

## LANGUAGE AS A MIRROR OF CULTURE: PHRASEOLOGY IN THE SPANISH LANGUAGE

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**Annotation:** Phraseological units (idioms, proverbs, set expressions) are compact repositories of cultural knowledge. This article examines how Spanish phraseology reflects and reproduces Spanish cultural models — values, historical experience, social norms, and emotional orientation. Building on theoretical work in cultural linguistics and phraseology, the paper offers a semantic classification of key phraseological domains, then analyses a carefully selected set of Spanish phraseological units in depth (12 items) to show how figurative structure, usage, pragmatic force, and translational behavior reveal cultural patterns. The study argues that phraseology functions both as a mirror (reflecting cultural patterns) and as a cultural engine (reproducing and adapting values in real discourse).

**Keywords:** phraseology, idiom, proverb, cultural linguistics, Spanish, metaphor, pragmatics, translation.

Language and culture are mutually constitutive: language encodes habitual ways of thinking and behaving, while cultural patterns motivate and shape linguistic forms. Phraseological units — fixed, often image-rich expressions — are especially rich for cultural analysis because they condense conventionalized worldviews into brief utterances. The Spanish-speaking world, with its long literary tradition, regional variety, and historical layers (Roman, Visigothic, Islamic, Christian Reconquest, colonial expansion), displays a phraseological system that stores and transmits collective values, norms, and evaluative orientations. This paper explores that storehouse by combining theoretical framing with close analyses of emblematic phraseological units [78, 2].

Two premises guide the analysis. First, phraseological units are not only lexical items but semiotic complexes whose semantics often depend on cultural background knowledge and conventional inference [114,3]. Second, conceptual metaphor theory and cultural linguistics provide productive tools for linking phraseological imagery with cultural models: metaphors such as TIME IS MONEY or LIFE IS A JOURNEY index values (productivity, teleology) and provide a structural grammar for many idioms [45,5]. Phraseology should thus be analysed at multiple levels: form (syntactic fixedness), semantics (literal vs figurative components and

metaphorical mapping), pragmatics (speech-act force and evaluative stance), cultural script (background cultural model), and translational behavior (equivalents in other languages and losses/gains in translation) [38,1].

Based on literature and the observed distribution of idioms, Spanish phraseological units cluster around several culturally salient domains:

Time and temporality: idioms that valorize punctuality, endurance, or fatalism.

Religion and morality: expressions rooted in Catholic imagery and moral judgement.

Work, effort, and luck: idioms linking success with effort or fortune.

Social relations, honor, and shame: expressions about reputation, belonging, and social roles.

Food and bodily metaphors: idioms using culinary images to express affect and evaluation.

Nature, animals, and the environment: idioms derived from rural life and observation of nature.

The article uses a qualitative, close-reading methodology: selection of phraseological items widely attested in peninsular and Latin American Spanish (reference dictionaries, refraneros, corpora), followed by multi-level analysis (etymology where available, conceptual metaphor, pragmatic function, frequency of use, and translation notes). The focus is on depth rather than breadth: 12 idioms are analysed intensively to show how a limited number of expressions can reveal multifaceted cultural patterns. Citations in the text refer to established works on phraseology, metaphor, and Spanish idiom collections [214,8].

Before the examples, a short typology of frequent metaphorical patterns:

TIME AS A VALUABLE / RESOURCE — e.g., El tiempo es oro (“Time is gold”): encodes a productivity ethic and the notion that time can be spent, saved, or lost.

LIFE AS JOURNEY / PATH — e.g., Andar por buen camino: moral and teleological orientation.

SOCIAL STATUS AS PHYSICAL SPACE — e.g., Subir/bajar social rank expressed through movement metaphors.

EMOTION AS TEMPERATURE / LIQUID — e.g., tener sangre fría vs estar caliente.

FOOD AS VALUE METAPHOR — e.g., ser pan comido (“to be a piece of cake”) expresses ease with gastronomic imagery.

