

# ENGLISH AND SPANISH PHRASEOLOGY IN CONTRAST <sup>1</sup>.

SILVIA MOLINA

*Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha*

**ABSTRACT:** *This paper addresses some theoretical issues in cross-linguistic phraseology analysis<sup>2</sup> and focuses on problems which arise in connection with finding pragmatic adequate equivalents which are lexical items of both source and target language which can be used in the same situations. The paper tries to elaborate some principles of contrastive idiom analysis from a functional perspective through both the use of empirical data concerning the real usage of idioms (examples from the BNC) and a sound theoretical background. Relevant parameters of cross-linguistic comparison (Semantics, Syntax and Pragmatics) will be discussed with several examples trying to offer a typology of non-parallel features between L1 and L2 idioms and collocations. This paper ends up with a practical example of idioms related to body parts and their pragmatic expression in English and Spanish.*

**KEYWORDS:** *corpus, phraseology, idioms, collocations, functionalism.*

**RESUMEN:** *Este artículo presenta algunas cuestiones teóricas relativas a la fraseología contrastiva y se centra en la dificultad de hallar en ocasiones expresiones pragmáticas adecuadas que reflejen en la lengua término una situación análoga a la de la lengua original. Se presentan algunos principios de análisis contrastivo desde una perspectiva funcional mediante el uso de datos empíricos (los ejemplos proceden del BNC, British National Corpus). Se utilizan criterios semánticos, sintácticos y pragmáticos ilustrados con ejemplos con el objetivo de ofrecer una tipología de rasgos no paralelos entre las frases idiomáticas y colocaciones en inglés y castellano. El artículo concluye con un ejemplo práctico de frases idiomáticas relacionadas con partes del cuerpo en castellano y un análisis de su expresión pragmática en lengua inglesa.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *corpus, fraseología, refranes, colocaciones, funcionalismo.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION: PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS IN PERSPECTIVE

Glässer (1994/1995:46-58) has studied phraseology in English basing her classification on the notions of “centre” and “periphery” from the Prague school. The *centre* comprises phraseological units that function like single words such as nouns (*blind alley*), verbs (*make assumptions, make choices*), etc.; function words that denote relations between phenomena or objects (prepositions: *by dint of, in terms of/* conjunctions: *in order to, as if*) and Glässer also includes some bilexic units (*blanket cover*) but eliminates others (*man-made, milkman*). The *transition area* includes ‘irreversible binomials’ (word pairs which have a fixed order such as *bread and butter*), stereotyped combinations or similes (*as old as the hills*), sentence-like, fragments of sentence-like phrases (*a rolling stone*), quotations and literary allusions (*Scylla and Charibdis* situation) and finally, collocations. Last but not least, the *periphery* includes proverbs, truisms (*boys will be boys*), maxims, quotations, slogans and routine formulae (*what’s up?*).

Glässer’s typology is fairly complete but it has the disadvantage of treating idioms and collocations fairly similarly and such distinctions (units with a unified meaning vs. units more loosely combined) are important in translation.

Given the peculiarities of phraseological units in English and Spanish, one should expect they would be the focus of much attention on the part of bilingual lexicographers, but it is not always the case neither in general nor specialized dictionaries. It is still rare to find quotations, proverbs (or fragments), stereotyped comparisons or slogans in them. Collocations (*horse riding* > *montar a caballo*), proverbs (*you can lead a horse to water but you can’t make them drink* > *puedes darle un consejo a algn pero no puedes obligarle a que lo siga*), and idioms (*eat like a horse* > *comer como una lima*) are grouped pell-met along with other phraseological units.

## 2. SEMANTICS

The content plane of idioms consists of two macro-components: figurative and mental image. These two elements are independent of each other to a certain extent. In consequence, there are some idioms which have almost the same image but differ with regard to their actual meanings, as well as idioms which have (nearly) the same actual meaning, but differ in regard to their images (*to call a spade a spade* > *al pan, pan y al vino, vino*, literal translation: “to call bread, bread and wine, wine”).

