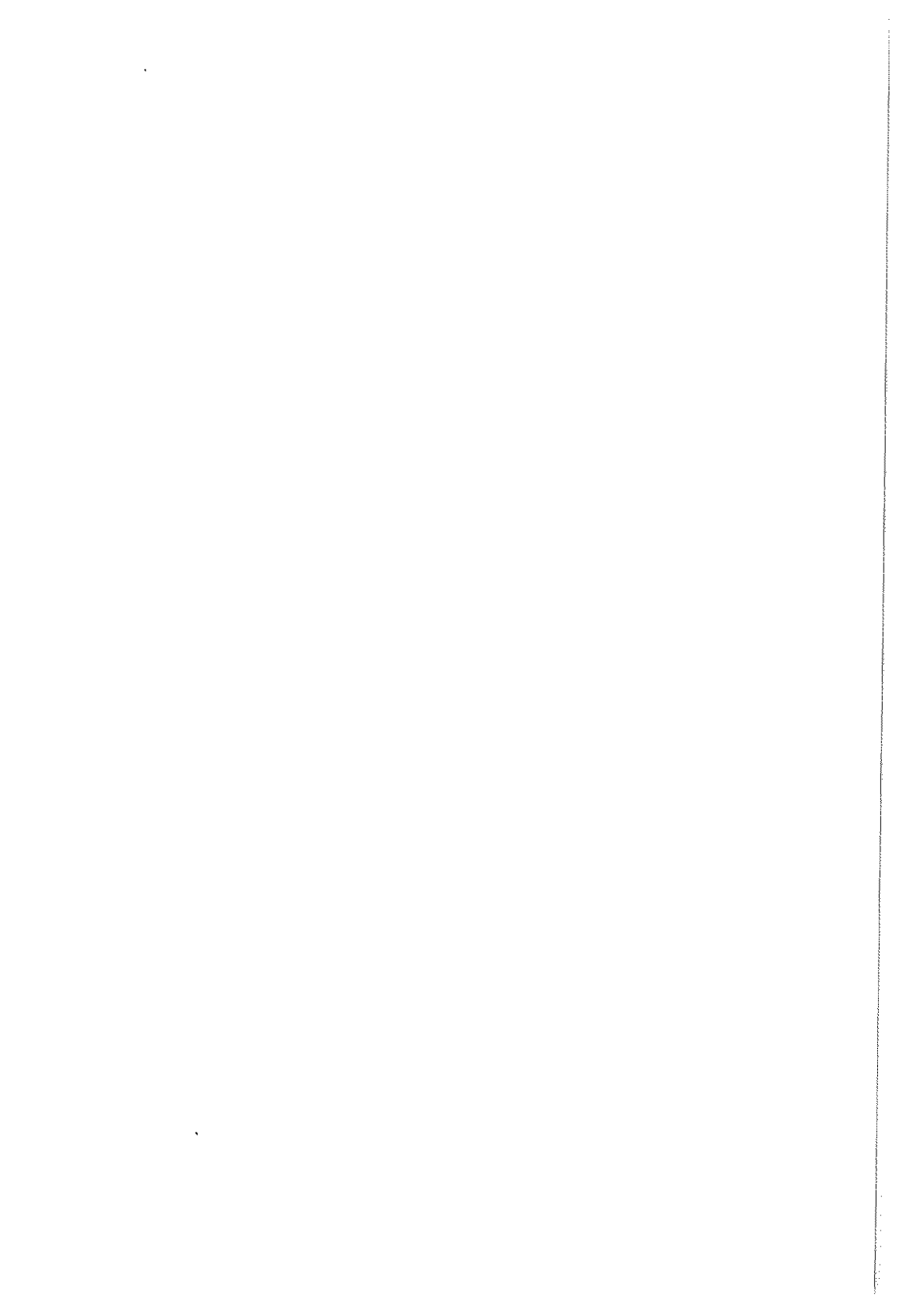


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**FALSE FRIENDS IN THE EUPHEMISTIC
LANGUAGE OF THE TABOO OF
SEX IN ENGLISH AND SPANISH**

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1. Definition

Throughout our paper, we use the term false friends in the sense of 'pairs of words bearing a great similarity between two languages'. This resemblance is generally found between words with the same lexical origin that have undergone different changes of meaning in two languages, English and Spanish, in the present case.

