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## THE DISCURSIVE USE OF SPANISH PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS: CONTEXTUAL ALTERATIONS AND NUANCES OF PHRASEOLOGICAL MEANING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF LEXICAL PRAGMATICS THROUGH A CORPUS-BASED STUDY<sup>1</sup>

The present article aims to investigate the pragmatic-discursive value of Spanish canonical phraseological units (PUs). Based on a two-level metapragmatic model of phraseological meaning proposed by Timofeeva (2008, 2012, 2018), we analyze the contextual dependency of selected PUs, namely their inference within a larger utterance. In other words, we focus on the discursive behavior of PUs according to their inherent semantic complexity. Our object of study will be, on the one hand, PUs whose evaluative implicatures present a fixed character, that is, they impose their semantic load on the host utterance and thus respond to the pattern of conventional implicatures (CIs). On the other hand, we will analyze PUs whose evaluations can be affected by contextual circumstances despite showing a certain degree of conventionalization and, as a result, acquire characteristics of generalized conversational implicatures (GCIs). Finally, we will investigate PUs that develop particularized implicatures (PCIs), i.e. those generated in a given context and not necessarily based on the first level of phraseological meaning.

**Keywords:** alteration of phraseological meaning, implicature value, canonical phraseological units, contextual dependency, Timofeeva's macro-componential model of phraseology meaning

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<sup>1</sup> This article develops general ideas on the pragmatic nature of phraseology, which were presented in our previous works published in Spanish (Szyndler 2014a, 2014b). However, the corpus used for this study has been expanded and modified.

[...] conventional phrases are a sort of fireworks, easily let off, and liable to take a great variety of shapes and colours not at all suggested by their original form.

(Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, Chapter 41)

## 1. Background

Although phraseology is a relatively recent discipline<sup>2</sup>, whose object of study is difficult to define univocally, it has recently become a very fruitful and solid field of research that continues to gain interest among linguists. Phraseological units (PUs, hereafter) are considered syntagmatic structures of pragmatic nature, for they “are born in use, become fixed in use and acquire a whole series of additional nuances and meanings thanks to their frequent use [...]”<sup>3</sup> (Timofeeva 2007: 1030). In other words, phraseology “is often linked to certain discursive contexts and communicative functions” (Kuo 2002, as cited in Fernández Toledo and Mena Martínez 2007: 182) and the units, the object of its study, represent “linguistic elements of fundamental importance in the configuration of discourse [...] that are used to express pragmatic contents of different types” (Mura 2012: 70).

The aim of the present article is to investigate the pragmatic value of canonical PUs in discourse, with a special emphasis on the discursive effects that the phraseological meaning triggers under certain contextual conditions. Under the term “canonical PU”, we understand a prefabricated, conventionalized, and multi-word expression that can perform various sentence functions. It is a fixed structure, meaning it is reproduced in discourse as a pre-constructed entity previously stored in the speakers’ memory; it is a unit of the mental lexicon (cf. Corpas Pastor 1996; Zuluaga Ospina 2001). The meaning of most PUs is non-compositional or non-dissociable. It cannot be deduced from the meanings of each of its components and cannot be understood without any reference to “a series of special knowledge that makes it possible to elucidate the intentions that have led the speaker to resort to PUs” (Timofeeva 2005: 1072). Consequently, any phraseological research must also consider the discursive linkage that allows the whole meaning of a given PU to be deciphered or grasped. For this reason, in the present article, we delve into the analysis of phraseological meaning from the perspective of lexical pragmatics, a branch of linguistics that investigates the processes through which the linguistically encoded meaning of

<sup>2</sup> The rise of phraseology dates from the late 1970s (cf. Corpas Pastor 2001: 21).

<sup>3</sup> Quotes included in the article have been translated and come from sources originally written in Spanish.

a word is modified in use (Wilson and Carston 2007). Within the lexical pragmatics framework, the meaning of words is often pragmatically adjusted to a specific context, so their contribution to the proposition expressed differs from the linguistically encoded meaning (Berbeira Gardón 2008: 26).

