# A Sociolinguistic Approach to the study of *Idioms:* Some anthropolinguistic sketches

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RESUMEN

Es bien sabido que el modismo es una secuencia de palabras que funciona autónomamente y cuyo significado no es inferible de sus partes constituyentes. En el repertorio de toda lengua las expresiones idiomáticas forman una categoría autónoma que presenta una estructura fija y un comportamiento específico. Proverbios, aforismos, refranes, dichos, etc., son manifestaciones espontáneas del lenguaje coloquial que requieren un aprendizaje similar al de cualquier lexema. Las expresiones idiomáticas se caracterizan, sin embargo, por una rigidez y una complejidad estructural mayores que las palabras individuales, lo que les hace ser elementos incómodos en cualquier teoría del lenguaje. Por otra parte, el hecho de que se trate de estructuras cuasi–rígidas, dado el escaso margen de variación que presentan, hace que sean consideradas como elementos secundarios en el aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera. Sin embargo, entendemos que merecen una mayor atención puesto que constituyen categorías que impregnan los sistemas lingüísticos a niveles más profundos de lo que normalmente se piensa. Partiendo de.un deslinde conceptual entre modismo y dicho, lo que nos da pie para cuestionar su naturaleza exclusivamente exocéntrica, abordamos desde una  perspectiva antropolingüística diversos ejemplos tanto en inglés como en español con el fin de poner de relieve distintos aspectos interculturales que han de ser tenidos en cuenta tanto desde una perspectiva didáctica como en el plano de la traducción.

ABSTRACT

An idiom is acknowledged to be a sequence of words functioning as a single unit whose meaning cannot be inferred from the meaning of the parts. In the repertoire of any language, idiomatic expressions constitute a special category of lexical items presenting a fixed structure and a specific behaviour in language use. Proverbs, frozen similes, aphorisms, binomials, sayings, etc., are spontaneous manifestations of colloquial language whose use needs to be mastered in much the same way as individual lexical items. Idioms though, display greater rigidity and structural complexity than individual words, which makes them uncomfortable elements in any theory of language. The fact that they are ready—made structures with small range, if any, for variability, accounts no doubt for their subsidiary role in second language learning. Yet they deserve much closer attention as they constitute categories that permeate languages at a much deeper level than what is usually taken for granted. In this paper, we question the exocentric character of some types of idioms (proverbs and sayings in particular) and discuss several examples of Spanish and English idioms within an anthropolinguistic framework in an attempt to foreground some aspects that are to be taken into account not just in a learning context but also in translation practice.

## I. IDIOMS AND IDIOMATICITY

Idioms, those polylexemic expressions not always amenable to structural manipulation, constitute a linguistic phenomenon that has proved to be extremely problematic for any theory of language to handle. But in spite of the undeniable difficulties that they present there is a tacit consensus that these expressions cannot be left out in a serious study of language: there is too much idiomaticity in every system to be simply ignored and it is too entrenched in symbolism and metaphor to consider it a minor field of concern.

In the main literature on the subject (Hockett, 1958; Malkiel, 1959; Katz and Postal, 1963; Chafe, 1968; Weinreich, 1969; Fraser, 1970: Makkai, 1972; Newmeyer, 1972; Glässer, 1980; Strassler, 1982, etc.) we find different notions of idiomaticity that range from Hockett's all—embracing approach to Amosova's phraseology as a theory of coilocations. All agree that essential to an idiom is that its meaning cannot be deduced from its grammatical structure. In fact this is one of the seven senses that the OED records under the entry *idiom:* «A form of expression, construction, phrase, etc., peculiar to a language; a peculiarity of phraseology approved» by usage, and often having a meaning other than its grammatical or logical one»[1]. This contrast between the meaning of the whole and the meaning of its parts is underlined by A. Healey (1968: 71) who defines an idiom as «any group of words whose meaning cannot be deduced from the meanings of the individual words». Sánchez Benedito

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1  **Definition given in 1628**

(1977: 1) too stresses this point further considering *as idiom* any expression that means something different from what its words seem to suggest[2]. And so does Strassler for whom «an idiom is a concatenation of more than one lexeme whose meaning is not derived from the meaning of its constituents and which does not consist of a verb plus an adverbial particle or preposition». W.J. Ball in his *Practical Guide to Colloquial ldiom* (1958: 6–7) goes further considering four basic features common to any idiomatic utterance: i) no alteration in the order or the composition of words is accepted except for normal grammatical changes: *to lead a dog's life* but not «to lead a kangaroo's life»; ii) they cannot be formed by false analogy: *I'm impartial to wine* but not «I'm impartial to brandy»; iii) once the meaning of an idiom is established, it is unequivocal provided that it is used in a right context and means the same for everybody; iv) unless the context is very revealing the meaning of an idiom cannot normally be guessed.

This agreement on the disjunction between structure and meaning is all the more surprising if we consider that one of the basic types of idioms, proverbs, is precisely an endocentric construction whose meaning is easily ascertainable from the sum of its constituents. An expression like *«En la mesa y en el juego se conoce al caballero»* or *«Better late than never»* cannot be said to have a structure whose meaning cannot be derived from the meaning of the intervening lexemes. Admittedly, not all proverbs are equally clear in their reference as our two previous examples and that there are other types of idiomatic expressions (sayings, binomials, phrasal verbs, frozen similes, etc.,) characterized as basically opaque expressions, but the fact that not all members of one important category do not conform to such pattern is in our opinion a sound argument against the idea of semantic opacity as an overriding feature of idioms.

