

# A Dictionary of Confusable Phrases

# Introduction

## FALSE “FRIENDS” AND “ENEMIES” IN ENGLISH PHRASEOLOGY

Even a cursory examination of English phraseology reveals the existence of numerous idiomatic expressions and recurrent word combinations characterized by similarity of wording or imagery without corresponding similarity in their meaning or usage. Phraseological units of this kind usually form pairs and sometimes larger groups of expressions not normally interchangeable in their respective contexts or only interchangeable in some of their meanings so errors can arise whenever one expression is sufficiently close to another to be semantically identified with it, *cf.*: *bring one's mind to something / bring something to mind* or *at the top of the tree / up a tree*. While positive intralingual transfer may help in the case of perceived linguistic similarities, *cf.*: *make hay while the sun shines / strike while the iron is hot*, negative intralingual transfer will lead to problems owing to semantic or grammatical differences between units. The probability of their confusion is conditioned by the extent of similarity while their respective linguistic currency determines which unit in the group is likely to be mistaken for another more familiar and seemingly identical expression.

Alongside such phraseological “false friends” there exist less numerous cases of “false enemies” or pseudo-antonyms whose form may induce the learner to believe that they are opposite in meaning which in reality they are not,\* *cf.*: *absence of mind / presence of mind* and *come on the carpet / step off the carpet*.

Whereas errors caused by *interlingual* phraseological interference are predetermined by the student's first language and mostly occur when learners pattern phrases in the target language after the models of their own language, errors caused by *intralingual* phraseological interference are generally due to erroneous identification within the framework of the target language of semantically unrelated phraseological units with conceptually related components. Errors of this kind do not depend on the learners' first language and are common to all EFL/ESL students. They may adversely affect comprehension and usage, so learners are in urgent need for practical resource that will systematically address this problem and “defuse” potentially confusable multi-word units. Nonetheless, prior to the present publication there was no dictionary

\*The phenomenon of “false friends” is commonly associated with words of different languages relating as formal equivalents for the reason of their material similarity while their meanings are quite different. A similar phenomenon can be observed at the phraseological level when set expressions of one language have formal, semantically dissimilar equivalents in another language (for instance, the following English expressions have their exact formal counterparts in Russian with altogether different meanings: dirty money, high words, service flat, special school, art film, wind in the head, etc.).

specifically devoted to phraseological pitfalls of this kind even though some dictionaries of idioms would provide random cross-references warning of idiomatic expressions whose form may mislead the user into thinking that they are semantically related. At the same time, there exist numerous dictionaries of usage bringing to the attention of the learner the difference in the meaning, spelling, pronunciation, and the range of application of individual words characterized by outward similarity.\* The present dictionary, providing systematic contrastive coverage of all kinds of phraseological “false friends” and “enemies,” is expected therefore to remedy this imbalance and to fill, at least partially, the existing lexicographical lacuna. Primarily intended for EFL/ESL students as a tool of reference and prophylactics, it presents a complete and orderly catalog of multi-word units that require special consideration because of their interferential potential. Furthermore, the sizeable volume of the dictionary and its user-friendly Phrase Index enable it to be used as a regular phraseological dictionary providing definitions to individual idioms, clichés and set expressions.

In the selection of phrases making up the dictionary I proceeded from the broadest possible concept of phraseology and considered both idiomatic and non-idiomatic recurrent word combinations, prepositional collocations and phrasal verbs. No limits have been set with respect to their structural or pragmatic characteristics, the principal criteria being similarity or contrast in the wording or imagery of multi-word units whose meanings or usage do not show corresponding similarity or contrast. Potentially interferential units were culled from the phraseological pool provided by over a hundred mono- and bilingual dictionaries as well as numerous online databases. Contrastive-differentiating analysis of the totality of phraseological units thus selected made it possible to separate groups of semantically and pragmatically similar phraseological synonyms and variants (*cf.*: *add fuel to*

*the fire / add fuel to the flames*) from interferentially significant “false friends.” This inductive methodology made it possible to concentrate not on the actual interferential interactions of phraseological units (error analysis) but on the hypothetical possibility of their confusion, predicting *all likely cases* of flawed reasoning at phraseological level. As a result, some entries may contain well-known modern phrases whose interferentially relevant oppositions are represented by expressions pertaining to professional or social jargon, slang, as well as by phrases that are regional, dialectal, extinct or rarely heard nowadays. Phraseological oppositions of this sort, though less topical for language learners, demonstrate interesting cases of coincidence in imagery through time and space.