We will also regard as false friends those words taken as borrowings from the English language which developed new meanings in Spanish; we will disregard, however, those cases that have just certain phonetic and/or spelling similarities that can be considered a mere accident or coincidence, e.g. **van**, the vehicle/ *van*, 3rd person plural of the present of the verb *ir*, 'to go'. Although some authors¹ have taken up the study of false friends from a morphosyntactic point of view, in our paper we will concentrate on the semantic aspects, since it is the semantic features that are more likely to cause problems and confusion.

2. Focussing the problem

In most of the analyses of false friends² and cognates in general³ carried

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1. See, WOTJAK, G., 1990. The author offers an interesting list of different works about false friends in different languages.
 2. KOESSLER, M. & DEROCQUIGNY, J. 1946. This study is addressed to the translator, analysing many examples of terms which can be treacherous including a corpus of English and French pairs.
 3. See, VAN ROEY, J., 1995.

out so far⁴ false friends have been used as a valid strategy for foreign language teaching. Several works and guides⁵ to help the translator when facing false friends have been written as well. Yet, in our opinion, the approach to the problem cannot be limited to descriptive synchronic studies and lists of words, and the study of the causes that produce false friends is also essential.

Languages with such a close relation as English and Spanish, which share a Latin heritage together with a French influence, have a lot of words which are alike in form, but in many cases their resemblance is deceitful. Thus, the pair **congress** and *congreso*, having the same origin in Latin *congressus*, past part. of *congregare*, 'to go together', mean⁶ 'the action of coming together, meeting', 'a formal meeting or assembly of delegates or representatives for the discussion and settlement of some questions' and 'the legislative body in some countries'. But the English word also has the lexicalized⁷ meaning of 'sexual union or copulation', (*OED.*, 1589-1870), which is not found any longer in Spanish

3. Change of meaning process

If false friends are the consequence of the change of meaning undergone by one of the pair of terms in two related languages, but not by the other, a study of the causes that brought about the new meaning will make it possible to understand the phenomenon.

According to Lakoff, Johnson, Searle and Sweetser, changes of meaning can be explained as a result of the metaphorical processes that words are likely to undergo. Some instances of these metaphorical processes are the changes of meaning caused by rhetoric figures such as: 1, metaphor, which produced the pair of false friends, **abatement/abatimiento**, for example; 2, metonymy, which caused the pair **mascara/máscara**; 3, euphemism, in pairs like **constipation/constipado**; 4, dysphemism, in pairs like **packet/paquete**; 5, irony, in pairs like **gracious/gracioso**; 6, ellipsis, in pairs like **loco/loco**; 7, comparison, in pairs like **sierra/sierra** and 8, borrowings, in pairs like **meeting/mitin**. We will concentrate on the changes of meaning produced by euphemism.

4. GALLEGOS, A., 1983.

5. KOESSLER, M., 1975.

6. For the English terms, we use the definitions given in the *OED*, 2nd edition, and for the Spanish ones, those given in the *DRAE*.

7. We use the term lexicalized in the sense of 'included in the *OED*.'

In the language of taboo, the semantic changes produced by the metaphorical processes in each language community, influenced by the cultural and idiosyncratic aspects of each group of speakers, have a specific linguistic function. This function, common to all languages, is to enhance some aspects of a given reality while concealing others. In other words, we conceptualise a reality in terms of another to highlight some aspects and to hide others that we do not want to show.

From a linguistic point of view, a euphemism is just a term used with a metaphorical meaning to give a word that has a typified literal meaning, a different new sense. Thus, by using a new noun for a specific entity, we avoid the unpleasant or taboo sense it evokes. What characterises euphemism is the fact that it keeps its literal meaning, which is like a screen to hide reality. And, what distinguishes it from metaphor in general is not its linguistic mechanism, which is also the substitution of the meaning of one word for another, but extralinguistic considerations like the speaker or hearer's intention or the fact that the object we are referring to is considered taboo socially.

The taboo object generally corresponds to realities that cannot be mentioned. They are related to sexual objects and religious beliefs which are forbidden because of moral or superstitious norms. But in our contrastive study between English and Spanish euphemisms, we will concentrate on a specific object which is still taboo in our Western culture. Namely words that name sexual practices and parts of our body, specifically those applied to the sexual functions and the sexual organs.