These *ready–made* utterances are said to be learned –and therefore constitute– «unanalysable wholes» (Lyons 1968: 177–8). Lyons emphasizes their function as single units characterised by displaying specific semantic, morphological and syntactic restrictions. Semantically, he insists on the exocentric nature that we have just put into question in the case of proverbs. From a morphological point of view, the internal structure of idioms does not completely permit the application of a number of word– combining rules, whereas syntactically, the intervening constituents do not display the range of variability that they would exhibit in other contexts. Finally, from a phonological point of view, idioms have rhythmic and intonational patterns similar to the ones that characterize sentences generated by the grammar.

Proverbs and sayings are but a part of the patterned arrangement of words in language, a subject T.F. Mitchell (1971, 1975) has paid special attention to. Following a strict Firthian tradition, Mitchell does not envisage morphology and syntax as separate entities, but rather as unitary components of grammar in which roots, morphemes, words, word–classes, collocations, idioms and compounds are all meaningful elements, not because of their inherent properties but because of their relations-

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2 «Entendemos por «modismo» toda expresión que significa algo distinto a lo que las palabras que lo componen parecen indicar», (Sánchez Benedito 1977: 1).

hip with each other. Unlike collocations that are the result of dependencies where collocability plays an important role, idiomatic expressions» belong to a different order of abstraction. Thus, whereas by «collocation» Mitchell (1975: 130) refers to «the habitual association of a word in language with other particular words in sentences...», he defines an idiom as «a particular cumulate association, immutable in the sense that its parts are unproductive in relation to the whole in terms of the normal operational processes of substitution, transposition, expansion, etc. [...] The semantic unity of the idiom corresponds to a «tighter», often more immediately apparent collocability than in the case of collocation» (1971: pp. 57–58).

This idea of «tightness» is therefore used to differentiate not just between idioms and words but also between idioms and collocations. It might ultimately be used to establish a typology of idioms that would encompass not just well–known categories such as proverbs and sayings but also frozen expression like similes (e.g. as drunk as a lord), stereotyped, formulaic constructions (how do you do). binomials (*bag and haggage*), «tournure» idioms (*to fly* off the handle), and even phrasal and prepositional verbs –these last two disregarded as proper idioms by Strassler (1982). The dividing line between them is indeed not as clearcut as the examples would lead us to think, hence the difficulty in establishing, and ultimately acknowledging, all these polylexemic structures as different categories. For our present purposes, we shall focus our attention on proverbs and sayings, the two idiomatic categories that exhibit a basic sentential construction and are, therefore, autonomous expressions. Otherwise they differ in important respects: in their degree of frozenness (more in the case of proverbs than in sayings), in their force (proverbs, unlike sayings, are memorable expressions) and in their scope (proverbs convey a sense of enduring truth validity and are less situationally bound than sayings). Structurally. sayings are more opaque expressions and are characterized by the possibility of a small amount of structural manipulation, absent in the case of proverbs (compare *«Boys* will he *boys»* (proverb) with *«To* kick *the bucket»* (saying)).

## II. SOME ANTHROPOLINGUISTIC ASPECTS OF IDIOMS

In 1950 Julio Casares asked for a discipline within the field of linguistics able to deal with those expressions whose meaning cannot be inferred from their separate parts: «¿qué ley fonética, qué sistema semántico, qué nueva rama de la lingüística podrá guiamos hasta la esencia entrañable de los modismos?» (Casares 1950: 241)[3]. In a brief study on the nature of idioms, Víctor Pina Medina (1990: 151) in an atternpt to provide an answer to this question advocated a sociolinguistic approach to them: «todo

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3 There is a puzzling aggregate of terms in Spanish to refer to this area of supposedly frozen expressions known as *Paremiología:* refranes, proverbios, adagios. dichos, modismos, sentencias, locuciones, máximas, etc. Their limits are by no means clear and dictionaries (e.g. M. Moliner's) are no great help as they provide definitions that are disappointing circumlocutions.

esto implica un estudio de tipo sociolingüístico, basado en condicionamientos culturales, sociales y lingüísticos»[4]. This has meant a change of emphasis from purely linguistic approaches such as Hockett's structural model (1958), Healey's functional–tagmemics (1968), Katz and Postal's transformational model (1963), Makkai's stratificational framework (1972), etc., to a view less involved with the idea of well–formedness, according to which «...idioms had the status of anomalies» (Strassler 1982:132).

With this in mind, we have approached the study of idioms from a sociolinguistic perspective. But «sociolinguistics» here is understood not so much in a Labovian or even Trudgillian sense –purely linguistic in intent– or even as an entirely sociological phenomenon –more within an *ethnomethodological* tradition–, but rather as a combination of sociological and linguistic aspects as done in *anthropolinguistics.* It is this discipline, which «studies language variation and use in relation to the cultural patterns and beliefs of man, as investigated using the theories and methods of anthropology» (David Crystal 1985: 18), that will provide us with the theoretical underpinnings for dealing with idiomaticity.

