

## ITALIAN FALSE FRIENDS

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# **Italian False Friends**

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**For**

**Annie, Stefan and Nathalie**

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# Preface

It is only in the past decade or so that 'false friends' have begun to be properly explored. French-English *faux amis* have, inevitably, been fairly extensively treated.\* Italian-English *falsi amici* have received some attention in Italian but very little in English.\*\*

From the practical and pedagogical viewpoints this neglect appears particularly surprising. The amusing pitfalls of such unreliaables as *casino* (brothel or mess, not casino), *costipazione* (blocked nose more often than constipation), *intossicazione* (food poisoning, not intoxication) and *preservativo* (condom, but never preservative) are well known to most Italianists, and can be attested to by anecdotes both personal and apocryphal. Teachers of the language and students progressing beyond the basics feel, intuitively, that these are only the tip of an insidious and largely uncharted iceberg.

On the survival level, signs, menus, brochures and posters bristle with the treacherous attractions of *abusivo* (not abusive but illegal), *caratteristico* (picturesque as well as characteristic), *coincidenza* (a coincidence, but also a travel connection), *prezzi convenienti* (value-for-money, not convenient, prices), *genuino* (wholesome instead of genuine), *suggestivo* (not suggestive but evocative), and many more. Innocuous-looking headlines turn out to be subtly misleading. The main story in *La Repubblica* (16/9/93) was headed: *Assassinati due parà. Facevano footing ... I soldati erano disarmati. 'Tragica fatalità'*. To avoid misreading it one had to be aware that *assassinare*, here, meant to murder, not assassinate; that the two paratroopers had been jogging (*il footing* is a false anglicism rapidly being supplanted by *il jogging*); that these unfortunate soldiers were unarmed (*disarmati*) not disarmed; and that while *una fatalità* looks like a fatality it actually means a misfortune.

Accurate translation, essay and comprehension work, as well as the proper appreciation of advanced Italian texts, hinge on the confident handling of key words like *abilità* (skill or shrewdness, not just ability), *argomento* (not argument but topic or subject), *attuale* (present/topical, never actual), *attualmente* (resembles actually but means: at present), *discussione* (either discussion or argument), *casuale* (fortuitous, not casual), and *eventuale* (not eventual but possible).

Owing to the passing or only haphazard treatment of *falsi amici* in language texts, in conjunction with the regrettable silence of even the best bilingual dictionaries, it is probably seldom appreciated just how widespread the phenomenon is. My own analyses, based on ten years of collecting and sifting material, suggest, for instance, that in extended journalistic articles it is not unusual for around 10% of nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs to be false friends. What is more they tend, as the above examples illustrate, to be important, recurring items. One function of the present book is to make available to anyone interested — from beginners to scholars — this rich seam of potential lexical confusion, providing

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\* See, e.g., C. W. E. Kirk-Greene, *French False Friends*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1981; P. Thody and H. Evans, *Faux Amis and Key Words*, Athlone, London, 1985; and J. Van Roey, S. Granger and H. Swallow, *Dictionnaire des faux amis français-anglais*, Duculot, Paris, 1988.

\*\* See the SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY, below, p. 121.

clear, readable guidance backed by helpful examples with accompanying translations.

In some ways it is equally odd that unreliaables have not attracted the attention of sociolinguists for the fascinating insights which they provide into those impalpable links between a society and its language. It is perhaps worth pointing out the obvious at this juncture. Accidental lookalikes are not the object of this investigation. Chance resemblances, for example, *pane* and *pane* (bread), are of negligible interest, and only one, the irresistible crook versus *crucco*, has been included. False friends are correctly defined as deceptive cognates. This means that they share a common etymological origin. In the majority of words studied this origin is Latin, the parent of all Romance languages, including Italian, but also a huge contributor, through the Norman conquest and later deliberate borrowing, to the vocabulary of English — originally a Germanic language, but now sometimes described as semi-Romance. In a minority of cases the shared root is, on account of more recent two-way exchanges, Italian or English.

