaning is not a factor; it is the historical relationship between words which are now across linguistic boundaries—that historical relationship alone—that qualifies two words as cognates.

In contrast, most authors use the term "false friend" whether the words in question are etymologically related or not. The focus, then, is not on meaning but form; that is, the words in question look or sound as if they should mean the same thing, but they do not. Likewise, the term "true friend", though rarely used, refers to words whose meanings are essentially the same, just as their formal resemblance would lead one to believe.

Table 1 attempts to categorize the terminology necessary for a discussion regarding words that look or sound alike across language.

[2] The term "friend(s)" is never used in isolation. It is most often used in the phrase "false friend(s)" and occasionally in the correlate "true friend(s)".

Table 1: Potentially deceptive words (due to formal resemblance)

	True Friend	False Friend	*Overlap in Meaning*
Cognate	True Friend[a]	—	*Full/Nearly Full*
	—	Partial False Friend[b]	*Partial*
	—	Full False Friend[b]	*None/Insignificant*
Non-Cognate	Accidental Friend[c]	—	*Full/Nearly Full*
	—	Accidental Friend[c]	*Partial*
	—	Chance False Friend	*None/Insignificant*

[a] This is the term used by Abou-Khalil et al. (2018). Others have used the term "true cognate".

[b] "Partial false friend" and "full false friend" together constitute the category "deceptive cognate". The partial false friend will be further broken down into three categories below (figures 2–4).

[c] Though it could be done, I see no need to distinguish between accidental friends that have either partial or full semantic overlap. Any overlap in meaning is purely coincidental.

For the purposes of Bible translation, the origin of the words is less important than the fact that their formal resemblance—and perhaps even a certain degree of shared meaning—leads translators and consultants to assume a complete overlap in meaning.[3] For that reason, this paper will use the general term "false friends" rather than a more specific term, even if most words that resemble each other will likely share an etymological origin.

1.2 How they can be false

The way in which two (or more) words may be considered false friends is by no means singular, demonstrated in the figures below adapted from Abou-Khalil

[3] I agree with Carroll (1992:97–98) that, even in those cases where etymological information is known, "This information will normally play no role" in assuming a common meaning.

et al. (2018:2). The words in question may have zero overlap in meaning (figure 1). Alternatively, they may have one or more senses, connotations, or collocations that they share with one another, each having at least one sense/connotation/collocation that is unique to that language's (or, language variety's) usage (figure 2). Different still is the potential for the full range of meaning and use of a word in one language to be included in, but less than, that of a word in another language (figures 3 and 4).

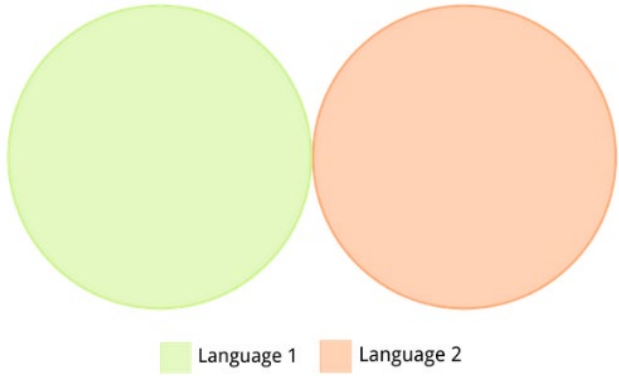


Figure 1: Full false friends.

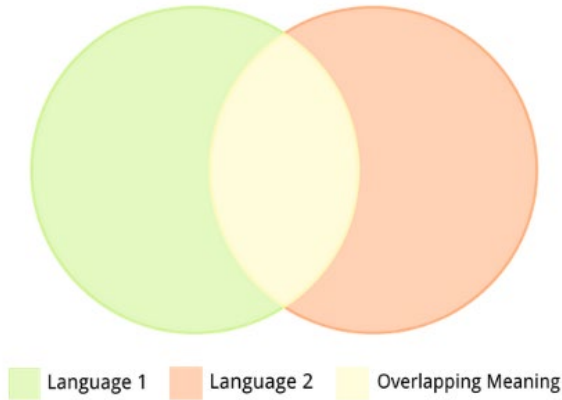


Figure 2: Partial false friends (L1∩L2).

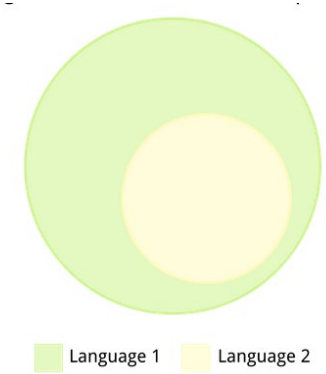


Figure 3: Partial false friends (L1⊃L2).

