

NUANCES
Mésententes cordiales

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FRANCO-BRITISH COUNCIL
British Section

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Preface

We all know what ‘false friends’ are, even when we fail to recognise them. ‘*Demander*’, for instance, means ‘ask’ or ‘request’, not ‘demand’ (‘*exiger*’). The late Philip Thody, with Howard Evans and Gwilym Rees, produced a rightly famous compendium of such malapropisms, *Faux Amis & Key Words*, which dealt learnedly and wittily with usages current in 1985. He followed it ten years later by *Le Franglais*; and in 2001 Henriette Walter studied what she called ‘the incredible love story between French and English’ in *Honni soit qui mal y pense*.

This booklet has no comparable ambitions. Its aim, in any case, is different. As its title suggests, it seeks to indicate how ‘true friends’ – words virtually identical in French and English – may carry divergent and often misleading overtones. ‘*Radical*’ in French is the same word as ‘radical’ in English, with the same primary meaning: but their connotations are widely, wildly different. ‘*Sentimental*’ is another example. On one occasion, when President Pompidou visited London, his official interpreter quoted him as ‘understanding the sentimental links between Britain and the Commonwealth’. It was almost false friendship – linguistically, that is. Similar cases recur below. And as Franglais spreads, the distinction between nuances and errors is evanescent and blurred. ‘*Réaliser*’, for example, is increasingly used (or misused) in its English sense. But as a rapid snapshot of changing habits, *Nuances* may be useful. It is at least *un petit livre de poche*.

acquis, n.m. legislation already passed by the European Union, to be adopted by new members.

actuel, adj. present-day, existing.

altérer, v. change for the worse.

Angleterre, n.f. strictly England, but often used to mean ‘Britain’ or ‘the United Kingdom’. The adjective is often similarly misapplied.

anglo-saxon, adj. unconnected with King Alfred, but Anglo-American: usually implying unduly free-market, laissez-faire, hire-and-fire economic philosophy.

arabe, adj. in ‘*le téléphone arabe*’, bush telegraph.

argument, n.m. argument, but in the sense of a contention advanced, not a dispute.

atlantiste, adj. favouring, sometimes uncritically or unduly, close relations with the United States.

banlieue, n.f. suburb, but with economic and social connotations, especially around Paris and other big cities, more like those of ‘inner-city’ elsewhere.

bourgeois, adj. middle-class, usually but not always with the negative, quasi-Marxist connotation the word sometimes carries in English.

cabinet, n.m. the private office of a Minister or other dignitary.

cadre, n.m. member of the supposedly affluent middle classes; yuppie (but without negative connotations), as in *Fédération nationale d’achat des cadres (FNAC)*, comparable in some respects with Marks and Spencer or John Lewis.

certain, adj. in some contexts, uncertain: e.g. ‘*un certain nombre*’ – although the same is true in English.

citoyen, n.m. citizen, certainly, but with an overtone of pride in independence, not unlike ‘yeoman’ in English, derived from its French Revolutionary history and its place in the *Marseillaise*; some commentators have contrasted it with ‘British subject’, implying that this phrase connotes subjection.

Colbertisme, n.m. state aid to private industry, as practised by Louis XIV’s Finance Minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619-83) and still deprecated more than 300 years later.

collaborateur, n.m. colleague, assistant, contributor to a newspaper; but – with a capital ‘C’ – a Vichyite collaborator with the occupying Nazis in World War II, an overtone that the ordinary word can still momentarily evoke.

collégial, adj. collectively responsible, as in a British Cabinet, the College of Cardinals, or the European Commission; seldom used in an educational sense, which even the word ‘*Collège*’ does not exclusively suggest.

commodité, n.f. convenience: not used to denote a ‘commodity’ in the sense of, say, a raw material supplied in bulk.

commun, adj. common, in the sense of shared or communal, but never in that of ‘vulgar’.

communal, adj. not ‘communal’ in the sense of shared, but belonging to the Commune.