Under a host of influences, internal and external, languages evolve inexorably. The same root planted in different soils will develop in more or less diverse directions. In some cases, only the etymologist perceives the connection. *Un pupillo* (from Latin, little doll) is a cognate of pupil but means a ward of court. *Dislocare* (from Latin, to displace) is not to dislocate but to post troops or employees in Italian. *Concussione* (from Latin, shaking about) has a common source with concussion but is now embezzlement. A continued, partially shared, meaning which is most frequently the outcome, is often more confusing still. *Crisi*, *fiscale*, and *raccomandazione* are crisis, fiscal and recommendation, but they have acquired very different cultural connotations. *Eccellente* may sometimes translate unproblematically as excellent; however, due to the historical associations of *Eccellenza* (Your Excellency), newspaper headlines of the type *arresti eccellenti* do not mean excellent but celebrity or V.I.P. arrests (a common meaning not recorded in any Italian-English dictionary). Tangible evidence of language evolution in action is provided by the disconcerting semantic changes already undergone by some recent English loan-words in Italian: *big*, *box*, *basket*, *gadget*, *pocket*, *ticket* and *tight* are part of a new, expanding vein of *falsi amici*. This branching off parallels the shifts in meaning undergone by an earlier series of Italian words, such as *alfresco*, *ballerina*, *bimbo*, *bravura* and *furor*, borrowed by English from Italian.

I have, consequently, endeavoured to stress the link between word and society. Frequent references are made to Italian life and culture, and my examples are drawn, where possible, from Italian authors, as well as from daily newspapers, periodicals and advertising.

A word about justification and limitation. I have felt impelled to carry out this study by my (partly) bilingual origins, by fourteen years of teaching Italian to young adults, from beginners to finalists, and by the frustrating neglect of the topic to which I have alluded. I am confident of having included all the common deceptive cognates and of having examined the core ones adequately, within the practical constraints of space. However, ambitions of completeness in this area are an illusion. Even descriptive dictionaries involve exclusion and judgement. All the more so in a work on false friends. Ultimately subjective decisions have constantly had to be made about what constitutes a useful entry (I have rejected, for example, the pair *filibuster/filibustiere* — buccaneer or rogue — on the grounds that each is rather uncommon and mix-ups are highly unlikely), and even about what constitutes a false friend (would *asilo* be taken for asylum?). Finally, it was not an aim of this work to examine every possible meaning of each headword, only to concentrate on areas of possible misunderstanding.

Some acknowledgements are in order. I have had fruitful discussions on cognates with colleagues, notably Michela Masci-Gore, and also Davina Chaplin, with whom I collaborated on an earlier, very different false-friend project. Alison Grant has contributed immaculate word-processing skills but also sound advice. I am grateful to Sandy Grant for his computing expertise, and to Elena Tognini-Bonelli for providing me with access to, and materials from, the *Corpus of Modern Italian* at the University of Birmingham. Stefan Ferguson has read my entries critically, pointing up the verbose or unconvincing. Above all, I owe a debt of thanks to my family for their patience and encouragement.

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## Signs, Abbreviations and Translations

Cross references to headwords are indicated by an asterisk (\*) or by an arrow (————→). The English translation of headword examples often follows a colon, to avoid awkwardness and ambiguities. The equals sign (=) is followed by the correct translation of the English cognate. *Italics* are reserved for Italian words and phrases.

The following conventional abbreviations have been employed:

ad.	- advertisement
adj.	- adjective
adv.	- adverb
coll.	- colloquialism
interj.	- interjection
lit.	- literally
n.f.	- noun, feminine
n.f.pl.	- noun, feminine, plural
n.m.	- noun, masculine
n.m.pl.	- noun, masculine, plural
U.S.	- American English
v.	- verb

Translations of illustrative examples are my own. I have likewise used my own renderings of Italian book titles where no widely-established English equivalent exists.

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