

THE ROLE OF PHRASEOLOGISMS IN LEARNING SPANISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract: Phraseological units are a fundamental yet often underexplored dimension of foreign language learning which is rarely or insufficiently integrated in Spanish teaching materials. In this article we examine a paradox that we observe in our experience as researchers and educators: while students display a strong interest in learning phraseologisms from the beginner levels, in textbooks and resources they are introduced at the more advanced levels. Through a review of theoretical frameworks and practical observations we argue that phraseological competence should not be postponed to higher levels as the benefits of teaching such expressions lie not only in their semantic and pragmatic functions, but also in their sociocultural dimension. Nonetheless, Spanish teachers must be cautious: phraseological usage varies across regions, and some expressions may hinder comprehension if introduced without contextualization. This underlines the need for careful pedagogical selection. We suggest that the systematic integration of phraseological units, even at early stages of foreign language education, would foster communicative competence, cultural awareness, and learner motivation. In this regard, we believe that greater presence of phraseological expressions in didactic resources is essential to reflect the authentic use of the language. The role of the teacher remains central, as effective instruction depends on providing contextualized, relevant, and culturally situated explanations. Ultimately, phraseological units should be considered not as peripheral elements, but as essential lexicon that facilitates both linguistic acquisition and intercultural understanding in the classes of Spanish as a foreign language.

Keywords: *phraseological units, Spanish as a foreign language, didactics.*

Field: Humanities

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, phraseology has become a popular subject of linguistic study and a theme of vigorous interest for a few main reasons, the first one being the relatively "young" age of this discipline, which makes it a ground still waiting to be "explored". The second reason is the desire of linguists to define and describe in the most precise way its scope and to determine precisely the range of word combinations that can be considered to be phraseological units (PUs from here on), to clarify their construction as well as their peculiarities. Another objective of the recent phraseological studies is to determine if they are truly so important in everyday communication and if their incorporation into the curriculums of foreign language classes could contribute to the faster and easier acquisition of the foreign speech. This argument leads to another type of linguistic studies that aim to propose didactical methods and materials which can facilitate the teaching and learning processes of PUs in the classroom.

In this global world where people from different countries communicate with each other on a daily basis, the necessity of having good command of foreign languages is a prime concern of many, leading to a high demand for not only educational institutions that provide these kinds of service, but also, and nowadays even more likely, for educational systems, tools and materials that facilitate the process of acquiring a new language. Unfortunately, the educational resources rarely contain PUs as a part of the targeted vocabulary for each level.

2. THE PROBLEM

When it comes to the Spanish language, our experience as Phraseology researchers and Spanish language lecturers has shown us a paradox that we are aiming to address in this paper. On one hand, the Spanish language students are eager to learn a lot of PUs from the start of their tuition (that is from the beginner levels), because they realize that these units help them formulate their speech easier and faster. On the other hand, the Spanish language resources, especially the students' books, include nearly no lexical material of this kind in the initial stages of the foreign language education. This inconsistency raises two main questions:

1. Do Spanish language students need to study PUs from the initial levels of their tuition, or should

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this type of expressions be reserved solely for the higher levels of language competence? (we are referring to Spanish learners in particular as the case with other foreign languages may be different).

2. Should the PUs be more present in students' books and materials for Spanish learners and what are the benefits and disadvantages of their presence or of their lack in the teaching resources?

The first question is one frequently asked by linguists whose research is aimed at didactics. We must point out that according to the two main guideline documents that give instructions on Spanish educational programs, activities and materials, i.e., The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and The Cervantes Institute Curricular Plan (Instituto Cervantes, 2006), Phraseology is a part of the semantic and sociolinguistic competence that should be acquired by learners mostly on the levels of proficiency and mastery (C1-C2). As Naydenova-Chorbadzhiyska (2025) resumes: "Se trata de la conciencia y del control de organización del significado, así como de los conocimientos necesarios para abordar la dimensión social del uso de la lengua" [It involves awareness and control of the organization of meaning, as well as the knowledge necessary to address the social dimension of language use] (p. 354, own translation).