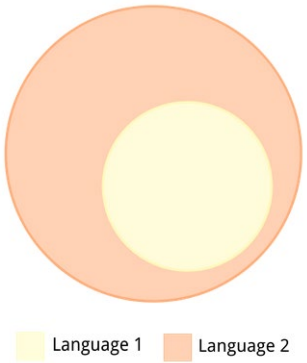


Figure 4: Partial false friends (L1⊂L2).

If we consider for a moment that the two words in question are etymologically related but divergent in meaning (i.e., deceptive cognates), then we can imagine that at some point in time Language 1 and Language 2 were once one and the same, and the figure to demonstrate this would simply be one yellow circle. However, over time, as one language diverges into distinct language varieties and then eventually distinct languages, the meaning of a once singular lexical item shifts in one or both directions. Chamizo Domínguez and Nerlich (2002:1833) put it this way in their abstract:

> The links between their meanings in different languages can be based on metaphor, metonymy and euphemism, but also on specialisation and generalisation. Semantic false friends [i.e., deceptive cognates] are the semantic relics of pragmatic language use over time and space.

The main challenge when working across languages is that the speakers of these languages are usually unaware of whether, how, and to what extent the meanings have diverged; therefore, most speakers will assume that they are looking at true friends. As many scholars have pointed out, this strategy is not only natural but often helpful, because cognate languages have many true friends. Gallegos (1983:8–9) summarizes this by referring to true friends in this way:

> If ... those words with similar meaning and form, are properly presented, the semantic knowledge of the first language should serve as a link to learning vocabulary in the second language (Hammer 1975). To a great extent, this relationship serves as an advantage to the second language learner because vocabulary acquisition is made

> easier, and many more vocabulary words can be retained and retrieved because of the similarity (Bebout 1978).
>
> The linking of words between languages is possible only to the extent that word meanings overlap. In such cases, the bilingual does not need to have two distinct conceptual frameworks. More rapid learning of new vocabulary may be attained by not having to go from the known to the unknown.

Said more simply, "L1 [lexical] addresses are activated by L2[4] stimuli" (Carroll 1992:95–96). Some have referred to this as the "cognate facilitation effect" (Bultena et al. 2014:1215–1218); Lindgren and Bohnacker (2020:593). The problem is that even across dialects word meanings do not always overlap. Some of these lexical items which are assumed to be true friends turn out to be false friends. Here is how Hayward and Moulin (1984:190) describe how this happens:

> Confusion arises because word A (which belongs to the foreign language being learned or used) looks or sounds exactly or nearly like word B, which belongs to the learner's mother tongue. The user then establishes an unwarranted interlingual equivalence on the basis of this total or partial similarity.

The most challenging part about this assumed equivalence is that, when dealing with closely related languages, this assumption is often correct. This becomes self-reinforcing, and it is particularly dangerous for those who are not proficient in the target language. Chacón Beltrán notes that "less proficient [language] learners generally transfer more elements from their first language than those who have a high proficiency" (2006:30). This means that the less speakers are aware of the details of all languages in question, the more likely they are to assume that what is true of the language(s) they know well will be true of the other(s). This transfer can be either positive or negative, depending on whether the word meanings overlap significantly or not; specifically, positive transfer "facilitates L2 learning when L1 words are like L2 words", while negative transfer "hinders L2 when they are not" (Carroll 1992:94).

Using the figures above as examples of negative transfer, in the case of figure 1, no meaning is shared between the two words, so any meaning transferred from the L1 word to the L2 word is entirely incorrect. In the case of

[4] Regarding the designations "L1" and "L2", the literature generally assumes that L1 is a speaker's first language and L2 their second. For the purposes of this paper, L1 is not necessarily the mother tongue but the language that the speaker/translator/consultant has significant (or significantly more) proficiency in (i.e., the target language for translators and the LWC for consultants).

figure 2, some meaning is shared, but if the speaker transfers all of the meaning from the L1 word, some meaning will be added to and lost from the L2 word. In the case of figure 3, some meaning will be added, and in the case of figure 4, some meaning will be lost.

Having established what false friends are and how they operate, the application of this knowledge to the field of Bible translation should be self-evident. Although the research on this topic pertaining directly to Bible translation is scarce, it has the potential to impact the quality of Bible translation in many parts of the world. In fact, I argue that understanding false friends is not merely a helpful option but a necessity.