Through the study of a community's language, anthropolinguistics focuses on *kinship systems, systems of linguistic taboo* and *linguistic relativity* with the aim of knowing more about the language, structure and values of a given community. It is well known that the study of a language constantly requires an interpretation of socially determined meaning, and, by the same token, that culture is intermeshed with language. This interplay between language and society manifests itself in three basic ways: in the influence of society on language, in the covariation of linguistic and social phenomena, and in the influence of language on society. Taboo words, kinship systems, colour–terms, pronouns of address, and lexical structures reflect the influence of society on language, whereas linguistic relativity takes as its basic tenet the overriding influence that language exerts on society, thus conditioning our view of the world as hypothesised by Sapir and Whorf[5].

lrrespective of the validity of this claim –an aspect we are not concerned with here– it is an empirical fact that «languages differ in the way they classify experience» (Leech, 1974: 28), and that there exists a varying degree of *arhitrariness* when conceptualizing experience by means of language. Hence conceptual meaning can be described as a system of arbitrary categories that vary from language to language in the sense that they impose an artificial structure on experience[6].

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4 Francisco Sánchez Benedito (1977) and J.L. Vázquez Marruecos & M.R. Ramírez García (1984) have dealt with these enigmatic expressions bearing in mind an extralinguistic point of view, although none of them explicitly stated the necessity of a sociolinguistic approach.

5 According to John Lyons (1981: 304), «The **Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis,** as it is usually presented, combines linguistic determinism («Language determines thought») with linguistic relativity («There is no limit to the structural diversity of languages»)».

6 This argument has been illustrated by comparing what has been called **Standard Average** *European* features –shared by languages such as English, German, Spanish, French, Italian, etc.– with some American Indian languages, such as the Hopi Indians of North America in New Mexico; but it is difficult to accept a strong form of the Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis as Trudgill (1983: 26) points out, it can be argued that thought is to a certain extent conditioned, but not in fact constrained, by language.

   The effect of society on language and the way in which environment is reflected can be illustrated, on the other hand, in the use of kinship systems, pronouns of address, colour–terms, taboo words, etc., that are in a way cross–culturally variable and specific. Standard examples of the influence of culture on language are the different words that the Eskimo language has for *snow,* the variety of words that the Sami (Lapp) languages of northern Scandinavia have associated with *reindeer,* the large vocabulary that Bedouin Arabic has for *camels[7],* etc. Berlin & Kay (1969) and Brown & Lenneberg (1954: 245), referring to cultural differences, speak of *codability,* a feature not necessarily constant and uniform even within a given language–community. People tend to notice and remember the things that are codable in their language, things falling within the scope of readily available words and expressions relevant to a given culture (e.g. the words for «rice» in Ifugeo (Philippines), or for different kinds of oranges that we find among citrus farmers in Southern Spain, etc.).

   *Idioms* do show this influence of the cultural values of society on language: the *corpus* of idiomatic expressions that conform a system is a reliable reflection of the way of thinking and behaving not just of the individual (microlevel) but also of the whole community (macrolevel). All this is part of the idiosyncrasy of such community supported by its historical and cultural heritage. Julio Casares (1950: 241) referred to the various aspects that contributed towards idiom creation as follows:

> Leyendas desaparecidas, supersticiones ahuyentadas, ritos, costumbres, juegos populares, oficios venidos a menos, rivalidades entre pueblos vecinos, minúsculos sucesos memorables para una aldea o para una familia... Toda la psicología, toda la vida íntima y social, toda la historia no historiable de nuestros antepasados, ha ido dejando sus huellas en esas fórmulas elípticas, que se acuñaron para dejarlas en herencia a los que vinieron después.

   In the case of Spain, the wars against the Moors, the discovery of a new world with unfulfilled expectations of wealth, popular customs and traditions, etc., have all left a deep mark in idiomaticity. Only with such background can one understand why, for instance, someone is not *«santo de su devoción))*,that *«pide/promete el oro y el moro»,* that *«no es oro todo lo que reluce*,* or that someone would not do anything *«por todo el oro del mundo)).* An Englishman under the same circumstances would say of somebody that he/she is not *«one's cup of tea»,* he would refuse doing anything *«for all the tea in China»* (a clear reference to a large tradition of tea trade with the colonies), and he would not be particularly pleased with someone who

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7 «For example, just as Eskimo is said to have no single word for snow, it seems that most Australian languages have no word meaning «sand», but several words which denote various kinds of sand. The reason is obvious enough in each case. The difference between one kind of snow or sand and another is of great importance in the day–to–day life of the Eskimo, on the one hand, and of the Australian Aborigine, on the other» (John Lyons 1981: 306).

*«asks for/promises the moon»*. Bull–fighting is specially rich in idioms **(sayings** mainly) with no congruous semantic equivalence in the English language as the following examples show:

*«Ver los toros desde la barrera))*          *«Tirarse/lanzarse al ruedo»*
*«Poner un par de banderillas»*          *«Echar un capote»*
*«Estar para el arrastre»*          *«Estar al quite»*
*«Poner los cuernos))*          *«Fuerte como un toro»*
*«Pillarle a uno el toro»*          *«Dar la puntilla))*
*«Entrar al trapo»*          *«Tener un buen trapío))*

Only in some rare cases one could talk of a corresponding semantic equivalence although applied to a different discursive mode as in *Tirarse al ruedo – To jump into the fray.* Conversely, the English language abounds in idiomatic forms referring to cricket, a popular sport practically unknown in Spain. Hence expressions like:

*«That's not cricket!»*          *«To play a straight bat»*
*«Off one's own bat»*          *«To bat on a sticky wicket»*
*«A long stop»*          *«To he 100 not out»*
*«To have a good innings»*          *«To be bowled out»*
*«To he stumped»*          *«To catch out»*

As said above, full understanding of these and similar expressions comes only with a full understanding of the cultural environment they belong to.