Since realities such as sex organs or sexual relations should not be explicitly mentioned, this particular lexical field is full of euphemisms, especially because languages seldom have completely neutral unmarked terms to name them. On the contrary, usually there is only a formal or technical vocabulary at one extreme and a highly colloquial one at the other, so it is not strange for a word to take on a new sexual meaning besides its usual literal one. If this new meaning develops only in one of two given languages but not in the other, the degree of polysemy for the same original word becomes different in the two languages, and a new pair of false friends is born. That is the case of **dose/dosis**: **dose** is a euphemism for 'gonorrhoea', whereas this sense is not found in the Spanish *dosis*.

The changes that the original word undergoes in this process can be of three types:

1. A word changes its original meaning to the extent of losing it

When there is a complete lexicalization⁸ of a meaning and the original sense of the word is lost, the metaphorical process that brought the new meaning about is not perceptible to the speaker. Then, it is more difficult to understand why one meaning can be so different from one language to the other. This happens in the pair **fundament**/*fundamento*. The two words, from Latin *fundamentum*, from *fundare*, 'to found', do not share any sense at present. The English word means 'the buttock and the anus' whereas the Spanish word means 'the base of a wall and foundations'. They had similar meanings that are obsolete in English now. Here we have a clear example of total false friends as they have complete different meanings. But in most cases we find partial false friends, that is, words which share some of their senses.

2. The original meaning of a word is kept and new senses are added

Let's consider the case of the change of meaning in a half-lexicalized euphemism like the English word **tart**, 'cake' and 'prostitute'. If we compare the pair **tart**, 'cake', 'prostitute' /*tarta*, 'cake', we find they have the same origin in the Latin *torta panis* and French *tarte*. But **tart** is a half-lexicalized euphemism since it keeps the original meaning 'a piece of pastry', and it has developed several new meanings, which are also registered in the *OED*, that of 'prostitute' among them. If **tart** were to lose its original meaning of 'a piece of pastry' and come to mean just 'a prostitute', then it would not be a euphemism any more. This case is a clear example of partial false friends: **tart** and *tarta* share the meaning of 'tarta', but the euphemistic meaning of 'prostitute' has only developed in English.

3. New senses, not included in the *OED* or the *DRAE*, are added to a word

8. Constipation is another example of this process. The word comes from Latin *constipare*, 'to press, to cram'. It was taken in English where it first meant 'the action of packing or pressing closely together; the condition of being so compressed; condensation, compression'. It soon became a medical term with the meaning 'contraction or constriction of organic tissues, the vein etc.' (*OED*, c.1400-1660). In the 16th c., it took on the specific meaning of 'confinement of the bowels: a state of the bowels in which the evacuations are obstructed or stopped; costiveness'. The Spanish *constipado*, also borrowed from Latin, could still be applied to a closing of the intestines, like the English **constipation**, in the 18th c., but it gradually lost this meaning, and by the 19th c., it referred exclusively to the state of 'closing and constraining the pores stopping transpiration' and hence 'having a cold'.

If we look up the meanings of a pair like *aesthete/esteta* in the *OED* and the *DRAE*, resp., we may be led to conclude that here we have a perfect example of synonymy. Yet, there is a euphemistic use in English when the term is used to refer to a male homosexual. This new sense, coming from the meaning 'someone who appreciates beauty', is not to be found in the *OED*. Perhaps it will become lexicalized in the future or it may be replaced by another word. The new meanings which are not lexicalized prove that the semantic change process is continuous, and new senses are the consequence of the way the speaker understands and conceives reality in the present synchronic moment.

4. False friends in pairs of euphemisms in the language of taboo

4.1 Sexual practices

Certain sexual practices which are regarded as denigrating by society should not be mentioned, so euphemisms must be used instead. These words have a different and accepted literal sense. For instance, a **pimp** that obtains prostitutes for his clients is called a **procurer**. Since it is considered in bad taste to refer to someone whose activities are related to obtaining a person for the gratification of lust with the words **pimp** or **ponce**, equivalent to the colloquial Spanish word *chulo*, the speaker chooses the term **procurer**⁹ which was adopted in the 17th c. This word comes from Latin *procuratorem*, which had the meaning of 'deputy, administrator of the Imperial incomes'. In Spanish, the original Latin word has given rise to *procurador* that means 'an attorney, a legal representative in court, or a Parliament deputy who represents a region or province'. Furthermore, it can designate a person that is in charge of the administration in a certain area, this being restricted mostly to religious orders. As we can see, the original Latin meaning is still present in Spanish with no variations, whereas English which had the same senses as Spanish until the 16th c., has developed new meanings. The old senses are lexicalized as obsolete or are rare¹⁰ at present.