1.3 The need for application in Bible translation

There is indeed a strong concept of how meaning works in the field of Bible translation, but what of the conversation on false friends? There are a few small mentions; for example, without using the terminology of "false friends", Beekman and Callow discuss the danger of borrowing Spanish words (as well as phrases and idioms) into minority languages of Mexico, because those borrowings do not sustain the same meanings. They offer a warning that this paper echoes:

> The translator should therefore avoid jumping to conclusions about the meaning of a loan word which he recognizes. It should be checked just as carefully as any indigenous term, for sometimes there are quite unexpected shifts of meaning (1974:199).

In addition, Larson includes a small section on false friends (1998:201–202), but does not add or expand significantly on what Beekman and Callow had enumerated nearly a quarter-century before. However, in the years of training I have received in this field, these examples nor any others were ever discussed.

In fact, the opposite is often reinforced. Consultants will often approve a target language key term based on their understanding of that word or phrase in a cognate language. Additionally, learning related languages and using LWC (language of wider communication) dictionaries are encouraged. Overall, these suggestions are good ones that can pay multiple dividends; however, they should be, but are not, qualified with a warning about the divergent meanings that are bound to appear between cognate languages. We cannot assume that knowledge of one language entails knowledge of another, yet that is what is often done in practice.

Indeed, this is the central warning of this paper:

> **The more comfortable one becomes in one or more cognate languages, the more likely that person will be to transfer that**

> **knowledge to a cognate target language, without regard to the nuances or divergences the target language may have developed**.

Building on the concepts found in the relevant literature, we can restate the warning in this way:

> **The factors that make it expedient for a language learner to use language knowledge from L1 and transfer that knowledge to L2 are the same that make it expedient for someone working in Bible translation to make a similar transfer from one language to another, without any regard for the possibility of negative transfer**.

Most of the scholarship in and around Bible translation has focused on understanding the biblical and target languages and ways to communicate the meaning of the former using the latter. Yet we must recognize that much of Bible translation today uses an LWC as a medium of understanding. Naturally then, this involves less intimate knowledge of the biblical languages by the translators and less intimate knowledge of the target languages by those checking the translations.

Translators often are not familiar with Hebrew or Greek and so are usually reliant on an LWC as a source. And while they may have functional knowledge of the LWC, it is often not enough proficiency to recognize false friends. Additionally, consultants are increasingly unfamiliar with the target languages they are working in. If consultants know a language (e.g., an LWC) related to the target language, or use a dictionary or translation software (e.g., Google Translate), they are likely to lean on that knowledge and make decisions entirely unaware of the potential for false friends.

In the South Asian context, the source text for the translation team is usually one from a related language. For any given word in the source text, the likelihood that the team will use a cognate for their own translation is very high. But what if these cognates are also false friends? Chacón Beltrán (2006:32) cites an earlier work on language learning when stating the following:

> It should also be taken into consideration that when a language learner misunderstands a false friend, it is very improbable that s/he will realise the mistake unless negative evidence is provided by means of explicit information (Lightbown and Spada 1993).

Chacón Beltrán goes on to claim that partial false friends in particular cause the most difficulty (2006:32). The more closely related any two languages are, the more likely they are to have more overlapping meaning and the less likely it will be for any divergence in meaning to be noticed. Sometimes the context will reveal the issues, but often it will not. **Understanding this phenomenon is**

critical for anyone working with related languages. In agreement with this claim, Chamizo Domínguez and Nerlich (2002:1835) make their own:

> Since "the context might offer no hint" (Hill 1982:*i*), a pragmatic strategy[5] is needed to resolve this sometimes hidden semantic problem. This can be especially problematic when reading a (badly) translated text.

This is a challenge to those working in Bible translation in particular. A practical strategy is needed to resolve this problem that often goes unnoticed. Some concrete examples of how this issue has manifested in South Asia will be a helpful framework for this conversation.