And yet, there are many cases where we find striking similarities between two cultures. This *cultural overlap* in Lyons' words (1991:324) is all the more surprising if we consider two languages as culturally distant as English and Spanish. The explanation for this undeniable identity can, of course, be purely historical, through borrowings from other languages or from the Bible, but in many a case such identity cannot be explained unless some kind of cultural universals are posited. Obviously, any claim for universality requires a larger sampling of languages and a broader idiomatic repertoire, but the following expressions will serve our present purposes to show this apparently intriguing behaviour:

*«To take the law into one's own hands»*          *«Tomarse la justicia por su mano))*
*«To have one's back against the wall»*          *«Estar entre la espalda y la pared»*
*«A hot potato»*          *«Una patata caliente»*
*«To dig one's own grave»*          *«Cavarse su propia tumba»*
*«To take the bull by the horns»*          *«Coger el toro por los cuernos))*
*«To lose one's head»*          *«Perder la cabeza»*
*«To put one's foot in it»*          *«Meter la pata»*
*«The black sheep»*          *«La oveja negra»*
*«To have/keep one's feet on the ground»*          *«Tener los pies en el suelo»*

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| *«To move heaven and earth»* | *«Remover cielos y tierra»* |
| *«To break the ice»* | *«Romper el hielo»* |
| *«To tighten one's belt»* | *«Apretarse el cinturón»* |
| *«To lift one's elbow»* | *«Empinar el codo»* |
| *«To have the last word»* | *«Tener la última palabra»* |
| *«To throw in the towel»* | *«Arrojar la toalla»* |
| *«To rise from the ashes»* | *«Resurgir de las cenizas»* |
| *«To be all ears»* | *«Ser todo oídos»* |
| *«Four eyes can see more than two»* | *«Cuatro ojos ven más que dos»* |
| *«Better late than never»* | *«Más vale tarde que nunca))* |
| *«To count for nothing»* | *«No contar para nada»* |
| *«There's no accounting for tastes»* | *«Sobre gustos no hay nada escrito)* |
| *«Business is business»* | *«Los negocios son los negocios))* |
| *«To make one's mouth water»* | *«Hacer(se) la boca agua»* |
| *«To be up to the neck»* | *«Estar con el agua al cuello»* |
| *«To swim withlagainst the tide»* | *«Nadar conlcontra corriente))* |
| *«To die with one's boots on»* | *«Morir con las botas puestas))* |
| *«To take into one's head»* | *«Metérsele a uno en la cabeza»* |
| *«To rest on one's laurels»* | *«Dormirse en los laureles»* |

Sometimes the overlapping is not complete, and **similarity** is apparent in the choice of a different item from an identical or closely related semantic field. In some cases the explanation is fairly straightforward: *«To take French leave»* (*«Despedirse a la francesa»*), for instance, was a «compliment» that 17th c. European powers (Spain, France and England in particular) would apply to each other (the French equivalent is *«s'en aller à l'anglaise»*). In other instances, identity gives way to a perceptual similarity not always warranted by a possible language contact (e.g *«A blue joke»* –*«un chiste verde»)*. Assuming this different cultural and historical heritage for our languages (English and Spanish), one is surprised at this degree of coincidence in apprehending reality, mainly in a figurative sense, as the following examples clearly show:

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| *«A blue book»* | *«Un libro verde»* |
| *«Green with envy»* | *«Amarillo de envidia»* |
| *«A cut has nine lives»* | *«Siete vidas tiene un gato»* |
| *«To tuke French leave»*[8] | *«Despedirse a la francesa»* |
| *«To be double Dutch»* | *«Sonar a chino»* |
| *«To foul one's nest»* | *«Tirar piedras a su propio tejado»* |
| *«I don't give a damn»* | *«Me importa un bledo»* |
| *«By the skin of one's teeth»* | *«Por los pelos»* |

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8 It is really worth noting the French idiomatic expression equivalent to the English one: «Filer à l'anglaise». Historical rivalries and «hate» between French and English are easily perceived here (Sánchez Benedito 1977: 7).