Furthermore, there are L1 idioms which have more than one meaning whereas the corresponding L2 idiom has only one meaning. Their contrastive description and the relevant dictionary entries have to contain information about such cross-linguistic asymmetry. Examples of this kind can be taken from the Spanish idiom *dejar tieso, -a*. According to the Longman Advanced Dictionary English-Spanish/ Spanish-English, it has two meanings:

1. ‘bleed sb. white’, and
2. (slang) ‘bump sb. off’

but it has also a third meaning ‘leave sb. stunned’. Thus, bilingual dictionaries such as this one which considers *dejar tieso* as a equivalent of ‘bump sb off, do sb in’ or ‘bleed sb. white’ provide the user with misleading information. Another example is *sus más y sus menos* which has two meanings: a) ‘differences of opinion’ and b) ‘have problems, complications’. From the functional point of view, these collocations are not fully equivalent because the first meaning, ‘*diferencias de opinión*’, is hardly ever used in current Spanish.

Finally, let us consider idioms of SL and TL which are similar with regard to their actual meanings, but differ as to their images. For example, in standard contexts the English idiom *silence is golden* means ‘keeping quiet is a good idea’ can be translated into Spanish by the idiom *en boca cerrada no entran moscas* (literally, ‘if you keep your mouth shut, flies

will not get in’) evoking a mental image of a situation where silence is advisable. Likewise *blow the gaff* means according to the *New Oxford Dictionary of English* ‘reveal a plot or a secret’ which is equivalent to the idioms *descubrir el pastel*; *levantar la liebre*, being the second one related to hunting but equivalent to the English idioms ‘to let the cat out of the bag’, ‘to blow the gaff’ (BrE, colloquial).

Bearing in mind all these facts, the translator of phraseological units should take into account several important points:

1. Literal translation of the constituents should be avoided because phraseological units only rarely have the same form in the TL, leading to an “unnatural” equivalent at best (*a severe winter*> \**un invierno severo*, being a better option the adjective *inclemente*) or to a mistranslation at worst (*no querer alhajas con dientes*> \**do not want jewels with teeth*). The latter Spanish expression means “to reject a valuable present such as a jewel (*alhaja*) because it is not a real gift in fact”.

There is an exception to this rule in the translation of economics texts which introduce new concepts which are metaphors in the SL. Their literal translation create new similarities in the target culture, thus contributing to terminological and cultural uniformity as well as the spreading of concepts i.e. *monetary injection*> *inyección monetaria*.

2. The starting point for the rendering of the phraseological unit should be their meaning, rather than considering it as a unit of form. Moreover, as phraseological units can be polysemous, it is the meaning in context that must be rendered. Thus the meaning of ‘*estar chungo*’ is different in the sentence ‘*Carlos está chungo*’ (i.e. Carlos is in a bad way, out of sorts) and the sentence ‘*la cosa está chungo*’ (i.e. things aren’t too good).

3. The meaning of the SL phraseological unit can be rendered in one of three ways:

- by an equivalent phraseological unit in the TL, if one exists: *coger el toro por los cuernos*> *to take the bull by the horns*;

- by a single word (*in order to* > *para*);
- by a paraphrase (*nobody took a blind bit of notice* > *nadie le hizo ni pizca de caso*).

### 3. SYNTACTIC TAXONOMY OF PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS IN SPANISH AND ENGLISH

The first step for translating these phraseological units adequately is to identify them, a task made easier by electronic media such as parallel corpora, translation memories, electronic dictionaries and internet. Traditional dictionaries and glossaries that record these unit are also a big help.<sup>3</sup>

We also have to take into account other syntactic phenomena which may entail translation problems such as the following:

1. Grammatical reductions (abbreviated syntactic constructions) to avoid expressive redundancy in economics texts, as in *streamlined management* > *una gestión con menos burocracia*.
2. Ergativity (in verbs of movement such as *rise, fall, increase*, etc.). i.e: Figure 1 shows what happens > *en la figura 1 se muestra lo que ocurre*.
3. Transformations such as negations (*there is no time to lose* > *no hay tiempo que perder*), passivization (*to settle a score* > *a score is settled*) and embedding (Moon 1998: 118 gives an example: *Another straw at which we can clutch is that if real snow arrives in the near future it will be falling on cold slopes*).

