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The lexicon acquisition process: simple lexicon opposed to phraseological units in Spanish

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Abstract

Studies on phraseology in Spain live an era of splendor since the 1990s, in which the analysis of the phraseological facts from many and varied perspectives began. A common feature of all this scientific production is its contrastive nature, either with the aim of showing the systemic differences between the constructions of two languages, or to facilitate the teaching and learning of phraseological units in foreign languages. However, the processes of acquisition and learning of phraseological units in a native tongue have been forgotten in the field of phraseology and are scarce the studies dealing with how these linguistic units are acquired, how the process of acquisition of phraseological units relates to the acquisition of simple vocabulary or how phraseology can help in the development of other language skills in primary and secondary education. The object of this study is to present the differences existing in the process of interpretation and acquisition of phraseological units as opposed to simple lexical units, analyzing, furthermore, how the characteristics of the phraseologisms affect the processing and subsequent storage of these structures in the mental lexicon of the student.

Keywords: phraseological units; simple lexicon; Spanish language; language development; acquisition of the lexicon.

1. Introduction

Phraseological units (PU) are linguistic structures with an ample presence in the language, in both the more colloquial and formal records, and this presence compels the speaker to have to face daily the challenge of recognising, deciphering and interpreting some sequences which, in the majority of cases, do not respond to the
simple sum of the meanings of its components. Therefore, a native speaker must also acquire “phraseological proficiency”, i.e. “Recognise the different (PU) of a language, and know how to interpret and integrate them in a particular discourse, oral or written, in accordance with the co-text, the context, the relationship with the interlocutor, the social norms and our intention of interaction” (Solano Rodríguez, 2004, p. 411). This phraseological proficiency is based on a “phraseological awareness”, a mechanism that allows the speaker to recognize these structures (despite the possible morphosyntactic aberrations that it may contain — as in a ojos vista — or the use of idiomatic words — de extranjis —) and understand that they should be interpreted as a unit of meaning.

Studies regarding the acquisition of the PU in Spanish as their mother tongue have been scarce, and have limited to affirming that the PU are learnt as blocks of significations that are memorized thanks to the literal repetition of stereotyped formulas (García-Page, 1993). This conception, somewhat simplistic, has not taken into consideration, first of all, the strategies involved in the correct interpretation of the PU, and, secondly, the factors that determine the acquisition of the same by a native speaker. This communication aims to analyse the differences that exist between the acquisition of the PU and the acquisition of simple vocabulary and highlight the differences.

2. The phraseological universe

We understand by PU a set of two or more words that have a relatively fixed structure and unitary meaning, usually not decipherable from the individual meanings of its components. Regarding this, we share a broad vision of the phraseological universe, which we can divide, following the classification of Corpas Pastor (1996), in three broad areas, which differ according to the criteria of statement and fixing. These three major areas are:

• Collocations are fixed phraseological units in the use. These are free syntagmas that have certain combinatorial restrictions determined by their use. There are different types of collocations according to the types of words that compose them: estallar una guerra, declararse una epidemia, entablar amistad, poner a prueba, odio mortal, viaje relámpago, diente de ajo, ciclo de conferencias, desear fervientemente, felicitar efusivamente, rematadamente loco, relacionado estrechamente, etc.

• The idioms are fixed in the system and present major combinatorial restrictions. The idioms are commonly classified according to their function in the phrase: nominal (peso pesado, coser y cantar), adjectival (mondo y lirondo, de pelo en pecho), adverbial (a la chita callando, largo y tendido, boca arriba), verbal (costar un ojo de la cara, saltarse (algo) a la torera, dormir como un tronco), prepositional (delante de, con vistas a, gracias a), conjunctive (con tal de, más que, al fin y al cabo, con todo) and clausal (salarle a alguien el tiro por la culata, no llegarle a alguien la camisa al cuerpo).

• Phraseological statements are phraseological units which establish complete sentences, and can be divided into two types, according to the kind of autonomy presented: the proverbs have textual autonomy (statements of specific value: las paredes oyen, haber moros en la costa, haz el amor y no la guerra; dates; la vida es sueño; and proverbs: de tal palo, tal astilla, por la boca muere el pez, sólo se vive una vez); routine formulas are phraseological units with situational dependence: ¿Qué hay?, A ver, Hasta luego, A eso voy, Y es más, ¿Qué te digo yo?, Perdone que le moleste, Ya lo creo, Y tanto, Ni hablar, Y un jamón, Muchas gracias, No las merece, Suerte y al toro, ¿Qué se le va a a hacer!, ¡A mí, plin!, ¿Y qué?, Ya ajustaremos cuentas, Al grano, ¿Qué mosca te ha picado?, No es para tanto, Lo que yo diga, ¿No te fastidia!, Buenos días, Ve con Dios, etc.

