

## *The relationship between constructions and units in Spanish phraseology*

### La relación entre las construcciones y las unidades en la fraseología española

Antonio Pamies Bertrán

University of Granada, Spain

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8193-9359>

Correo electrónico: [apamies@ugr.es](mailto:apamies@ugr.es)

#### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** For phraseological studies, the relationship between fixedness and variation is an essential one, given the need of updating some concepts after the epistemological shift of the grammatical theories which, for the first time, include phrasemes in their object of study. This article deals with the dichotomy opposing a *unit* (element selected in a paradigm available) and a *construction* (combination of available units).

**Methods:** The paper approaches the relationship between constructions and units in Spanish phraseology from the different views of: the Lexique-Grammaire school, Cognitive Grammar and the Grammar of Constructions. It starts with a review of the criteria of inclusion and exclusion, as well as the structural systemic analysis of a series of phraseological patterns for these trends, and then analyzes these theoretical considerations in a group of phraseological units.

**Results:** Phrasemes have an internal syntax, as constructions, and an external syntax, as units. The former governs the fixity and idiomaticity of the expression itself, the latter governs their combinations with their immediate context, making them doubly idiomatic: internally and as components of another phrasing, in which they are imbricated. This characteristic can affect collocations, idioms, LVC, phrasal verbs, proverbs or constructive idioms. The case of adverbial idioms is prototypical in this sense, since, although they are (by definition) totally invariable in their internal syntax, nothing prevents them from forming a larger phraseme with a lesser degree of fixity, forming an imbricated collocation with a verb or a verbal idiom.

**Conclusions:** We can say, without self-contradiction, that phrasemes are fixed and variable at the same time. The principle of imbrication links two syntactic levels corresponding to the different phraseological «spheres» (in Corpas' sense): for the includer (collocation), fixity implies the norm, while, for the includer (idiom), it implies the system.

**KEYWORDS:** construction Grammar; constructional idiom; collocations; collocation; phrasal verb; imbrication principle

#### RESUMEN

**Introducción:** Para los estudios fraseológicos, la relación entre fijación y variación es esencial, dada la necesidad de actualizar algunos conceptos tras el giro epistemológico de las teorías

gramaticales que, por primera vez, incluyen los frasemas en su objeto de estudio. Este artículo aborda la dicotomía que opone una unidad (elemento seleccionado en un paradigma disponible) y una construcción (combinación de unidades disponibles).

**Métodos:** El trabajo aborda la relación entre construcciones y unidades en la fraseología española a partir de las diferentes visiones de: la escuela *Lexique-Grammaire*, la Gramática Cognitiva y la Gramática de las Construcciones. Se parte de una revisión de los criterios de inclusión y exclusión, así como el análisis sistémico estructural de una serie de patrones fraseológicos para las estas tendencias, para luego analizar estas consideraciones teóricas en un grupo de unidades fraseológicas.

**Resultados:** Los frasemas tienen una sintaxis interna, como construcciones, y una sintaxis externa, como unidades. La primera rige la fijeza y la idiomatidad de la expresión en sí, la segunda rige sus combinaciones con su contexto inmediato, haciéndolos doblemente idiomáticos: internamente y como componentes de otro fraseo, en el que se imbrican. Esta característica, puede afectar a colocaciones, modismos, LVC, *phrasal verbs*, proverbios o modismos constructivos. El caso de los modismos adverbiales es prototípico en este sentido, ya que, aunque son (por definición) totalmente invariables en su sintaxis interna, nada les impide formar un frasema mayor con menor grado de fijeza, formando una colocación imbricada con un verbo o un modismo verbal.

**Conclusiones:** Podemos decir, sin autocontradicción, que los frasemas son fijos y variables al mismo tiempo. El principio de imbricación vincula dos niveles sintácticos que corresponden a las diferentes «esferas» fraseológicas (en el sentido de Corpas): para el incluyente (la colocación), la fijación implica la norma, mientras que, para el incluido (el modismo), implica el sistema.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** gramática de la construcción; lenguaje constructivo; coloestructuras; colocación; verbo frasal; principio de imbricación

## INTRODUCTION

The defining features of phraseology uses to include simultaneously fixedness and variation (*Cfr.* Corpas, 1996: 23, 27, 269, *inter alia*). A similar contradiction concerns the criterion of idiomatity, understood as ‘semantic non-compositionality’, whereas, at the same time, psycholinguistic experimental studies distinguish between nondecomposable idioms and decomposable idioms (*Cfr.* Nunberg et al., 1994; Riehemann, 2002: 3-34). Despite the empirical data supporting both phenomena separately, the mere addition of diametrically opposed features remains a theoretical oxymoron, unless the reasons for such a paradoxical duality are justified.

This paper deals with the dichotomy opposing a *unit* (element selected in a paradigm available) and a *construction* (combination of available units). This dichotomy, inherited from a modular view consecrated by generative linguistics, has been challenged by the emergence of the *Lexique-Grammaire* school (Gross, 1982), Cognitive Grammar (Langacker, 1987-91; 2005; 2006) and Grammar of Constructions (Fillmore, Kay & O’Connor, 1988; Kay, 1992; Kay & Michaelis, 2012; Michaelis, 2019), which reject any ‘real’ boundary between

lexicon and syntax, in favor of a *continuum of idiomaticity*, along which various types of constructions would be staggered, with varying degrees of complexity, stability and schematicity (Goldberg, 2006: 215).

For Cognitive Grammar, the *unit* is a structure that can be activated as a prepackaged whole (Langacker, 2006: 44), while the term *construction* refers to any symbolic pairing between form and content, with no distinction between lexis and grammar (Langacker, 2005: 102-104). It follows then that phrasemes are «units», and thus a special subclass of «constructions», which are defined more precisely, though not incompatibly, by Construction Grammar: «every conventional association that must be learned or recognized separately by the speaker of a language is a construction. This includes all idioms and partially productive lexical-grammatical patterns» (Kay, 1992: 310). Fully regular grammatical combinations would be excluded from the construction continuum, and a distinction is made between phrasemes proper and semi-schematic patterns. According to Michaelis (2019: 194) the concept of *pattern* also excludes phrasemes admitting no variation at all, thus confirming the essential relevance of the degree of internal variability.