#### 4.PRAGMATICS

The pragmatic taxonomy is less developed in the literature. The most representative works are Hieke and Lattey (1983) and Lattey (1986) which use the concept of pragmatic focus for their classification. If the focus is on the individual, we get expressions such as *throw in the towel, be knackered*; if it is the world: *to go down the drain*; the interaction among individuals: *tirarse los trastos a la cabeza* (fam) > ‘to have a fight, have a blazing or flaming row’, ‘win sb’s heart’ or the interaction of persons with the world *comerse el mundo* > ‘take on the world’. These groups are subdivided in positive, negative or neuter, according to the result of the action with the addressor, the addressee or a third party. For example *to pull sb’s leg*, or *to laugh in sb’s face* are included in the NEGATIVE INTERACTION among individuals’ category. In practice, however, the distinction becomes blurred, and it is not always possible to identify the exact nature and locus of the evaluation. Moon (1998:247) offers an example: *wash one’s hands of something/ someone*, an idiom which denotes giving up. Such an action may be perceived as good or bad, the subject of the verb as right or wrong, and the object of the preposition as bad or good according to the sympathies of the speaker/writer.

Even when an idiomatic equivalent of these idioms is proposed by a dictionary, the TL equivalent provided may not fit as naturally into the TL content as the SL phraseological unit. Take for example, some expressions such as *a rajatabla* (strictly) o *llevar la corriente* (to follow the crowd) which presuppose a good knowledge of cultural schemas related to Spanish history, clearly obvious in idioms such as ‘*no hay moros en la costa*’ (the coast is clear, meaning ‘this is a good moment’), or schemas related to religion *hasta verte, Jesús mío* (down the hatch!) etc. The last expression is old-fashioned and has been substituted by *¡salud!* in current Spanish.

Besides cultural differences, the degree of familiarity and textual frequency must be also taken into account in contrastive pragmatic analysis. A good case in point is *hijo de puta* in Spanish, which is normally rendered as *son of a bitch, bastard* in English but these are far less used than its Spanish counterpart. Besides, this Spanish expression is also used among young people as a familiar greeting meaning no offence in Andalusia. No information of this sort is included in standard bilingual dictionaries, however. Strässler (1982:119), quite rightly, says: ‘when applied to idioms, the two requirements of the maxim of quality read as follows:

1. Do not use an idiom if you believe you are in a social situation which does not allow such usage.
2. Do not use idioms if you are not sure about the present social situation’

In this way, the demands of frequency and politeness in several contexts can be met. Indeed, context plays a more important role in the rendering of phraseological units than in that of simple lexemes, as the phraseological unit has its own structure that has to fit in the larger structure of the sentence. From this specific context, the translation procedures vary. In what follows, I am going to show some textual binomials in order to illustrate several translation strategies and the functioning of pragmatic phraseological competence.

The most traditional translation procedure is the use of *equivalence* or the substitution of the SL (Source Language) phraseological unit for a supposed equivalent in the TL (Target Language). In the first example: *She was pushing up daisies* > *estaba criando malvas*, the metaphorical image and the lexical composition is fairly similar (*malvas* backtranslates into English as *mallows*). However, this procedure does not always offer an adequate solution, despite the phraseological unit has been recognized and interpreted in its co-text. It may happen that we get an infra-translation or over-translation of certain pragmatic aspects of the

phraseological unit. Corpas (2003:314-5) gives an example with the Spanish *salir por peteneras* ('to say something silly') which implies an absurd and senseless action done on purpose which was translated into English by *miss the point* which implies a silly but *totally involuntary* action.

