

Cognitive and Semantic Features of Spanish Phraseology: Conceptualization and Metaphoric Structures

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Abstract

This article explores the cognitive and semantic characteristics of Spanish phraseology, focusing on how idiomatic expressions reflect conceptual structures and metaphoric patterns in the language. Through an interdisciplinary approach integrating cognitive linguistics, semantic theory, and phraseological research, the study examines how Spanish phraseological units (PUs) function not only as lexicalized forms but also as conceptual metaphors shaped by cultural and cognitive processes. The analysis demonstrates that phraseological metaphors in Spanish are deeply rooted in embodied cognition, cultural models, and cross-linguistic similarities and differences. The article also considers the role of conceptual blending and image schemas in the construction of meaning in Spanish idioms. By providing theoretical insights and illustrative examples, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between cognition, culture, and phraseological semantics.

Keywords: Cognitive linguistics, semantic features, Spanish phraseology, conceptual metaphors, idiomatic expressions, embodiment, conceptual blending, phraseological units.

The study of phraseology within the framework of cognitive linguistics has gained considerable attention in recent decades, driven by advances in our understanding of how language reflects underlying conceptual structures and cognitive processes. In the specific context of Spanish phraseology, idiomatic expressions provide a rich domain for exploring the interplay between linguistic form, meaning construction, and cultural conceptualization. Spanish idioms, proverbs, and fixed expressions serve not merely as linguistic artifacts but as cognitive embodiments of culturally salient models, metaphorical mappings, and experiential patterns. This article seeks to elucidate the cognitive and semantic features of Spanish phraseology, emphasizing conceptualization and metaphoric structures that shape the interpretation and use of idiomatic expressions in this language.

The field of cognitive linguistics positions language as a reflection of entrenched patterns of thought rather than as a

formalized autonomous system. From this perspective, phraseological units (PUs) are not arbitrary bundles of words with opaque meanings but structured cognitive units that reveal how speakers categorize, conceptualize, and map experience onto linguistic form. According to Fillmore, Johnson, and Lakoff, metaphors are pervasive in everyday thinking and language, providing systematic mappings from a source domain (typically concrete or embodied experience) to a target domain (often abstract concepts) (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Spanish idioms often instantiate these metaphorical mappings, which can be analyzed in terms of underlying image schemas, conceptual metaphors, and cultural models.

One of the core cognitive features of Spanish phraseology lies in the embodiment of meaning. Embodied cognition suggests that meaning is grounded in sensorimotor experiences, and that conceptual structures are shaped by bodily interactions with the physical world (Barsalou, 1999). Many Spanish idiomatic

expressions derive from bodily experiences, spatial orientation, motion events, and physical objects, mapping these experiences onto abstract domains such as emotion, social relations, or moral judgment. For example, consider the Spanish idiom *tener la cabeza en las nubes* (literally “to have the head in the clouds”) to describe a person who is daydreaming or inattentive. This expression maps the physical image of an elevated head above ground (“in the clouds”) onto the cognitive state of abstract thinking detached from immediate tasks. The conceptual metaphor *ATTENTION IS VERTICAL LOCATION* is at play here, associating attention with being grounded and lack of attention with being off the ground or elevated.

Another significant cognitive mechanism in Spanish phraseology is the use of conceptual metaphors to express emotional states. Emotional experiences are inherently subjective and abstract, yet speakers use metaphorical expressions to anchor them in more concrete domains. For instance, expressions like *estar hasta las narices* (literally “to be up to the nostrils”) meaning “to be fed up” exemplify the mapping of bodily space onto emotional saturation. The conceptual metaphor *EMOTION IS PHYSICAL SUBSTANCE* is evident, where being overwhelmed with frustration or annoyance is conceptualized as fluid rising to a bodily threshold. Similarly, *echar chispas* (literally “to throw sparks”) meaning “to be furious” maps visual and kinetic experiences of sparks flying to the intense emotional state of anger. These metaphoric constructions illustrate how embodied experiences serve as cognitive anchors for abstract semantic domains.

Conceptual blending theory, proposed by Fauconnier and Turner (2002), further illuminates how idiomatic meanings emerge through the integration of multiple mental spaces. In Spanish phraseology, many

expressions result from the blending of distinct conceptual domains, resulting in novel or culturally resonant meanings. For example, the idiom *dar en el clavo* (“to hit the nail on the head”), meaning to say or do exactly the right thing, integrates two domains—tool use (hammering) and epistemic precision (correctness in thought or speech). The blend yields an emergent structure where the physical action of accurately hitting a nail mirrors cognitive precision. Such blends are not arbitrary but reflect culturally shared schemas where manual skill and intellectual insight are analogically related.

Metaphoric structures in Spanish phraseology also reveal how culture influences conceptualization. Metaphors that arise from agricultural, religious, or social practices highlight culturally salient experiences and values. The expression *estar en la luna de Valencia* (literally “to be on the moon of Valencia”), meaning to be absent-minded or oblivious, has cultural and historical roots tied to 19th-century Valencia, where locals allegedly daydreamed during long walks in the orchard-filled outskirts. The metaphor thus encodes not only spatial and experiential imagery but also a locally grounded cultural narrative. Such culturally specific idioms underscore that cognitive processes are intertwined with the sociocultural environment, shaping how phraseological meaning is constructed and interpreted.