2 Translation examples from South Asia

2.1 Good "crafty" or bad "crafty"?

One team (Language A) was doing a consultant check of Proverbs when they came to the Hebrew word *ormah* 'shrewdness'. In Hebrew, as in English, this word is not necessarily negative, though it is often used that way. This is precisely the case in the LWC with the words *chaalaak* and *chatur*, though the former is more likely to be used in a negative sense than the latter. However, in Language A, which is related to the LWC, both of these words have negative connotations; there is no such thing as being *chaalaak* or *chatur* without being a bit sneaky, devious, or trying to take advantage of someone else. To further demonstrate the complexity of false friends in South Asia, there is a different language (B), from the same language family, for which *chaalaak* is always a positive word! Every parent wants their children to be *chaalaak*—it is more like 'discernment'. This was a significant issue in Language B when translating Genesis 3. Combined with the fact that snakes are revered in that culture, declaring the serpent to be *chaalaak* was akin to setting it up as the main character. The table below summarizes this information more succinctly:

[5] In their work, "pragmatic" is used in the sense of "practical", rather than the linguistic category.

Table 2: Meaning/Connotation of *chaalaak* in three cognate languages

Language	Meaning/Connotation
LWC	morally neutral
Language A	morally negative
Language B	morally positive

Whereas the word *chaalaak* in Language A and Language B are each a subset of the LWC word (that is, each with a L1⊂L2 relationship with the LWC, where the LWC is L2), they are *different* subsets, as demonstrated by figure 5.

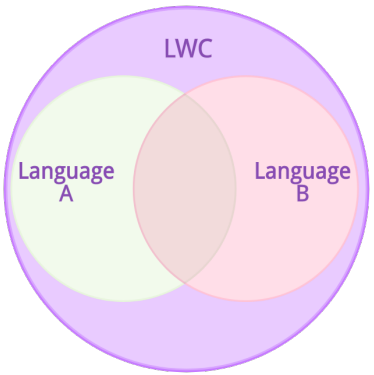


Figure 5: The meaning of *chaalaak* in three different languages.

What needs to be recognized here is that *chaalaak* in the LWC is a neutral term which can be interpreted as positive or negative depending on the context, much like the Hebrew word *ormah* 'shrewdness'. In that sense, it may be possible to translate the Hebrew word *ormah* concordantly in the LWC; that is, with the same word every time. In Language A, *chaalaak* may be used quite accurately in places like Genesis 3 or in Job—really, anywhere other than Proverbs. In Language B, however, the exact opposite will be true. For that language, *chaalaak* fits well in Proverbs, but probably will not be the best word choice in other passages—the serpent should not be the main character, much less the hero, in Genesis 3!

2.2 Understanding the "spirit" of it

In a South Asian LWC, the word *aatma* is the standard word for 'spirit'. In accordance with that meaning, *pavitra aatma* is a fine translation for 'holy spirit', and *karaab aatma* is a perfectly acceptable translation for 'evil spirit'. In Language C (and a number of others), however, *aatma* can refer to a person. For example, a *pavitra aatma* can be understood as a 'good person', while a *karaab aatma* is the opposite. As a result, there was a mismatch between languages because of an extended meaning of the word *aatma* 'spirit' in Language C, demonstrated in figure 3 above.

This mismatch led to a negative transfer that was not immediately obvious because the languages in question were so closely related. Perhaps the most surprising and complicated part of this mismatch is that, given the prevalent worldview in South Asia, there were certain passages that still made quite good sense in Language C, even though they were meant to refer to 'holy spirit' and not to 'good person'. We must remember what was already quoted above, that "it is very improbable that [someone encountering false friends] will realise the mistake unless negative evidence is provided by means of explicit information," (Chacón Beltrán 2006:32) and "the context might offer no hint" (Hill 1982:i).

In this case, the interpretation was clearly not correct, and it was essentially by chance that the team caught the issue. This underscores the point that texts can be communicating an incorrect meaning, yet still be logically and narratively coherent for a UNS (uninitiated native speaker) or for a translation team.

2.3 "Meet" in the "sheet"?

Another example comes from Language D. The phrase that the team was using for the Hebrew term *ohel moed* 'tent of meeting' was a cognate phrase to the one used in an LWC translation—essentially the same phrase, with some minor spelling differences. It was a phrase that seemed to mean "tent of meeting" (whereas another LWC translation used the phrase "holy tent"). In my estimation, "tent of meeting" was fine, but I also asked the team to create a glossary entry. When checking the entry, it was clear that they were not using the single word *paal* for 'tent' but two words (*kripaalka jhopri*). When I asked about the meaning of these two words, the translation advisor said, "Yes, for this language, using the word *paal* only will make people think of a bedsheet. *Kripaalka jhopri* is a proper tent." The word *paal* in this case is an example of specification (see figure 4). So the translation advisor and the team together decided that it would be better to use the more meaningful phrase, *kripaalka jhopri*, for the key term 'tent' itself.