Drawing on a two-level metapragmatic phraseological meaning model proposed by Larissa Timofeeva (2008, 2012, 2018), we will place special emphasis not only on the semantic particularities of selected PUs in their canonical form, but also on the inferences they develop within a larger utterance. In other words, to depict the discursive behavior of PUs according to their polyhedral identity, we will focus on the dual nature of PUs, that is, on the complexity semantics deriving from its polylexical structure and on the effects of that inherent semantic complexity on the pragmatic level. Since PUs are units of *additional naming*<sup>4</sup>, whose appearance in discourse is always a marked phenomenon, we aim to investigate the extent to which the implicature traits of the first (semantic) level of phraseological meaning influence the second (pragmatic) one.

In order to achieve this goal, we will provide, on the one hand, precise and relevant examples of PUs whose evaluative implicatures present a fixed and conventionalized character: they impose their semantic load on the host utterance and thus respond to the pattern of conventional implicatures (CIs). On the other hand, we will examine PUs whose evaluative assessments (especially those of the emotional and attitudinal block), despite showing a certain degree of conventionalization, can be affected by contextual circumstances to achieve different perlocutionary aims and, as a result, acquire characteristics of generalized conversational implicatures (GCIs). Furthermore, we will look at PUs that develop particularized implicatures (PCIs), which are generated in a specific contextual environments and are not directly related to the first (semantic) level of phraseological meaning. Such analysis will allow us to delve into the complexity of phraseological meaning and its discursive effects.

As far as the corpus is concerned, it is worth mentioning that the examples cited come from the *Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual (CREA)* and different electronic sources (digital versions of the leading Spanish newspapers, blogs or web pages). In each case, the spelling of the quotation is kept as it appears in its corresponding source, while the expression(s) that constitute the object of our study are highlighted in bold type. For the sake of clarity, both the original fragment in Spanish and its English translation are included in this article. The literal translations into English of the analyzed Spanish PUs,

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<sup>4</sup> As Timofeeva (2018: 146) points out, the criterion of *additional naming* draws attention to the fact that PUs “constitute an alternative or secondary way to denote a concept and therefore they appear by definition as one of the variety of options available together with primary denotative lexemes”.

accompanied by their respective English phraseological equivalents, if such exist, appear in square brackets. It is worth clarifying that we will only examine PUs of institutionalized use; hence, creative and original expressions made up by speakers *ad hoc* will be left aside. In other words, we will not address the question of phraseological de-automatization (cf. Mena Martínez 2003).

## 2. On the pragmatic-discursive value of PUs

PUs are essentially pragmatic structures, often carrying a conventionalized denotative meaning and an intense emotive load, as they express the speaker's attitude (cf. Timofeeva 2007: 1030). Considering that "the semantic dimension does not cover all aspects related to human communication" (Timofeeva 2008: 172), the author suggests reanalyzing the configuration of phraseological meaning. In other words, she highlights the communicative power of the phraseological universe and proposes her own metapragmatic model, divided into two levels:

- 1) the semantic level, which encompasses the pragmatic parameters displayed at the level of conventionalized meaning of the PU. Such parameters are not made explicit in use because they are part of the "internal memory" of a given PU. In other words, this level describes conventional phraseological meaning with no reference whatsoever to contextual circumstances;
- 2) the pragmatic level, associated with additional communicative capabilities, which are generated depending on the information contained in a larger utterance. At this level, "the attention focuses on the degree of influence that these semantic data exert on discursive idiom performance, as well as on other kinds of inferences triggered by a multi-word lexeme within an utterance" (Timofeeva 2018: 148).

Noticeably, this model distinguishes two types of information provided by a discursive unit: information directly derived from the linguistic meaning of the sign and information derived from its integration and combination with other elements in a given context (Timofeeva 2008: 174; 371). The first type, first-level implicatures<sup>5</sup>, refers to implicit information of a specific nature and with some degree of conventionalization, which depends on the characteristics of the internal form of a given PU. As such, this first level of phraseological meaning focuses on the semantic dimension of a given PU, derives mainly from the

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<sup>5</sup> Timofeeva's (2008: 374, 2012: 205-244, 2018: 147-151) macro-componential model of first-level phraseological meaning (semantic dimension of PUs) is composed of six blocks: 1. Denotative block; 2. Motivational block: the image component; 3. Rational assessment block; 4. Emotional and attitudinal assessment block; 5. Stylistic block; 6. Grammatical block.

motivational characteristics of the image component<sup>6</sup>, and does not inquire into its communicative consequences. It refers to the codified meaning of the PU, as it appears in the dictionary.