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| *«To pull one's leg»* | *«Tomar el pelo»* |
| *«To turn a blind eye»* | *«Hacer la vista gorda»* |
| *«To build castles in Spain»* | *«Hacer castillos en el aire»* |
| *«To he in the bag»* | *«Estar en el bote»* |
| *«Silence gives consent»* | *«Quien calla, otorga»* |
| *«Clothes don't make the man»* | *«El háhiro no hace al monje»* |

Similarities of this type are not just restricted to a small group of idioms or a particular area. On the contrary, we find that they happen to occur cross−culturally more often than expected. Nature, customs and traditions, religion and beliefs, literature, and popular knowledge (folklore) provide us with expressions that are both structurally and semantically closely related. If we consider NATURE, for instance, we find identity or similarity in idioms with intervening elements like **heaven/earth** (*«to move heaven and earth»* or *«remover cielos y tierra»*), **water** (*«to pour cold water. on»* or *«echar un jarro de agua fría»),* **fire** (*«to add fuel to the fire»* or *«echar leña al juego»),* **animals** (*«to lead a dog's life»* or *«llevar una vida de perro»*), **birds** (*«a hird in hand is worth two in the bush»* or *«más vale pájaro en mano que ciento volando)))* **fish** (*«packed like sardines»* or *«como sardinas en lata»*) **flowers** (*«a bed of roses»* or *«un camino de rosas»*), etc.

CUSTOMS and TRADITIONS are also present in idioms related to things to **eat and drink** (*«hunger is the hest sauce»* or *«a buen hambre no hay pan duro».* *«honey is not for the ass's mouth»* or *«no se hizo la miel para la boca del asno»*), **clothing** (*«to throw down the gauntlet»* or *«arrojar el guante»,* *«do not wash dirty linen in public»* or *«la ropa sucia en casa se lava»*), **games and sports** (*«dirty game»* or *«juego sucio»,* *«to he un ace at»* or *«ser un as en»,* *«to swim against the stream»* or *«nadar contra− corriente»*), **work and occupations** (*«to work like a Trojan»,* or *«trabajar como un demonio»,* *«the cohbler should stick to his last»* or *«zapatero, u tus zapatos»,* *«to takc the law into one's hand»* or *«tomarse la justicia por su mano»),* etc.

In the sphere of RELIGION and BELIEFS, Spain being for a long time the stronghold of the Roman Catholic Church, it is not surprising that the language should contain a good stock of idioms about religion'. Yet, we find idiomatic expressions that show a close connection between the two languages. We are not referring to biblical idioms proper such as *«You cannot serve God and Mammon»* (*«No se pueden servir a dos señores»),* or *«The spirit is willing, hut the flesh is weak»* (*«El espíritu está pronto pero la carne es débil»*), but to instances like *«To roh Peter to pay Paul»* (*«Desnudar a un santo para vestir otro»),* *«Man proposes, God disposes»*

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9 In fact, as far as profanity and blasphemy in language is concerned, in Catholic and Orthodox countries there are several taboos associated with religion. According to Anderson & Trudgill one can find more sacrilegious expressions relating to the Virgin Mary. for instance. in Catholic countries than in Protestant ones.

(*«El hombre propone y Dios dispone»*), or the common *«The habit does not make the monk»* (*«El hábito no hace al monje»*).

The great bulk of English and Spanish idioms though has no straightforward correspondence. This mismatch between the two systems is reflected in a number of dimensions, linguistic and social, that permeate the whole network of idiomaticity. Thus, having focused so far on idiomatic similarities and furnished a possible explanation for their occurrence, we need to explore now those aspects that characterize idioms in English and Spanish in order to build up a rough picture of their use and importance in both languages.

From a phonostylistic viewpoint, Spanish proverbs in particular use rhyme of one form or another, including paronymy (eg. *«A lo hecho, pecho»*, *«De cuarenta para arriba, no te mojes la barriga»*). English makes a more spare use of rhyme and assonance, but resorts instead to alliteration –nearly absent in Spanish– and to balanced forms, this being the commonest device of all:

> *«Cut your coat according to your cloth»*
> *«Like futher, like son»*
> *«Little strokes fell great oaks»*
> *«Easy come, easy go»*
> *«Mor-e haste, less speed»*, etc.

In terms of *structural complexity*, English idioms tend to be shorter than the Spanish ones. A superficial explanation, not extent of self–complacency with one's own linguistic system  would attribute this to the phlegmatic attitude of the Englishman in contrast with the more imaginative one of the Spaniard. A more objective reason can be found in the way each culture apprehends reality. As Robert Kaplan *(1966)* demonstrated in discussing paragraph development in various languages. English organizes the whole argumentation in a linear way, whereas a speaker of a Romance language (Spanish, for instance) is more digressive. This compactness of writing is apparent in a number of idiomatic expressions when compared with their Spanish equivalents:

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| *«Grasp all, lose all»* | *«Quien mucho abarca, poco aprieta»* |
| *«A dead dog cannot bite»* | *«Muerto el perro, se acabó la rabia»* |
| *«That's another story»* | *«Eso es harina de otro costal»* |
| *«Forewarned is forearmed»* | *«Hombre prevenido vale por dos»* |
| *«The least said the better»* | *«Quien mucho habla, mucho yerra»* |
| *«Third time lucky»* | *«A la tercera va la vencida»* |
| *«To sleep rough»* | *«Dormir al aire libre»* |
| *«To get on one's nerves»* | *«Poner los nervios de punta»* |
| *«A storm in a tea–cup»* | *«Como una tempestad en un vuso de agua»* |
| *«It's never too late»* | *((Nuncaes tarde si la dicha es buena»* |
| *«Miles from anywhere»* | *«Donde Cristo dio las tres voces»*, etc. |

This, however, is not a hard and fast rule, for we find instances where Spanish outstrips English in idiomatic conciseness as the expressions below reveal:

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| *«To get on the gravy train»* | *«Chupar del bote»* |
| *«To he always hlowing one's own trumpet»«* | *No tener abuela»* |
| *«What's sauce for the goose* | |
| *is sauce for the gander»* | *«O todos moros, o todos cristianos»* |
| *«To draw a red herring across the track»* | *«Dar una pista falsa»* |
| *«He hasn't got two pennies* | |
| *to ruh together»* | *«No tiene donde caerse muerto»* |
| *«To keep one's fingers crossed»* | *«Tocar madera»* |
| *«Where there is u will there is a way»* | *«Querer es poder»,* etc. |

A related aspect worth mentioning refers to the nature of idioms. English proverbs and sayings accommiodate to the language tendency towards concreteness (*«There is good fishing in troubled waters»*, *«To kill two hirds with one stone»*, etc.). yet we find abstractness at the expense of concreteness in a number of instances, thus contrasting with their Spanish counterparts:

| | |
|---|---|
| *«The unexpected always happens»* | *«Cuando menos te lo esperas salta la liebre»* |
| *«Beware of one who flatters unduly,* | |
| *he will also censure unjustly»* | *«Quien mucho te alaba te la clava))* |
| *«Fine feathers make fine birds»* | *«Aunque la mona se vista de seda, monu se queda»,* etc. |

## III. STYLE, REGISTER AND *IDIOMS*

Language varies not just only according to the social characteristics of its users –their social class, ethnic group, age and sex– but also according to the socio–cultural context in which they find themselves. The socio–cultural meaning is concerned with the linguistic aspect of who says what to whom and, crucially, under which circumstances. As Mitchell puts it: «an individual presents himself to his interlocutor/s in a variety of guises, largely translatable into terms of the relative roles and statuses of language users. One «places» one's interlocutor and adjusts one's speech in accordance with various biographical assumptions» *(1971: 39).* The same speaker, therefore, may use different linguistic varieties in different situations and for different purposes.

Part of a community's *verbal repertoire* is the variation that language undergoes depending on the **situation** (formal/informal), the **topic,** the **subject** or the **activity** (*register*). Numerous idioms are confined to particular groups of *users* or occasions

of *use,* the situations in which they are normally used being variable factors. Amongst the most significant of those factors are: **(i)** the social relationship between the speakers and **(ii)** the setting, which establishes the degree of seriousness. As far as the social relationships between interlocutors is concerned, it has to be pointed out that idioms are good indicators of the speaker's *attitude* towards the person(s) or events denoted. Giles & Smith (1979) using linguistic data developed what is known as *accommodation theory,* which attempts to explain why speakers modify their language in the presence of others in the way and to the extent that they do. Giles & Smith attempt to explain temporary or long–term adjustments in certain aspects of linguistic behaviour in terms of a drive either a) to approximate one's language to that of one's interlocutors (*accent convergence*) or *b)* to distance one's language from that of the speakers one wishes to dissociate oneself from, show disapproval of, or simply in order to assert one's own identity (*accent divergence*). In this way, the use of a formal style in an informal situation, for instance. can be used as a joke or to signal disapproval or social distance.

Idiomatic expressions are said (Cowie, Mackin & McCaig 1983) to express the speaker's own irritation, anger, a contemptuous attitude towards the person/thing denoted or even a lightly humorous or quietly mocking view of the person/thing referred to. Thus, an idiom marked as «formal» will tend to reflect a distant rather than a close relationship, implying an official setting and suggesting a serious or elevated tone. whereas an idiorn marked as «informal» will reflect a close rather that a distant relationship, implying a domestic setting and suggesting an easy, relaxed tone. But to apply this to *all* idioms is a gross overgeneralization. True that in the case of sayings there are shades of meaning associated with degrees of attachment to the person or thing concerned  —one can think of the different attitude revealed by the two Spanish expressions *«Pasar a mejor vida»* and *«Estirar la pata».* And there is no doubt that some idioms portray a humorous attitude towards life if not a self–consolatory philosophy, particularly in the case of ad hoc creations *(«Ojos que no ven, porrazo que se pegan», «Lo bueno si breve, se agradece», ((Cuando no tengo lomo, caviar como»,* etc.). However, one cannot talk of the speaker's attitude in the case of proverbs. By their very nature, –enduring wisdom and memorability– such frozen chunks are devoid of the attitudinal component that characterize other idiomatic expressions. Nor have they the formal/informal range typical of sayings, for instance. Expressions like *«Practice makes perfect»* or *«Better late than never»* cannot be said to be stylistically marked alongside a scale of formality. Only in this sense does one understand Seidl's words that «an important fact which must be stressed is that idioms are not only colloquial expressions, as many people believe. They can appear in formal style and in slang. They can appear in poetry or in the language of Shakespeare and the Bible» (1978: 5).