Many theorists share this view and consider only routine formulas such as Buenos días [Good morning], Hasta la vista [See you soon!] or ¡Qué va! [No way!] to be adequate to the beginner levels of education. They observe that learners should have sufficient linguistic resources in order to start using formulaic language. Other authors such as Nenkova (2018), Leal Riol (2011), Saracho (2020), observe the limited presence of such phrases in the educational materials for foreigners and express concerns regarding this fact. In this regard Rădoi (2021) points out:

... if the native speakers recur to the use of PUs constantly, as long as they are present in conversations, songs, movies, media and advertising, it is inconceivable for the PUs to not be incorporated into teaching, even from the initial level. (p.14)

We agree with this school of thought as our experience with Bulgarian students has shown us the high level of interest that the students hold from the beginning of their education in this language. They justify this curiosity they have with the additional materials they tend to use (mostly from the area of entertainment, i.e., music, movies, series) in order to get acquainted with the language in a faster and more natural way. We believe that this initial drive to knowledge should not be held back during the educational process, on the contrary, it has to be encouraged with the proper didactical means. In this sense, we agree completely with Nenkova's observations (2020):

La importancia del conocimiento de las unidades fraseológicas no radica tanto en su significado semántico, sino en su uso pragmático, es decir, en lo que se persigue a través de ellas: enfatizar, advertir, dar consejos, mostrar indiferencia, rechazo, agrado, desagrado, queja, amonestar o simplemente llamar la atención del interlocutor. [...] El profesor de ELE debe priorizar que lo aprendido se pueda aplicar de manera adecuada a la situación comunicativa [the importance of knowing PUs lies not so much in their semantic meaning, but in their pragmatic use, that is, in how they are intended to be used: to emphasize, warn, give advice, to show indifference, rejection, pleasure, displeasure, complain, to admonish, or simply to draw the interlocutor's attention. [...] The SFL (Spanish as a Foreign Language) teacher must prioritize ensuring that what has been learned can be appropriately applied to the communicative situation]. (p. 63, own translation)

In order to answer the second question, we must note that at present the majority of didactical material for Spanish learners barely includes phrasemes as a part of the aimed lexicon. Nenkova (2020) confirms that the current methods of teaching foreign languages insist from the outset on teaching and learning fixed phrases (for greeting and farewell, for expressing gratitude or apology, for lamenting), universal comparisons and some collocations that have no idiomatic or figurative meaning. But regardless of the fact that at the higher levels (B1 to C1) there are exercises or sections dedicated to the use of more complex PUs, they still seem to be insufficient. According to Nénkova (2020):

...la excepcionalidad de estos ejercicios o apartados demuestra una vez más la escasa atención que se concede a la fraseología en la enseñanza de español como lengua extranjera. Esporádicamente aparecen ejercicios de comprensión, de memorización y de reagrupación de las unidades fraseológicas por campos semánticos. [...] Con todo, en el proceso de enseñanza y aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras, en general, no se profundiza demasiado en el estudio de las unidades fraseológicas. [...the exceptional nature of these exercises or sections demonstrates once again the scarce attention given to the Phraseology in the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language. Comprehension exercises, memorization exercises, and exercises for grouping phraseological units into semantic fields appear sporadically. [...] However, in the process of teaching and learning foreign languages, in general, not much depth is given to the study of phraseological units]. (p. 62, own translation)

We consider this lack of sufficient material to be a problem, because the fixed phrases that are

united under the name of PUs do not only contain lexical meaning and do not serve solely as pragmatic means of expression. Their cultural, historic and social significance sparks the curiosity of the learners and submerge them in the world of the native speakers. In other words, PUs serve as cultural representatives of the language they belong to and as such are highly informational to the learners. But, if there is one thing we can agree on, it is that not all PUs facilitate learning Spanish. In fact, we want to emphasize that sometimes they can hinder the communication; that is because not all foreigners are aware that some collocations, idioms and phraseological statements are not used in all areas where Spanish is the primary language. Therefore, we believe that in class the teachers should have great caution when they introduce these structures. They should inform the students of the peculiarities of the phrases, while also considering if the PUs are appropriate for the objectives and the level of knowledge of the attendees.

