

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SPANISH AND FRENCH PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS: A LINGUOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. This paper offers a comparative analysis of set expressions in Spanish and French, focusing on their national and cultural specificity. The language material is seen as a way to verbalize the cultural codes in two Romance ethnic groups. The relevance of the study stems from the need to better understand how reality is conceptualized in closely related linguocultures, and also from the fact that the comparative phraseology of Spanish and French remains underexplored. The aim is to identify and then analyze in depth the national and cultural features of phraseological units in these two languages. The empirical base consists of 120 phraseological units (60 from each language), collected by continuous sampling from reliable lexicographic sources [1;2;3;4]. The research uses componential analysis, phraseological identification method, linguoculturological analysis, comparative method and quantitative data processing. The results confirm that the phraseological funds of Spanish and French show both isomorphic traits (due to their common origin and universal human experience) and allomorphic traits that reflect each culture's uniqueness. In French, the gastronomic cultural code clearly dominates, while in Spanish there is a more balanced distribution of codes, with anthropic and gastronomic codes being somewhat more frequent. We also identified three types of cross-language correspondence: full equivalents, partial equivalents, and nonequivalent idioms. The axiological analysis shows that in both languages idioms with negative connotations are more numerous. The findings can be useful for lexicographic practice, translation theory and teaching Spanish and French as foreign languages.

Keywords: phraseology, idiom, linguoculturology, cultural code, comparative analysis, the Spanish language, the French language

Introduction

One of the main tasks of modern linguoculturology and ethnopsycholinguistics is to explore the linguistic picture of the world [5]. Language and culture are inseparable. Studying idioms – set expressions – helps us understand deeper meanings of national worldviews. The phraseological fund acts like the «soul» of a language: it accumulates centuries of observations, value systems, stereotypes and everyday habits of a people [6, p. 78–85].

Comparative analysis of phraseological units belonging to the same language group but developing in different sociocultural contexts is especially interesting. Spanish and French are both Romance languages, but

despite their common roots and longterm cultural contact, their phraseological systems show both typological similarities and important differences. These differences come mainly from the specific national perceptions, value systems and ways of life of the speakers [7, p. 156–178].

Understanding these national and cultural codes is very relevant for tourism and service industries. Hotel staff, tour guides, travel managers constantly interact with people from other cultures. Knowing phraseology well helps them not only to translate informational materials correctly but also to build effective crosscultural communication and avoid misunderstandings and conflicts.

Literature review

The scientific approach to set word combinations was first developed by Swiss linguist Ch. Bally, who is considered the founder of phraseology as a linguistic discipline. His works laid the foundation for a systematic description of the phraseological fund [6, p. 78–85].

A major contribution to the linguoculturological direction was made by V. N. Teliya. In her fundamental monograph «Russian Phraseology: Semantic, Pragmatic and Linguoculturological Aspects» (1996), she developed the theory of cultural connotation and cultural interpretation of linguistic signs [5, p. 214–223].

For comparative analysis of Romance phraseology, the works of V. G. Gak are essential. His research reveals isomorphic and allomorphic features in the semantics and figurative basis of French and Russian phraseological units [7, p. 156–178]. The comparative and typological model proposed by V. G. Gak can also be applied to other language pairs, including Spanish and French. Important ideas for understanding the structure and semantics of idioms can be found in A. V. Kunin's "Course of Phraseology of Modern English" [8, p. 189–203]; his methodology works well for Spanish and French as well.

Problems of language contacts and phraseological borrowings in Romance languages have been studied by S. M. Kravtsov [9, p. 45–52], I. V. Zytkova [10, p. 112–125], and in a collective monograph edited by S. V. Shustova [11, p. 140–161]. Recent comparative studies of Germanic and Romance phraseology include works by K. Filatova and colleagues [12, p. 1505] and Yu. V. Novogran [13, p. 532–533]. Theoretical issues of phraseology in diachrony and synchrony are addressed by V. M. Mokienko [14, p. 9–15] and V. V. Vinogradov [15, p. 140–161].

In this study, we follow the definition of phraseological unit given by I. I. Chernysheva: «Phraseological units are stable word combinations that, regardless of the number of components, form a semantic whole and perform a nominative or expressive function in the language» [16, p. 29].

