

Beware our 'faux friends' in the world of language

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Foreign language teachers sometimes use the term "false friends", or the corresponding French form "faux amis", for words in different languages which look similar but do not actually mean the same thing. In French, for example, *demande* looks like the English word *demand*; but a *demande* is in fact something much more polite, a request. German *aktuell* looks like our *actual*, but actually (!) means *current* or *present*; Germans speaking English sometimes say *actually* meaning "right now". Catalan *embarrassada* means *pregnant*, not *embarrassed*.

Even among varieties of English there are a number of false friends. Most of us probably think we are quite good at comprehending American vocabulary. We all know that the boot of a car is the trunk in the USA. We realise that a *freeway* is the same kind of entity as a *motorway*. When Americans say *dumb*, we understand that we would say *stupid* instead. And we know that their *sidewalk* is what we would call a *pavement*.

But how many people on this side of the Atlantic know what Americans mean by *pavement*? The first time I saw a sign in a small American town saying "No cycling



■ Peter Trudgill explains that the same word in different countries can have different meanings - a scrappy game in the UK means it wasn't very good but in the USA it means it was a good scrap...
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on pavement". I was not at all surprised - you are not allowed to cycle on the pavement in this country either (not that that stops cyclists doing just that these days). But then someone told me that, actually, it means that you must cycle on what we would call the pavement, because in the USA, the pavement is the roadway. In this small town, they wanted cyclists to keep to the sidewalks!

Other American false friends include the words *nervy* and *scrappy*, particularly in a sporting context. In this country, a *nervy* player would be one who is rather

on the timid and nervous side - full of nerves - and you wouldn't want such a person taking your penalties in a football match. But in America, a *nervy* player is one who is full, not of nerves, but of nerve - that is, very brave and courageous!

And in this country, if you said of a football match that it was a *scrappy* game, you would mean that it was not very good: there was no coherent play, and neither side really got going. In the US, a *scrappy* football game is one which is a good scrap: a keenly-fought contest where both teams are trying their hardest.