

PRESENTACIÓN

**A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE USE OF POPULAR PHRASES
IN ENGLISH AND SPANISH**

María Dolores Trebucq

Facultad de Lenguas, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba | Argentina
loletrebucq@hotmail.com

Emilse García Ferreyra

Facultad de Lenguas, Universidad Nacional de Córdoba | Argentina
emilsegf@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Native speakers interpret and transmit their ideas, beliefs and thoughts with amazing accuracy and economy of words by resorting to idioms or popular phrases. This paper focuses on a number of idiomatic expressions in English and Spanish and traces their origins and uses. It aims to show that the lexical items through which meaning is conveyed may be the same in English and Spanish or may vary from one culture to the other, depending on the way in which certain events are perceived by the community members. It also shows that some idioms or popular phrases may be so closely tied to the socio-cultural history of each speech community that they do not have equivalent meaning associations in the language contrasted. In conclusion, the work demonstrates that the meanings conveyed by idiomatic expressions, at least in English and Spanish, are closely connected with the experiences undergone by the speech communities in which they are conventionally used.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to show how the meaning conveyed by idiomatic expressions in English and Spanish is closely connected with the experiences undergone by the speech communities.

By resorting to the use of such popular phrases, native speakers interpret and transmit their ideas, beliefs and thoughts with amazing accuracy and economy of words. Since these conventional phrases imply a clear relationship between cultural background and meaning, it seems appropriate to research about the circumstances that have given birth to some of those English and Spanish idiomatic expressions in order to show that similar meaning associations may be present in both cultures. In such cases, the lexical items through which meaning is conveyed may be the same in Spanish and English or may vary from one culture to the other depending on the way in which certain events are perceived by

the community members. Besides, there are some idioms or popular phrases which are so closely tied to the sociocultural history of each speech community that they do not have equivalent meaning associations in the language contrasted.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The Position of Semantics within Linguistics

Linguistics is defined as the science of language. It deals not only with language in general, but also with languages in particular. Traditionally, linguists have concentrated on three main areas: syntax, phonology and semantics. While syntax and phonology study the systems of structures and sounds respectively, semantics, from the Greek *sema*, a sign, deals with the meanings that can be expressed. However, none of these areas operate separated from the others; on the contrary, the three disciplines are interrelated and complement each other. Geoffrey Leech states that “semantics is an area of study parallel to, and interacting with, those of syntax and phonology” (Leech, 1981).

To these three levels we should add a fourth one which has received considerable attention in the last decades: pragmatics. The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* defines pragmatics as “the study of how words and phrases are used with special meanings in particular situations” (*Longman Dictionary*, 1995: 1105).

There is much disagreement among different authors as to whether it is possible to separate semantics from pragmatics. Some theories favor subsuming pragmatics under semantics, while other positions hold the opposite view. In his *Semantics*, Geoffrey Leech poses a complementary position in which semantics and pragmatics are distinct and complementary fields of study. This “division of labour” implies a conception of meaning not just as a property of language, but as a particular speaker's use of language in a particular context including an intention that may or may not be evident from the message itself. In this case, the interpretation by the hearer is likely to depend on the context; and meaning itself, becomes something which is “performed” rather than something that exists in a static way (Leech, 1981: 320).

If we favour the idea that meaning involves not only an action on the part of the speaker, who produces an effect on the hearer, but also an interaction of both of them on the basis of their mutual knowledge, the justification of pragmatics as a complementary discipline to semantics becomes evident.

The Nature of Lexis and Meaning

Human beings have a natural tendency to make meaning. In order to satisfy themselves they have at their disposal a highly developed system: language. But not all language is equally meaningful, or meaningful in the same way.

It is well-known that the individual *word* is the most basic kind of lexical item and that its usefulness rests upon the frequency of occurrence, its availability, its familiarity, and coverage (Lewis, 1994: 91).

Collocations belong to the group of lexical items which are multi-word units and may vary from free collocations, where the combination of words is totally unexpected, to fixed collocations which offer no alternative in the way words are arranged.

While collocations are message-oriented, fixed phrases or “institutionalized expressions”, as Michael Lewis calls them in his *The Lexical Approach*, are essentially pragmatic in character thus serving the needs of native speakers as well as foreign learners who show a natural disposition towards storing and re-using them in order to convey meaning. Lewis claims that a certain degree of analysis is possible; however, he points out that modern research suggests that “speech may be processed more rapidly if the units are perceived as single unanalysed wholes” (Lewis, 1994: 93-945).

