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On the (meta)pragmatic value of some Spanish idioms based on terms for body parts

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A B S T R A C T

This paper is part of a broader research project on the multiple phenomena encompassed by the field of metalinguistics in Spanish. In particular, a corpus of Spanish metapragmatic idioms based on terms for parts of the body is analyzed. The main objective of the study is to describe the pragmatic behavior of this group of expressions, which occurs within three different sub-spheres (discursive organization; regulation of the interaction between speakers; modality). This analytical perspective is combined with a formal and functional approach to the corpus which completes the description of the real discursive value of each unit. Finally, in light of the particular nature of the corpus, the current pragmatic values of the idioms are related to the metaphorical and metonymical foundations that may have played a part in their process of grammaticalization.

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1. Introduction

This study deals with one specific area in what is referred to as the *metalinguistic phraseology* of languages, a field that has been extensively analyzed in Spanish as part of the research project entitled "Lo metalingüístico en español/ Metalinguistics in Spanish"[1] (see Fernández Bernárdez, 2002; Aznárez Mauleón, 2006; Olza, 2006a,b,c, 2007, 2011; Manero Richard, 2011). In particular, this article draws on a broader research project (Olza, 2011) whose purpose is to analyze the figurative conception of *language* – as part of reality – that underlies the idiomatic meaning of the sub-set of Spanish phraseology *containing terms for body parts as base constituents*. The overall objective of this research project is to determine how – in cognitive terms – *somatic experience* is projected metaphorically and metonymically into the target domain LANGUAGE.

In general terms, an idiom[2] may be regarded as *metalinguistic* either when it describes some aspect of linguistic action – in such paradigmatic examples as *to say* something *with your tongue in your cheek* ('not to talk seriously') or *by word of mouth* ('in spoken, not written, words'); or when it effects some kind of metapragmatic or metadiscursive function. Some preliminary examples of metalinguistic idioms containing terms for body parts may be examined in this regard:

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  [2] The terms *idiom* and *phraseological unit/phraseological expression* are used as equivalents in this study, and they denote any 'fixed and multi-lexical expression whose meaning is basically non-compositional'.

Table 1
Descriptive idioms vs. idioms of pragmatic-discursive value.

Description of linguistic action	Metapragmatic/metadiscursive value
echar pelillos a la mar	*pelillos a la mar*
[to throw little hairs to the sea][a]	[little hairs to the sea]
poner punto en boca	*punto en boca*
[to put a dot/period in your mouth]	[dot/period in mouth]

[a] A word-for-word rendering is given for each idiom addressed (see Sections 2.1 and 3 below for an explanation of the equivalences and translations into English given for each particular idiom).

In fact, while the phraseological expressions included as examples of the former group – *echar pelillos a la mar*, which means 'to reconcile'; and *poner punto en boca*, 'to stop talking' – refer to language and linguistic action as objects of reality, the referential or descriptive meaning of other idioms has been weakened in favor of a new pragmatic content related to a particular metadiscursive operation. This is the case with the pragmatic counterparts of the descriptive expressions cited above: *pelillos a la mar*, which may be used to minimize previous objections or, more generally, any kind of verbal confrontation, thus re-directing cooperation in a specific linguistic exchange (see an example of the real use of this phraseological unit in Section 4.2); and *punto en boca*, which is employed by a speaker to silence an interlocutor (see Section 4.2). In any case, both types of metalinguistic idioms – descriptive units and expressions of metapragmatic or metadiscursive value – may be regarded as examples of what Rey-Debove (1997: 22–23) referred to as the *common* or *natural metalanguage of languages*, i.e. the terms and expressions of natural languages used by speakers themselves to refer to language as an object or to perform a wide range of metapragmatic functions and procedures.[3] Also, from Verschueren's (1999: Section 6.4; 2000: Section 2) perspective, the existence and particular usage of this metalinguistic phraseology may be read as explicit indicators of what he labels *reflexive* or *metapragmatic awareness*, which, in the end, regulates all sorts of linguistic interaction:

> Being a crucial aspect of what goes on when language is used (whether in uttering or in interpreting), pragmatic analyses have to come to terms with the role of consciousness, awareness, or salience – whatever the preferred term may be – in order to understand linguistic behavior. [...] salience has within its scope all the processes operating on structural choices anchored in context that contribute to the meaningful functioning of language. In other words, language users know more or less what they are doing when using language. Self-monitoring, at whatever level of salience, is always going on.

> It is this general aspect of language use in relation to the medium of adaptability that I call *reflexive* or *metapragmatic awareness* (a usage that is in line with the terminology anthropologists use [...]). Studying this type of awareness is crucial to an understanding of verbal *behavior* because, like any other form of social action, language use is always *interpreted*, in the sense that the actors involved attach meaning to it, so that the actors' interpretations become part and parcel of what needs to be described and explained. (Verschueren, 2000: 444–445)

Hence, given that they support and illustrate the action of reflexive consciousness that conditions all language use, both groups of metalinguistic expressions could also be referred to as *metapragmatic* idioms, in a more general sense.

The subsequent sections of this article focus on the analysis of a corpus of Spanish metalinguistic idioms that – as is the case with *pelillos a la mar* and *punto en boca* –: (a) carry out some kind of pragmatic-discursive operation, and can be regarded as specifically metapragmatic or metadiscursive; and (b) are based on terms for body parts. The main objectives of this study are to define the *pragmatic behavior* of this corpus of idioms – i.e. to describe their discursive value and the type of pragmatic functions that they carry out – and to offer an explanation for the *figurative motivation* of this particular set of expressions, that is, to show how their actual pragmatic value arises from a series of grammaticalization processes in which a set of *somatic metaphors and metonymies* plays an essential role.

The corpus of idioms is presented in Section 2 below, followed by an analysis of the expressions from a formal and functional perspective so as to give an account of their actual discursive behavior (Section 3). Section 4 comprises the core of the analysis as it describes the pragmatic-discursive functions carried out by each phraseological unit and defines the different pragmatic spheres into which those functions can be categorized. Finally, the pragmatic-discursive values of the idioms are related to their figurative basis (Section 5;).

2. The corpus of Spanish metapragmatic idioms based on terms for body parts

2.1. English equivalences and correspondences. Other criteria for the presentation of the units

The corpus of Spanish metapragmatic or metadiscursive idioms based on terms for body parts contains 30 units, which are distributed into the lexical bases presented in Table 2 (see below).

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[3] Rey-De bove (1997: Section 2.1–2.2) regards this common metalanguage as a type of linguistic metalanguage, which is opposed to the metalanguage of logic—language designed to account for the truth of propositions. Scientific-didactic metalanguage—the discourse of linguists (or linguistics itself) and of those who teach or learn languages—is the second type of linguistic metalanguage defined by Rey-Debove.