communauté, n.f. community, most often as the title of the European Union’s constituent institutions or of France’s would-be Commonwealth (‘*la Communauté française*’), but also as an element in civil law and marriage.

commune, n.f. not ‘commune’ in the sense of a hippyish group, but the smallest local government unit, comparable to the parish.

compétence, n.m. competence, but also authority, power, or remit.

compétent, adj. competent, but also authorised, relevant, concerned.

compléter, v. to complete, but more often to supplement.

conjoncture, n.f. the state of the market or of the economy generally: an immensely useful word, with no precise equivalent in English.

conservateur, adj. preservative, as in ‘*agent conservateur*’, once memorably mistranslated as ‘Conservative agent’ and mistranslated back from ‘preservative’ as ‘*préservatif*’ (condom).

constater, v. to note, realise, recognise. Another useful word with no precise English equivalent; often used to absolve the speaker from adopting an attitude to what is discussed: ‘*Je ne juge pas – je constate.*’

constitution, n.f. has the same meaning as in English, but with the historic overtones of successive written constitutions implying both documentary form and the possibility of modifying or replacing them. Contrast this with the UK constitution – unwritten, ‘organic’, and deeply resistant to change. Hence, in part, Britain’s suspicion of the European Union’s constitutional treaty.

le continent, n.m. the French mainland, as seen from (say) Corsica.

contingent, n.m. in foreign trade, a quota; in the armed services, the conscript element as distinct from regulars.

contrôle, n.m. not control, but supervision – except that, under the influence of English, the notion is acquiring more ‘controlling’ force: e.g. ‘*le contrôle de soi*’, or ‘*les contrôleurs aériens*’. ‘*Le contrôle parlementaire*’ is an intermediate instance, which parliamentarians would no doubt like to make closer to the English. ‘control’.

copie, nf. facsimile, transcript, reproduction, imitation, not one copy of a multiple.

décomposer, v. seldom ‘discompose’ but deconstruct.

demander, v. ask, request, not ‘demand’; a notorious *faux ami*.

député, n.m. deputy or delegate; but most frequently a member of the *Assemblée Nationale*, counterpart of a British Member of Parliament.

dialogue, n.m. dialogue, conversation, but habitually used in politics to describe interchange, not necessarily oral, among groups or institutions such as the EU Commission and the Council or the European Parliament.

directeur, n.m. director (of a Ministerial or Commission department, a newspaper, or a college); but not of a firm (where the term means a manager, while the *Président-Directeur Général (PDG)* is Chairman and Managing Director), or in cinema, theatre, radio and television, where the director is the *metteur en scène* and the *réalisateur* is (strictly) the producer, though here too *français* may creep in.

dirigisme, n.m. state planning and, at the extreme, control.

discussion, n.f. discussion, but usually more argumentative than the English word suggests.

disposer, v. not 'to dispose of' (*se débarrasser de*), but to have at one's disposal; '*vous pouvez disposer*' is 'you may leave'.

droit commun, n.m. not common law (*droit coutumier*), but normal, non-exceptional law.

économique, adj. economic, but also economical, so that '*un prix économique*' is a 'bargain price' rather than 'an economic price', which is '*un prix réel*'.

énergétique, adj. not 'energetic', but to do with energy and fuel supplies.

énergique, adj. energetic (up to and sometimes including 'violent').

état, n.m. state; but seldom applied to the French Republic owing to the word's contamination in World War II, when Marshal Pétain established the collaborationist *État français*

Europe, n.f. Europe, but often used to denote the European Union.