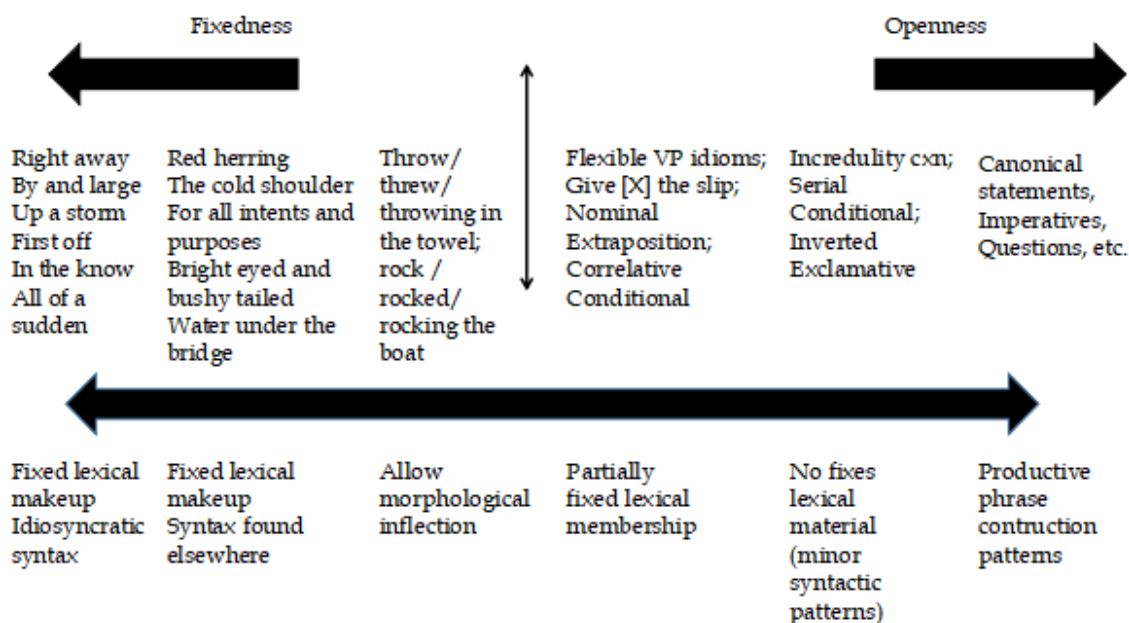


Fig. 1. The continuum of idiomaticity in English

Source: Michaelis, 2019.

For phraseological studies, the relationship between fixedness and variation is an essential one, given the need of updating some concepts after the epistemological shift of the grammatical theories which, for the first time, include phrasemes in their object of study (Cfr. Dobrovolskij, 2011; Colson, 2018; Mellado, 2020a). From this perspective, our proposal of *imbrication principle* addresses one aspect of the forementioned contradiction, shifting the problem of internal variation of phraseologisms towards syntactic operations between phrasemes, rather than adding more 'mixed' or 'intermediate' categories to their taxonomy.

## Variation, imbrication, and collocation

The fact that many phrasemes are semi-compositional did not go unnoticed by the pioneers of theoretical phraseology (Bally, 1909; Vinogradov, 1947), who defended a gradual conception of fixedness and idiomaticity. It is well known that the existence of variants (e.g., *estar hasta las narices* = *estar hasta la coronilla* = *estar hasta el gorro* = *estar hasta el moño* = *estar hasta los mismísimos* = 'to be fed up')<sup>1</sup> are not the only infringement to the canonical criterion of fixedness which underlies the traditional boundary between idioms and collocations.

In principle, collocations establish a recurrent, non-obligatory, and generally arbitrary, semantic association between at least two words: the base, usually literal, and the collocative, usually figurative and carrying out a lexical function. Light verb constructions (LVC) would be a subclass of collocations, since a high frequency «desemantized» verb act as the collocative of a nominal base, converting it into a predicate (*Oper.* lexical function, Mel'čuk, 1998).<sup>2</sup> E.g., sp. *dar pena* (\*give sadness: 'to grieve'), *prestar atención* (\*lend attention: 'to pay attention'),  *echar una mirada* (\*throw a glance: 'to have a look'), etc. Unlike idioms, which do not combine their components because they function as a single word, semantically and syntactically, collocations are relatively memorized *constructions* rather than *units*. However, even if we assume a stable boundary between idioms and collocations, some sequences may be analyzed as one or the other, depending on whether the verb is considered as a part of the expression or not. E.g., sp. *gritar a los cuatro vientos* (\*shout to the four winds: 'to shout from the roof tops'); *dormir a pierna suelta* (\*sleep at loose leg: 'to sleep soundly'); *comer a cuatro carrillos* (\*eat with four cheeks: 'to stuff oneself'), etc. As stated by García-Page:

it is sometimes not easy to decide whether a specific construction is an adverbial idiom by itself or only a part of a verbal or sentential idiom, given that there are many of them made up of a prepositional phrase with a general adverbial or grammatical regime. (2007: 137)

Although they include the same verb, the canonical boundary categorizes  *echar de menos* as an idiom (\*throw of less: 'to miss'),  *echar humo* as a collocation (\*throw smoke: 'be fuming'), and  *echar la siesta* (\*throw the nap: 'take a nap') as a LVC. However, this limit becomes unclear when the complement is also both multi-lexical and idiomatic, as in  *echar el mal de ojo* (\*throw the bad of eye: 'cast the evil eye') or  *pagar a escote* (\*pay at neckline: 'to go Dutch'). Is it a verbal idiom or the juxtaposition of a verb and an adverbial idiom? A proof of this metalinguistic uncertainty is the fact that a sequence such as  *llover a cántaros* (\*rain at pitchers: 'to rain cats and dogs') is classified in a surprisingly discrepant way, as:

<sup>1</sup> [Literally: \*to be until one's noses / one's little crown / one's hat / one's chignon / one's balls].

