ABSTRACT

Idiomatic expressions have been vastly researched in the last years (Corpas, Manual; González Rey; Boers and Stengers, “Quantitative”; “Adding”). Many studies have approached idioms from a cross-linguistic perspective (Awwad; Dobrovol’skij, “Phraseological”; “Idioms”; Corpas, Lenguas; Dobrovol’skij and Piirainen), highlighting the similarities between idioms from different languages. The present paper seeks to contribute to cross-linguistic idiom analysis. We aim to conduct research into the English, Spanish and French idiomatic repertoires in order to find out both similarities and differences. We will concentrate on the semantic specifics of idioms on the basis of the hypothesis that the identity, similarity or divergence of idioms is largely grounded on the plane of content.

KEY WORDS: Idiom, equivalence, metaphor, mental image, culture.

RESUMEN

Las expresiones idiomáticas han sido objeto de numerosas investigaciones en los últimos años (Corpas, Manual; González Rey; Boers and Stengers, “Quantitative”; “Adding”). Los estudios se han centrado en la comparación interlingüística de fraseologismos (Awwad; Dobrovol’skij, “Phraseological”; “Idioms”; Corpas, Lenguas; Dobrovol’skij and Piirainen) y han subrayado las similitudes entre unidades fraseológicas de distintas lenguas. Este artículo pretende contribuir a la comparación fraseológica a través del análisis de los inventarios fraseológicos del inglés, español y francés con el fin de estudiar las semejanzas y diferencias entre ellos. El estudio se plantea desde una perspectiva semántica basada en la idea de que la identidad, semejanza y divergencia que presentan las expresiones idiomáticas se asienta en gran medida en el plano del contenido.

PALABRAS CLAVE: expresión idiomática, equivalencia, metáfora, imagen mental, cultura.

1. INTRODUCTION

Idiomatic expressions have been vastly researched in the last years (Corpas, Manual; González Rey; Boers and Stengers, “Quantitative”; “Adding”). The study of idioms has been undertaken from three perspectives: psychological, cognitive and linguistic. Psychological studies have examined people’s mental imagery of idi-
Cognitive studies have explored the metaphorical motivation of idioms (Lakoff, "Women"; “Contemporary”; Lakoff and Johnson; Lakoff and Turner; Gibbs and Steen; Kövecses, *Metaphor; Language*; Boers and Stengers, “Adding”). Much of the linguistic research into idioms has been done from a cross-linguistic perspective. Cross-linguistic idiom analysis has focused on three domains (Dobrovolskij, “Idioms” 368):

– description and comparison of structural types of idioms
– description of thematic groups, i.e. idioms with constituents from the same semantic field
– types of cross-linguistic equivalents

The present article focuses on the last domain. We provide a comparative description of English, Spanish (from Spain) and French idioms from a semantic perspective.

2. SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH, SPANISH AND FRENCH IDIOMS

Many English, Spanish and French idioms display both similarities and divergences. The contrastive analysis yields three types of equivalence: full or absolute equivalence, partial equivalence and non-equivalence.

1. FULL EQUIVALENCE

A considerable proportion of English, Spanish and French idioms are full equivalents, i.e. they are identical with regard to meaning, syntactic and lexical structure, and imagery basis. We provide some examples below:

- tighten one’s belt / apretarse el cinturón / se serrer la ceinture
- on the tip of one’s tongue / en la punta de la lengua / sur le bout de la langue
- not to lift a finger / no mover un dedo / ne pas remuer/bouger/lever le petit doigt
- have one’s head in the clouds / estar en las nubes / être dans les nuages
- do something behind someone’s back / hacer algo a espaldas de alguien / faire quelque chose sur le dos de quelqu’un
- take one’s time / tomarse su tiempo / prendre son temps
- pull the wool over somebody’s eyes / quitar la venda de los ojos de alguien / faire tomber le bandeau des yeux de quelqu’un
- be on the same wavelength / estar en la misma onda / être sur la même longueur d’onde
- have an eye on someone / no quitar ojo a alguien / avoir l’œil sur quelqu’un
- have nerves of steel / tener nervios de acero / avoir des nerfs d’acier
- get out of hand / escaparse de las manos / échapper des mains
Full equivalence frequently results from the fact that the idioms are “interlingual loans” (préstamos interlingüísticos) in Wotjak’s and Corpas’ (Diez) terms. Consider the following examples:

headhunter / cazatalentos / chasseur de têtes
the black box / la caja negra / la boîte noire
coger el toro por los cuernos / take the bull by the horns / prendre le taureau par les cornes

Other similarities between idioms rest upon a metaphoric or cultural basis. A metaphoric or metonymic motivation underlies many English, Spanish and French idioms. Let us illustrate this kind of idioms:

THE HEAD IS THE SEAT OF EMOTIONS: break someone’s heart / romper el corazón / briser le coeur.
POWER IS UP: look over one’s shoulder / mirar por encima del hombro / regarder par-dessus l’épaule.
HAPPY IS UP: be in seventh heaven / estar en el séptimo cielo / être au septième ciel.