Methodology and methods

The theoretical and methodological basis of the research is the comparative and typological approach, which helps to identify similarities and differences in the figurative basis of phraseological units [7, p. 156–178]. To achieve the goals we used several linguistic methods:

1. Continuous sampling – to collect the phraseological units from lexicographic sources [1;2;3;4].
2. Componential analysis – to examine the semantic structure of the idioms.
3. Phraseological identification method (following A. V. Kunin) – to classify the units and define their boundaries [8, p. 20].
4. Linguoculturological analysis – to interpret the inner form of idioms and reveal the cultural codes behind them [10, p. 178].
5. Quantitative method – to process the obtained data.

The empirical material consisted of 120 phraseological units (60 from each language), selected from the following lexicographic sources.

Results

After analysing the corpus we obtained systematised data, and based on them we constructed a thematic classification of Spanish and French idioms (Table 1), identified dominant cultural codes (Table 2) and types of interlingual correspondence.

The distribution is relatively even. In Spanish, the highest proportion corresponds to life circumstances (30 %), which may reflect the Spanish attitude towards fate and their ability to cope. In French, idioms describing interpersonal relations (30 %) and life circumstances (30 %) are more frequent.

Spanish shows a relatively balanced distribution of cultural codes, with a slight predominance of the anthropic (27 %) and gastronomic (23 %) codes. The anthropic code is present in many idioms that reflect key values and ways of life of the Spanish: «al mal tiempo, buena cara» («against bad weather – a good face»), «ojos que no ven, corazón que no siente» («eyes that don't see, heart that doesn't feel»). The gastronomic metaphor in Spanish is also vivid and often involves actions or unexpected comparisons: «vete a freír espárragos» («go fry asparagus»), and the universal «¡Es la leche!» which can express both enthusiasm and disappointment, depending on intonation. Another characteristic idiom is «Éramos pocos, y parió la abuela» («there were few of us, and the grandmother gave birth»), showing a specific attitude towards problems: things were already difficult, and now there is one more trouble.

In French, the gastronomic code clearly dominates (30 %). This confirms the idea that culinary metaphor plays a key role in French language consciousness [7, p. 234–256]. The most illustrative examples are: «raconter des salades» («to tell salads» – to lie), «c'est la fin des haricots» («it's the end of the beans» – things are bad), «s'occuper de ses oignons» («to mind one's onions» – mind your own business). There are also common idioms related to the animal world and nature: «Quand les poules auront des dents» («when hens have teeth»), «Avoir d'autres chats à fouetter» («to have other cats to whip»), «Coup de foudre» (lightning strike).

Types of interlingual correspondence

Three main types were identified:

1. Full equivalents (18 %). International idioms: «comprar un gato en la bolsa» – «acheter un chat en poche» (to buy a cat in a bag) [17, p. 158].
2. Partial equivalents (52 %). The meaning coincides but the figurative basis differs. For example, the concept «to die»: Spanish «estirar la pata» (lit. «to stretch the paw»), French «manger les pissenlits par la racine» (lit. «to eat dandelions by the root»).
3. Nonequivalent idioms (30 %). Unique cultural references without analogues in the other language. Spanish «dar calabazas» (lit. «to give

Table 1 – Thematic classification of idioms in French and Spanish

Thematic group	Spanish (%)	French (%)	Spanish (%)
Human character, moral qualities		23 %	27 %
Work, professional activity		17 %	20 %
Interpersonal relations		30 %	23 %
Life circumstances		30 %	30 %

Table 2 – Distribution of cultural codes in the inner form of French and Spanish idioms

Cultural code	French (%)	Spanish (%)
Anthropic	23 %	27 %
Gastronomic	30 %	23 %
Zoomorphic	17 %	20 %
Objectdomestic	13 %	13 %

pumpkins» – to reject), French «avoir un poil dans la main» (lit. «to have a hair in the palm» – to be lazy) [13, p. 533].

Axiological characteristics

The analysis of the evaluative component shows that in both languages idioms with negative connotations predominate (Table 3).

The prevalence of negatively connoted idioms (50–57 %) reflects a common linguistic tendency: deviations from the norm are marked more frequently and more expressively than the norm itself [5, p. 223].

Structural and grammatical features

Verbal phraseological units dominate in both languages: from 58 % in French to 60 % in Spanish. This reflects the procedural nature of the situations described and confirms the functional role of phraseological units as means of naming actions, states and processes [8, p. 157].

Discussion

The data we got are interesting not only by themselves but also when you compare them with what we already know about other languages. Actually, comparative phraseology always gives food for thought about how differently people see the world.