2.4 Not so "simple"

A more complicated example was found in Language A when translating the Hebrew word *peti* 'simple'. In Hebrew, the 'simple' is not like the 'fool'. The 'fool' is seen as either unable or unwilling to do what is right. The 'simple', on the other hand, is seen as inexperienced or naive; they can be easily convinced to walk in unrighteousness, but they are not without hope of good guidance and change. In one LWC, the word *bhola* is a great translation for the Hebrew word. In Language A, the word *bhola* is not used in regular speech. However, the team was aware of the LWC word *bhola* and said in Language A, they use the word *sidha*. That sounded like a word that could work well because in the LWC, a person who is *sidha* is someone who can be easily tricked, easily convinced of this thing or that. The problem, though, is that in Language A, *sidha* carries the meaning of "uprightness". Imagine how this would sound in a verse like Proverbs 1:22:

> How long, O *simple ones [petaim]*, will you love being *simple [peti]*?
> How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge? (ESV)

Using the word *sidha* in Language A would sound like this:

> How long, O *upright ones [sidhaman]*, will you love being *upright [sidha]*?
> How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge?

The form of the question in the first line, as well as its parallel with the question in the second (i.e., the scoffers' delight in scoffing and the fools' hatred of knowledge), makes it clear that being "simple" is not a good thing. In this case, because of a translation advisor, the consultant was aware of the semantic mismatch and was able to ask the team, "What is wrong with being 'upright' (*sidha*)?" The team was then able to think of a different term that was acceptable and fit the meaning more accurately.

In that more complicated case, *sidha* was a false friend of a supposed translation equivalent rather than a presumed cognate. In line with this specific phenomenon, Granger and Swallow (1988:117) make a point that few to none in the conversation about false friends have:

> Almost as treacherous [as false friends] are pairs of words such as [French/English] *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.

This seems to be what Beekman and Callow refer to as "translationisms" (1974:198). For those who are even semi-functionally bilingual, even these

translationisms—these non-similar but presumably equivalent words—can suffer from some of the same assumptions as false friends.

3 Naming the danger

Each of the examples above has this one thing in common: **A word or phrase which was fine in the LWC was not an acceptable translation in the target language, though the languages were closely related**. The big point here is that the words we tend to think of as safe—as familiar friends—are often not.

As a result, I want to posit three things:

1. The better we as consultants understand an LWC and/or other languages related to the target language, the more likely we will be to transfer that knowledge to the target language, assuming that if two words share an etymology, they must also share meaning.
2. This confidence can lead to overlooking any divergent meanings between these related words.
3. Missing these differences will lead to translations that lack either communal acceptability or accuracy in meaning.

The logic of the first point has already been recognized above. This assumption often proves to be true, which reinforces its application. But there will inevitably be situations where this is not the case, and our comfort with these supposedly cognate terms makes them false friends. **When we are familiar with a term in one language, our guard goes down; it feels like an old friend that we can rely on to be faithful and stay true, even across language borders; and even experienced consultants can fall for the deception**.

This points to the obvious, but somewhat counterintuitive, takeaway: **The danger of false friends is in fact most acute for those who have *some* proficiency in at least one cognate language**. For the translation consultant, it is the lack of proficiency in the *target language* in particular that will lead to the trap of the false friend. Said another way, gaining more linguistic expertise can actually make one *more susceptible* to the lure of false friends.

What further cements this claim is that the converse has proven to be true as well. Consultants who are unfamiliar with the entire language family of the target language, and therefore have no cognate knowledge to draw from, tend to ask far more questions about the meanings of certain words, especially key terms. This, of course, slows down the process, but those who do not know any false friends are incapable of being deceived by them. This is the great irony and danger of false friends: **The more comfortable one gets in any given language**

family, the more precautions must be taken to make sure that the ever-lingering false friend does not go unnoticed.

There is one very important exception to this problem that we must give thought to before discussing solutions. Certain key terms may in some ways be safer within church contexts, assuming the translation is not targeting non-churched people. This potential exists because there is greater possibility that "church lingo" across the region/country (as pastors and believers talk to each other across linguistic boundaries) has become something of a macro language in which certain terms maintain a relatively standard range of meaning. In that sense, Indo-Aryan words like *daya* 'kindness' and *anugra* 'grace' in the South Asian context may be perfectly understood within the walls of the church, even if their usage in the wider language communities does not reflect such unanimity. But again, this only limits the problem if the church is the target audience. A healthy skepticism should be the rule, not the exception, as we move forward in considering the meaning of cognate words.