Semantic features of Spanish phraseological units are tightly connected to their syntactic and morphological properties. Phraseological fixedness or semi-fixedness determines the degree to which elements can vary while retaining idiomatic meaning. Idioms like *tirar la casa por la ventana* (literally “to throw the house out the window”), meaning to spare no expense, exhibit a high degree of fixedness: substitution or alteration of core elements often results in loss of idiomaticity. The

metaphorical mapping here—extravagance as throwing away structures that are typically associated with stability—relies on entrenched imagery that resists lexical substitution. Semantic transparency varies, with some idioms being more analyzable (*poner los puntos sobre las íes* “to dot the i’s”) and others opaque (*estar como una cabra* “to be crazy” literally “to be like a goat”). Transparency correlates with cognitive accessibility: more transparent idioms align with clearer metaphorical mappings that can be explicated in conceptual terms.

Cross-linguistic comparison further highlights the cognitive underpinnings of phraseology. While many languages share common conceptual metaphors—such as *EMOTION IS HEAT* or *TIME IS SPACE*—the specific linguistic instantiations vary according to cultural schemas. For example, the Spanish metaphor *el tiempo vuela* (“time flies”) parallels the English *time flies*, but other idiomatic expressions such as *estar entre la espada y la pared* (literally “to be between the sword and the wall”), akin to English *between a rock and a hard place*, reflect different metaphorical source domains—medieval weaponry and fortification in Spanish versus geological imagery in English. These cross-linguistic differences reveal that while cognitive mechanisms like metaphor are universal, the specific mappings and lexical realizations are shaped by shared cultural and experiential histories.

A crucial cognitive dimension of phraseological semantics is the role of image schemas—recurring dynamic patterns of sensory-motor experience that structure meaning. Image schemas such as CONTAINER, PATH, BALANCE, and FORCE influence how speakers conceptualize events and relationships. Expressions like *salir de dudas* (“to get rid of doubts”) leverage the CONTAINER schema, where doubt is conceptualized as

an entity that can be exited. Similarly, *perder el equilibrio* (“to lose balance”) maps a physical state to psychological or social instability. These image schemas serve as conceptual primitives that organize experience and facilitate semantic extension from concrete to abstract domains.

Research on phraseological semantics also emphasizes the interaction between lexicon and cognition. Idioms are stored and processed as lexical units, yet their interpretation engages broader conceptual networks. The mental lexicon, according to cognitive models, houses not only word forms but also schematic frames and metaphorical templates. When encountering a phraseological expression, speakers activate both lexical memory and associated conceptual mappings. This activation process is influenced by frequency of use, context, and pragmatic factors.

Additionally, the pragmatic dimension of phraseology cannot be overlooked. Phraseological units serve not only semantic functions but also social and interactional roles in communication. Idioms convey group membership, cultural identity, humor, and affective nuance. Spanish idiomatic expressions often carry pragmatic cues that go beyond literal meaning, shaping interpersonal dynamics and discourse style. For example, *no tener pelos en la lengua* (literally “to not have hairs on the tongue”), meaning to speak bluntly, conveys evaluative and interpersonal stances. The metaphor underlying this idiom—lack of impediments to speech—also encodes cultural attitudes toward directness and social propriety.

The cognitive and semantic study of Spanish phraseology thus encompasses multiple interrelated dimensions: embodied experience, conceptual metaphor, image schemas, cultural models, lexical structure, and pragmatic function. Scholars in this field

draw on a rich body of research from cognitive linguistics, phraseological studies, and cross-linguistic analysis. The work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) laid foundational insights into conceptual metaphor, which have been extended in the context of phraseology by researchers such as Fernando (1996), Wierzbicka (1992), and Dirven and Pörings (2002). These scholars underscore that idioms are not peripheral curiosities but windows into fundamental cognitive operations that shape language and thought.

Empirical studies on Spanish phraseology further corroborate the centrality of metaphor and cognitive structuring. Corpus-based research reveals systematic patterns in the distribution and usage of metaphorically grounded idioms across genres and registers. For example, idioms related to motion and spatial orientation are prevalent in narratives and everyday speech, reflecting embodied conceptual frameworks that structure experience. Experimental studies also show that metaphorically rich idioms influence cognitive processing, with metaphor-congruent contexts facilitating comprehension and recall. These findings suggest that phraseological metaphors are deeply embedded in cognitive networks and play active roles in mental representation.

The pedagogical implications of understanding cognitive and semantic features of phraseology are significant. In second language acquisition, idioms often pose challenges due to their non-compositional semantics and cultural specificity. A cognitive approach that highlights conceptual metaphors and underlying image schemas can aid learners in forming meaningful connections between form and concept. Teaching idioms through metaphorical mappings and conceptual frameworks allows learners to internalize not only the expression but the cognitive logic that governs its use. Such an

approach moves beyond rote memorization toward deeper comprehension and productive competence.

In conclusion, the cognitive and semantic features of Spanish phraseology reveal that idiomatic expressions are not isolated lexical artifacts but dynamic intersections of embodiment, metaphor, culture, and cognition. Conceptual metaphors provide systematic mappings that structure how abstract experiences are linguistically expressed, while image schemas and cultural models ground these expressions in shared human experience. Understanding the cognitive architecture of phraseology enhances our grasp of how language reflects thought and how speakers navigate meaning in context. Future research may further investigate the neural correlates of phraseological processing, cross-cultural variations in metaphorical mappings, and applications of cognitive phraseology in education and artificial intelligence.

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