Sometimes the phraseological unit is replaced by a single word (non-phraseological equivalence) or a neutralization of phraseological meanings in context takes place. In the *Oxford Superlex Dictionary* we find *to be right up sb's alley* translated as *ser un trabajo ideal para algn.* which misses the colloquial connotations of this American English idiom. On certain occasions, the phraseological unit is totally omitted because the translator considers that its translation is irrelevant or it is impossible to transfer it into another culture (some Spanish idioms related to bullfighting i.e. *ver los toros desde la barrera* implies that you watch something from the sidelines but you neither want to get involved nor give your opinion about it, keeping out of that business). This evaluative proverb clearly shows an appeal to authority and the contextual ideology, it alludes to a socio-cultural schema where the stereotype is that bullfighters in the real world *do* see bulls in front of them and not from the barrier. So, if you are not a bullfighter, then it is advisable "to watch things from the sidelines". This Spanish schema is rhetorically powerful, coercing agreement.

Although it may seem strange, a very frequent translation procedure for translating phraseological units from English into Spanish is *calques*. This strategy maintains the original source culture, making the translator 'visible' Thus, the locution *the genuine article* in the sentence: *Often products are sold at, or near to, the price of the genuine article* was translated in an Economics text as *el artículo genuino* although there is a possible Spanish equivalence *auténtico* (> 'authentic').

The translation of phraseological units may even get more difficult when the SL author manipulates them for rhetorical discourse purposes, which is fairly usual in several



texts (Moon, 1998;Wotjak 1992 ). Such contextual changes depend on the supposed semantic and formal stability that characterizes these units and on the previous recognition of the original units that function as a base<sup>4</sup>.

As an example, the Spanish idiom *no dejar ni a sol ni a sombra* (‘not to give sb a moment’s peace, not to leave sb alone for a minute’) is reduced in the verbal component in *Ni a sol ni a sombra la deja en pa* (> ‘He never gives her alone for a minute’) which reinforces the tenacity, insistency and constancy implicit somehow in such locution. Out of context, the phrasal verb *let up* cannot be accepted as the corresponding phraseological equivalence of the Spanish unit.

Last but not least, many uses of phraseological units are related to the pragmatics of *politeness*. Many are used to preserve or threaten face, establishing social relationships (Strässler 1982:126 ff.) For example: *he gets on my nerves* reflects the power relationship of the discourse participants. Phraseological units may be also used in the first and second person, generally used as mitigators, or in expressions of solidarity and sympathy such as in the following example quoted in Moon (1998: 263) ‘Then you’ve got *a real hot spot in your hands*, don’t you?’, which can be translated into Spanish “tener un punto de fricción/ motivo de discordia”, also showing solidarity with your interlocutor.

The selection of phraseological units such as this one acknowledges common ground between discourse participants by appealing to shared sociocultural schemas and evaluations. They allow evaluations to be expressed politely and also intensify solidarity between speaker and hearer, establishing an intimacy and conversational tone. While the use of these phraseological units evidences a good range of pragmatic devices on the speaker’s part, they are also seen sometimes as cliché (*to break the ice*> *romper el hielo*; *at the end of the day*> *al fin y al cabo, a fin de cuentas/ al final*) evidencing an impoverished vocabulary. These

clichés are not static however and change over time, being interpersonal strategies which enable the communication of the message.