4 Potential solutions

How do we proceed? How do we know we are exercising enough caution? We have established (or at least postulated) that no word or phrase is safe. In fact, Belmekki (2007) refers to this phenomenon as a minefield for translators. That is an apt image to describe the dangers that lie just beneath the surface. False friends could be hidden anywhere. At the same time, we must acknowledge that there is no time to question every single word. So, what are some helpful ways forward? I propose that there are three necessary stages that we must attend to.

4.1 First stage: Admission and watchfulness

The first step must be to admit that false friends are a distinct possibility, especially in related languages. We cannot simply be satisfied with the fact that the target language has used the same term as the LWC. Even if the consultant personally knows the meaning of that term in the LWC and/or other related languages, they cannot assume the same meaning in any given target language. Through the whole process, we must admit that while proper usage of a term in one language may increase the likelihood that the cognate term will be accurate and acceptable in another, it gives us no guarantees.

Along with this recognition must be watchfulness. Belmekki (2007:68) gives this advice to those working in translation: "They should get used to treading carefully and it is unwise of them to take things for granted." So, recognition and watchfulness constitute the first and most important step forward. If the issue of false friends is not acknowledged, practitioners in Bible translation will continue

to walk into the minefield. A lack of vigilance will lead to one misstep after another, and those who will feel the impact are the language communities for whom they are working. What follows in the second stage are not successive, linear steps as much as recommended possibilities for ways forward. Additionally, neither the second nor third stages are meant to be exhaustive; the hope here is to stimulate thoughtful, ongoing conversation.

4.2 Second stage

4.2.1 Asking better questions to the right people

Sometimes there will be complex nuances of meaning lying deep in the psyche of mother tongue speakers. However, we may find that more often than not, simply changing the kinds of questions we ask will reveal that the insights we are looking for are just below the surface.

The first kind of question to consider is the "Why" question. The "Why" question gets to the hearer's concept of coherence. When you are reading through a narrative and you ask, "Why do you think she did that?" you are really asking: "How were her actions coherent with the flow of the story so far, based on what you understand of what has happened already and what would be normal in those circumstances?" If the "Why" question cannot be answered, it may be for higher discourse reasons, but it may simply be the presence of a false friend. Perhaps more dangerously, a false friend may lead to a very confident answer that is not correct.

In non-narrative texts, whether poetry or prose, there will be different propositions that relate specifically to what precedes and/or what follows, and understanding these propositional relations is what leads to coherence. The "Why" question can help identify false friends in anything from couplets to entire epistles. In the aforementioned example with the word *simple* (2.4), the context was only a couplet, but the clarifying question was in essence a "Why" question aiming at coherence. Recall that the question the consultant asked was essentially, "Why is it wrong to be 'upright'?" This question provided the logical link between the two lines that would have been more obvious had the team used a more accurate term.

So, the "Why" question addresses head-on the fact that "the context might offer no hint" (Hill 1982:i). It helps to reveal how the speakers of the target language are understanding the flow of thought and how the word in question fits in—and to some extent, shapes—the context.

Another question that can help bring clarity is the "What kind of..." question. There are several variations of this question, but they all attempt to arrive at certain details about a specific term. These types of questions are less

about coherence within a text and far more about the semantics of the word itself. In that sense, there is a lot of overlap with a semantic domain study (see 4.2.3 below). Indeed, one can go as in depth as desired with these questions to gain more insight into the word in general, but here they will focus only on one occurrence at a time:

- "What kind of person does this [verb]?"
- "How is this [adjective] kind of person different from other people?"
- "What kinds of things/work/activities does this kind of person [noun] normally do?"
- "What kind of place (i.e., where) would you expect to see this [adjective] kind of person [noun]?"

These kinds of questions help us arrive at a picture of the cognitive environment of the target language in addition to the semantics of the words themselves.

Getting beyond simple semantics and into more granular levels of meaning is difficult, but it is possible. Some questions that can help us dive deeper in this way are "When…" and "How…" questions: "When can you (not) use this word?" "How do people use this word?" "How is this word different from that similar word?"

I have found it helpful to ask these kinds of questions to both the translation team and to the UNS. Additionally, translation advisors are often a great resource person in these matters, as they can serve as a bridge between the translation team and the consultant. Indeed, two of the four examples above were clarified by translation advisors.[6] That is not to say that every question needs to be asked of both the team and the UNS, but any of these questions could be posed to either.