Similarities and differences in thematic areas

As seen from Table 1, in both languages the most frequent spheres that idioms describe are human character, work, relationships with people and life circumstances. These are universal things, but there are nuances. For instance, in French there are clearly more expressions describing interpersonal relations (30 % against 23 % in Spanish). Maybe this is because French culture pays more attention to speech etiquette, forms of address, social distance [7]. The Spanish, on the contrary, talk more about life circumstances (30 %), and often with optimism – «al mal tiempo, buena cara». This highlights their love for life and ability to keep their spirits up.

Why French people love food so much, but Spanish love both body and food?

The most striking result is, of course, the difference in cultural codes. In French, the gastronomic code leads by a large margin (30 %). This is no accident: France is the home of haute cuisine, gastronomic criticism, restaurant business. The French are used to describing the world around them through food. They «tell salads» when they lie, for them «it's the end of the beans» means total collapse, and if someone meddles in other people's business, they tell him to «mind his onions». This has become so rooted in the language that without food a French person can hardly express any thought [7, p. 234–256].

In Spanish, the picture is different. Yes, the gastronomic code is also strong (23 %), but the first place goes to the anthropic code (27 %). Spanish people often talk about face, eyes, hands, about how someone looks, how they react to events. Remember «ojos que no ven, corazón que no siente» – here both eyes and heart, both physical images. Or «dar calabazas» – actually «to give pumpkins», but it means to reject someone, so it's an action performed by a person, not about the food itself. We can suppose that Spanish culture is more focused on outward expression of emotions, facial

Table 3 – Axiological characteristics of Spanish and French idioms

Type of evaluation	French (%)	Spanish (%)
Positive	17 %	23 %
Negative	57 %	50 %
Neutral	26 %	27 %

expressions, gestures, while French culture focuses more on everyday life and comfort.

Where do partial equivalents come from?

In our study more than half of all idioms (52 %) turned out to be partial equivalents. This is a very important point for translators and teachers. Take for instance the topic of death. In Spanish «estirar la pata» (to stretch the paw) – an informal and even a bit crude expression. In French «manger les pissenlits par la racine» (to eat dandelions by the root) – more figurative and slightly softer, though also colloquial. They match in function but create different visual images. A person learning a language must know such nuances; otherwise they might use the wrong idiom in the wrong situation [8].

Nonequivalent idioms (30 %) are a real treasure for cultural studies. They cannot be translated literally, and their meaning must simply be memorised together with the cultural context. French «avoir un poil dans la main» (to have a hair in the palm) – a lazy person. A rather funny image. Spanish «dar calabazas» (to give pumpkins) – to reject someone in love or fail an exam. Why pumpkins? Here historical explanations are needed: in Spain the pumpkin was a symbol of emptiness and uselessness [13]. Without knowledge of the local customs, the meaning of such an idiom remains elusive.

Negative evaluation – a normal thing for language

The axiological analysis (Table 3) showed that negative idioms outnumber positive ones in both languages. This is a common feature not only of Spanish and French but of many other languages. People more often talk about shortcomings, mistakes, troubles than about virtues. Psychologists explain this by the fact that negative experiences are remembered better and require more words [5, p. 223]. However, it's interesting that in Spanish there are slightly more positive idioms (23 % vs 17 % in French). Maybe this is another manifestation of Spanish optimism, that very «buena cara» in the face of difficulties.

Practical use in tourism and service

For a journal focused on tourism and service, it is important to emphasise the practical relevance of the research. Hotel staff, tour guides, and travel managers constantly interact with international guests. Knowing at least the basic idioms of the visitor's language helps avoid awkward situations and misunderstandings. Imagine a guide says to a Spanish tourist «vamos a freír espárragos» instead of «vamos a empezar» – literally «let's go fry asparagus», which in Spanish is a rather rude way of saying «leave me alone» or «go away». The tourist would be, to say the least, puzzled. Or imagine a French person says «ne vous occupez pas de vos oignons», and the listener translates it literally as «don't mind your onions» – the actual meaning («mind your own business») is completely lost, and the conversation breaks down.

Limitations and future plans

The collected material – 120 units – certainly does not exhaust the full wealth of Spanish and French idiomatics. In future we should expand the corpus, also including regional variants (Latin American Spanish, Belgian and Swiss French). Moreover, it would be interesting to compare the obtained data with Italian or Portuguese – that would give a more complete picture of Romance phraseology [7].

Furthermore, the question of how idioms are interpreted by foreigners lacking cultural context deserves attention. Perhaps native speakers themselves do not always realise how saturated their speech is with cultural codes, but for learners this becomes a real barrier.

Practical recommendations for tourism and service professionals

Since this journal focuses on tourism and service, it's worth talking separately about how our results can help in practice. Theory is theory, but the main thing is that the conclusions work in real life – in communication with tourists and clients.