9. It must have been a well-chosen euphemism to have lasted for over three centuries and be still in use at present. However, according to Ayto, the same word in French is preferred because it seems more tactful: 'The basic rule of euphemism- it is more discreet in a foreign language- has encouraged the use of a French version **procurer** in English, and French **procoreuse** has stood in for the English feminine form **procureess**: 'What a coarse face (...) She looks like a *procureuse*'. Evelyn Waugh 1930'. AYTO, J., 1993, p. 100.
10. The *OED*, includes another more general meaning, closely related to the Latin root, which is still used: 'One who procures or obtain'. Other well-known dictionaries like the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* 1992: Longman, London, also include this sense although specifying that the most usual meaning is 'a pander'.

The same can be said of the verb **to procure**; it has a similar euphemistic meaning of 'obtaining (women) for the gratification of lust, to act as a procurer or procuress', which has resulted in another false friend with respect to the Spanish verb *procurar*. But the reason why this English euphemism, which has been used for so many years, is still valid could be due to the fact that the general sense of the word, 'to obtain',¹¹ has been kept as we can see in sentences like:

'I've managed **to procure** two tickets for the final,'

4.2. Sexual organs

Taboo words that name genitals are generally banned, too, so a lot of creative thought has gone into ways of naming the sexual organs in a more respectable manner. For instance, instead of explicitly using a taboo word to name them we can refer to the part of the body where they are located. Thus, if an English baseball reporter has to make a comment on the injuries or pain that a player feels because his genitals have been hit, he would probably make use of an anatomical substitution, referring to those parts as **abdomen** or **lower abdomen**. Or if the male sexual organs have to be mentioned, they will be called **personal parts** or **privates**. Likewise, euphemisms as **ace of spades** or **the monosyllable**¹² denote the female sexual organs. As we have not always conceptualised the taboo object in the same way in Spanish, we find that there are a great amount of false friends in this specific semantic field as we will see below (5).

There are indeed many euphemistic terms in English in this area, which have no parallel in Spanish. Let's consider the case of **monosyllable**, for example. A Spanish speaker will find it hard to understand this word as a euphemism for the female genitals, especially as the commonest taboo word in Spanish is disyllabic. In the same way, if the sport reporter speaks about the **abdomen**, a Spanish speaker may understand that the player has been hit somewhere near his stomach.

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11. The *OED* includes a non-euphemistic sense of the verb: 'To obtain by care or effort; to gain, win, get possession of, acquire.'
 12. 'Of a somewhat different order of euphemism is **the monosyllable**, which was in widespread use in the 18th and 19th centuries as a polite substitute for the word *cunt*. Not so much euphemistic as eulogistic was the elaborate version, **the divine monosyllable**.' AYTO J., 1993, p. 136.

5. Lexicographic study

For our contrastive study we have considered two cases: 1, words whose taboo meanings are included in the *OED*, and 2, words whose taboo meanings are not included in the *OED*.

5.1. Sexual meaning registered in the *OED*

Ability and habilidad

Both come from Latin *habilitas*, from *habilis*, 'easy to be held or handled', from *habere*, 'to hold', and mean 'suitableness, fitness, aptitude, or capacity', but the English **ability**¹³ has been used in the sense of sexual potency, a meaning that is absent from *habilidad* in Spanish.

Approach and aproximarse

Both come from Latin; in the case of English, via Old French *approchier*, from Late Latin *adpropiare*, 'from' + *propius*, 'near', and in the case of Spanish, from *ad* + *proximus* (superlative of *propius*). They both mean 'to come near', but the English term can also mean 'to have sexual intercourse, to copulate with (a woman)'¹⁴, a meaning that has not been used in Spanish¹⁵.

Assault and asalto

Both come from Latin *ad* + *saltus*, and mean 'an onset or rush upon any one with hostile intent; an attack with blows or weapons'; 'the sudden rush or charge of an attacking force against the walls of a city or fortress' and 'an unlawful attack upon the person of another', but **assault** was used as a euphemism for 'copulation' in the 16th-17th c. (*OED*, 1599-1611), not so *asalto* in Spanish.