éventuel, adj. not 'eventual', but possible, likely, conceivable.

exemplaire, n.m. not 'example' but copy.

exploitation, n.f. full use, development; although also ‘exploitation’ in the sense of ‘despoiling’, the word is usually morally neutral, as are *exploitant* (n.m.) and *exploiter* (v.).

faux frais, n.m.pl. not fiddled expenses, but overheads.

fédéral, adj. federal, but without the overtones of centralised integration often given the word by British ‘Euro sceptics’.

footing, n.m. not a ‘foothold’ or a ‘secure position’, but jogging - ‘faire du footing au Bois de Boulogne’.

forfait, n.m. not a ‘forfeit’ or a ‘fine’ but a lump sum supposedly settling all bills in advance.

formel, adj. strict, categorical, definite, but not ‘formal’ in the sense of (merely) a matter of form.

gage, n.m. forfeit, deposit, guarantee. In the plural, a servant’s (or an assassin’s) wages.

gaullien, adj. associated with General Charles de Gaulle.

gaulliste, adj. associated with General de Gaulle’s philosophy and politics.

global, adj. usually meaning overall or on the whole; but also used of international trade (see *Globalisation*) below.

globalisation, n.f. the opening of international markets; often with negative overtones owing to fear of low-wage competition.

grand, adj. large, etc., but also ‘leading’, as in ‘*grand reporter*’.

haut, adj. high, etc., but also ‘senior’ as in ‘*haut fonctionnaire*’; the ‘*Haute Autorité*’ of the European Coal and Steel Community was translated as ‘High Authority’, but this had a lofty air, and at first was sometimes conversationally rendered as ‘Higher Authority’.

intégration, n.f. in European politics, far-reaching unification; in education, the possible induction of independent schools into the state system.

intégrité, n.f. integrity; but also identity, notably national cohesion.

intervention, n.f. intervention, but also a speech or a surgical operation.

intelligent, adj. intelligent, unblushingly used of people, whereas (at least in the past) the British more commonly applied the word to animals and pets.

intéresser, v. interest, but also concern; '*intéressé*' can also imply 'liable (or needing) to declare an interest'.

inviter, v. invite, but often with pressure or compulsion.

irresponsable, adj. irresponsible; but also (without pejorative implications) not answerable to, e.g., an elected authority.

largement, adv. not largely, but 'by a large margin'.

libéral, adj. liberal; but also Conservative because favouring private-enterprise free markets, and opposed to both *dirigisme* and (it is feared) social welfare.

libre, adj. in education, independent of the state system (and often based on religious principles); in shops, '*entrée libre*' means without obligation to buy (hence the waggish addition '*sortie payante*').

livide, adj. pale, e.g. with fear.

loyal, adj. loyal; but also fair, as in '*concurrence loyale*' or fair competition.

marché, n.m. market; but also agreement or contract, as in '*marché publique*', a public works contract.

métropole, n.f. metropolis; but in '*La Métropole*' the mother country (France) as seen from (say) '*Réunion*'.

mondialisation, n.f. see *globalisation*.

national, adj. national, but used more frequently than in Britain where 'royal' and 'British' often serve, or in the United States, where 'federal' and 'American' are alternatives.

notable, adj.& n.m.f. notable; but also a worthy, usually local.

occulter, v. from astronomy, to eclipse; but in politics, to obscure, minimise, or fudge.

officieux, adj. not, of course, ‘official’, but semi-official or unofficial (although it used to mean ‘obliging’, which action of this kind sometimes is).

onéreux, adj. costing money; but not necessarily ‘onerous’, which is ‘*pénible*’.

opportunité, s.f. opportuneness, not ‘opportunity’ (*occasion*); but sometimes (mis)used to mean ‘opportunity’ by hasty *franglais*-influenced French writers or politicians.

original, adj. original, both as ‘at the beginning’ and as ‘novel’; but it can imply ‘eccentric’ or ‘bizarre’.

partenaire, n.m.f. partner; in the expression ‘*partenaires sociaux*’, both sides of industry (employers and employees).

patriote, n.m.f. patriot; but with lingering French-Revolutionary and therefore left-wing echoes

paysan, n.m. farmer; also peasant, rustic, but without the archaic ‘country bumpkin’ overtones of those two words, and much closer to ‘country-dweller’.

politicien, n.m. & adj. politician; but with a slightly disparaging tone, and by implication less than a statesman, and (as an adjective) uncomplimentary. A more neutral, value-free term is ‘*homme politique*’.