We believe it is necessary to review the concepts of what is considered to be a PU in order to explain what we are referring to.

3. THEORETICAL ASPECTS

One of the most controversial aspects we encounter when dealing with the topic of PUs is their definition and classification. Their common characteristics are fixation and idiomaticity, although they have other specific characteristics as well. There are numerous definitions and classifications on the subject, but the one by Corpas Pastor (1996) is interesting for its educational purposes. According to her, the PUs are:

...las unidades fraseológicas son unidades léxicas formadas por más de dos palabras gráficas en su límite inferior, cuyo límite superior se sitúa en el nivel de la oración compuesta. Dichas unidades se caracterizan por su alta frecuencia de uso, y de coaparición de sus elementos integrantes; por su institucionalización, entendida en términos de fijación y especialización semántica; por su idiomaticidad y variaciones potenciales; así como por el grado en el cual se dan todos estos aspectos en los distintos tipos. [...lexical units formed by more than two graphic words as a minimum, and whose maximum is located at the level of the compound sentence. These units are characterized by their high frequency of use and the co-appearance of their constituent elements; by their institutionalization, understood in terms of semantic fixation and specialization; by their idiomaticity and potential variation; as well as by the degree to which all these aspects are present in the different types]. (p.20, own translation)

When it comes to the theoretical studies of PUs, we are faced with a wide variety of definitions, all of which share common characteristics: fixation, stability, reproducibility, semantic integrity, idiomaticity. According to Corpas Pastor (1996) in order for a word combination to be considered a PU it has to be comprised of several word, it has to be institutionalized, it must have a certain degree of stability and present a certain syntactic or semantic peculiarity.

Regarding the classification of PUs there are also different opinions, but the one we consider most relevant is that of Corpas Pastor (1996), as she establishes three groups: collocations (word combinations fixed by the norm, but which do not constitute complete statements), set phrases or idioms (which function as components of the sentence and belong to the system of the language), and phraseological statements (self-contained statements and speech acts fixed in discourse). The first two do not constitute complete statements; they are equivalent to syntagms, so they need to be combined with other linguistic elements to have full meaning within the act of communication. They have referential meaning. The phraseological statements, on the contrary, can stand alone as independent sentences or speech acts.

Of course, we do not advocate for teaching these theoretical postulates to the Spanish learners, even less so in the beginner levels of their tuition. What we consider appropriate is for different kinds of PUs to be incorporated in the education, so that foreign learners can get used to them from the very start of their acquaintance with the language and start to consider them a crucial part of it, as they truly are such.

We have already mentioned the cultural, historic and social significance of the PUs, and also, especially in Spanish, the geographical variations that may present difficulties in the teaching-learning process. Both aspects deserve to be explained and described for more clarity.

4. CULTURAL ASPECTS

Understanding the cultural characteristics of PUs is of significant importance not from a theoretical, but from a practical perspective. When learning foreign languages, students generally encounter idioms and everyday expressions, which provide an opportunity to experience their cultural dimensions, regional variations and historical connotations. However, upon teaching these expressions, it is essential that

the tutors consider the students' competence level carefully. For example, an idiom such as *más vale tarde que nunca* [better late than never] may have slightly different interpretation in different Spanish-speaking regions, as the cultural values it reflects may vary between patience and perseverance. While incorporating such expressions allows students to develop pragmatic and sociocultural competence by enhancing their comprehension and authentic use of PUs in real communicative context, these phrases may not be suitable for all levels or all regions. Let us give some more examples:

- *Despedirse a la francesa* [to leave without saying goodbye] - In Spain it means to leave without farewell. In Latin America this phrase would be incomprehensible as in this case the people there use the verb *esfumarse* [to disappear].

- *Hacerse el sueco* [to play dumb] - In Spain this phrase is used when someone is acting as if they do not understand what they are being told. In Latin America this phrase is unknown, and, in such context, people tend to say *hacerse el loco* [to play dumb].

- *Pasar de alguien* [to ignore] - In Spain, it means to ignore someone or to not pay attention to them. In some countries in Latin American, the phrase can be interpreted as a physical action (walking past someone) rather than an act of ignoring them.