Parallel to potentially confusable phraseological oppositions, there are numerous instances when units longer than the word form similar, semantically contrastive relationships with consonant compound words, *cf.*: *day-man / man of the day*. In many cases dictionaries differ whether to treat a particular two-word combination as a phrase or a compound and there seems to be no hard and fast rule about which category such an item should be in. The distinction between separate and solid writing of such units becomes relevant, however, when it serves to differentiate between semantically dissimilar entities, *cf.*: *back drop / backdrop*, or units functioning as different parts of speech, *cf.*: *common sense / commonsense*. Since their outward similarity may likewise confuse the learner, we deemed it necessary to incorporate all cases involving potentially interferential compounds in the present dictionary.

The dictionary compiled on the above principles is comprehensive in that it encompasses the whole spectrum of phraseological units irrespective of their contemporary status in the language, social currency, or the degree of idiomaticity (that is, semantic interdependence of their components), the units ranging all the way from free word combinations to id-

\*See, for example: G. A. Owen, *Dictionary of “Confusibles”* (Somerset: Brodie, 1966); A. Room, *Room’s Dictionary of Confusibles* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979); L. Urdang, *The Dictionary of Confusable Words* (New York: Facts on File, 1988).

idiomatic expressions. In between these two categories there is a vast layer of the so called set phrases institutionalized as such in the language and originated owing to the ability of words to regularly link up with other words forming their lexical environment. Whereas their global meanings are readily grasped from the meanings of their component parts, relatively independent of each other and used in their literal or metaphorical sense, the meanings of idiomatic expressions proper often appear unmotivated and cannot be deduced from the meanings of their constituents. As regards the degree of their structural mobility, idiomatic expressions are generally more or less invariable in form or order and do not admit of the usual grammatical operations which their literal counterparts will permit. Other types of phrases normally show some degree of variation. Phrases making up the dictionary are just as heterogeneous syntactically: some of them are full sentences (catch phrases, proverbial expressions, rhetorical questions and social formulae) while others function like particular parts of speech (nominal, verbal, adverbial and adjectival phrases).

Phraseological units whose meanings may mistakenly appear similar or opposite can be reduced to the following principal types of inter-differentially relevant oppositions (in the order of diminishing similarity of their notional components):

- specific cases of phraseological polysemy or homonymy when formally identical units are used differently by British and American speakers, e.g.:  

pavement artist (*UK*)  
pavement artist (*US*)
- semantically dissimilar units with identical notional components, relating as pseudo-quantitative variants, when one of the phrases is not really just a shortened form of an extended phrase, e.g.:  

keep one's head  
keep one's head up
- semantically dissimilar units all of whose notional components are identical, e.g.:

cut loose from something  
cut loose with something

- phrases forming semantic oppositions to analogous solidly spelled compounds, e.g.:  

black eye  
blackeye
- morphologically consonant, though unrelated place names, e.g.:  

Saint John's  
Saint Johns
- semantically dissimilar prepositional phrases with identical notional component preceding the preposition, e.g.:  

absent from something  
absent in something
- semantically dissimilar prepositional phrases with identical notional component following the preposition, e.g.:  

in time  
on time
- semantically distinct phrasal verbs with identical verbal component, e.g.:  

turn on someone  
turn to someone
- semantically dissimilar collocations with identical verbal component taking direct and prepositional object respectively, e.g.:  

advertise for something  
advertise something
- semantically dissimilar units some of whose components are identical while others relate as paronyms, e.g.:  

historic event  
historical event
- semantically dissimilar units with paronymic and identical notional components, which belong to different parts of speech, e.g.:  

curtain raiser  
raise the curtain
- semantically dissimilar units some of whose components are identical while others relate as synonyms, e.g.:  

hold an appointment  
keep an appointment

- semantically dissimilar units some of whose components are identical while others designate contiguous notions, e.g.:  
    **turn someone's brain**  
    **turn someone's head**
- semantically dissimilar units some of whose components are identical while others associate with the same class of things, e.g.:  
    **lose one's head**  
    **lose one's mind**
- phrasal verbs forming structural and semantic oppositions to compound verbs with formally identical component parts represented in reverse order, e.g.:  
    **do something over**  
    **overdo something**
- phraseological units some of whose components are identical while others relate as antonyms, whose imagery may be mistakenly construed as semantically antonymous, e.g.:  
    **in deep water**  
    **in low water**
- semantically dissimilar phrasal verbs with synonymous verbal components and identical prepositions or adverbs, e.g.:  
    **come off something**  
    **go off something**
- semantically unrelated units of similar structure some of whose notional components may match, whose general phraseological idea may appear similar, e.g.:  
    **when the balloon goes up**  
    **when the eagle flies**
- semantically unrelated units that may differ in structure and have no components in common, whose general phraseological idea or imagery may appear similar, e.g.:  
    **be dead in the water**  
    **sleep with the fishes**
- semantically unrelated units that may differ in structure and have no components in common, whose general phraseological idea or imagery may appear antonymous, e.g.:  
    **carry the torch**  
    **hide one's light under a bushel**