<sup>2</sup> *Cfr.* also Giry-Schneider, 1987; Hausmann, 1989; Tutin & Grossmann, 2002; Alonso Ramos, 2003; Ouerhani, 2006; Buckingham, 2009).

- a) verbal idiom (Zuluaga, 1980: 163; Ruiz Gurillo, 1997: 80; Penadés, 2000: 50)
- b) union of a free verb and an adverbial idiom (Mogorrón, 2011: 220)
- c) collocational concatenation (Corpas, 1996: 273)
- d) collocation (Alonso Ramos, 1993; Bosque, 2001)
- e) complex collocation (Koike, 2001a, 2012; García-Page, 2008, 2011)

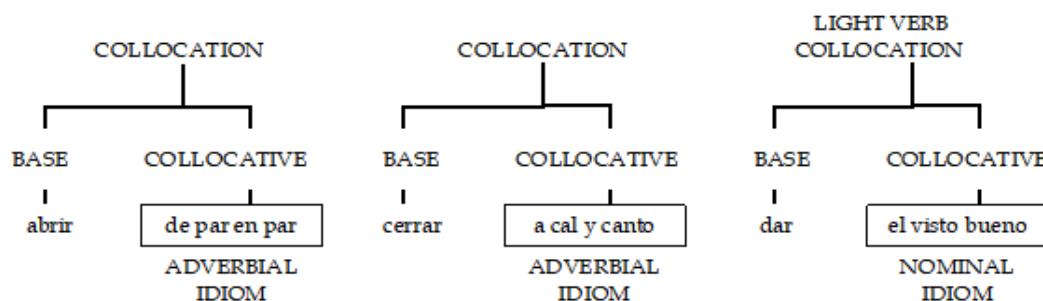
García-Page collects abundant examples of phraseological units whose location in dictionaries is haphazard and incoherent due to the hesitant exclusion or inclusion of the verb into the phraseme (2004: 269-276; 2007: 137-139):

- *hablar por los codos* (\*talk by the elbows: ‘talk a blue streak’)
- *llover a raudales* (\*rain at torrents: ‘to rain cats and dogs’)
- *negarse en redondo* (\*refuse-oneself in round: ‘to refuse outright’)
- *disparar a bocajarro* (\*shoot at jar-mouth: ‘to shoot point-blank’)
- *pagar a tocateja* (\*pay at touch-tile: ‘to pay flat out’)
- *saber al dedillo* (\*know at little+finger: ‘to know inside out’)
- *luchar a brazo partido* (\*fight at arm broken: ‘to fight tooth and nail’)
- *saber a ciencia cierta* (\*know at science true: ‘to know for sure’)
- *entregarse en cuerpo y alma* (\*deliver+oneself in body and soul: ‘to surrender body and soul’), etc.

An expedient way to solve the problem would be to create an intermediate category (such as Koike's *complex collocation*), but such an enjambment would bypass a more important boundary, that between units and non-units. It would also unnecessarily increase the number of idiomatic subclasses, it would be more economical to address this obstacle by means of a productive rule, which postulates the ability of phrasemes to fit into one another (Cfr. Pamies et al., 2013; Pamies, 2017, 2018b, 2019b). Thus, adverbial idioms, such as *de par en par* (\*from pair in pair); *a cal y canto* (\*at lime and pebble), are semantically «specialized» for the verbs *abrir* (‘open’) and *cerrar* (‘close’) respectively, since they only acquire their respective figurative meaning with these verbs (Cfr. Mellado, 2015), forming collocations with them at the immediately higher combinatorial level (meaning respectively ‘open wide’ and ‘closed and locked’).

In the sequence *reír a mandíbula batiente* (\*laugh at jaw beating: ‘laugh at jaw dropping’), the base and the collocative contribute separately to the global meaning. They allow substitutions of the latter that do not alter the overall sense of the phraseme nor its lexical function (Magn.): *reír a carcajadas* (\*laugh at guffaws) ≈ *reír a carcajada limpia* (\*laugh at clean guffaw) ≈ *reír con toda la boca* (\*laugh with all the mouth). Therefore, we are dealing

with imbricated constructions: verbal collocations which include an adverbial idiom inside. In *dar el visto bueno* (\*give the seen good: ‘express conformity’), a nominal idiom is included into an LVC, since *dar* (‘give’) is not literal too. Conversely, an idiom can also act as the base of a monolexical collocative. If *sp. pagar religiosamente* is a collocation (\*pay religiously: ‘pay in due time’), there is no reason why its synonym *soltar la pasta religiosamente* should not be as well (\*drop the dough religiously).<sup>3</sup>



Variation can also affect the (non-metaphorical) base of an imbricated collocation. E.g., *sp. prometer el oro y el moro* (\*promise the gold and the Moor: ‘to promise the world’), whose figurative complement is internally invariable, but also collocates with other literal verbs. This collocative is an adverbial idiom of quantity, which cooccurs most frequently with *prometer* (‘promise’): since 967 of its 1827 occurrences correspond to this verb in the corpus. Mellado quotes another verb: *costar el oro y el moro* (\*cost the gold and Moor) (2020c: 243), and our Spanish corpus (*esTenTen18*) contains other recurring examples with *ofrecer* (‘offer’), *dar* (‘give’), *cobrar* (‘charge’), *pedir* (‘request’), *exigir* (‘require’), among others. They are not *phraseological variants*, since their global meaning is not the same,<sup>4</sup> but rather different and independent (imbricated) collocations.