The figurative meaning of several idioms in English, Spanish and French is obtained through the metaphoric background of a constituent. Thus, coldness displays a metaphorical link with lack of emotion or indifference or cowardice, as shown in the idioms ‘in cold blood’ / a sangre fria / de sang-froid, ‘leave somebody cold’ / dejar frío a alguien / ne faire ni froid ni chaud.

Some body terms show a link to a personality or behavioural trait. Hence the hand is metaphorically linked to control (rule with an iron fist / gobernar con mano de hierro / gouverner avec une main de fer) and the nose to curiosity (be nosy / meter las narices / mettre son nez).

A few full equivalents are based on the same metonymy. Let us look at a few examples:

THE ORGAN FOR THE SENSE: turn a deaf ear / faire la sourde oreille (the ear for hearing). The Spanish equivalent hacer oídos sordos contains the sense term (oído ‘hearing’).
THE SIGN OF AN EMOTION FOR THE EMOTION: red with anger / rojo de ira / rouge de colère.

Cross-linguistic idiom equivalence may rely on an identical cultural basis. Several English, Spanish and French equivalent idioms are culturally rooted. Culturally-marked idioms fall into two groups:

a) Idioms based on the European cultural heritage, which has religious, literary and mythological components. Thus the expressions ‘separate the wheat from the chaff’ / separar el grano de la paja / séparer le grain de l’ivraie, ‘bear one’s cross’ / llevar su cruz / porter sa croix (cruz/croix meaning ‘cross’) con-
tain a biblical reference, while the idioms ‘rest on one’s laurels’/ dormirse en los laureles / s’endormir sus ses lauriers, Achilles’ heel / el talón de Aquiles / le talon d’Achille refer to classical mythology.

b) Idioms based on a cultural element (e.g. a common belief or tradition). Thus the idiomatic meaning of ‘keep your fingers crossed’/ cruzar los dedos relies upon the belief that making this gesture with one’s fingers gives luck. The meaning of the expressions ‘the black sheep’ / la oveja negra is based on shepherds’ belief that black wool is not as valuable as white wool.

2. PARTIAL EQUIVALENCE

Another type of cross-linguistic idiom equivalence is partial equivalence. Partial equivalents show divergences in the compositional structure or in the imagery basis. We will illustrate the different types of partial equivalence by means of several examples.

1. Contrast in the compositional structure

Some idioms show variation at the level of lexical implementation. For example, the Spanish idiom a plena luz del día differs from the English expression ‘in the cold light of day’ in the adjective modifying the kernel constituent, and from the French counterpart en plein jour in the addition of the nominal element ‘light’. In much the same way, the lexical difference between the English idiom ‘slam the door in somebody’s face’ and the corresponding Spanish and French expressions, dar con la puerta en las narices / fermer la porte au nez, lies in the choice of the body term (face versus narices/nez ‘nose’).

Differences in the syntactic structure may be put down to the addition of a constituent, as in a bolt from the blue / algo caído del cielo / c’est tombé du ciel (addition of a verbal constituent in the Spanish and French expressions, caído/tombé ‘fallen’) and être tout yeux, tout oreilles / be all ears / ser todo oídos (addition of a further noun constituent in French, yeux ‘eyes’).

A few idioms differ in the location element. It is the case of put one’s foot in it / mettre les pieds dans le plat / meter la pata, build castles in the air / construir castillos en el aire.

Other idioms show differences in the syntactic pattern of the verb. Thus, the idiom ‘to ring a bell’ has a ditransitive pattern, while its Spanish equivalent, sonarle a alguien, is intransitive. The metaphoric view of sleeptime as a time to think before making an important decision is present in the idioms ‘sleep on something’/ consultar con la almohada / la nuit porte conseil, but while in English it is articulated through a verb, which is followed by an object in Spanish, in French it is lexicalized by a clausal structure.
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particularly true of idioms from culturally salient domains in the language, including French idioms from the domain of cooking, English idioms from the domain of sailing, and Spanish idioms from the domain of bullfighting. This type of idioms have no absolute equivalent. Below we present some examples:

it’s a piece of cake / es pan comido / c’est du gâteau
sell like hot cakes / venderse como churros
have a bun in the oven / avoir une brioche au four
sit on the fence / ver los toros desde la barrera

3. Non-equivalence

Non-equivalent idioms abound in the English, Spanish and French repertoires. Some authors have laid the emphasis on the semantic differences between idioms from different languages. In this light, Dobrovolskij (“Idioms” 368) adopts a strong position: “In bilingual dictionaries and contrastive descriptions of idioms it is usually impossible to find parallel expressions which can be used equally in all cases.”