## 5. A PRACTICAL APPRAISAL OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS RELATED TO BODY PARTS

From these general remarks, we put forward a possible treatment of phraseological units in both languages. Our starting point is a list with parts of the body, either internal or external. We are just going to focus on a small subcorpus within this group with units that have in Spanish *ojos, cabeza, pie y boca*. The list is the following:

### 5.1. *Idioms with boca*

Activities and states related to *boca* (mouth) in Spanish

#### Speaking

*(no) abrir la boca ; andar una cosa/alguien de boca en boca; andar en boca de las gentes; callar la boca; cerrar la boca a alguien ;tapar la boca a alguien; coserse la boca ; punto en boca; no descoserse la boca; (no) despegar la boca ; irse de boca; quitarle algo a alguien de la boca venírsele algo a alguien a la boca*

#### Other activities

*abrir la boca > "to yawn"; hacer boca > "to eat a snack".*

### 5.2. *Idioms with cabeza*

Main activities or states related to *cabeza* (head):

metaphor: head=receptacle to “place” ideas in *meter una cosa en la cabeza a alguien*; *meter cosas en la cabeza a alguien*; *metersele/ponérsele una cosa en la cabeza a alguien*; *pasarle a uno una cosa por la cabeza*; *quitar a alguien una cosa de la cabeza* ; *no meterse en la cabeza de algn.* ; *sacar de la cabeza - sacar alguien una cosa de su cabeza*

- intelligence, mental health, concentration, intellectual effort *calentarse la cabeza alguien calentarle la cabeza a alguien darle a uno vueltas la cabeza estar mal/ tocado de la cabeza írsele a uno la cabeza perder la cabeza romperse la cabeza*
- beginning of smt. *a la cabeza de; en cabeza de.*
- honourable attitude /ashamed *alzar la cabeza bajar la cabeza ir con la cabeza alta ir con la cabeza baja*
- take a risk *jugarse la cabeza*
- head=person *por cabeza > by a head.*

### 5.3. Idioms with ojo

Main activities or states related to eye:

- look, stare, peer at, eye *abrir los ojos > open your eyes abrir los ojos a alguien aguzar los ojos cerrar los ojos a algo clavar los ojos en algo/alguien devorar con los ojos a algo/alguien echar el ojo a algo/alguien írsele los ojos a alguien tras de algo pasar los ojos por algo poner los ojos en algo/alguien tener los ojos en algo/alguien*
- prestar atención *estar/ir/andar con cien ojos; ser todo ojos tener ojo clínico (to have good intuition)*
- c/to die, to sleep *no pegar ojo; no cerrar los ojos.*

#### 5. 4. Idioms related to pie

Main activities or states related to *pie* (foot) in Spanish:

- support, balance, lack of balance, security *sentar alguien el pie altarle a alguien*  
*los pies rsele los pies a alguien mantenerse de/en pie una cosa/alguien no hacer*  
*pie no poner los pies en el suelo no tenerse en pie una cosa/ alguien perder pie*  
*sostenerse de pie tenerse de pie*
- end, from beginning to end (opposed to another element)  
*De pies a cabeza (> from head to foot)*
- negative faculties as *pie* is the opposite of *cabeza*  
*hacer algo con los pies; pensar con los pies; no tener ni pies ni cabeza*

There is an unmistakable relationship between some body parts and certain activities or states that people carry out with them. Besides, it happens in other cultures as well, which means that several fixed expressions can be translated almost literally in different languages.

Our proposal is to select and study those fixed expressions whose meanings preserve clearly the incentive that originated them. We have noticed, for example, that some of the expressions related to *mouth* (*boca*) are linked with *speaking* and *eating*. Literal examples in Spanish are *callar la boca, no abrir la boca* ( English equivalents: ‘shut your mouth, do not open sb’s mouth’) but we also find metaphorical uses: *andar algo de boca en boca* (*to be on everybody’s lips*), *andar en boca de las gentes* (*to be common knowledge*), *coserse la boca* (*keep quiet, keep mum*) o *de boca para fuera* (‘to pay lip-service’). Notice that in some of the expressions the word “mouth” also turns up in English but in others parts of the mouth, such as the lips, involved in the same activities to express the same meanings.