ponctuel, adj. punctual; but in politics more often piecemeal, isolated, unsystematic.

populaire, adj. seldom ‘popular’ as enjoying popularity, more ‘often concerning or involving the people’, notably in the wistful, aspirational, or propagandist names of political parties and regimes.

le pouvoir, n.m. the authorities, with no necessary sense of oppression.

premier, adj. first, but also biggest, most important.

prêt-à-porter, adj. ready-to-wear, but without the pejorative implication of “off the peg” (= “*de confection*”): it can even carry the overtone of “designer”, although not of course bespoke.

prévoir, v. foresee; but also anticipate, provide for.

radical, adj. radical; but in politics far more often referring to the old (and old-fashioned) Radical Party, politically leftist but economically conservative and eventually split along these lines.

rampant, adj. not ‘rampant’ in the usual English sense of ‘out of control’, but gradual, creeping, insidious.

réaliser, v. not ‘realise’ (save in realising – i.e. making ‘real’ – assets), but achieve. However, like *opportunité*, the word is often now used, especially in conversation, as if it were its counterpart in English.

rente, n.f. not ‘rent’, which is *loyer*, but unearned income.

républicain, adj. republican; but with far more historical resonance and sense of allegiance than in English, because since the French Revolution France’s republican regime has been interrupted by two Napoleonic Empires and one Vichyite French State.

reporter, v. not report (which is *rappporter*), but postpone.

salaire, n.m. strictly not salary, but wages, although now often used by even salaried recipients, save for actors, etc., whose payment is a *cachet*

sauvage, adj. of animals, etc., ‘wild’; but also of industrial strikes, wildcat; of capitalism, unrestrained.

scientifique, adj. not only ‘scientific’ but also ‘to do with ordered knowledge’; ‘*une revue scientifique*’ is a learned journal.

séculaire, adj. not ‘secular’ but age-old or (more rarely) centennial.

sentimental, adj. not ‘sentimental’, but ‘to do with feelings’, even ‘heartfelt’.

sinistre, adj. & n.m. sinister, but also gloomy or morbid. ‘*Un sinistre*’ is an accident or natural disaster.

standing, n.m. prestige. René Clair, at the Cannes Film Festival with the late Alexander Walker, saw a poster for an apartment block ‘*de grand standing*’ and asked him what was the English translation. ‘*De luxe*’ was the reply.

sujet, n.m. subject, but seldom applied to a French citizen, for whom the word has undemocratic connotations.

suppression, n.f. abolition; more rarely (and mildly) repression.

trust, n.m. not a trust in the British sense, but a cartel or dominant conglomerate; a rather old-fashioned Leftist boo-word; cf. more recently '*les multinationales*'.

union, n.f. union, but not a trade union, which is '*un syndicat*'; in recent years, often used in '*l'Union européenne*', formerly the European Community.

unité, n.f. unit; also unity in the religious sense of oneness, but very rarely in a political sense.

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Préface

Tout le monde sait ce que sont les ‘faux amis’, même lorsque l’on ne les reconnaît pas. ‘Demand’, par exemple, veut dire ‘exiger’ au lieu de ‘demander’ (‘ask’ ou ‘request’). En 1985, le feu Philip Thody, avec la collaboration de Howard Evans et Gwilym Rees, a publié une collection des ces pièges linguistiques qui est justement bien connue: Faux Amis & Key Words, traitant avec esprit et érudition des usages alors courants. Dix ans plus tard il a étudié Le Français et en 2001 Henriette Walter a consacré un livre, Honni soit qui mal y pense, à ce qu’elle appelle ‘l’incroyable histoire d’amour entre le français et l’anglais.’