- *No me rayes* [don't confuse me] - In Spain, it means "don't confuse me" or "don't bother me." In Latin America, this usage is not common, and the verb *rayar* is usually associated with drawing lines or leaving marks on a surface. In Venezuela, for example, it can also be used as an expression, but its meaning would be "don't embarrass me".

- *Ser la leche* [to be the best, to be incredible] - In Spain, it means that something is incredible. In Latin America, the use of *leche* in this context does not exist, so it may sound confusing or funny.

- *Ser una fiera* [to be skilled at something] - In Spain, this expression means to be very skilled or talented at something. In Latin America, *fiera* is more associated with a wild animal or a beast, and the phrase can be interpreted literally.

- *Dejar el peleró* [to escape fast] - In Latin America this phrase means to escape fast from someone or something, where in Spain it is not used. The people there say *salir por patas*.

- *Estar en las nubes* [to daydream] - This expression is used in Latin America to say that someone is daydreaming or is absent-minded. In Spain the phrase used in this case is *estar en Babia*.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Some of these expressions may be difficult for beginners, not because of their vocabulary, but because of their usage. This does not prevent the teachers from incorporating them in the classroom; instead, it gives them a good opportunity to teach such phrases through their practical use and the cultural context to which they belong. There are many expressions worth adding in the beginner's levels, as their use is more widespread and general across different regions and cultures. They may even have similarities with the students' mother tongues. Some examples are: *estar por las nubes* [head in the clouds], *dormir la siesta* [to take a nap], *ir de compras* [to go shopping], *ser la oveja negra* [to be the black sheep], *ser una gallina* [to be a coward], *pelear como perro y gato* [to fight like cats and dogs].

We consider it important to include more PUs in the lessons for foreign learners, since when we learn a language, we are not only referring to its lexis, grammar or spelling, but also to a community and culture that will allow us to understand its way of thinking and acting. And as López Vázquez (2011:) points out:

Las expresiones fijas han sido tratadas tradicionalmente como un fenómeno anecdótico y, por lo tanto, de poco interés a la hora de aprender una nueva lengua. Sin embargo, las investigaciones más recientes demuestran que la competencia fraseológica tiene una gran importancia en los intercambios comunicativos de cualquier comunidad lingüística y, en consecuencia, el componente fraseológico debe ocupar un lugar fundamental en la adquisición de una lengua extranjera [Fixed expressions have traditionally been treated as an anecdotal phenomenon and, therefore, have been of little interest when learning a new language. However, the most recent researches show that phraseological competence is of great importance in the communicative exchanges within any linguistic community and, consequently, the phraseological component must occupy a fundamental place in the acquisition of a foreign language]. (p.531, own translation)

In addition, we would like to mention that in the recent years we have noticed a decrease in competence among young people when it comes to the phraseological units in their mother tongue. We do not aim to discuss the reasons for this phenomenon in the present paper, but to emphasize on the importance of this knowledge as pointed out by Salmerón Luckes (2023) "...si se presta mayor atención a la fraseología de la lengua materna, los hablantes poseeremos mayor competencia comunicativa ya

que nos aportan también mejoras en nuestra destreza discursiva” [...if greater attention is paid to the phraseology of the native language, speakers will have greater communicative competence, as it also improves our discursive skills]. (p.174, own translation)

In this regard Martín Rider (2022) notes: “Actualmente, el desarrollo de la competencia comunicativa es la finalidad del proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje de cualquier lengua, tanto materna (LM) como extranjera (LE). Para lograr ese fin, el conocimiento léxico en general y fraseológico en particular es imprescindible” [Currently, the development of communicative competence is the goal of the teaching-learning process of any language, both native (L1) and foreign (L2). To achieve this goal, vocabulary in general and phraseological knowledge in particular are essential]. (p.10 own translation).

Spanish phraseology is vast, which makes the task of grouping and compiling it into a single manual quite difficult, if not impossible. Nevertheless, it should have greater presence in textbooks designed for foreign learners. The role of the teachers is essential, as based on their experience and knowledge they can provide students with the most appropriate examples and relevant explanations. Expressions, on their own, hold little value if they are not accompanied by their corresponding sociocultural components.

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