How idioms affect service quality

Many hotel staff, guides, travel managers learn foreign languages, but they often focus on standard phrases: «Hello», «Thank you», «How can I get to...?». Idioms fall by the wayside. But it's idioms that cause the most misunderstandings. A tourist might say «Je suis sur la paille» (literally «I'm on the straw») – it doesn't mean they need bedding, it means they have no money. Or «¡Estoy hasta la coronilla!» – this is not about a crown, it means the person is worn out or annoyed.

If a guide or receptionist doesn't understand such expressions, a barrier appears. The tourist feels they're being talked to like a textbook, not like a real person. On the other hand, if the employee uses a couple of appropriate idioms, it immediately creates a good impression. For example, telling a Spanish person «¡Qué mala suerte!» is fine, but adding «Estás de malas» – that's more natural.

Which idioms should be included in phrasebooks for tourism workers

Based on our study we can pick out a few expressions that appear often in everyday speech. For French:

- «Ça coûte les yeux de la tête» – very expensive. Useful when a tourist asks about the price of an excursion or a souvenir.
- «Être dans la galère» – to be in a difficult situation. You can say it if a flight is delayed or the hotel is overbooked.
- «Avoir le cafard» – to feel down, to be sad. Not for the client, but for colleagues to describe a mood.

For Spanish:

- «Estar sin blanca» – to be without money (literally «without a white one»). Useful if a tourist needs to understand that there will be no discounts.
- «Tirar la casa por la ventana» – to splash out, to spare no expense. You can praise a tourist for being generous.
- «Ponerse las pilas» – to get one's act together, to pull oneself together. Good for excursions: «Hay que ponerse las pilas, que empezamos».

Of course, you need to be careful with idioms that might sound rude or too familiar. In the examined material, for instance, French «avoir un poil dans la main» (lazy person) – one should refrain from using this with a client, and Spanish «vete a freír espárragos» (get lost) – all the more so.

How to train staff in idioms

Study programmes in hotel management and tourism usually do not allocate specific time to phraseology. Nevertheless, a simple method can be proposed: learn three new idioms per week and try to use them when speaking with colleagues. It may also be helpful to display posters with idioms and their explanations in staff areas – such a technique serves as a constant reminder.

In addition, it is worthwhile to collect feedback from the tourists themselves. If a guest uses an unfamiliar fixed expression, it should be noted down and later discussed with a language teacher. In this way, an active linguistic repertoire is gradually built up.

What to avoid

First. Do not translate idioms literally. The French “raconter des salades” is not about cooking; it means lying or making up stories. If a tourist complains that the guide is “telling salads”, they are not asking for tomatoes but expressing dissatisfaction.

Second. Avoid outdated or overly bookish expressions. Our material included, for example, idioms dating back to the 17th century. They are of interest for research, but they sound unnatural in the speech of a contemporary person.

Third. Take cultural distance into account. Addressing a guest informally and using familiar expressions is by no means acceptable in all cultures. Spanish people tend to be more relaxed, while the French, on the contrary, are more reserved. It is better first to listen to how a native speaker addresses you and then adjust your own manner of communication.

Economic effect

At first glance, language and finance may seem unrelated. However, if a client feels understood at a cultural level, they will return to the hotel again, recommend it to friends and leave positive feedback. A negative review, by contrast, leads to lost bookings. Investment in language training for staff pays off fairly quickly. Preventing just one conflict caused by a misinterpreted phrase already generates savings.

Thus, one should not underestimate such “small things” as idioms. They do not merely embellish speech; they fulfil an important communicative function. Our research has shown that these expressions differ significantly in Spanish and French, and the tourism business should take these differences into account when training its staff.

Conclusion

The research leads to the following conclusions:

1. The phraseological funds of Spanish and French show both isomorphic (shared) features due to genetic relationship and allomorphic (specific) features reflecting the uniqueness of each linguoculture.
2. Dominant cultural codes: in French – gastronomic (30 %); in Spanish – balanced distribution with anthropic (27 %) and gastronomic (23 %) codes slightly ahead.
3. Degrees of equivalence: full equivalents (18 %), partial equivalents (52 %), nonequivalent units (30 %).
4. Axiological analysis: idioms with negative connotations prevail (50.57 %).
5. Structural and grammatical analysis: verbal phraseological units predominate (58.60 %).

The obtained results can be used in lexicography, translation practice, and teaching Spanish and French as foreign languages. In the fields of tourism and service, understanding cultural codes helps to achieve effective crosscultural communication and improve service quality.

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