According to Mellado Blanco (2015: 112-113), sequences such as *trabajar codo con codo* (\*work elbow with elbow: ‘working hand in hand’) and *vivir puerta con puerta* (\*live door with door: ‘living door to door’) are *constructional idioms*, which entail patterns whose *open slot* would be filled by a free verbal element, regardless of its frequency of co-occurrence:

[V + *codo con codo*] and [V + *puerta con puerta*]

However, depending on the verb, the frequency criterion (of collocations) is fulfilled too. Among the abundant uses of *codo con codo*, its co-occurrence with *trabajar* is the overwhelming majority. Does this example fulfill the definitions of two phraseological

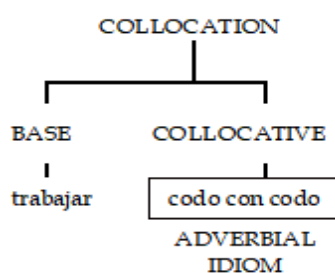
<sup>3</sup> Real examples are easily found: ...*estoy convencida de que la mayoría de ellas lo único que ha hecho en su vida es tirarse al que le suelta la pasta religiosamente para que ella se lo gaste en trapitos* (El Portal de la Rosa de los Vientos: 16/03/2008) ([www.rosavientos.es](http://www.rosavientos.es)) acceso 25/10/2021); ...*pícaras muletas de un Ejecutivo acabado, pero que suelta la mosca religiosamente* (*esTenTen18*).

<sup>4</sup> The phraseological variants have always the same global meaning (García-Page, 1996: 479), therefore they form a very reduced and closed paradigm, and they retain a strong formal similarity with their canonical model (Koike, 2001b: 88; García-Page, 2008: 242).

categories at the same time? In the corpus *esTenTen18*, there is a total amount of 12,364 occurrences of *codó con codó*, of which 7062 co-occur with *trabajar*, while the remaining 5302 are scattered among a multitude of other verbs, without a clear semantic core in common for all of them.

(*realizar, crear, construir, estudiar, desarrollar, organizar, colaborar, compartir, jugar, competir, entrenar, luchar, pelear, combatir, lidiar, defender, ir, avanzar, caminar, desfilar, empujar, continuar, juntarse, sentarse, estar, vivir, convivir, situarse, coincidir, etc.*)<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, *trabajar codó con codó*, is not an idiom (it has two separable parts, one of them literal). It is not an instance of a constructional idiom too, since the paradigm of the co-occurring verbs is quite opened. According to the frequency rate of co-occurrence between the adverbial idiom and the verb, we might analyze it as a collocation.



As for the other pattern, [V + *puerta con puerta*], 107 of its 285 instances in the corpus correspond to *vivir* ('live'), whereas the other verbs do not belong to the same semantic class, and each of them has a low co-occurrence rate (*estar, haber, situarse, encontrarse, compartir, trabajar, dormir, lindar, pegar, ampliar, ubicarse, criarse, crecer, veranear, dar, tocar, chocar...*).<sup>6</sup> These data entail that the adverbial idiom *puerta con puerta* is an idiom by itself, in free combination with the verb, but, in the case of *vivir puerta con puerta*, which represents more than a third part of the examples of the corpus, it could be categorized as well as a collocation, according to the purely statistical criteria.

A paper by Abraçado and Moreira (2021) studies the Portuguese verb *pagar* ('pay') remarking that the sequence pt. *pagar sem bufar* (\*pay without grumbling: 'paying without complaints') would be a *constructional idiom*. By analogy, we performed a search in Spanish, extracting from the corpus all the instances of the equivalent pattern, [V + *sin rechistar*]. These verbs do not belong to a same semantic class, discarding the constructional idiom, whereas 251 of 7717 occurrences<sup>7</sup> of the adverbial idiom are

<sup>5</sup> Respectively: eng. 'realize', 'create', 'build', 'construct', 'study', 'develop', 'organize', 'collaborate', 'share', 'play', 'compete', 'train', 'fight', 'defend', 'go', 'advance', 'walk', 'parade', 'push', 'continue', 'gather', 'sit', 'be', 'live', 'coexist', 'situate', 'coincide'.

<sup>6</sup> Respectively: eng. 'be', 'have', 'be located', 'meet', 'share', 'work', 'sleep', 'border', 'stick', 'expand', 'locate', 'grow', 'spend the summer', 'give', 'touch', 'crash'.

<sup>7</sup> Sketchengine query, advanced CQL with a 0 to 3 word window after the verb.,

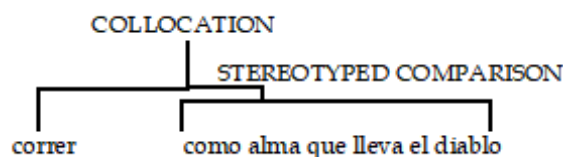


associated to the verb *pagar*. This statistical relative superiority seems sufficient for *pagar sin rechistar* to meet the canonical definition of collocation by Sinclair (1991).

What is said here about adverbial idioms may apply to some stereotyped comparisons too.<sup>8</sup> If the verb is literal, with a complement playing the role of a [Magn.] lexical function, being also multi-lexical and idiomatic by itself, we must assume that it is also a collocation (by imbrication). In these examples, the comparative collocative is always associated to the same base.

- *pesar más que una vaca en brazos* (\*weigh more than a cow in arms: ‘to be very heavy’)
- *ser más largo que un día sin pan* (\*be longer than a day without bread: ‘to be very long’)
- *disfrutar como un marrano en una charca* (\*enjoy like a pig in a pond: ‘to have a blast’)
- *defenderse como gato panza arriba* (\*defend oneself like a cat belly up: ‘to fight tooth and nail’)
- *correr como alma que lleva el Diablo* (\*running like a soul that the Devil is taking: ‘to take one’s heels’)

Spanish examples taken from Luque Durán (2005) and Alfaro (2014)



In Spanish, many of these hyperboles contain a comparative of superiority or inferiority instead of *como* (‘like’), in which case it turns out that *más que* (‘more than’) and *menos que* (‘less than’) are already (conjunctive) idioms by themselves, imbricated into a stereotyped comparison:

- *ser más pobre que puta en Cuaresma* (\*be poorer than a whore in Lent: ‘to be very poor’)
- *pasar más hambre que el perro de un ciego* (\*be hungrier than a blind man's dog: ‘to be starving’)
- *ser más feo que pegarle a un padre* (\*be uglier than hitting one’s father: ‘to be hideous’).