The second type, second-level implicatures, originate from the interaction of the internal form of a PU with a given context. It should be emphasized that both types of implicatures are interrelated and exert mutual influence on each other. As Timofeeva (2018: 154) points out, “the degree of conventionalization found in implicatures at the first *semantic* level somehow determines their behavior at the second *pragmatic* level. [...], when an idiom comes to form part of an utterance, it becomes a functional lexeme, but the pragmatic features of its complex semantics expand their influence on the basis of criteria that can be systematized to a certain extent”.

As far as the first level of phraseological meaning is concerned, it is worth mentioning that not only do PUs designate an object, but they also endow it with predicative characteristics; they classify it. Any assessment is considered an evaluation that can be understood as a type of information containing data about the denoted value (cf. Teliya 1996: 109; Kabakova 2002: 4, as cited in Timofeeva 2008: 395). This evaluation can be qualitative or quantitative in nature. The former is distributed along a trifocal scale configured around the zero evaluation (indifference), the positive evaluation, and the negative evaluation – all expressed at different degrees. The latter type of evaluation oscillates between values “more than the norm”, “the norm” and “less than the norm”. The evaluation of these characteristics is called rational, as it must be analyzed in the context of the speaker's opinion about it (ibid.: 395-396).

It should be emphasized that PUs can not only express the speaker's opinion about the referent, but also produce a feeling or emotional reaction to it (of approval, admiration, disapproval, disgust or rejection, etc.). This has to do with the immediate emotive and emotional assessment of the image component (based on its literal reading). It is about the instant reaction to the image as such, with no connection to its referent. For example, *faltar un tornillo* [lack a screw / *to have a screw loose*]; *te ha comido la lengua el gato?* [Has the cat eaten your tongue? / *Cat got your tongue?*]. On the other hand, as Timofeeva (2008: 401) points out, such evaluation is not limited to the reaction to the literal image underlying the PU, but also results from the interpretation of that component (its evaluation) in the normative dimension of a given sociolinguistic community.

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<sup>6</sup> According to Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen (2010: 74), “the so-called *image component* of an idiom takes the role of a semantic bridge between the two levels. What is meant by *image component* is neither the etymology nor the original image, but linguistically relevant traces of an image that are comprehensible for the majority of speakers. It is an additional conceptual link that mediates between the literal reading (fixed in the idiom's lexical structure) and the lexicalized meaning of an idiom”.

However, assessment in the rational block does not always trigger emotive and emotional evaluations at the first level of phraseological meaning. Consequently, additional data, coming from a broader context (second-level implicatures) are often required to trigger such kind of assessment. Above all, PUs that are qualitatively characterized as neutral or those that elicit quantitative evaluations (e.g. *poner pies en polvorosa* [to put one's feet in dust / to take to one's heels]) may not convey emotional values on their first-level meaning (ibid.: 415).

Accordingly, three types of PUs can be distinguished depending on the implicatures developed (cf. Timofeeva 2008, 2012):

- a) PUs with a full level of phraseologization, which include *Conventional Implicatures* (CIs). They present the complete encoding or conventionalization of their implicature values, impose their evaluative load on a larger utterance, and dominate the general tone of the utterance. They are totally fixed values and are part of the vericonditional content of the PU;
- b) PUs with an intermediate level of phraseologization, which develop implicatures in terms of preferred inferences called *Generalized Conversational Implicatures* (GCIs). These are pieces of information collected in the two evaluative blocks. Despite presenting a certain degree of conventionalization, they can be modified by certain contextual circumstances at the second level of phraseological meaning and, therefore, show greater dependence on the general context of the utterance containing them;
- c) PUs that develop new implicatures generated under certain contextual circumstances but are related to one of the informative blocks of the phraseological meaning, namely *Particularized Conversational Implicature* (PCIs).