These metaphors are not unique to Spanish, but their particular instantiations and pragmatic colorings (religious inflection, regional variants, humor) are culturally specific [45, 5].

A quien madruga, Dios le ayuda - Literal image: “To whom wakes early, God helps.” Figurative meaning: Early initiative is rewarded. Cultural reading: The proverb blends a Christian worldview (divine providence) with a Protestant-style valorization of punctuality and initiative — a synthesis that gained currency in popular speech. The presence of explicit religious agency (Dios) is telling: success is framed as both personal effort and divinely sanctioned. This doubles the proverb’s function: normative (advising industriousness) and legitimacy (framing success as morally sanctioned). Pragmatics: Often used to encourage action or to moralize laziness.

Can be ironic. Translation: Common English equivalent: “The early bird catches the worm” — similar pragmatic import but lacks religious reference, showing a lexical-cultural loss/gain [284, 9].

Dios aprieta pero no ahoga - Literal image: “God squeezes but does not strangle.” Figurative meaning: Hardship is controlled by providence; suffering has limits. Cultural reading: Deeply embedded in Catholic cultural coping strategies: suffering is acceptable but bounded; there is hope. The idiom supports resilience and tempers fatalism with reassurance. It encodes a theological anthropology where divine will permits but does not annihilate human endurance. Pragmatics: Consolatory contexts; often used to moderate complaints. Translation: No direct English idiom carries the religious consolation fully; paraphrase is common, showing cultural-specific affect [214, 8].

El tiempo es oro - Literal image: Time equated with gold. Figurative meaning: Time is valuable and should be used economically. Cultural reading: The metaphor indexes a monetized view of life — modern economic values permeating everyday language. In Spanish contexts, the proverb coexists with sayings encouraging patience — showing a cultural tension between productivity and the Mediterranean relaxed attitude. Pragmatics: Used in work-related contexts and admonitions. Frequently invoked in management discourse. Translation: Identical in many languages; universality masks cultural inflections (how strictly the proverb is applied varies by region) [328, 10].

Tirar la casa por la ventana - Literal image: “To throw the house out the window.” Figurative meaning: To spend lavishly; celebrate without restraint. Cultural reading: Historically tied to Spanish festive practices (popular etymologies connect it to popular eighteenth–nineteenth century displays): the idiom encodes an aesthetic of celebration and communal display. It reflects a cultural readiness to invest in public festivity as social capital. Pragmatics: Often used to comment on extravagant weddings or public celebrations. Can be approving or critical depending on speaker stance. Translation: “To spare no expense” captures the meaning but loses historical color [284, 9].

Ser la oveja negra - Literal image: “To be the black sheep.” Figurative meaning: To be the odd, disapproved member of a family/community. Cultural reading: Reflects strong family/community norms and the social costs of deviation. The animal imagery is shared with English, but in Spanish contexts the idiom can carry stronger moral condemnation in conservative settings. Pragmatics: Used in social diagnosis — identity-marking. Translation: Direct equivalent in English; cultural salience varies regionally [114, 3].

Más vale pájaro en mano que ciento volando - Literal image: “A bird in the hand is worth more than a hundred flying.” Figurative meaning: Prefer the secure small gain over uncertain greater gains. Cultural reading: The proverb encodes practical risk-aversion, a learned economic prudence widespread in everyday Spanish-speaking cultures, perhaps reinforced by historical

instability in many societies of the Hispanic world. Pragmatics: Advising caution or pragmatic decision-making. Translation: Direct equivalents in many languages; the proverb's pragmatic feel remains robust [327, 1]

Estar como una cabra - Literal image: "To be like a goat." Figurative meaning: To be crazy/odd. Cultural reading: Animal metaphors here reflect rural observation and social stereotyping. The use of cabra (goat) — an animal associated with caprice — links perceived temperament to agrarian imagery. In urban contexts this idiom often carries affectionate mockery rather than formal stigma. Pragmatics: Humorous evaluation among friends. Translation: No exact English match; "to be a little crazy" is the pragmatic equivalent [92, 6].