Our study will focus on the verbal locutions, since we believe that it is one of the most productive and linguistically used PU types.

2.1. Characteristics of the verbal idioms opposed to simple lexicon

The most evident difference between a PU and the rest of the simple lexicon is its multi-verbalism, that is the combination of words (coser y cantar – fácil; irse por los cerros de Úbeda – divagar). However, this feature implies
in turn a set of particular traits, some exclusive and others shared with other units of the system, that determine that
the interpretation and the PU acquisition strategies will differ from the simple vocabulary.

Firstly, this combination of words presents a higher or lower fixing. We understand by fixing “the gradual
conversion of a free and variable construction in a fixed construction (stable), invariant and solid, thanks to the
insistent literal repetition” (García-Page, 2008, p. 25). This morphosyntactic feature can be displayed in different
degrees in the locutions, although generally there is little chance of altering its components (*dar gato por liebre –
dar un gato por liebre/dar dos gatos por liebre*).

Secondly, the meaning of the PU and the idioms in particular, does not usually correspond to the sum of the
meanings of its components (dar gato por liebre, irse de la lengua). This is due to its idiomaticity, a very
controversial concept. The idiomaticity has been confused at times with the figurative and metaphorical use of words
(because of the metaphorical and metonymical origin of many PU), and is closely related to the non
compositionality, semantic transparency, opacity or the semantic analyzability (García-Page, 2008, p. 27). All these
terms refer, in short, to the feature through which is not possible to extract the meaning of a PU from the sum of the
individual significances of each of its components, caused by “the extent to which the meanings of the words
forming an idiom contribute to its overall figurative interpretation” (Cacciari & Levorato, 1998, p. 159). Although
the phraseological tradition has identified idiomaticity with no compositionality, there is no controlling criteria
among the phraseologists, being possible to find authors who defend the identification between idiomaticity and non
compositionality opposed to others who believe that an idiomatic PU can be compositional. To this we link the
relationship between idiomaticity and opacity or transparency, which establishes the degree of semantic
interpretability of the PU: a PU can be highly idiomatic but at the same time clearly prove the relationship between
their literal and idiomatic meanings. It should be taken into account, in addition, that the figurative significance of
many PU resides in fossilized or dead metaphors, unknown to the standard speaker, so the relationship between the
literal and idiomatic meanings is more opaque. The idiomaticity is not an exclusive feature of the PU (cf. the
figurative meaning of simple vocabulary) but gradual, since one of the PU constituents sometimes presents a direct
significance (ahogarse en un vaso de agua, no decir ni pío, nadar en la abundancia) that helps in the implication of
the meaning of the PU. The cases of homonymy in which a PU has a literal meaning and another figurative one, are
not unusual (rasgarse las vestiduras, separar el grano de la paja, salir por la puerta grande).

2.2. Factors which determine the interpretation of PU

The factors which determine the interpretation and acquisition of PU in a native tongue can be classified into two
groups: linguistic factors (directly related to the communicative act) and extra linguistic-factors (external to the
communicative act).

2.2.1. Linguistic Factors

Availability of contextual clues. The context is a relevant factor in the interpretation of any new word, both in
children and in adults, and therefore, contextual support is also very important for the interpretation of a PU. For
example, Cacciari and Levorato (1989) demonstrate how the context allows children to interpret unknown PU. On
the other hand, the context can guide the interpretation of a PU towards its literal or figurative meaning. Once the PU
is acquired, the context becomes less important in the strategies of interpretation of the PU (Gibbs, 1980), being
more relevant other factors (the institutionalized meanings of PU, for example).

The degree of transparency of the PU. The PU, in usually possessing a figurative meaning, often causes
interpretational errors. Those whose meanings both literal and figurative are closer will be easier to interpret by a
native speaker who doesn’t know them, since “the learner tries to infer the nonliteral meaning from the literal
meaning of the expression” (Nippold & Rudzinski, 1993, p. 736). In this sense, we find a clear difference with
respect to the meaning of simple vocabulary, which can only be inferred due to the context. The PU, however, won’t
be learnt as a block of significations, but via the active analysis of the individual meaning of the components that
would help to relate its literal and figurative meaning. Nippold et al. (2001, p. 170) confirm that “the findings
concerning transparency support the ‘metasemantic’ hypothesis, the view that idioms are also learned through efforts
to infer the nonliteral meaning from the literal meaning, a process that is easier to execute when the expressions are transparent”.