Climax and climax

Both come from Late Latin *climax*, from Greek *klímax*, 'ladder', and mean 'a figure in which a number of propositions are set forth so as to form a series in which each rises above the preceding in force or effectiveness of expressions; gradation' and 'the higher point of anything reached by

13. The initial *h* was lost in English before 1700, after a long struggle on the part of scholars like More, Ascham, Bacon, Browne and others, to preserve the written link with Latin.

14. The euphemism was used in the translation of the Authorised (King James) version of the Bible of 1611.

15. It is found in the Spanish translation of the Bible, but the euphemism is not specifically registered in the *DRAE*.

gradual ascent; the culmination, height, acme, apex', but in English the word has a lexicalized sense which refers to 'an orgasm'(OED, 1918-1963.), a sense that is not specifically registered in the *DRAE* for *climax*.

Congress and *congreso*

Both come from Latin *congressus*, past part. of *congregare*, 'go together', 'meet', and mean 'the action of coming together, meeting', 'a formal meeting or assembly of delegates or representatives for the discussion and settlement of some questions' and 'the legislative body in some countries', but the English word has the lexicalized meaning of sexual union or copulation, (OED, 1589-1870), which is not present any longer in the Spanish *congreso*.

Converse and *converso*

Both come from Latin *conversus*, past part. of *convertere*, 'to turn about', and mean 'to engage in conversation', but **to converse**, now obs., was also used as 'to copulate' (OED., 1536-1760).

Dose and *dosis*

Both come from French *dose*, from medieval Latin *dosis*, from Greek *dosis*, 'giving', and mean 'a definite quantity of medicine or drug given or prescribed to be given at one time and a definite quantity or amount of something regarded as analogous in some respect to the medical prescription', but **dose** has been used in the sense of an occurrence of venereal disease, usually gonorrhoea, especially in **to give/get a dose**, 'to infect or to be infected with it' (OED, 1914-1968), a sense that is absent from the Spanish term.

Dike/dyke and *dique*

Both come from Dutch *dijk*, 'dam', and mean 'ditch' and 'embankment', but **dike** has been used in the sense of female genitals (although when the term has this meaning the OED regards its origin as obscure) and is now commonly used in the sense of 'lesbian' (OED, 1942-1965).

Epicene and *epiceno*

Both come from Latin *epicoenus*, 'of both sexes', and are used to refer to nouns which, without changing their grammatical gender, may denote either sex, but **epicene** is also used as a euphemism for 'effeminate' (OED, 1601-1876).

Fundament and *fundamento*

Although both words come directly from Latin *fundamentum*, from *fundare*, 'to found', they do not share any meanings now. Senses such as

'base of a wall' or 'foundations' are obs. in English but not in Spanish, and **fundament** means 'the buttocks' and 'the anus' only in English. (*OED*, 1297-1871).

Impregnate and *Impregnar*

Both come from Latin *impraegnare*, 'to make pregnant', and mean 'to fill, to saturate, to imbue and to fill with thoughts, principles or moral qualities', but **to impregnate** also refers to the action of making a woman pregnant (*OED*, 1646-1871).

Jazz and *yaz*

Origin unknown. As nouns, they both refer to "a kind of ragtime dance originating among American Negroes", but the English **jazz** also came to mean 'copulation' (*OED*, 1924), shortly after the musical term was coined in 1909.

Length and *Longitud*

Although the two words have a different origin: **length** from Old English *lengdu*, *longitud*, from Latin *longitudo*, they both mean 'the quality of being long', but **length** can also mean 'the erect penis' (*OED*, 1949).

Molest and *molestar*

Both come from Latin *molestare*, 'to annoy', the English term via Old French. *molester*, 'to molest'. They both mean 'to bother or interfere', but **to molest** has the specific meaning of 'accosting or attacking, especially with the intention of assaulting sexually'.

Occupy and *ocupar*

Both come from Latin *ocuppare*, 'to seize by force, get hold of', and mean 'to take possession, to tenant, to employ, to engage', but 'to coit a woman' is another sense found only in English (*OED*, 1432-1660).

Procurer/Procuress and *procurador*

Both come from Latin *procuratorem*, 'administrator and representative', but *procurador* means 'an agent, an attorney, a representative officer' in Spanish¹⁶, and the English word refers to a person who procures women for the gratification of love or lust, a **bawd**. Often feminine, **procuress**, (*OED*, 1632-1880).

