

## By William Z. Shetter

When you study a foreign language, especially a closely-related one like French, Spanish or German, now and then you find that a word means more or less just what it looks like it means. In French *moderniser* means 'modernize' and *libération* is 'liberation', in Spanish *perforado* is 'perforated' and *fortificación* is 'fortification', and in German *waschen* is 'wash' and *Socke* is 'sock'. But no word is ever an EXACT match - even similar-looking words like these will be used in expressions where they aren't in English.

The vast majority of similar-looking words, though, will have some meanings that they don't have in English. In addition to the obvious meaning, French *addition* also means 'check' and *marcher* also means 'walk', Spanish *embarazada* also means 'pregnant' and *casual* also means 'accidental', German *Direktion* also means 'administration' and *komisch* also means 'odd'.

But the real traps waiting for the unwary learner of these languages are the words that look the same as an English word but mean quite a different thing - in other words there is essentially no meaning overlap at all. These are known in the language-learning field as **false friends**. Here are a few examples of false friends that learners of French, Spanish and German inevitably run into.

### FRENCH

The word really means *Affluence crowd of people agrément charm blesser to wound déception disappointment défendre to prohibit fastidieux tiresome intoxiqué poisoned librairie bookstore location renting out réaliser to achieve*

You can see how in international negotiations, diplomats have to rely on their interpreters being alert enough not to be led astray by false friends. Suppose the French delegate said "*je demande ...*" and an unwary interpreter rendered it as "*I demand ...*". This could lead to a painful incident, while all the Frenchman meant was the polite "*I request ...*". The French might understandably wonder why you didn't react with more alarm when you were told someone was *intoxiqué* - not unreasonably, you thought they were merely drunk and could sleep it off.

### SPANISH

The word really means *actual current arena sand asistir to attend carpeta table cover, folder educado polite éxito success informal irregular, irresponsable pretender to try recordar to remind suceso event*

If a Mexican asks you to hand him *la carpeta*, try to resist the impulse to wonder whether he really expects you to rip the heavy thing all up. And if he mentions somebody's *decepción*, it could be damaging to human relations if you assumed she was *deceptive* rather than simply *disappointed*.

## GERMAN

the word really means *Art type bekommen to get brav well-behaved* (normally in a negative sense)  
*eventuell possible Gift poison Gymnasium high school Mist manure offiziös semi-official ordinär vulgar*  
*Spektakel noise*

German *eventuell* (and French *eventuel* with the same meaning) have created many a misunderstanding - and will no doubt continue to do so - by unintentionally betraying an English speaker into trusting that something was promised 'eventually' when all the German or Frenchman was intending to say was that something "might or might not" happen. You can invent other awkward moments, such as thinking you're talking about *mist* when you were really referring to *manure*. And if you call a German soldier *brav*, you might have to take the consequences of having told him he's nothing but a slavishly conformist 'model citizen'.

As we said in the opening paragraph, between ANY two languages there is no single word that occurs in all the same contexts in both languages. Look more closely at the German examples given just before that remark. Even though German *waschen* means 'wash', *Ich wasche ihm den Kopf* looks as if it means 'I wash his head', but although it can indeed mean that, it more commonly means 'I read him the riot act'. *Socke* means 'sock' but *Er macht sich auf die Socken* (literally 'he gets onto his socks') really means 'he beats it out of there'. *Banana* is *banane* in French, *banana* in Spanish, and *Banane* in German. Same fruit, same word. But if you try to translate that same word in *That music drives me bananas* into any of those three languages, you'll find that you get either quizzical looks or amused puzzled smiles. It's a friend all right, but occasionally a false one.

*This article is reprinted with the permission of William Z. Shetter, a retired university professor of foreign language and linguistics at Indiana University. He is the author of Language Miniatures: A Selection of Essays, published at Indiana University.*

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