

Faux-amis or False friends

A false friend is an English word which immediately makes you think of a French word which looks or sounds like it, but with which you cannot translate it. For example, the word **versatile** in French and *versatile* in English have the same Latin root, but they have come to mean two different things. In French it means changeable, capricious, while in English it means *talented, adaptable*.

A. Here is an example of a false friend which cannot be translated by the French word which resembles it:

He looked at me with *abenevolent* look.

The word *benevolent* cannot be translated by the word *bénévole*, and must be translated by **bienveillant**.

Translate the following false friends:

1. Don't worry, you will succeed *eventually!*
2. The *journey* to London only takes about three hours.
3. I'm not coming to this meeting but my *deputy* will answer all your questions.
4. This child is so *versatile* I'm sure he can do anything he likes.
5. She was obviously *deceived* by his attractive appearance.

B. The following false friends are even trickier, because although they cannot be used to translate each other, their meanings are not as far apart as the ones we have just seen. For instance:

How many books can you borrow from this *library*?

The word *library* means **bibliothèque**, which isn't too far off the word **librairie** (both contain books).

Translate the following sentences:

1. I heard about your job. Believe me, I do *sympathize*.
2. She was in *agony* when I last saw her.

3. The *dispute over* pay lasted for months.
4. He *pretended* he had been to Harvard
5. The police found the *corpse* lying on the ground.
6. Her *malice* meant that no one liked her.
7. We must celebrate this wonderful *reunion!*

C. The following false friends are only partial false friends. That is to say, in certain cases only, they can be translated by the French word which resembles them, but not in others.

You don't stand *a chance* of succeeding.
I met him *by chance*.

In the first case, ***chance*** can be translated by **chance**.

Tu n'as aucune chance de réussir.

In the second case, it has to be translated by **hasard**.

In the following exercise, all the false friends are partial. In each pair of sentences, the word in bold must be translated once by the French word which resembles it, and once by another word.

1. She has a great ***memory***: she remembers everything I have ever said.

I have very few *memories* of my trip to London.

2. My father ***retired*** last year.

If you don't mind, I ***will now retire*** to my bedroom.

3. The lawyer cannot ***demonstrate*** that he is innocent.

Did you ***demonstrate*** against the death penalty?

4. The New York **branch** rang up this morning.

The bird sat on the **branch** and sang.

5. She **disposed** the flowers neatly on the window sill.

He **disposed** of the waste in the yellow bin.

6. Myriam is very **anxious**: she bites her nails continuously.

I'm very **anxious** to meet you.

7. Peter **confesses** he talked to a priest last week.

She confessed to a priest in Milan.

8. What is your **position** on the death penalty?

Gary says he's in no **position** to buy a new house at the moment.

9. **Competition** in industry is terrible.

There is too much **competition** in this school.

10. There are three **characters** in the story.

She's never really shown her real **character**.