Many English, Spanish and French idioms do not have an idiomatic counterpart in the other(s) language(s). This point is illustrated by means of the following examples:

English idioms: white lie, be on the cards, put the cat among the pigeons, keep a low profile, face the music, be over a barrel, clutch at straws, be in someone’s good books, one sandwich short of a picnic, the gift of the gab, be over the hill, be tied up.

French idioms: avoir le bras long (‘be influential’), un navet (‘a bad film’), se faire des cheveux (‘worry’), avoir un poil dans la main (‘be lazy’), avoir le nez qui remue (‘lie’), avoir les mains libres (‘be able to act freely’), baiser les bras (‘give in’), en avoir plein les jambes (‘have walked too much’), avoir un coup de coeur (‘be keen on something/somebody’), avoir un cheveu sur la langue (‘lisp’), être aux oiseaux and être aux anges (‘be very happy’).

Spanish idioms: darse el tute (‘make a big effort’), pasarlas canutas (‘have a terrible time’), en el quinto pino (‘very far’), estar de mala uva (‘be in a foul mood’), saber latín (‘be very sharp’), no venir a cuento (‘be irrelevant’).

Cross-idiomatic non-equivalence may result from the fact that the concept expressed by an idiom in one language is not lexicalised in other languages. It is the case of golden handshake and pendre la crêmaillère (to move into a new house and have a party with your friends to celebrate).

Another type of non-equivalence between idioms is generated by their symbolic motivation. This seems to be the case of a few colour idioms where a colour
occurs in a symbolic function. Thus blue is a symbol for sadness in English (‘feel blue’), and yellow stands for dishonesty and deceit in French (rire jaune ‘force oneself to laugh’, un jaune ‘a strikebreaker’).

Cross-idiomatic non-equivalence may also be grounded in culture. There are four types of culturally-determined idioms:

a) Idioms that contain a culture-specific constituent, e.g ‘not to be short of a bob or two’, ‘spend a penny’, fermer la boîte à Camembert ‘die’, faire chou blanc ‘to fail’. The words Camembert (a kind of cheese) and chou ‘cabbage’ denote typical French foods.

b) Idioms that evoke an aspect of the target culture such a custom or tradition, a literary work or a historical figure. The figurative meaning of the idiom to be flavour of the month is connected with the supermarkets’ practice of putting a particular flavour of something on special offer for a month.

The French idiom ne pas s’embarquer sans biscuit refers to sailors’ custom of taking a piece of tough bread with them on their long and sometimes dangerous voyages. Hence the current meaning ‘not to get involved in something without taking precautions’. The French expression être/faire la mouche du coche draws upon a fable written by the 17th-century author La Fontaine. The idiom avoir un violon d’Ingres ‘have a hobby’ refers to the French painter Ingres’ habit of playing the violin (violon) in his leisure time. Finally, the meaning of the Spanish idiom estar entre Pinto y Valdemoro (be slightly drunk) evokes two Spanish towns which used to be famous for their wines.

c) Idioms from culturally relevant domains. The cultural idiosyncrasy of certain domains has been signalled by a number of authors (Nida; Santoyo). For instance, horsing is a culturally salient domain in English, which explains the relatively high proportion of idioms from this lexical field in the English idiomatic repertoire (‘to take pot luck’, ‘to go amiss’) and the absence of an idiomatic counterpart in Spanish and French.

We provide further examples of idioms from cultural domains:

SAILING: sail close to the wind, be a nervous wreck, be at sea, be plain sailing, miss the boat, put/stick one’s oar in something, learn the ropes.

BULLFIGHTING: dar la puntilla, vestirse de luces, echar un capote, entrar al trapo, caerse del cartel, estar al quite, estar hasta la bandera.

COOKING: retourner quelqu’un comme une crêpe ‘manipulate’, faire la crêpe ‘turn in bed from one side to the other because you cannot fall asleep’, sucrer quelqu’un ‘ill-treat somebody’, se ronger les foies ‘to worry’, une nouille/bûche ‘a silly person’.

d) Idioms built upon a stereotype. Another group of expressions with no idiomatic counterpart are those based on a cultural stereotype. For example, the British
and the Spanish communities appear to share a negative view of the French, as shown in the idioms 'take a French leave' / "despedirse a la francesa." The French counterpart of the latter expression, "filer à l'anglaise," hints at the French community's negative feelings about the English. Likewise, the idioms "bâtit des châteaux en Espagne" (‘build castles in the air’) and "parler français comme une vache espagnole" manifest a critical view of the Spanish.