This leads us to consider one further aspect related to idiomaticity: its popular character. Dictionaries tell us that a proverb is «a popular short saying with words of advice or warning» (Advanced Learner's Dictionary) thus giving the impression that idioms are part and parcel of popular speech and not so much of a more elaborate,

formal type of language. That idioms are popular is evident, and in fact one of the defining features of idiomaticity is precisely this, that they have become part of the popular consciousness. But this does not imply that idioms should be the prerogative of low class people that avoid long–winded speech by flavouring their conversation with those pithy expressions. Idioms, on the contrary, are common to all kinds of people and have an origin that can be popular as well as literary. Spain in particular has a long «paremiological» tradition that goes back to the beginnings of Spanish literature. Already in the 15th century we find the *Refranes que dicen las viejas tras el fuego* published by el Marqués de Santillana, and since then many literary men have interspersed their writings with all types of idiomatic expressions *(La Celestina,* Cervantes, Lope de Vega, and Camilo José Cela to mention but a contemporary Spanish writer). If not so strong, idioms have had in England an honourable history too that goes back first to the Bible and then to Shakespeare –the greatest literary source of the English modern proverb. In previous centuries, English children at schools «were expected to improve their minds as well as their writing by having to copy proverbs out in their copy–books» (Ridout & Witting 1977). The result being that the «commonest proverbs are still part of the background of every English– speaking child» (ibid.,1977).

Popularity then is not to be equated with low–class speech. **LITERATURE** has also been a source for idiomatic expressions through **tales** and **fables** (*«a dog in the manger»* or *«ser como el perro del hortelano», «to bell the cat»* or *«ponerle el cascabel al gato»),* **the Bible** and **Church history** (*«to oict–Herod Herod»* or *«ser más papista que el Papa», «to wash one's hands of»* or *«lavarse las manos»),* and **names of characters** taken from literary works we have: *«an Aladdin's cave», «like Rip van Winkle», Lilliputian», «to he a Don Juan», «a Jekyll and Hyde personality», «Robin Hood policies», «to he the Cinderella of»,* etc. Literary idiomatic expressions are too:

*«Brevity is the soul of wit»* (Shakespeare)
*«A rose by any other name would smell as sweet»* (Shakespeare)
*«A thing of heaiity is a joy for ever»* (Keats)
*«A little learning is a dangerous thing»* (Pope)
*«Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise»* (Gray), etc.

## IV. IDIOMS AND THEIR TRANSLATION

Undoubtedly, the main problem that we are confronted with when dealing with **idioms** from a cross–cultural perspective is their *translation*: «many students view them with the trepidation of a man approaching a well–planted minefield» (Cowie, Mackin & McCaig 1983: x). But this view of idiomatic expressions as having a «well–planted minefield» nature may be caused by thinking of the meaning–form

relation simply as a dyadic one between a word and its referent, rather than as a multidimensional and functional set of relations between the word in a sentence and the context of its occurrence. Idioms, like any other utterances, are to be produced and understood strictly within a shared context of situation, in which the personal, social, cultural, historical and physical setting has a relevant role to play. Discussing Malinowski's context of situation R.H. Robins (1971: 35) refers to this point when he writes:

> ... the meanings of words and sentences are not universals that happen to be differently labelled in different languages, but they are in large measure dependent on and a part of the culture of the speech community. Translation is possible only in the unification of the cultural context, and the deceptively simple problems of translation between most European languages are due to the historically shared Graeco−Roman−Christian cultural inheritance of Europe. The more diverse the cultures the harder becomes translation, and, significantly, the more deeply embedded in the culture a word or a phrase is, that is to say the more revealing it is of that culture, the greater the difficulty of rendering it in a language from outside the culture area.

Idiomatic expressions as part of a given culture are necessarily to be translated bearing in mind their **function** in the system and not just their **form.** Although, once again a distinction has to be made between proverbs and sayings. As we argued above, idioms cannot be defined by saying that the sense of the whole cannot be arrived at from a prior understanding of the meaning of the parts, as we saw that many authors took for granted, for otherwise the great majority of proverbs would not fit into this definition. Indeed, there is nothing specially opaque in expressions like *«There is no rose without a thorn»* or *«A stitch in time saves nine»* in spite of their figurative meaning. The problem arises the moment we have to render these expressions into another system. The fact that they are to be taken as semantic wholes means that we have to find a similar if not an identical idiomatic structure that culturally corresponds to the semantic import of the proverb. Sayings and frozen similes are still more problematic, for their figurative meaning is usually attached to the whole expression (*«To put one's foot in it»*) so that any literal meaning is bound to be a real «false friend». This point can be illustrated with the following widely−known text in Spanish:

> El español medio duerme como un lirón, come como una lima y tiene vista de lince, pero lleva una vida de perro. Para poder estar a las duras y a las maduras, tiene que ser astuto como el zorro. Aunque el amor, del que a menudo hace su caballo de batalla, le vuelve alegre como unas castañuelas y más contento que unas pascuas, no le gusta hacer el indio, ni que se las den con queso. Por tanto, si las mujeres le dan

demasiados plantones, sobre todo cuando hace un frío que pela, se mosquea rápidamente y, lejos de andarse por las ramas, no duda en coger al toro por los cuernos, porque, aunque sabe hacerse el tonto para conseguir lo que quiere, no le hacen comulgar con ruedas de molino. Puede que caiga enfermo como un perro, con una fiebre de aúpa, pero sabrá soportarlo todo sin inmutarse lo más mínimo, porque, si bien a veces charla por los codos, también sabe ser, llegado el caso, callado como una tumba. Reconozcan que es un bicho raro[10].