Notre plaquette Nuances n’a aucune ambition comparable. Son titre indique son objet: démontrer que plusieurs ‘bons amis’ comportent toutefois des sous-entendus divergents qui peuvent conduire en erreur. De toute évidence, ‘radical’ en anglais veut dire ‘radical’; mais en français ce même mot évoque des vellétés d’ordre politique et sociale inconnues au Royaume-uni. ‘Sentimental’ est en quelque sorte un cas contraire, ayant en anglais une résonance négative qui n’existe pas chez son homonyme français. Cette nuance est une fois échappée à l’attention de l’interprète officiel du Président Pompidou, en visite à Londres, où il a parlé des ‘sentimental links between Britain and the Commonwealth’ – comme si ces liens étaient exagérés ou artificiels. On trouvera plus loin d’autres exemples qui frôlent la ‘fausse amitié’. D’autre part, la défaillance linguistique que représente le ‘franglais’ tend à effacer la distinction entre la nuance et l’erreur. Qui n’a pas dit – ou au moins entendu – ‘réaliser’ au lieu de ‘s’en rendre compte’? Espérons quand même que Nuances sera utile. Notre plaquette n’est après tout qu’a little pocket book.

actual, *adj.* non pas ‘actuel’, mais réel.

Anglo-Saxon, *adj.* concernant la période et la langue du roi Alfred, etc.

alter, *v.* changer, sans la signification négative du mot ‘altérer’.

argument, *s.* argument (avancé au cours d’un débat), mais aussi et peut-être plus souvent une dispute.

the authorities, *s.pl.* le pouvoir.

beg the question, *v.* non pas ‘soulever la question’ (erreur fréquente au Royaume-uni), mais en anticiper abusivement la réponse.

blue-collar worker, *s.* artisan, travailleur manuel; ne pas à confondre avec ‘col-bleu’, dont la traduction anglaise est ‘blue-jacket’.

bush telegraph, *s.* le téléphone arabe.

Cabinet, *s.* Conseil des Ministres

certain, *adj.* souvent, incertain: p.ex. ‘a certain number’.

clever, *adj.* intelligent, mais souvent avec la connotation ‘malin’ et peut-être même ‘vantard’.

collective, *s.* association privée sans organisation hiérarchique.

commodity, *s.* produit, p.ex. matière première.

common, *adj.* commun, mais aussi et assez souvent ‘vulgaire’.

common law, *s.* non pas ‘droit commun’ mais droit coutumier.

commune, *s.* non pas une paroisse ou une commune administrative, mais un groupement dont les membres partagent la plupart des ressources, y compris quelquefois les partenaires intimes.

community, *s.* communauté, mais utilisé moins souvent en anglais, sauf pour des groupements sociaux (p.ex. ‘the Muslim community’) ou à l’échelle mondiale (‘the world community’).

complete, *adj.* total; ne veut pas dire ‘complet’ au sens de ‘complètement occupé’.

conservative, adj. *traditionnel; (d'une appréciation) réservée; avec C majuscule, Conservateur.*

constitution, s. *constitution, mais impliquant pour les Britanniques quelque chose fondamentale, historique, 'organique' et quasi-immuable, comparable à la constitution du Royaume-uni, notoirement non-écrite – ce qui explique une certaine méfiance envers le projet de constitution européenne.*

the Continent, s. *l'Europe continentale.*

control, v. *gouverner, mais non pas contrôler, mieux traduit par 'supervise'.*

convenience, s. *convenance, commodité; mais précédé de l'adjectif 'public' ce mot veut dire 'toilettes'.*

copy, n. *non pas seulement 'copie' mais aussi 'exemplaire'.*

decent, s. *convenable, décent, mais évoquant surtout la conduite du 'gentleman britannique traditionnel', style Major Thompson, ou de l'honnête homme dont le porte-parole typique était George Orwell.*

deconstruct, v. *non pas 'détruire' mais décomposer.*

delay, s. *non pas une date-limite mais un retard.*

demonstration, s. *démonstration (p. ex scientifique ou plus rarement militaire) mais surtout manifestation publique.*

dispose of, v. *non pas 'disposer de' mais 'se débarrasser de'.*

economic, adj. *relatif à l'économie; non pas 'à bon marché' ('economical')*

economical, adj. *économique ou à bon marché; (d'une personne) économe.*

energetic, adj. *non pas 'énergétique' mais énergique.*

Europe, s. *souvent, pour les Britanniques, l'Europe continentale, à l'exclusion du Royaume-uni.*

