

FALSE COGNATES

There are literally thousands of words that are the same or similar in appearance in English and Spanish, and have the same meaning in both languages (“cognates”). There are also, however, many instances where appearances are deceiving and words that look alike are quite different in meaning (“false cognates”). The following list includes some of the most common false cognates, also known as “false friends:”

la acción

In addition to meaning “action” in Spanish, it is also used in business to mean “share,” “stock.” *Las acciones de la compañía* = “the company’s stock” (or “shares”).

actual

In Spanish, means “present,” “current,” and not “actual” as we use it in English, which in Spanish is instead *real, verdadero*. e.g. *El presidente actual no ejerce el verdadero poder* = “The current presidente does not exercise the actual power.” Notice how Spanish uses *verdadero* = “true”, instead of *actual*, which instead of meaning “real” as it does in English, would only have the meaning of “present” or “current” in Spanish.

e.g. *actualmente*: “at the present time;” *en realidad, de veras, realmente* = “actually.”

asistir

In Spanish, means “to attend,” not “to assist,” and requires the preposition *a* before a noun. e.g. *Casi nunca asiste a sus clases* = “He almost never attends class”. “To assist,” with the meaning in English of “to help,” is *ayudar*.

el colegio

General term for “school,” or often, “high school”. Does not mean “college,” which in Spanish is *la universidad*.

una conferencia

This may mean “conference” as we know it in English, with the meaning of a “convention;” it has another, often-used meaning in

Spanish, which in English would be a “lecture” by a professor or a public speaker.

la decepción

Means “disappointment” and sometimes “a feeling of having been deceived;” “deception” in Spanish, however, is usually translated as “engaño.”

una desgracia

Means “misfortune,” not necessarily “disgrace.” *¡Qué desgracia!* = What a misfortune! *desgraciadamente*: “unfortunately.” A “disgrace” = una deshonra.

un disgusto

Means “unpleasantness,” “annoyance” as opposed to “disgust,” which is translated into Spanish as *asco*. *Me da asco* = “It disgusts me.” e.g. *Tuve un disgusto con mi cuñado*. = “I had an unpleasant incident with my brother-in-law.”

embarazada

Does not mean “embarrassed,” which in Spanish is *avergonzado/a*, *desconcertado/a*, or *turbado/a*. *Está embarazada* is one way of saying “She’s pregnant” in Spanish.

el éxito

Means “success.” e.g. *Su nueva comedia tuvo un gran éxito*. = “His new play was a great success.” Not to be confused with an “exit”, which in Spanish is *salida*.

fastidioso

“Annoying,” “bothersome.” *Fastidiar* is a commonly used verb; e.g. *No me fastidies*. = “Don’t bother (annoy) me.” Likewise, the noun is *(un/el) fastidio*. *Es un fastidio*. = “It’s a bother (nuisance, inconvenience).” It is difficult to find an equivalent for “fastidious” in Spanish. Several possibilities are *melindroso*, *quisquilloso*, *exigente*, *difícil de complacer*.

una firma

“Signature.” A “business firm” is *compañía* or *casa (comercial)*.

una grosería

The adjective *grosero* means “rude” or “course” and a *grosería* is “rudeness” or “coarseness.” Not to be confused as a translation of the English word “grocery,” which is known by a various terms depending on the country/region of the Hispanic world where it is used. Usually *una tienda de ultramarinos* in Spain, it is *una tienda de abarrotes* in Mexico; *una bodega* in Cuba and Venezuela; *un almacén* in Argentine, Uruguay and Chile; *un colmado* in Puerto Rico.

el idioma

In English, translates as “language”. What we call an “idiom” in English, on the other hand, is *modismo* in Spanish; e.g. *Hay muchos modismos en cada idioma.* = “There are many idioms in every language.”

un indiano

This is a special term used to refer to a Spaniard who went to the Spanish colonies in the New World and returned to Europe with great wealth. A (North/South/Central)-American Indian is most frequently referred to as *un indígena* or *un indio*; a person from the Indian continent is also referred to as *un indio*.

introducir

Means “introduce” in the sense of “to bring up a topic in conversation” (= *introducir un tema*) or “to stick in,” “to put into,” “to insert,” all physical actions. “To introduce a person” in Spanish is *presentar*.

largo

Means “long” in English. “Large” is instead *grande*.

una lectura

Means “reading,” in English, not “lecture.” The word for “lecture” in Spanish, as mentioned above, is *conferencia*.

la librería

= “bookstore.” “Library” is instead *la biblioteca*.

molestar

May mean “to molest” but more often is the equivalent of the English “to bother,” “disturb,” “annoy.” e.g. *Siento molestarlo* = “I’m sorry to

bother you.” Another common phrase is *No es ninguna molestia* = “It’s no trouble” (or “bother”).

oficio

= “trade, occupation.” “Office” is *el despacho* or *la oficina*.

el/la pariente

This is the general word for a “relative.” The word in Spanish for “parent” is *padre* (father) or *madre* (mother). “parents” = *los padres*

pretender

= “to attempt, to try to.” “To pretend” = *fingir*.

la propaganda

Not only “propaganda” as we use it in English but also “advertising,” “publicity.”

regular

In addition to having the meaning of “regular” in English, may also mean “average,” “so-so,” “O.K.”

In answer to the question *¿Cómo estás?*, means “so-so,” “O.K.”

sano

“Healthy” rather than “sane,” which is *cuerto/a*. Note the expression *sano y salvo* = “safe and sound.”

sensible

= “sensitive” in English. “Sensible” in English may be *sensato*, *cuerto*, *razonable*, *de buen sentido*. e.g. *Es una persona muy sensible*. = “He is a very sensitive person.”

una sentencia

Means a “sentence” only in the judicial sense. May also mean “a saying” or “proverb.” “Sentence” in the grammatical sense is “(una) frase.”

simpático

This is one of the finest compliments that can be given to a person. It is roughly the equivalent of “pleasant,” “charming,” “congenial.”

“Sympathetic” = *compasivo*, *simpatizante*.

un suceso

= “event, occurrence, happening.” The verb *suced*er means “to happen to,” “to occur.” Remember, as we have mentioned, “success” = *éxito*.

sujeto

Means “subject” only in the grammatical sense. It may also mean, colloquially, “fellow, guy,” with a derogatory feel. A subject in school is *(la) asignatura*, *(la) materia*, *(el) curso*. When it is the equivalent of “topic,” “subject” = *(el) tema*. When it refers to a citizen of a country, “subject” is *súbdito* or *ciudadano*.

tipo

Not only “type” as in “category,” but also used colloquially, with a derogatory feel, for “guy” or “character.” e.g. *No me gusta ese tipo*. = “I don’t like that guy.” Note the economic/financial term *tipo de cambio* = “exchange rate” (of currency).