Words do not show a one-to-one relationship with reality because meaning is not inherent to words. For this reason, language users select those lexical items they think will convey their message more accurately at certain times and in certain situations.

When the lexical item mentions “the basic facts”, that is to say, the dictionary definition of a word with no additional meaning, the speaker conveys **denotative** or **conceptual meaning**. However, if the speaker uses one word rather than another in order to give additional meaning to a purely conceptual content, the kind of meaning conveyed is **connotative** or **associative**. Eventually, this associative meaning of a lexical item can enjoy the properties of the referent. In such cases the connotative meaning will depend on the conventional viewpoint adopted by a community.

Lexical items formed by groups of words with a single, unequivocal meaning association are widely used not only in colloquial language, but also in formal language. The reasons that account for this phenomenon are varied and in some cases not traceable; nevertheless, it is difficult to deny that they constitute a more colorful way of expressing an idea than the objective, straightforward one.

In their purest form, these popular phrases have simply “caught on” with the public and are in frequent use thus constituting a conventional way of expression. They are made up of words which, taken together mean something different from the individual words of the phrase when they stand alone. Frequently oddly arranged, sometimes rhyming or alliterating, popular phrases

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give birth to metaphors, absurdities or ambiguities that certainly appeal to their users (Garrison, 1955: 55).

Among them, Nigel Rees, an authority on the popular use of language, distinguishes various categories: **slogans**, designed to promote a product, idea or cause, **sayings**, which unlike a formal quotation are probably not attributable to a precise source, **proverbial expressions**, which fall under the latter category, and **catch-phrases** and **idioms**, which Rees defines as “picturesque expressions used to convey a metaphorical meaning different to its literal one” (Rees, 1995: 6); or as *The Oxford Dictionary of Current Idiomatic English* puts it, “that have a meaning not deducible from those of the separate words” (Cowie, Mackin & Mc Caig, 1983: 695).

Like single words, idiomatic expressions may undergo changes in their associations thus enlarging or narrowing the scope of meaning associations they convey. Besides, they may become fashionable or lose strength and consequently become clichés. What was once a bright phrase may become devalued by frequent repetition or simply because it ceases to be appropriate for a particular time, situation or purpose (Pyles & Algeo, 1982: 238-248).

RESEARCH WORK

Idiomatic Expressions in English and Spanish which Show Similar Meaning Associations and are Lexicalized Differently

From the examples gathered it is possible to observe that most of the thoughts, ideas, or beliefs transmitted through language are shared by the members of both communities; however, the lexical items used to convey those meanings seem to have been originated under different circumstances.

An instance of this phenomenon is the equivalent phrases *NACER CON BUENA ESTRELLA* and *TO BE BORN WITH A SILVER SPOON IN ONE’S MOUTH*. The first phrase takes us back to Greek and Roman times when the position of stars in the sky was thought to determine a person's fate at the moment of his/her birth. Therefore, the word *estrella* became closely related to fate (Caras, 1995: 30).

The English equivalent phrase was coined around 1800 when only upper classes owned silver. While housewives of the middle and lower classes had to be content with pewter, wealthy persons adopted the practice of giving silver spoons to their godchildren. Gifts were formally presented at christening ceremonies, which usually took place when infants were only a few days old (Garrison, 1955: 105). Both expressions stand for “luck”, or any degree of wealth gained by accident of birth.

The phrase *SER PESCADO CON LAS MANOS EN LA MASA* carries identical meaning association to *TO BE CAUGHT RED-HANDED*. The English phrase was born before the nineteenth century when there were only two methods of criminal detec-

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tion: securing a confession by torture of a suspect, or catching a man in the act of committing a crime.

One of the most common felonies of the period was that of butchering another man's sheep. Many farmers and traders were suspected of such a crime; however, officers were reluctant to accuse them because they usually enjoyed good reputation. Farmers and traders were only accused when they were caught in the act of slaughtering the animal, that is to say with blood in their hands or *red-handed*.

By the time methods of criminal detection were improved, this phrase had already become popular and it is uttered nowadays whenever someone is seen at the moment when they are doing something wrong (Garrison, 1955: 86). Through a different metaphor, the Spanish expression conveys the same meaning.