Another type of contrast between idioms from different languages is rooted in the semantic structure. The non-equivalence is occasionally based on semantic properties. Dobrovol'skij ("Idioms" 376) refers to it as “asymmetrical polysemy.” This means that an idiom has developed a further meaning in the source language, but only shares one of its meanings with the target language idiom. For example, the Spanish idiom "perder la cabeza" has two meanings, ‘go crazy’ and ‘become too anxious to behave calmly’. The French idiom "perdre la tête" only has the first meaning, while the English expression ‘lose one's head’ only has the second meaning. Similarly, the Spanish idiom "tirarse de los pelos," which means ‘to despair’ and ‘to have a big argument’, shares the second meaning with the French expression "s'arracher les cheveux" and the first meaning with the English idiom "tear one's hair out."

Further examples of asymmetrical polysemy are found in the idiomatic expressions "tener un corazón de oro" / "avoir un cœur d'or" / "have a heart of gold" and "to have one's head in the clouds" / "avoir la tête dans les nuages." In the former set, the Spanish and French idioms mean both generosity and goodness, while the English expression only denotes generosity. The latter pair shares the meaning day-dreaming, but the French idiom has developed a further meaning, absent-mindedness.

The most striking type of non-equivalence is characterized by similarity of image and divergence in meaning. While “one-word false friends” have been the subject of much research (Kroschewski; Chamizo Domínguez and Nerlich; among others), "phraseological false friends" have been disregarded (Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen 109). From the viewpoint of cognitive semantics, idiomatic false friends consist of analogous constituents and have an identical image basis but display significant differences in actual meaning (Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen 109).

From a cognitive semantics perspective, the semantic differences between similarly-looking idioms can be accounted for by differences in (i) the underlying conceptual metaphor; (ii) the imagery basis; (iii) the figurative meaning of the core constituent.

We will now explore these three classes of idiomatic false friends in English, Spanish and French. The semantic contrast between idioms can be explained by various conceptual metaphors. The idioms profile different conceptual metaphors. Thus the English idiom ‘to set on one’s high horses’ has to be interpreted on the basis of the conceptual metaphor PRIDE IS UP. In contrast, the French idiom "monter sus ses grands chevaux" is based on the metaphor ANGER IS UP.

A group of phraseological false friends rely on the different reading of the mental image. The same lexical structure evokes different features of the image. An illustrative example is the pair ‘my ears are buzzing’ / "tes oreilles ont dû siffler." The underlying image of the English idiom evokes a continuous unpleasant sound that
the speaker can hear. In the French idiom the sound is the voice of people who have spoken about someone in their absence.

A further example is ‘burn the candle at both ends’ (to work too hard for too long) and *brûler la chandelle par les deux bouts* ‘to waste your money, to ruin your health’. Both idioms denote an extreme action. Yet in the French expression the negative aspect of the given situation is dominant.

The image underlying the idioms *estar en pie de guerra / être sur le pied de guerre* evokes a person ready to do something. Yet the action meant in the Spanish expression is fighting, whereas the action denoted in French is that of leaving or acting.

Sometimes the idioms evoke different frames. The English idiom ‘be in the same boat’ evokes the family frame, the idiomatic meaning being ‘take after somebody’, while the Spanish expression *estar en el mismo barco* evokes the work frame, the idiom referring to a group of people taking part in the same project.

Last but not least, several phraseological false friends are based on one constituent that triggers off different secondary readings. Idioms with somatic constituents are a very productive category that provides examples of this type of false friends. Consider the idioms ‘be nosey’ / *avoir du nez*. The NOSE concept does not occur in its basic sense in either idiom. On the contrary, it has different functions, curiosity in the English idiom, intuition in the French expression. The same holds for the HEART concept in the idioms *avoir bon coeur / tener buen corazón*. The function generosity occurs in the French idiom, while the function goodness occurs in the French expression.

CONCLUSION

In this contribution we have undertaken a comparative study of idioms focusing on both the semantic resemblances and divergences between idioms in Spanish, French and English. The cross-linguistic idiom description has given evidence of the three degrees of idiomatic equivalence across languages: full equivalence, partial equivalence, non-equivalence. The analysis suggests that many similarities and divergences between idioms across languages are grounded in conceptual structure (at the level of conceptual metaphor or at the level of the mental image) or in culture.

We believe that the metaphoric or cultural foundation of the (non-) equivalence between idioms is a matter that deserves future investigation. The scope of this study being limited, it seems that an analysis of the metaphoric and cultural basis of idioms as the basis for cross-linguistic equivalence should be done in a range of languages.
WORKS CITED