It is difficult to sufficiently highlight how crucial a UNS check is. The fact that the UNS is, by definition, uninitiated, puts them in a unique position to give invaluable insight into their language. They can give indispensable insight into the terms themselves, but also the coherence of the text itself. If at all possible, we should not neglect this crucial stage of checking in the translation process.

4.2.2 Using supplemental materials

The goal in any of these suggestions is to get to the point of understanding the target language. Using supplemental materials is another way to approach this goal. Supplementals such as section headings, footnotes, glossary entries, and introductions are less likely to be word-for-word translations of well-known

[6] While their research was focused specifically on oral Bible translation, my experience would agree with Younghans et al. (2019:3–5), namely that the presence and quality of a translation advisor can profoundly affect the project as a whole.

biblical passages in an LWC. In fact, these are often not translated from LWCs at all, but come from conversations within the team or with a consultant. Because of that, the team may feel the freedom to express ideas in ways that are more natural in their language. This is how the team mentioned in 2.3 above realized they needed to change their Key Term for "Tent of Meeting".

4.2.3 Engaging in semantic domain study

Nash (1976) "concluded that much more emphasis needs to be placed on vocabulary learning and on explaining contrastive differences in the range or domain of cognate word meanings" (cited in Gallegos 1983:58–59). Taking it a step further, Nunn and Van Scroy (1949) "advocated the study of semantic shifts of cognate words" (cited in Gallegos 1983:57). It is probably not necessary or practical to understand diachronic analysis of multiple languages; however, as Chamizo Domínguez and Nerlich (2002:1847) state, "since false friends are perhaps the main enemy of translators, they must know their enemies thoroughly so as to be able to beat them."

One tool which will be especially helpful when dealing with multiple related biblical terms is what some have referred to as a semantic domain study. This study has the potential to give insight into (1) the semantic range of any given word, as well as (2) related words within that semantic domain. Related words are helpful to know because they aid in clarifying the meaning of others, especially by way of contrast.

Barnwell (1986) has three chapters (8–10) that provide an extremely relevant introduction to this process, both in determining the semantic range of words in the biblical text, as well as words in the target language.[7] Discovering word meaning at this level will in the former case (biblical words) be beneficial for everyone involved, and in the latter case (target language words) be beneficial for any consultant involved.

4.3 Third stage

4.3.1 Where to keep the data

Once information on key terms is collected, it is also important to keep that information accessible somewhere. In the language learning field, a good number of articles and even books have been written simply to keep a record of false friends between a pair of languages. The Bible translation field can easily draw from this idea. Of course, not every team will do this to the same extent. If

[7] An exhaustive list of semantic domains—often used when doing rapid word collection (https://rapidwords.net/)—can be found at: https://semdom.org.

extensive semantic domain studies have been conducted for the language, one unified list may be the most helpful way to store that information. Recording that information in a shared document may be the easiest solution. New translation consultants can be directed to that document when they are given the translation brief, or any equivalent information.

In addition, translation software will have a way to store important information about any given key term. Within the software itself is a helpful place to record the most pertinent information regarding certain biblical terms in order to make sure it is not lost. This tool is especially useful for recording more nuanced information that will be impossible to put into an interlinear. For example, in one language we made note of the different possible translations for the Hebrew term *midbar* 'wilderness', depending on the context of its usage.

4.3.2 Good interlinear

A very basic but powerful way to keep track of important semantic information is by strategic use of an interlinear. This suggestion will, of course, not be helpful for Oral Bible Translation projects; however, for those working in text-based projects, an interlinear can provide very quick, useful data. It cannot provide detailed semantic information, as it is only meant as a glossing tool, but there are a few rules of thumb that can ensure it is used to its full potential.

The first suggestion is obvious: whenever there is a one-to-one correspondence between the target language and the glossing language, use that single term as the gloss. This might include people, such as 'Abraham'; places, such as 'Egypt'; things, such as 'water'; numbers, etc. If there is not a word-for-word correspondence, it will often be possible to use a phrase or some other method to indicate correspondence as much as possible. For example, in many Indo-Aryan languages, *sasuraal* is a term for one's in-laws' home. There is no single word available for that in English, for instance, so a phrase must be used. Another example might be the word *haat*. This is a standard word for 'hand', but can often refer to the entire arm, or even a unit of measure. One helpful way to gloss a word like this might be using a dash to separate the two primary English glosses: 'hand/arm'.