The phrase TOMARSE EL OLIVO has a Spanish origin since the word "olivo" alludes to the barrier that protects bullfighters from dangerous bulls. It used to convey the idea of leaving a place suddenly. In turn, this expression gave origin to DAR EL OLIVO which is used by Argentine speakers under unexpected dismissal from job (Caras, 1996a: 28). The equivalent English phrase is TO GET THE SACK. It was coined at the beginning of the machine age when it was customary for mechanics and artisans to carry their tools in a sack. Employers of the period did not give advance notice when they expected to discharge a man. They would have him work until quitting time of his last day, then tell him not to come back. Along with his pay they would hand him a sack in which to carry his tools. From then on, if somebody is dismissed from job he is said to *have got the sack* (Rees, 1995: 180).

One more example of similar connotation is the pair IR AL GRANO / TO GET DOWN TO BRASS TACKS. They convey the idea of abandoning the preliminaries and getting down to business.

In his *Why You Say It*, Webb Garrison tells us that when piece goods were sold by the yard, merchants used to put tacks in the edge of the counter to indicate a yard, half-yard, and quarter-yard. Only brass-headed tacks resisted rust, remaining clearly visible. After selecting several pieces of cloth, housewives would argue over prices until an agreement was reached. "All right", the weary merchant would sigh, "now I'll get down to brass tacks and measure it up for you". Only when the cloth actually went down on the counter alongside the brass tacks was any business transacted (Garrison, 1955: 242).

The history of TIRARSE UN LANCE takes us back to Roman Times when hunters designed the lance in order to throw it at their prey. Very soon, Roman men of resourceful imagination associated the act of throwing a lance with the act of throwing dice in which a certain degree of luck was expected.

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José Gobello explains in his *Nuevo diccionario lunfardo*, that the expression was first used in Argentina to convey the idea of taking the risk of receiving a rebuff in the hope of gaining something (Caras, 1996c: 27). Similarly, when an action is performed without the certain knowledge of its being successful, the English-speaking community resorts to the equivalent phrase TO CHANCE ONE'S ARM/LUCK.

Another instance of similar meaning association in the cultures contrasted is TOMAR CON PINZAS and TO TAKE WITH A GRAIN OF SALT. *The Encyclopedia Americana* explains that, in ancient times, salt was a rare and costly commodity thought to have magical powers. Consequently, in addition to using it as a seasoning, such notables as General Pompey threw it over the shoulder for luck or sprinkled it on food that they suspected might contain poison.

Hence, it became customary to eat a questionable dish only when salt had been added. A man in doubt would say "I'll take some-with a little salt" (*The Encyclopedia Americana*, 1979: 576). Although the ancient superstition has disappeared, it has left a colorful expression in English that can be used when in doubt about the accuracy of a statement.

Idiomatic Expressions in English and Spanish which Show Similar Meaning Associations and are Lexicalized in the Same Way

It seems that when the circumstances which have given birth to a popular phrase transpose international borders and acquire world recognition, the meaning association evoked by the phrase is lexicalized in the same way in both languages.

This is the case of LA CORTINA DE HIERRO / THE IRON CURTAIN, a metaphor that stands for the Russian domination over the Eastern European countries. During World War I, the Queen of Belgium is said to have told the Allies that "between her country and Germany a bloody iron curtain had been drawn". Later the phrase was used by Josef Goebbels, a Nazi leader, to announce that "in case the Russians took hold of the country, an iron curtain would be drawn along a vast boarder that would include the Soviet Union, part of Germany and Eastern Europe", and in 1945, Winston Churchill referred to the Soviet Union as "having an iron curtain drawn along the Russian front" (Caras, 1996d: 28). If we keep in mind the fact that World War I was a painful circumstance all over the world, it is easy to justify the global character of the fixed expression.

ESTAR OK and its English equivalent, TO BE O.K., enjoy amazing popularity in both speech communities. Adult speakers as well as children make use of this lexical group so enthusiastically that the scope of meaning conveyed by O.K. has been considerably enlarged. The origin of this phrase is not very clear. It is believed that the word "okay", also spelt "okey", was coined by a popular American politician who was really skillful at managing political propaganda. Since he

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would frequently make reference to his hometown, Kinderhook, his followers started to call him Old Kinderhook and very soon abbreviated it to O.K. The conviction of the community that their country was sure to succeed under O.K. were put into words in this economic, practical phrase (*Conocer y Saber*, 1993: 34).