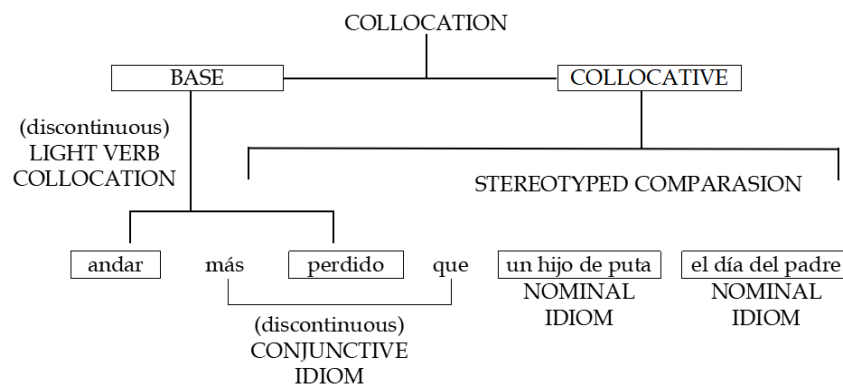
This type of imbrication works not only ‘vertically’ (hierarchical insertion between phrasemes) but also (‘horizontally’ overlapping between discontinuous phrasemes). Since these pseudo-comparative sequences with a magnifying function may have

<sup>8</sup> Although Zuluaga (1980) considers them as a type of idiom (*locuciones elativas*), Mel'čuk (1998) places them among *collocations* with a magnifying lexical function. Mellado (2020) interprets their variability as evidence that they are *constructional idioms*, since the same predicate can have many comparing referents without altering the overall meaning of the expression. In previous works, (Pamies 2016, 2017), we included stereotyped comparisons in the same group than collocations: the semi-syntagms, but if the collocative were itself an idiom, we would not be dealing with another category, but with the output of a productive rule of imbrication between phrasemes.



adjectival or even sentential expansions, they are deceptively similar to idioms, but, taking into account their semi-compositional nature, they look rather what Luque Durán (2005) calls ‘quantifying collocations by comparison’ (*colocaciones de cuantificación por comparación*).

- *llorar más que una Magdalena con conjuntivitis* (\*cry more than a Madeleine with conjunctivitis)
- *ser como el perro del hortelano que ni come ni deja comer* (\*be like the dog in the manger, which neither eats nor allows to eat)
- *ser más feo que Picio que tuvieron que darle los óleos en la nuca* (\*be uglier than Picio, who had to receive the holy oils on the back of the neck)



*Andar más perdido que un hijo de puta el día del padre*

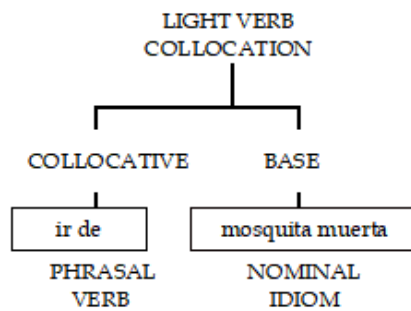
\*walking more lost than a son of a bitch on Father's Day ‘get completely lost’.

The categorial boundary with the idiom is even more blurred when the base of the stereotyped comparison is also a lexicalized metaphor, such as, e.g., *chupado* (\*sucked: ‘thin’), *agarrado* (\*caught: ‘stingy’), *liado* (\*tied: ‘busy’), *tieso* (\*stiff: ‘poor’), *sonado* (\*sounded: ‘crazy’), *crazy* *colgado* (\*hung: ‘stoned’), whose collocative pretends, as a humorous device, that the base was literal (Cfr. Luque Durán, 2017).

- *estar más chupado que la pipa de un indio* (\*be more sucked than an Indian's pipe: ‘to be very thin’)
- *estar más liado que la pata de un romano* (\*be more tied up than a Roman’s leg: ‘to be overloaded of work’)
- *estar más tieso que el cuello de una monja* (\*be stiffer than the neck of a nun: ‘to be very stiff’)
- *estar más sonado que las maracas de Machín* (\*be more sounded than Machin’s maracas: ‘to be mad as a hatter’)
- *estar más colgado que las casas de Cuenca* (\*be more hung than the houses of Cuenca: ‘to be stone-dead’).

Therefore, although stereotyped comparisons are a *sui generis* category, they are still a subclass of semi-syntagms, whose prototype are collocations, with which they can often commute (Pamies, 2018b; 2019b). This feature can also be produced by merging two autonomous idioms into a collocation: *repartir hostias* + *a diestro y siniestro* (\*distribute [sacred] hosts + at right and left: ‘handing out blows everywhere’). An imbricated collocation may also merge a phrasal verb and a nominal idiom: *ir de* + *mosquita muerta* (\*go of + dead little fly: ‘to look as if butter wouldn’t melt in one’s mouth’), forming a LVC with a lexical function [Oper.] in the upper micro-syntactic node.

The *esTenTen18* corpus contains 27 examples of the verbal idiom *repartir hostias* followed by the adverbial idiom *a diestro y siniestro*, whereas the Google search engine (not lemmatized) offers 716 examples in infinitive (*repartir hostias a diestro y siniestro*), plus 492 in gerund (*repartiendo hostias a diestro y siniestro*). As for the phrasal verb *ir de*, and the nominal idiom *mosquita muerta*, they co-occur 14 times in the *esTenTen18* corpus, whereas, in the Google search engine, the conjugated sequences *va de mosquita muerta* (sing.) and *van de mosquitas muertas* (pl.) appear respectively 7280 and 697 times. These features clearly allow us to rule out casual juxtaposition in favor of imbrication.