It will never be possible to cover all the nuances of meaning, but the harder we try to provide more comprehensive glosses, the more informed a consultant can be. For example, a word like *jait* may be used in a number of different ways in Language A, but in most cases, the best gloss will probably be something like 'people/tribe'. This should give the consultant enough information to judge its accuracy or determine if further questions need to be asked. Likewise, a word like *dharmik* most simply means 'good' in Language A, but it is a word that is associated with religious morals. In that case, a gloss like 'good/religious' is about

as informative as the tool will allow, but it gives the consultant a good idea of the word's meaning. Or, if we take the example of *chaalaak* from above, it might be best to gloss the main meaning and include important connotations in parentheses, e.g., 'crafty (NEG)'.

It is also important to note that the information that is helpful for consultants to see in an interlinear can often be confusing or irrelevant for translation teams. I have seen teams delete glosses for these reasons. So if a translation team is actively using the interlinear tool, it may be helpful to store more technical glosses on the morphology (word parsing) line, if available. This is especially helpful for pronouns (e.g., '2PL.NOM' and '2SG.ACC') and verb endings (e.g., '1PL.PST' and '1PL.FUT.CAUS'). This means that everyone will see 'you' as the main gloss, but the consultant will have the option to look on the morphology line to see whether it is singular or plural, nominative or accusative.

4.4 Summary of solutions

These solutions are neither exhaustive nor prescriptive. The hope here is to lay out a potential path forward as we prepare for the inevitability of encountering false friends in Bible translation. Though I have attempted to be as general as possible, different contexts will almost certainly require different solutions. No matter how we end up addressing the issue of false friends, the starting place must be an awareness of what they are, an understanding of how they can impact translations, and an admission that they are not only possible but probable. From that point, we can all decide what truly are the best steps forward in our own contexts.

5 Conclusion

When working in related languages, or languages that share many cognate terms, there is always potential for false friends. When expressions from different languages resemble each other, whether in speech or writing, the inclination will be for people to assume that they are essentially the same word, with similar or even identical meanings. These terms may truly be cognate—usually they are—but each language or language variety creates a different sociolinguistic environment for that term. These different environments have a way of altering meaning in unpredictable and often imperceptible ways. Overlooking these false friends will lead to translations that are either inaccurate, unacceptable, or both.

There are essentially three proposed stages for working out the issue of false friends: (1) exercise caution when we see cognates, (2) develop an accurate portrait of word meanings, both of source language and target language, and (3) ensure that we have a way to remember our findings and that others will be

able to access them as well. The goal is to make sure everyone is clear on the meaning of words in the target language (and biblical language, where appropriate) and to make sure that we are not leaning on the meaning of cognate words from another language. Working backwards, we can say that there will be no way to avoid making the same mistakes unless we take the time to record what we have learned about the semantics of any given language, especially where we have noticed false friends. Likewise, there will be no insights to record unless we have spent the time to investigate how each language is using these cognate terms. Perhaps most crucially, false friends will not be addressed at all unless we admit that they exist and take appropriate care when we see these familiar cognates.

Appendix A: "False Friends"

Resource	Related Etymology	Overlapping Meaning
Sabino (2016)	IRRELEVANT	NO[a]
Abou-Khalil, Flanagan, and Ogata (2018)	—	PARTIAL or NONE
Hayward and Moulin (1984)	IRRELEVANT	PARTIAL or NONE
Chamizo Domínguez and Nerlich (2002)	IRRELEVANT	PARTIAL or NONE
Granger and Swallow (1988)	YES	PARTIAL or NONE
Chacón Beltrán (2006)	IRRELEVANT	PARTIAL or NONE
Nicholls (2002)	IRRELEVANT	PARTIAL or NONE
Al-Wahy (2009)	IRRELEVANT	NO
Ferguson (1994)	YES	NO
Belmekki (2007)	—	PARTIAL or NONE

[a] In this and the following tables, "NO" is differentiated from "NONE" in that the author did not specify to what extent the meanings do not line up.

Appendix B: "Deceptive Cognates"

Resource	Related Etymology	Overlapping Meaning
Sabino (2016)	YES	NO
Gallegos (1983)	YES	PARTIAL
Granger and Swallow (1988)	YES	PARTIAL or NONE
Al-Wahy (2009)	YES	NO
Ferguson (1994)	YES	NO
Belmekki (2007)	YES	PARTIAL or NONE

Appendix C: “False Cognates”

Resource	Related Etymology	Overlapping Meaning
Sabino (2016)	NO	NO
Gallegos (1983)	YES	NO
Chacón Beltrán (2006)	IRRELEVANT	PARTIAL or NONE
Otwinowska and Szewczyk (2017)	—	NO
Al-Wahy (2009)	NO	—

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