Nowadays, if we are not ill, injured, or unhappy; if something is acceptable, nice, or helpful; if we ask or give permission to do something; and in many other situations we make use of the idiom which accurately communicates our intention.

The expression TIERRA DE NADIE meets its equivalent in NO MAN'S LAND. In his *Dictionary of Catchphrases*, Nigel Rees, takes us back to London more than a thousand years ago when the methods of criminal detection were crude and justice severe. Death was often the penalty for major crimes as well as for minor ones. Since authorities did not want to clutter up the city with the bodies of those who were killed, it was customary to take condemned men to a far-off place where they were executed. When real estate came to be recognized as a major type of wealth nobody would register a title over the land where executions had taken place. Since no man owned it, it was designated *no man's land* (Rees, 1995: 133). In both languages the phrases alluded are evocative of a dangerous place.

Among euphemisms for "death", PATEAR EL BALDE and TO KICK THE BUCKET also fit into this category of popular phrases. Webb. B. Garrison says that although professional butchers were known to the Anglo-Saxons, until modern times most meat animals were slaughtered on the farm. Some animals were comparatively easy to handle, but hanging half-ton oxen posed a major problem. It was solved by building heavy three-legged frames with pulleys at the center. After the feet of an animal were tied to a wooden beam, the rope was thrown over the pulley and he was hoisted up. The process of raising the beam was similar to that of pulling a bucket from a well, so the block came to be known as "bucket". Inevitably the load was frequently jerked as the pullers strained against the weight of a big animal. This threw the feet of the beast against the bucket, almost as though he were kicking. Since the ox or hog made to kick the bucket had already had his throat slit, the expression came into common use as slang for death in any form. Although the expression originated in England, Spanish speakers borrowed it thus making it part of the Spanish culture as well (Garrison, 1955: 263).

The following example takes us to the *Bible*. It evokes the way in which ancient Jews got rid of their sins on Forgiving Day. Each community used to choose a male goat as a carrier of their faults and sins. The goat was duly taken to the desert where a demon took possession of him as well as of the collective sins and faults. Afterwards, the goat was taken back to the community by one of its members whose clothes were immediately replaced as a sign of purification.

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So interesting a story gave origin to the expression SCAPEGOAT / CHIVO EXPIATORIO. It is used by both cultures in order to mean that a person or a group of people is carrying the faults of others (*Conocer y Saber*, 1995: 33). Another example of popular phrases that owe their origin to the *Bible* is LAVARSE LAS MANOS / TO WASH ONE'S HANDS OFF SOMETHING. This expression which denotes refusal to be responsible for something is an allusion to Pilate's washing of his hands at the trial of Jesus, after he had said that he found no fault in Jesus, but yet yielded to the clamor of the mob for his condemnation (García Pelayo y Gross, 1989: 249).

The great popularity enjoyed by this phrase lies in the fact that the alluded episode of the Bible is central to the Christian religion all over the world. Therefore, whenever the single phrase is uttered, language users save sentences or paragraphs of explanations.

As a synonym for "frightful", PONER LOS PELOS DE PUNTA and HAIR-RAISING are used in modern Spanish and English speech respectively. Pioneers and soldiers who fought the American Indians were horrified when they first learned that the red men scalped their victims. When whites adopted the practice Indian fighters began to speak of scalping as "lifting the hair" or *hair raising* (Cowie, Mackin & Mc Caig, 1983: 391). By the time the practice was abandoned the expression had made so strong an impact upon speech that the term remained in the language.

Idiomatic Expressions in English and Spanish which Have no Equivalents in the Language Contrasted

Finally, it has been noted that some idiomatic expressions do not have equivalent phrases in the language contrasted. This phenomenon occurs when the circumstances under which the expression originated are closely tied to the sociocultural history of only one speech community.

VOLVERÉ Y SERÉ MILLONES belongs to this group. Some people claim that the original phrase which read "Volveré y seré millones y el temblor vendrá desde abajo" was pronounced by a follower of Túpac Amaru who was the last man to surrender in a rebellion. Others assign its origin to Eva Perón referring to either the decay of her party or to her inevitable death due to a terminal illness (*Caras*, 1996b: 30).