Any translation", as Susan Bassnet (1991) rightly points out, requires full awareness of the cultures involved, so that «in order to be able to begin to translate, you have to accept that there are different experiences in different languages» (1991: 8). The translation process becomes therefore «a work that takes a text and transposes it into another culture», trying to re–encode it rather than translate it as such, i.e., always having as the ultimate goal not the linguistic message but the function that a text implies. This is all the more true in the case of idioms whose linguistic form is but a weak indicator of their pragmatic force. Thus, confronted with the task of translating the above text into English, one must consider not just the target language as a system of systems, but also the English culture as sanctioned by its society. It will be necessary to seek those linguistic forms –not individual lexemes, but idiomatic expressions of the target language that transmit the same pragmatic content as in the source language. The result would then be the following:

The average Spaniard sleeps like a log, eats like a horse and has the eyes of a lynx, but leads a dog's life. In order to be able to take the rough with the smooth he has to be as cunning as a fox. Though love, which is often his hobby–horse, can make him walk on air, happy as a lark, he doesn't like to be taken for a sucker, or be led up the garden path. So. if the «birds» stand him up too often, especially when it is cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey, he soon gets hot under the collar, and far from beating about the bush, he will take the bull by the horns, because, if he sometimes plays dumb to get what he wants, he's nobody's fool. He may get sick as a dog, with a hell of a fever, but he will manage to keep a stiff upper lip, for, if he can talk his head off, he also knows to remain, if need be, as silent as a tomb. Admit he's a queer fish[12].

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10 Spanish version of the comic portrait of ihe average French, by Pierre Daninos: *Le Jacassin.* Livre de Poche. Paris. Quoted by Francisco Sánchez Benedito (1977: 2).

11 A complete and useful bibliography on translation theory is provided in Susan Bassnei (1991).

12 English version of the comic portrait of the average French, by Pierre Daninos: *Le Jacassin.* Livre de Poche. Paris. Quoted by Francisco Sánchez Benedito (1977: 351)

And if idiom translation is a crucial problematic area so it is mastering idiomatic expressions within the context of second language learning. To the difficulty of acquiring a semantically self–contained and relatively frozen chunk the learner is faced with the hard task of grasping the figurative meanings that underlie those structures. Thus besides becoming familiar with their linguistic structures, it is necessary to know their meanings and their context of usage. In other words, mastery of idiomatic structures presupposes a cornpetence which is not merely linguistic but cultural in the broadest sense: the leamer rnust acquire what Dell Hymes (1972: 277) calls **communicutive competence** in order to «sound» natural. In the words of Wolfson & Judd (1983: 3–4):

> The cornpetent speaker needs to know not only the meanings of functions of the various forrns but also which ones are appropriate to use in which speech situations. Indeed, if nonnative speakers are to interpret what is said with any accuracy, it is necessary for them to understand the cultural values which underlie speech.

This basically implies the **ucculturation process** suggested by H. Brown (1980:129), a process of becoming adapted to a new culture. No doubt that one way of becoming adapted to such new culture is through the learning of idiomatic expressions and their cultural background.

## V. CONCLUSION

We may end up by stressing the point that idioms play an important role in all languages and are a prime vehicle of communication in many cultures. The fact that they behave like lexemes but with a pragmatic entailment absent from ordinary words makes them a special category not easily amenable to linguistic description. Idioms, however, are not a **separate** part of the language which one can choose either to use or to omit, but they form an **essential** part of the general vocabulary of any language. They are undoubtedly a reflection of a particular way of thinking, behaving, and also of conceptualizing reality and experience. In the case of English and Spanish, we have pointed out some curious coincidences that can be attributed to some sort of universal cross–linguistic stereotypes. As for differences, society and culture exert an overriding influence on each language that manifests itself most clearly in idiomaticity. This poses a great burden on the learner's shoulders who has to fight not just with a different linguistic system, but also with a specific conceptualization of reality if he is going to attain a real communicative competence.

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Sociolinguistics is the study of the relationship between language and society. Find out how culture and relationships influence the words we choose. Over the course of the play, Higgins does indeed transform Eliza from guttersnipe to grand dame, culminating with her presentation to the queen at a royal ball. Along the way, however, Eliza must modify not only her pronunciation but her choice of words and subject matter. In a wonderful third-act scene, Higgins brings his protégé out for a test run. 7 Some Findings and Issues An Early Study â€" New York City â€" Norwich and Reading â€" A Variety of Studies â€" Belfast â€" Controversies â€" Further Reading. vii viii. 1. Confronted with the task of trying to describe the grammar of a language like English, many linguists follow the approach which is associated with Chomsky, undoubtedly the most inuential gure in late twentieth-century linguis-tics. Chomsky has argued on many occasions that, in order to make meaningful discoveries about language, linguists must try to distinguish between what is important and what is unimportant about language and linguistic behavior. •§ 2. Two Approaches to Language Study. •§ 3. Lexicology and Sociolinguistics. •§ 4. Lexical Units. From the above-adduced examples it follows that in contrast with Phonology, Morphology and Syntax, Lexicology is essentially a sociolinguistic science. The lexicologist should always take into account correlations between purely linguistic facts and the underlying social facts which brought them into existence, his research should be based on establishing scientifically grounded interrelation and points of contact which have come into existence between the language and the social life of the speech community in question. § 4. Lexical Units. It was pointed out above that Lexicology studies vari