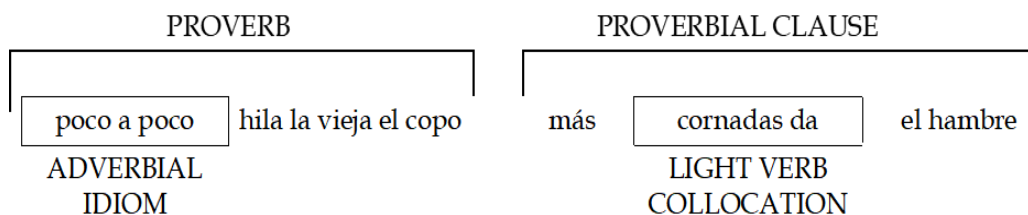


Two phrasemes can also imbricate «horizontally», forming a collocation by overlapping concatenation:

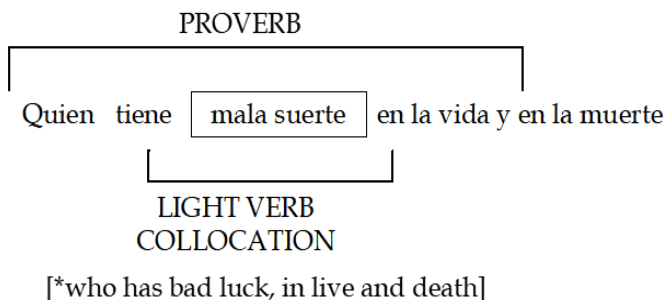
- *perder tiempo* (\*lose time) + *recuperar tiempo* (\*recover time) = *recuperar el tiempo perdido* (\*recover lost time: ‘making up for lost time’)
- *los siete pecados capitales* (\*the seven capital sins) + *ser más feo que un pecado* (\*be uglier than a sin) = *ser más feo que los siete pecados capitales* (\*be uglier than the seven deadly sins: ‘to be hideous’).

### Imbrication and phraseological utterances

Therefore, imbrication is not one more phraseological subcategory, but a mechanism that cuts across all phraseological classes. An idiom can participate in the formation of a larger phraseological utterance, without adding new phraseological classes in the taxonomy.



Besides, a proverb may have more than two levels of imbrication, e.g.,



### Imbrication and constructional idioms

Languages make it possible to produce sequences that mix features taken from the ready-made units and from the «free» syntax combinations. According to J.P. Colson, these facts correspond to a psychological process of transition between construction and unit, called *entrenchment*.

Much in the same way as an activity tends to become a habit, a linguistic structure may undergo progressive entrenchment and eventually become established as a unit. This is valid at the lexical level (for the traditional notion of words) but also at higher levels of complexity [...] Entrenchment remains largely a theoretical hypothesis, which is very hard to prove from a purely scientific point of view. However, collostructional analysis has already provided some clues in that direction. (2018: 17-18)

Although the graduality of idiomaticity and affixation were already mentioned by the pioneers of phraseology (Bally, 1909; Vinogradov, 1947), Construction Grammar has extended the continuum between idiomaticity and productivity from the most «petrified» idioms and formulas to productive combinations (Kay & Michaelis, 2012). In the intermediate zone, would take place the phrasemes that allow morphological inflections, the verbal idioms that require syntactic arguments, those that allow passive transformation, nominalization, topicalization... as well as sequences without fixedness, but which still constitute *minor syntactic patterns* whose variability depends on contextual constraints. (eng. *the more I drink the better you look / one more beer and I'm leaving*).

The *constructional idioms*, called in Spanish *esquemas fraseológicos* ('phraseological schemes'), *locuciones con casillas vacías* ('idioms with empty slots'), *construcción fraseológica* ('phraseological construction') and *construcciones semiesquemáticas* (semi-schematic

constructions),<sup>9</sup> are defined as *sequences which are partly fixed and partly free [...] oscillating between free speech and repeated speech* (Mura, 2012: 101).<sup>10</sup> Therefore, they constitute a contact zone between *units* and *constructions*, where semantically non-predetermined variables participate into formulaic language, as in the well-known English example by Kay & Fillmore (1999): *what's this fly doing in my soup?* Here are some Spanish examples often quoted in the literature (Ruiz Gurillo, 1997; Montoro, 2008: 137; Mura, 2012 [2019]; Sumiyoshi, 2012; Mellado, 2015), although we disagree about their representativity of the category, because the open slot is restricted only by its grammatical category:

- ¡qué <NP> ni qué narices!* [\*what <NP> nor what noses!]  
e.g. *¡qué confinamiento ni qué narices!*  
con < NP > *al canto* [\*with < NP > at the corner]  
e.g. *con multa al canto*  
*cuanto más <VP>, más < VP >* [\*the more <VP> the more <VP>]  
e.g. *cuanto más la buscas más te ignora*  
*tener hasta < NP > para < VP >* [\*have until <NP> to]  
e.g. *Vd tiene hasta el 20 de junio para entregar su declaración*  
*no soy de <VP>* [\*I am not of <NP>]  
e.g., *no soy de comer mucho*  
*no seré yo quien + <VP> [\*]* [\*I will not be the one who <VP>]  
e.g., *¡no seré yo quien diga lo contrario!*  
*¡será por + <NP>!* [\*it will be for <NP>!]  
e.g., *¡será por dinero!*  
*¿<VP> + o qué?* [\*<VP> or what?]  
e.g., *¿estás sordo o qué?*  
*<VP+VP> + pero...* [\*<VP+VP> but...]  
e.g., *trabajar, trabaja, pero...*  
*¡Qué + <VP> + ni qué ocho cuartos!* [\*what <NP> neither eight quarters!]  
e.g., *¡qué enfermedad ni qué ocho cuartos!*  
*¡Anda que no + <VP> + ni nada!* [\*walk that not <VP>]  
e.g., *¡anda que no es fea ni nada!*

Examples taken from Ruiz Gurillo, 1997; Montoro, 2008; Mura, 2012 [2019];  
Sumiyoshi, 2012; Mellado, 2015

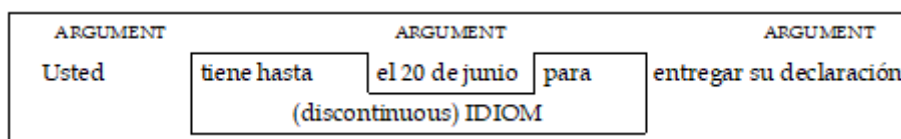
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<sup>9</sup> Cfr. Zuluaga (1980: 108-113, 159-160); Corpas (1996: 116); Ruiz Gurillo (1997); Wotjak (1998); Mendivil (1999); García-Page (2001, 2008); Álvarez de la Granja (2003); Zamora (2005); Montoro (2006, 2011); Mura (2012 [2019]; Mogorrón (2011); Martí Solano (2013); Penadés (2021), Mellado (2015, 2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2021).