In any case, the meaning association of the phrase has outlived the leader of the Argentine masses and the lexical item nowadays constitutes a practical way of evoking the optimistic feeling that an idea will spread among many, even if the present context or situation is unfavourable.

ESTAR EN PAMPA Y LA VÍA has its origin in Palermo Hippodrome. Apparently, there used to be a train that stopped in front of the hippodrome and finished its way at Pampa street. Amazingly, passengers who caught the train in front of

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the hippodrome were not supposed to pay any fare since it was assumed that they had lost all their money at the horse-races. "Pampa y la vía" was the farthest those gamblers could reach (*Conocer y Saber*, 1996: 34). This expression, which would be meaningless in another country, is used by the Argentine community to refer to a person who has run out of money.

The pejorative phrase PAÍSES BANANEROS evokes all Latinamerican countries which pretend they belong to the First World. The phrase owes its origin to the fact that while the rich countries of the world have been able to develop sophisticated industries, Latinamerican countries can only boast about their fruit production. Although there is some irony in the expression, we cannot deny that it constitutes an effective, economical way of expressing a painful reality.

Whithin the English culture the phrase THE REAL MCCOY conveys the idea of what is genuine. McCoy was an American late-nineteenth century boxer who fought under the name of Kid McCoy and was so good that other fighters adopted the same name, whereupon he had to bill himself as "the real McCoy". We can assume that the Mr.McCoy alluded before must have enjoyed great popularity in the English-speaking community who chose his name to give frame to their idea of genuineness (McCrum, Cran & MacNeil, 1989: 254).

The expression a BREAD-AND-BUTTER NOTE is one more example of a popular English phrase which has no equivalent in Spanish. It stands for a conventional thank-you for any sort of hospitality, even when nothing remotely resembling bread and butter has been offered to a guest.

In his book *Why You Say It*, Webb B. Garrison tells us that except for the privileged classes, persons of the eighteenth century usually had little variety in their food. Menus were so slender that *bread and butter* came to be the jocular term for coarse, everyday food. Then the expression expanded and was applied to any sort of meal (Garrison, 1955: 107).

One more instance is the English popular phrase HE/SHE EATS NO FISH which, according to Martin Eayrs in one of his articles about fishermen's tales, was coined in Tudor and Stuart days in Britain. At that time the country lurched backwards and forwards between Protestant and Roman Catholic monarchs. The latter used to eat fish on Fridays while the Protestants did not. From this we get the expression *he eats no fish* said of someone as a sign that the person in question is to be trusted (*Buenos Aires Herald*, 1990: 7).

Finally, the expression TO READ THE RIOT ACT is frequently used by English speakers to give someone a strong warning that they must stop causing trouble. It was coined during the reign of King George I when popular discontent among middle-classes reached a climax. In order to put an end to tedious talks, a special law was enacted, under which a person involved in a riot could be treated as a felon with the possibility of receiving a death sentence. To give the statute more force, a rider was attached. Under its terms a riot was defined as

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any group of twelve or more persons who refused to disperse after hearing an officer read certain paragraphs of the law. When a sheriff feared trouble, he would *read the riot act* in order to break up the crowd.¹

As it has been seen in the previous examples, the expression has no equivalent in Spanish because it evokes circumstances that are only related to the English-speaking community.

CONCLUSION

After having analysed a considerable number of popular phrases in English and Spanish, we can conclude that in some cases the same meaning association is lexicalized similarly in both languages because the circumstances that have given birth to those idiomatic expressions belong to a culture that is common to the two communities. This is the case of biblical accounts, wars, and other outstanding events that have come to constitute the patrimony of human kind.

In the instances of identical meaning associations conveyed through different lexical units, we clearly notice that although both languages may share the emotional charge of some idiomatic expressions, each community conventionally decides to evoke different, memorable circumstances by different terms, depending on the extent of the influence these have exercised upon the community.

In the final set of examples we have seen that some idiomatic expressions do not have equivalents in the language contrasted because such phrases evoke meaning associations which are tightly connected to the sociocultural history of each community.

At this point, it seems reasonable to conclude that the countless events that constitute everyday experience trigger the imagination of human beings allowing them to create more practical, colourful ways of communication.

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¹ Cf. <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/read-the-riot-act.html>.

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