It's easier therefore to translate those universal metaphors or to take into account "the systematic nature of metaphorical concepts" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980: 43). Take *head* (*cabeza*), for example. The metaphor links "head" to a "receptacle" where things may be introduced, ideas fundamentally. This idea justifies the metaphorical uses of the verbs *meter*, *sacar y pasar* ('to get in/ to get out of/ to enter') in fixed expressions such as *meter en la cabeza*, *sacar de la cabeza*, *pasarle a uno por la cabeza* ('to get smt in sb's head, to get an idea out of one's head, to enter sb's head'). Furthermore, due to a contiguity relationship, it seems obvious to state that part of the fixed expressions with "head" will be related to the mental faculties of the human being located in that part of the body. Here we have the incentive for another group of fixed expressions such as (*írsele a uno la cabeza*, *estar mal de la cabeza*, *romperse la cabeza*), which do not have a literal interpretation but are easily understood by foreign learners when translating them into English ('to feel dizzy, to be out of one's head, to rack one's brains'). Finally, notice also the idiom *pensar con los pies*, which means that you do not think properly as you do not use your head but the opposite part of the body. We also have metonymies where *cabeza* substitutes the whole person (*por cabeza* > 'a/ per head'); or those cases where the word *cabeza* is interpreted in the sense of 'beginning, start' as opposed to *pie* (foot) meaning 'end, conclusion' such as *con los pies por delante* > *feet first*, *to leave in a (wooden) box* or *estar con un pie en el hoyo* > *to have one foot in the grave*. As far as *ojos* (eyes) are concerned, they do several things or a sign of different states: 'looking', 'glaring', 'paying attention', 'peering', 'sleeping', 'keeping watch on', etc. Good examples are the following fixed expressions in Spanish: *no pegar ojo*, *tener ojos en la nuca*, *abrir los ojos*, etc. which allow an almost literal translation into English 'not to sleep a wink', 'to have eyes in the back of one's head', 'to open one's eyes (to smt.)'.

Last but not least, fixed expressions with *foot* in Spanish show meanings where the notions of ‘support’, ‘balance’, ‘imbalance’, ‘security’, ‘realism’, etc.; and are related with those fixed expressions with *cabeza*.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

We have noticed that bilingual dictionaries include common sets of predictable collocations and idioms, but do not take account of many unpredictable ones, nor all sets of predictable ones. If students of an L2 develop a consciousness of the phraseological units, this may mean a better grasp of their own speech as well as to an improved contrastive knowledge of languages. In this sense, our analysis of certain collocations and idioms cross-linguistically from a functional point of view has attempted a deeper understanding of the frequency of such a relatively neglected usage phenomenon in English and Spanish. Electronic media offer new opportunities for this making standard phraseology available for translation in the two languages, bearing in mind statistically significant combinations of words.

## NOTES

1. Phraseology is not clearly defined in the literature, covering different realities for different linguists. Some limit phraseology to fixed expressions or *idioms* (Dubois et al. 1973) whose definition is “a sequence of words which has a different meaning as a group from the meaning it would have if you understood each word separately” (Summers, 1998:vii). Still others, like Benson, Benson and Ilson (1986) include collocations, that is, word combinations which are usual in the language but not fixed as idioms. We adopt the latter’s approach for this paper.

2. This paper forms part of a R & D Project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Technology BFF 2003-02540 called “Diccionario bilingüe de unidades fraseológicas inglés-español/ español-inglés con ejemplos procedentes de corpora”. It is a modified version of a paper presented at the International Pragmatics Conference in Riva del Garda in July 2005.
3. Examples are Alcaraz Varó & Hughes 1993. *Diccionario de terminos jurídicos, Inglés-Español, Spanish-English*. Barcelona: Ariel. Alcaraz Varó & Hughes 1996. *Diccionario de términos económicos y comerciales inglés-español/ Spanish-English*. Barcelona: Ariel.
4. See Delabatista (1988) for the translation of manipulated phraseological units.

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