

Beware False Friends!

By Miguel Prada

When learning a new language like English, it's normal to find words that look or sound similar to words in Spanish. These are called cognates. These words can cause confusion, and sometimes even funny or embarrassing mistakes.

For example, *animal* in Spanish and *animal* in English look the same—and they mean the same thing, but not always... Since sometimes, these “friendly-looking” words aren't so friendly. That's when we call them false friends or false cognates.



Image taken from: <https://www.profesapeltijera.com/es/product/2903#>

Imagine saying “Estoy embarazada” in English, thinking it means “I’m embarrassed” ... when it really means “I’m pregnant”!

With that in mind, I’m going to take the liberty to share some common false friends that may confuse us while learning English as a second language:

English Word	Looks Like (Spanish)	Real Meaning (English)	Spanish Word Actually Means
Actually	Actualmente	In fact / really	Actualmente = Nowadays
Assist	Asistir	To help	Asistir = To attend
Library	Librería	Place to borrow books	Librería = Bookstore
Sympathetic	Simpático	Compassionate / understanding	Simpático = Nice / friendly
Embarrassed	Embarazada	Ashamed / self-conscious	Embarazada = Pregnant
Realize	Realizar	To become aware	Realizar = To carry out / do
Sensible	Sensible	Reasonable / practical	Sensible = Sensitive
Exit	Éxito	A way out / departure	Éxito = Success
Fabric	Fábrica	Cloth / material	Fábrica = Factory
Constipated	Constipado	Unable to go to the bathroom	Constipado = Have a cold
Molest	Molestar	To harass or abuse	Molestar = To bother
Pretend	Pretender	To act as if	Pretender = To intend / try
Eventually	Eventualmente	In the end / finally	Eventualmente = Possibly / maybe
Rope	Ropa	Thick cord	Ropa = Clothes
Introduce	Introducir	To present someone	Introducir = To insert
Lecture	Lectura	A talk or speech	Lectura = Reading

Chef	Jefe	Head cook	Jefe = Boss
Assistants	Asistentes	Helpers	Asistentes = Attendees
Preservative	Preservativo	Food additive to prevent spoilage	Preservativo = Condom
Eventually	Eventualmente	Finally	Eventualmente = Possibly

False friends are tricky, but with practice, you'll learn to spot them easily. Just remember: not every English word with a Spanish "twin" is telling you the truth, so check the context because a word's meaning can change depending on how it's used.

Also, use a dictionary or translator when you're unsure, then you can make a personal list of false friends that confuse you, and review it often in order to be practiced with examples or mini dialogues to see how they are really used.

Imágen destacada/ Highlighted image:



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References used:

Cambridge Dictionary – “False Friends”

Cambridge provides clear explanations and examples of common false friends in English.
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/grammar/british-grammar/false-friends>

British Council – LearnEnglish Teens: False Friends

A great student-friendly resource with activities, explanations, and interactive exercises.
<https://learnenglishteens.britishcouncil.org/grammar/b1-b2-grammar/false-friends>

WordReference Forum – Spanish-English False Friends

A widely used bilingual dictionary with forums discussing false cognates and their correct use.
<https://www.wordreference.com>

FluentU Blog – 40 Common False Cognates in English and Spanish

A practical list with explanations, examples, and visual learning support.
<https://www.fluentu.com/blog/english/spanish-english-false-cognates/>