Pudding and *pudín*

Pudding comes from Middle English *poding*, 'bag' or 'cloth' (apparently

16. These senses are lexicalized as obs. in the *OED* (1470-1560).

implying the boiling of the composition in a bag or cloth). The Spanish word, **puđín**, is a borrowing from the English term. Both words mean 'a preparation of food of a soft or moderately firm consistency, in which, the ingredients, animal or vegetable, are either mingled in a farinaceous basis (...) cooked by boiling or steaming' or 'preparations of butter, milk and eggs, rice, sago, tapioca (...) suitably seasoned, and cooked by baking', but **puđing** is also coarse sl. for 'penis' (*OED*, 1719-1972).

Serve and servir

Both come from Latin *servire*, 'to be a servant or slave, to serve', and mean 'to be a servant (to), render service (to), to be subordinate, serviceable or useful (to), to answer a purpose' and 'to minister to a person at table'; hence 'to supply, furnish, present with', but **to serve**, when referring to male animals, means 'to cover the female; especially the stallions, bulls, etc. kept and hired out for the purpose; also transf. to humans', (*OED*, 1577-1909).

Tart and tarta

From French *tarte*, 'an open tart'. Ultimate origin uncertain, perhaps from Late Latin *torta panis*, 'a sort of loaf of bread' or, in the case of English, short for **raspberry tart**. The English and Spanish terms mean 'a piece of pastry, filled with fruit preserve or other sweet confection', but there are some meanings in English which do not exist in Spanish: 1, 'a girl or woman', especially in Australia and New Zealand; 2, in Liverpool dialect, 'a wife or girlfriend', (*OED*, 1864-1980); 3, 'a prostitute' and a term of abuse (*OED*, 1887-1979); 4, in homosexual use, 'the young favourite of an older man' and 5, in a more general sense, 'a male prostitute', (*OED*, 1935).

Yard and yard

The English **yard** is of obscure origin, probably related to Latin *haste*, 'spear', or Old Irish *at*, 'rod'. In Spanish the word is a borrowing from English. Both words mean 'a measure of length', but **yard** is also a euphemism for 'penis'.

5.2. Sexual meanings not registered in the OED

Aesthete and esteta

Both come from Greek *aísjqthv*, 'one who perceives', and mean 'one who professes a special appreciation of what is beautiful and endeavours to carry his ideas of beauty into practical manifestation', but the English **aesthete** can also be found applied to a male homosexual from the meaning 'someone who appreciates beauty'.

Apogee and *apogeo*

Both come from Latin *apogeum*, 'away from the earth', in English, via French, *apogée*, and mean 'the point of orbit of the moon, or any planet, at which it is at its greatest distance from the earth and climax', but the English term was used in the 18th c. as a euphemism for 'an orgasm', from the literal meaning: 'the point in the orbit of the sun, the moon or a planet, at which it is at its greatest distance from the earth'.

Bilingual and *bilingüe*

Both come from Latin *bilingu-is*, 'speaking two languages', and mean 'having two languages and written in two languages', but **bilingual** is also used as a code word in personal ads, signifying 'a desire to have oral sex with both men and women'.

Conjugate and *conjugar*

Both come from Latin *conjugare*, 'to join together, marry', and mean 'to join together and to inflect a verb', but **to conjugate** was used in the 19th c. as a euphemism, often humorous, for 'to copulate'.

Dissolve and *dissolver*

Both come from Latin *dissolvere*, 'to loosen asunder, disunite', and mean 'to melt or reduce to a liquid condition, to detach, to release and to disperse', but **dissolve** was often used in the 18th-19th c. as a euphemism for 'to have an orgasm(of both sexes)'.

Seminary and *seminario*

Both come from Latin *seminarium*, 'seed-plot', and mean 'a school or college for training persons for the priesthood' and 'a place or institution for the training of those destined for some particular education', but in the 19th c., **seminary** could also refer to the female genitals, punning on semen, 'seed' and 'the place where the seed is sown'.

6. Conclusion

False friends are caused by a process of metaphorical changes of meaning. In the case of euphemisms, this change of meaning process is governed by a desire on the part of the speaker to hide a forbidden reality. English and Spanish have many words with a common origin that have adopted new senses according to the different euphemistic uses that the speakers have made of them in each language. And it is precisely the different evolution of the same word in each language that originates new dissimilar meanings, thus giving rise to pairs of false friends.

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ABBREVIATIONS USED

- c. century
DRAE *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española*
OED *Oxford English Dictionary*
obs. obsolete
p. page
q. pages
part. participle
sl. slang