Ser pan comido - Literal image: "To be eaten bread" (i.e., something eaten as bread). Figurative meaning: Something very easy. Cultural reading: Food-as-value metaphors are especially salient in Spanish culture, where shared meals and culinary expertise are central to identity. Equating ease with a staple food item evokes ordinary everydayness. Pragmatics: Minimizes difficulty; often used in instruction. Translation: "A piece of cake" is a cultural equivalent with similar figurative mapping [28, 10].

No hay mal que por bien no venga - Literal image: "There is no bad from which good does not come." Figurative meaning: Every misfortune may bring a benefit. Cultural reading: Expresses a cultural optimism and reframing strategy: adversity is reinterpretable as opportunity. It aligns with a resilient, narrative-making habit in popular culture. The moralizing valence is strong — encourages acceptance and sense-making. Pragmatics: Consolation and sense-making in discourse about setbacks. Translation: "Every cloud has a silver lining" approximates the meaning but differs in imagery [214, 8].

Meter la pata - Literal image: "To put the paw/leg in" (i.e., make a blunder). Figurative meaning: To make a mistake or say something awkward. Cultural reading: The colloquial, bodily metaphor indexes face-threatening acts and interpersonal norms: social errors are conceived as physical misplacement. This idiom is frequent in spoken Spanish and reveals interactional sensitivity to embarrassment. Pragmatics: Self-deprecating admissions of error; mitigated by humor. Translation: "To put one's foot in it" is an English cognate both in image and function. [327, 1].

Tener la sartén por el mango - Literal image: "To have the frying pan by the handle." Figurative meaning: To hold the power in a situation. Cultural reading: Domestic utensils as metaphors for control reveal gendered histories (kitchen as site of household agency). The expression encodes banal domestic objects into social-power metaphors. It also reflects a pragmatic orientation: power is enacted in ordinary situations. Pragmatics: Used to comment on negotiation dynamics and control. Translation: "To hold all the cards" conveys power but loses domestic imagery [114, 3].

Estar en las nubes - Literal image: “To be in the clouds.” Figurative meaning: To be distracted or daydreaming. Cultural reading: A cognitive–spatial metaphor where mental state is mapped onto vertical displacement, reflecting a poetic tradition and the value of contemplative imagination. This idiom is used both affectionately and critically. Pragmatics: Mild reproach or gentle teasing. [328, 10].

Cross-cutting observations (what the examples show about culture):

Religious lexicon persists. Several idioms explicitly invoke Dios or theological concepts, signaling the historic depth of Catholic worldview in popular language even where secularization is present [156, 6].

Domestic and culinary imagery is frequent. The prominence of food and kitchen metaphors indicates the centrality of communal eating and domestic life in cultural schemata [328, 10].

Rural/nature-based metaphors survive in urban speech. Animal and agricultural metaphors (goat, bird, frying pan) point to long-standing agrarian frames that continue to inform metaphoric mapping despite urbanization [92, 6].

Pragmatic orientation: Many idioms function as evaluative tools — to advise, comfort, chastise, or gloss social behavior — showing that phraseology is a practical resource for social management [327, 1].

Translatability varies. Some idioms have near-equivalents in other languages, while others carry cultural color that is lost in literal translation, requiring paraphrase or cultural footnotes [38, 1].

Phraseology should have a central place in advanced language instruction because idioms index cultural expectations and pragmatic norms [114, 3]. Teaching must go beyond literal glosses to explain cultural scripts and typical contexts of use. In translation, literal equivalents often fail to transmit pragmatic loading; translators should opt for functional equivalents or explicatory notes when cultural content is salient [327, 1].

A focused analysis of Spanish phraseology shows that idioms are compact cultural texts: they crystallize religious residues, domestic imaginaries, rural metaphors, economic valuations of time, and interactional norms. By studying a moderated set of well-attested phraseological items with careful semantic, pragmatic, and cultural attention, we can see how language both mirrors and perpetuates cultural models. Phraseology thus remains an indispensable window into national worldview and a practical resource for intercultural competence [102, 4].

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