Eurosceptic, adj. *soupçonneux, voire hostile, envers l'Union européenne.*

- eventual**, *adj.* non pas 'éventuel', mais final, à la longue.
- expenditure**, *s.* dépenses.
- expenses**, *s.pl.* frais.
- exploitation**, *s.* exploitation, mais impliquant presque toujours 'spoliation', 'dépouillement'.
- federal**, *s.* fédéral, mais souvent (lorsqu'il s'agit de l'unification de l'Europe) interprété par les Britanniques comme 'centralisé', 'intégré'.
- forfeit**, *s.* non pas 'forfait', mais (dans un jeu) gage.
- formal**, *adj.* non pas 'formel' mais solennel, comme il faut, en bonne et due forme; aussi, superficiel parce que relatif à la forme plutôt qu'à la substance.
- free**, *adj.* libre; mais aussi gratuit.
- grand**, *adj.* non pas seulement grand, mais opulent, magnifique, splendide.
- integration**, *s.* unification (européenne), quelquefois avec une nuance négative qui implique une diminution de l'indépendance nationale.
- intelligent**, *adj.* intelligent; mais (au moins par le passé) un adjectif appliqué plus souvent aux animaux qu'aux êtres humains.
- largely**, *adv.* non pas largement, mais 'en grande partie'.
- liberal**, *adj.* libéral, généreux; associé au parti 'Liberal Democrat'; plus rarement, libre-échangiste.
- livid**, *adj.* (littéralement) très pâle; mais normalement 'furieux'.
- market forces**, *s.pl.* la pression du marché; expression plus positive au Royaume-uni qu'en France.
- modern-day**, *adj.* moderne, actuel, à la page; remplace 'modern' et 'contemporary'.
- onerous**, *adj.* non pas 'onéreux', mais pénible.

peasant, *n.* non pas ‘paysan’; mais exploitant agricole ou fermier primitif, métayer.

politician, *s.* homme politique, sans l’écho plutôt négatif du mot ‘politicien’.

rampant, *adj.* rarement ‘rampant’: plus souvent, déchaîné.

ready-to-wear, *adj.* de confection (légèrement moins noble que “prêt-à-porter”).

republican, *adj.*, & *s.* républicain, sans la résonance historique de son équivalent français, notamment parce que les États-unis, où l’adjectif est utilisé le plus souvent (pour désigner le Republican Party), demeurent incontestablement une république.

rent, *s.* non pas rente, mais loyer.

salary, *s.* non pas salaire (‘wages’, reçues par des ouvriers, etc.), mais traitement, honoraires.

scientific, *adj.* scientifique, mais normalement relatif aux sciences naturelles.

secular, *adj.* laïc; séculier.

senior, *adj.* aîné, supérieur; mais ‘a senior official’ est un haut fonctionnaire.

sentimental, *adj.* excessivement (ou faussement) imbu de sentiment.

social market economy, *s.* système économique libéral, mais comportant des éléments de sécurité sociale.

state, *s.* état, sans le fardeau historique du régime de Vichy mais légèrement péjoratif, car il peut évoquer le spectre de la dictature.

suburb, *s.* banlieue; mot qui indique un milieu paisiblement bourgeois, moqué par certains intellectuels ‘gauche caviar’, mais sans aucune notion de misère ou de violence.

subsidiarity, *s.* dans la mesure du possible, dévolution du pouvoir de décision (au sein de l’Union européenne) au niveau national ou régional.

this country, *adj.* & *s.* le Royaume-uni; phrase utilisée un peu comme on parle en France de ‘l’hexagone’.

union, s. *très souvent, syndicat; en général, union (notamment européenne).*

unity, s. *unité au sens de 'union' mais jamais en tant qu'individuel (en anglais 'unit').*