The following excerpts exemplify the above-mentioned aspects:

- (1) La Real no puede mantener ninguna convocatoria, porque todavía no la ha hecho, sólo existe un acuerdo de Junta. La actitud del actual Consejo es del todo inaceptable. Sus maniobras por agarrarse a la silla están cayendo en un total desprecio a la masa social. ¿Se creen que nos pueden **tomar el pelo**? ¿Están tan acostumbrados a que nadie les pida cuentas que creen que pueden actuar impunemente? (CREA, "Frases", *El Diario Vasco*, 11/01/2001)

*The Royal [General Board of Trade] cannot keep the call open because they have not made one yet. So far, there is only an agreement with the [Supreme Central] Junta. The attitude of the current Council is completely unacceptable. Their maneuvers to stay in power are falling into a total disregard for the social mass. Do they think they can **take our hair [pull our leg/ deceive us]**? Are they so used to not being held accountable that they think they can act with impunity?*

- (2) El presidente del Partido Popular de Granada, Francisco Rodríguez, ha reclamado este sábado a los dirigentes del PSOE que “**dejen de tomar el pelo** a los ciudadanos” y exijan al Gobierno de Pedro Sánchez que asuma la ejecución de la totalidad de las canalizaciones de Rules y de los espigones que “llevan años anunciando”.

“**Ya está bien de esta tomadura de pelo** y de este reguero de fechas de continuo anuncios de obras inminentes que nunca llegan”, ha afirmado Rodríguez, que ha lamentado el “espectáculo” [...] (<https://www.europapress.es/andalucia/noticia-pp-insta-psoe-deje-tomar-pelo-ciudadanos-ejecute-tuberias-rules-espigones-granada-20230218142127.html>; fecha de consulta: 16/05/2023).

*The president of the Popular Party of Granada, Francisco Rodríguez, has asked the leaders of the PSOE this Saturday to “**stop taking the citizens’ hair [pulling the citizens’ leg / deceiving the citizens]**” and demand the Government of Pedro Sánchez to be responsible for the execution of all the pipelines and the breakwaters in Rules, which “they have been announcing for years”.*

*“**Enough of this taking our hair! [Stop pulling our leg!]** and this mess of dates of continuous announcements of imminent works that never begin”, said Rodriguez, who deplored the “spectacle” [...]*

- (3) Así **nos dan gato por liebre**: atún que no es atún, jamón que no es jamón y Vega Sicilia que sirve para hacer calimocho (<https://www.lavozdegalicia.es/noticia/gastronomia/mas-actualidad/2021/06/25/dan-gato-liebre-atun-atun-jamon-jamon-vega-sicilia-sirve-calimocho/00031624609722084822187.htm>; fecha de consulta: 16/05/2023).

*This is how **we get a cat for a hare [we get a pig in a poke]**: tuna that is not tuna, ham that is not ham and Vega Sicilia that is used to make calimocho.*

- (4) “Qué vergüenza -oigo decir con asco a mi hijo, cada vez que me pillá ante el programa-. De qué cosas vive la gente”. Y tiene razón, sin duda, pues no hay que confundir el despelleje con el humor, y, en ese programa, se nos quiere **dar gato por liebre** y hacer pasar por gracioso lo que es pura bilis (CREA, “Tele humoristas”, *El Mundo*, 01/03/1994).

*“What a shame!” – I hear my son say with disgust every time he catches me watching the program “What people live on”. And he is right, no doubt, because we must not confuse ridicule with humor and, in this program, they want to **give a cat for a hare [pull the wool over our eyes]** and pass off as funny what is pure scorn.*

In light of the proposed examples, the two verbal locutions analyzed present a clear conventionalization of negative values at the first level of their phraseological meaning. In other words, both the first PU *tomar el pelo a alguien*

[to grasp/take somebody's hair/ Eng. *To pull someone's leg* or *To pull the wool over someone's eyes*], which means "to tease someone with false praise, promises or flattery" (DLE), and the second one: *dar gato por liebre* [to give someone a cat as if it was a hare/ Eng. *Give a pig in a poke*], 'cheating on the quality of something by means of an inferior thing that resembles it' (DLE), carry negative implications in the rational assessment block (the qualitative axis). In their denotative block they allude to the culturally rejected concept of DECEIT or LIE, which gives rise to the feeling of disapproval and a strong rejection in the emotional and attitudinal assessment block. This negative load of the first level of phraseological signification is so substantial that it imposes itself on the general utterance in which such PUs appear, i.e. their high degree of conventionalization dominates the overall evaluative nuance of the whole paragraph. In other words, the analyzed PU maintains its semantic negativity inside an utterance. Thus, the evaluative implicatures of both the rational and the emotional-attitudinal axis presented by the PUs in question acquire characteristics of ICs – they form a fixed part of their first-level conventionalized meaning and are fully integrated into their "semantics".