2.2.2. Extra-linguistic Factors

Exposure or familiarity. Various experiments have shown that some PU with highly idiomatic meanings are correctly interpreted at very early ages, so the familiarity or the degree of exposure to a PU favours without doubt its interpretation and acquisition. The familiarity is the frequency with which a user comes into contact with a PU, until it forms part of their vocabulary. Some authors (Brinton et al., 1985) consider that familiarity is an important prerequisite (essential according to others, such as Ortony et al., 1978) for the acquisition of PU, even when these PU are not understood.

Degree of maturation. The degree of maturation, usually measured by the age of the speaker, is considered another important factor in the interpretation and acquisition of the PU (Brinton et al., 1985; Nippold & Duthie, 2003). The maturing process permits the person greater cognition in the interpretation of PU, via a linguistic sophistication that is not reached until about the age of eleven. However, the fact that some younger children (5 and 6 year olds) will demonstrate the correct interpretation of some PU converts the age into an important but not determinative factor (Brinton et al., 1985).

The maturing process is accompanied by the augmentation in the understanding of figurative language, which is accomplished through a twofold process (Burgess & Chiarello, 1996): a pragmatic process (“top-down pragmatic process”) focused on the linguistic context (the situation of the speaker, the communicative intention, etc.), and a semantic process (“bottom-up semantic process”) that tends to the individual meaning of the words that form part of the PU. This aspect is important as in the correct interpretation of the simple lexicon the semantic process is carried out by linking the literal/known meanings of the words in the sentence, whilst to correctly interpret a PU the subject is compelled to unite these meanings in smaller groups than the sentence to compose a new meaning. It is interesting, in addition, that there seems to be a natural tendency of the human being to promote or prefer the figured interpretations opposed to the verbatim, even if it is a long process that begins at the age of five and is completed in late adolescence. Cacciari and Levorato (1989), when studying the influence of the context in the production of phraseologisms in children, found that the 9 year-old children who were presented with incomplete PU contexts preferred to complete them with “idiomatically incorrect answers” (‘break the fear’, ‘break the problem’) before using verbatim responses (‘break the pencils’), being however correct the majority of the idiomatic responses (‘break the ice’).

Degree of relevance of the PU for the speaker. For some authors (Bromley, 1984) the relevance that the PU has for the success of the communicative act or its importance in a determinant communicative context can be a relevant factor for a rapid acquisition of the same. It is, however, an aspect which has not been greatly studied.

As indicated by Nippold et al. (2001, p. 170), “Idiom interpretation is therefore seen as a flexible activity that lends itself to a variety of strategies that can be combined in different ways depending on the needs of the learner and other circumstances surrounding the expression”. Taking these variables into account, it is possible to develop a scale that puts into relation how different factors in the interpretation and acquisition of PU interacts in native speakers, giving rise to different scenarios:

- Correct interpretation: the speaker knows and uses all the fundamental factors, for which he correctly interprets the PU in all contexts of use.
- Possibly correct interpretation: the speaker knows all except one of the variables, whose absence is remedied by the rest of factors. The speaker has many possibilities to interpret the PU correctly.
- Variable interpretation: the speaker only uses two or three of the five variables, for which it is not possible to ensure the interpretation of the PU. In this case, it will depend on which factors intervene, being more relevant for a correct interpretation the contextual factor, the transparency and the exposure.
• Possibly erroneous interpretation: the speaker uses a single variable to interpret the PU, therefore does not have sufficient elements available for a correct interpretation. In this case, it is very probable that the speaker cannot understand the meaning of the PU.

• Erroneous or impossible interpretation: The speaker cannot make use of any of the interpretation factors, making it impossible to decipher the PU.

3. Conclusions

The PU are presented to the language user as greater lexicon items, that share acquisition processes with the simple lexicon (essentially the repeated exposure and the contextual support) but whose morpho-syntax and semantic characteristics make specific skills necessary for its interpretation. In this regard, we observe that the fundamental difference between the simple lexicon and the PU lies in the interpretation process of the meaning of a PU, which should firstly decipher partial and literally the PU (in a similar process, but on a reduced scale, of the textual interpretation process) and subsequently relate these meanings with the overall significance of the phrase. In this process, the semantic transparency, a feature which is absent in the simple lexicon, becomes a key factor, which can be assisted by the rest of factors analyzed (context, exposure, maturation and relevance).

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