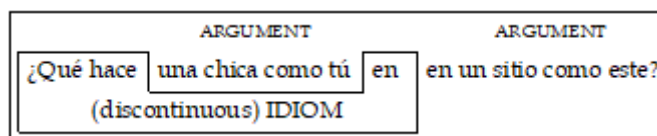
<sup>10</sup> In English, these terms also correspond to several metalinguistic terms, such as *lexically open idioms* (Fillmore; Kay & O'Connor, 1988), *partially lexically filled phrasal patterns* (Goldberg, 2006), *constructional idioms* (Booj, 2002), or *collostructions* (Stefanowitsh & Gries, 2003; Sumiyoshi, 2012).

In (true) *constructional idioms*, are fully compositional, (Mellado, 2015: 113), and not synonymous with each other, but they are not semantically «free» (Mura, 2012: 107). In fact, we should not translate *open slots* as *casillas vacías* ('empty slots'), because it would seem to assume that their *filler* is part of the phraseme itself, creating an unnecessary contradiction with respect to the concept of fixedness. This is the reason why, even if we agree with the definition, we disagree with the abovementioned examples. In such sentences, the filler is not part of the idiom, but combines to it by virtue of a rule of dependencies, saturating its valences, just as any verbal idiom can require a subject and an addressee (Cfr. Laporte, 1988: 119, 123; Burger, 2007: 106; Svensson, 2004: 135; Mel'čuk, 2011: 50; Pamies, 2018). This alternative sidesteps such a contradiction by shifting the problem from the internal syntax of phrasemes to their external syntax, considering these sequences as discontinuous idioms, combined with the arguments required by their valency. The fact that they are not the same as those of a free construction is one more evidence of their phraseological character.

Normally, the verb *tener* ('have') requires a direct object, whereas [*tener* <NP> *para* <VP>] requires a time complement and a purpose complement. The verb *hacer* ('make') does not normally require an obligatory spatial complement, which does occur in the model [*¿qué hace* <NP1> *in* <NP2>?] ('what is NP1 doing in NP2?'). According to this view, there would be no empty boxes in these examples, but discontinuity and valency requirements.



'You have until June 20.<sup>th</sup> to submit your tax return'.

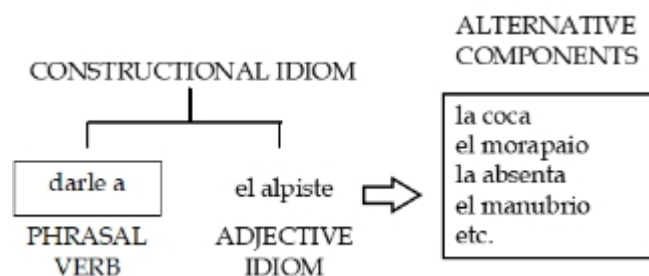


'What's a girl like you doing in a place like this?'

As for «true» constructional idioms (i.e., those which are not mere valences of discontinuous idioms), they are better represented by series of phrasemes whose variable slot is semantically restricted to a given notional field. A relevant example would be *darle al alpiste* (\*give+him to+the birdseed: 'to be an alcoholic'). It is partially compositional because the fixed part is the phrasal verb *darle a* (\*give+him to), meaning 'to be addicted to', and the variable component belongs to a given semantic class. E.g., [*darle*] *a la coca* (\*[give+him to] the cocaine) / *al morapio* (\*the purple one [cheap red wine]) / *la absenta* (\*the absinthe) / *las pastillas* (\*the pills) / *al canuto* (\*the joint) / *al manubrio* (\*to+the

crank+handle ['frequent male masturbation']), etc. Thus, the slot filler belongs to the semantic class of the «addictive substances or activities», and the pattern would be:

[darle a + NP ADDICTIVE THING OR ACTIVITY].



The complement is not a particular word (unlike in collocations) but it is not freely chosen too, it belongs to a semantically predetermined set, a feature which defines constructional idioms:

Free slots are renewed in discourse by means of lexemes corresponding to a predetermined semantic profile, i.e., in general they are not totally free. The degree of semantic restriction to which free spaces are subject is variable according to each construction. (Mellado, 2015: 112)

The sequence *dar por* (\*give by) is a phrasal verb that can be associated to a variable slot fulfilled by a passive participle (VPP) (Cfr. Montoro, 2008: 137; Mellado, 2019: 9), though semantically restricted to verbs entailing a change of consideration or status. Thus, both parts together form a (true) constructional idiom. E.g., *darlo por muerto* (\*give+him by dead: 'to give him up for dead'); *darlo por sentado* (\*give+it by sitted: 'to take it for granted'); *darse por vencido* (\*give+oneself by defeated: 'to give up'); *darse por aludido* (\*give+oneself by alluded: 'to take the hint').

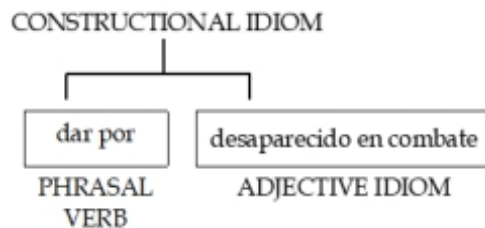
<dar por> *muerto* (\*dead) / *extinguido* (\*extinguished) / *perdido* (\*lost) / *hecho* (\*done) / *sentado* (\*sitted) / *supuesto* (\*supposed) / *entendido* (\*understood) / *sabido* (\*known) / *descontado* (\*obvious) / *olvidado* (\*forgotten) / *concluido* (\*concluded) / *finalizado* (\*finished) / *caducado* (\*expired) / *zanjado* (\*settled) / *superado* (\*surpassed) / *vencido* (\*vanquished) / *enterado* (\*informed) / *aludido* (\*alluded) / *satisfecho* (\*satisfied)...

The construction pattern would be:

[dar(se) por + VPP CHANGE OF STATUS]

Imbrication may affect this type of constructions, since the participle can, in turn, integrate an idiom, giving rise to a larger collostruction. It is the case of the same phrasal verb in sequences such as *lo dieron por inútil total* (\*they gave him by complete worthless: 'he was declared unfit for military service'), or *in lo dieron por desaparecido en combate* (\*they gave him by disappeared in fight: 'he was reported missing in action').





Another example is the expression *dinero contante y sonante* (\*money counting and sounding: 'hard cash'). It might seem a nominal idiom at first glance, but the corpus shows that only 1741 of 2650 instances of *contante y sonante* co-occur with *dinero*, confirming that the latter is an adjective idiom in itself. If we take into account its co-occurrence rate with *dinero*, we could consider it a collocation. But this criterion would seem to exclude the remaining 106 occurrences from this category, just because of their lower frequency.

*dinerito, dinerillo, dinerín, dinerete, moneda, euro, dólar, pasta, pastita, guita, oro, plata, metal, vil metal, billete, calderilla, gasto, dispendio, valor, valor añadido, beneficio, interés, rentabilidad, rédito, sacar tajada, ingreso, facturación, ahorro, inversión, financiación, capital, OPA, cifra, cuantía, millón, 20% en, 80% en, el resto en, expresado en, suma, liquidez, coste, cash, cash flow, activo, riqueza, patrimonio, economía, apuesta, recompensa, rebaja, ajuste contable, material, cosa, realidad, prueba, algo...*<sup>11</sup>

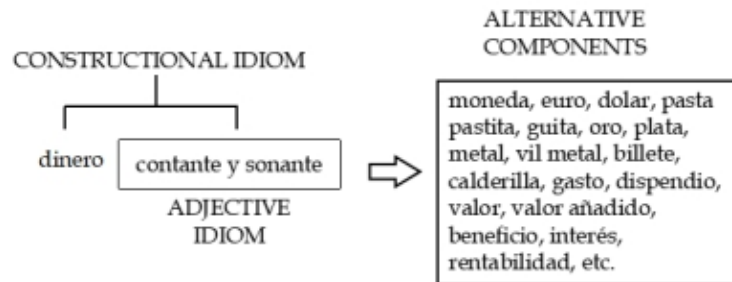
Neither are they *variants*, since the global meaning is not the same (savings are not benefits, interests are not investments). Some of these nouns have a low cooccurrence rate with *contante y sonante*, but all of them are restricted to the same semantic field (economy). Therefore, they can be considered as instances of a constructional idiom, whose fixedness is not manifested by lexical stability (as in collocations) but by semantic analogy. However, since *dinero* also belongs to this paradigm, its frequency rate makes it to fulfill the definitions of a collocation and of a constructional idiom at the same time. This apparent inconsistency is due to the mixture of two criteria which are not fully dependent from each other (statistics and semantics). The high co-occurrence frequency defining collocations is only a symptomatic feature, whose undulations do not always coincide with linguistic facts.

In this particular case, the item *dinero contante y sonante* could be included in the more general collocation [NP MATERIAL WEALTH + *contante y sonante*] although being a collocation by its frequency rate. There would not be an equipollent relation between this collocation and the other instances of the pattern, but rather a neutralization, due to the

<sup>11</sup> The first 4 terms are affectionate diminutive variants of *dinero*, meaning 'little money'. English equivalents of the other terms would be: 'coin', 'euro', 'dollar', 'dough' [slang], 'little dough' [slang], 'string' [slang], 'gold', 'silver', 'metal', 'vile metal', 'bank note', 'boilerplate' [slang], 'expenditure', 'expense', 'value', 'added value', 'benefits', 'interest', 'profitability', 'income', 'to take advantage', 'entry', 'billing', 'savings', 'investment', 'financing', 'capital', 'takeover bid', 'figure', 'amount', 'million', '20% in', '80% in', 'the rest in', 'expressed in', 'sum', 'liquidity', 'cost', 'cash', 'cash flow', 'asset', 'wealth', 'patrimony', 'economy', 'a bet', 'a reward', 'refund', 'accounting adjustment', 'material', 'thing', 'reality', 'proof', 'something'.



frequential context. This is perhaps a particular feature of phraseological imbrication: the possibility for a phrasem to participate in several phraseological levels at the same time.



Sp. *dinero contante y sonante*, (\*money counting and sounding: 'hard cash').

## CONCLUSIONS

1. Phrasemes have an internal syntax, as constructions, and an external syntax as units. The former governs the fixedness and idiomaticity of the expression itself, the latter governs their combinations with their immediate context, making them doubly idiomatic: internally and as components of another phraseme, into which they are imbricated.
2. This feature, in which one phraseme acts as a component of another, is a transversal property that can affect collocations, idioms, LVC, phrasal verbs, proverbs or constructional idioms.
3. The case of adverbial idioms is prototypical in this respect, since, although they are (by definition) totally invariable in their internal syntax, nothing prevents them from forming a larger phraseme with a lower degree of fixedness, forming an imbricated collocation with a verb or a verbal idiom.
4. This ability is one of the reasons why we can say, without self-contradiction, that phrasemes are fixed and variable at the same time.
5. The imbrication principle links two syntactic levels that correspond to different phraseological «spheres» (in Corpas' sense), since, for the includer (the collocation), the fixedness involves the norm, while, for the included (the idiom), it involves the system.

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## DATOS DEL AUTOR

**Antonio Pamies Bertrán.** Licenciado en Traducción-Interpretación (1985), Licenciado en Filología francesa (1987) y Doctor en Filología (1994) por la Universidad de Granada. Especialista con sumo reconocimiento en los estudios sobre lingüística general y amplios resultados en investigativos en lexicografía, subjuntivo, insulto, y fraseología. Es miembro del claustro de varios posgrados relacionados con las ciencias del lenguaje. Catedrático del Departamento de Lingüística General y Teoría de la Literatura de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de Granada.



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