Nevertheless, apart from the PUs whose "semantic" (first level) implicatures present a conventional character and seem "independent" from the communicative context, there are others in which the inferences made admit certain adjustments or nuances depending on the context. As Timofeeva (2008: 426) emphasizes, "such adjustments are basically made in the emotive-emotional evaluation block, although, sometimes, this may have repercussions on the rationalized evaluation".

In what follows, we will analyze the PUs whose valuations are not completely fixed and conventionalized, but respond either to the pattern of generalized conversational implicatures (GCIs) or to that of particularized implicatures (PCIs). As an example, we can use locutions whose figurative meaning can be defined as BEING VERY CUNNING/SHREWD: *Ser (un) lagarto* [To be a lizard/ Eng. *To be a sly fox*] 'a sly, cunning man' (DLE); *Tener/esconder más conchas que un galápago* [To have/hide more shells than a tortoise/ Eng. *To be as slippery as an eel*] 'to be very reserved, secretive, and cunning' (DLE); *Ser un zorro/astuto como un zorro* [To be a fox/clever like a fox/ Eng. *To be sly/clever like a fox, as cunning as a fox*] 'a very cunning and shrewd man' (DLE). At first glance, these phraseological units activate evaluative implicatures tending toward the negative pole, both in the rational and the emotional and the emotional-attitudinal assessment blocks, since a person's cunning or slyness, their ability to deceive and succeed in their schemes, can be considered a derogatory trait. Based on this premise, let us examine the following examples:

- (5) Impresiona saber que la suma de todos los votos emitidos por políticos de todos los pelambres representa el 63% del total. ¿Qué quiere decir eso? El



colombiano piensa que no es posible ser político sin **ser lagarto**. Pero también puede querer decir que los colombianos detestan a los políticos y les clavan el epíteto que consideran de lo más despreciable: **¡lagarto!** También tengo la sospecha, aunque no lo puedo comprobar, de que muchos votos se emitieron para denigrar de quienes les competían en alguna carrera política. Qué mejor que decirle **lagarto** al competidor. La otra hipótesis es peor: Roy **es tan lagarto** que quiso ganarse esta votación con tal de aparecer, y puso a varios amigos a votar por él. Sus competidores deben estar celosos, pues también usan y abusan de los medios ([http://www.eltiempo.com/opinion/columnistas/carloscastillocardona/ARTICULO-WEB-NEW\\_NOTA\\_INTERIOR-10956101.html](http://www.eltiempo.com/opinion/columnistas/carloscastillocardona/ARTICULO-WEB-NEW_NOTA_INTERIOR-10956101.html); fecha de consulta: 08/10/2023).

*It is striking to note that the sum of all the votes cast by politicians of all stripes represents 63% of the total. What does that mean? Colombians think it is impossible to be a politician without **being a lizard [being a sly man]**. But it could also mean that Colombians despise politicians and label them with what they consider the most contemptible epithet: **lizard! [a sly man]** I also suspect, though I cannot prove it, that many votes were cast to discredit those competing in some political race. What better way to insult a competitor than to call them **a lizard [a sly man]**? The other hypothesis is worse: Roy **is such a lizard [is such a sly man]** that he wanted to win this vote just to gain attention, and he got several friends to vote for him. His competitors must be jealous, as they also use and abuse the media.*

- (6) Conocen bien a los que envían a las zorras a sus gallineros y saben que **tienen más conchas que un galápago**, que venderían a su madre por un plato de lentejas, o de votos [...] (<https://gaceta.es/opinion/el-canto-del-cisne-globalista-20240208-0455/>; fecha de consulta: 08/10/2024).

*They are well aware of those who send foxes into their henhouses and know **they have more shells than a tortoise [they are more slippery than an eel]**, that they would sell their own mother for a plate of lentils—or votes.*

- (7) Dejen de juzgar, esperen que las cosas pasen, es solo una recomendación, creo firmemente que hay otra acción en curso, este hombre **es un zorro viejo**, en el arte de la guerra el engaño es la mejor estrategia, no puedes dejar al descubierto tus movimientos (<https://x.com/Yanitzagrimont5/status/1862231777999237587>; 08/12/2024).

*Stop judging; wait for things to unfold; it is just a recommendation. I firmly believe that another action is underway. This man **is a sly old fox**; deception is the best strategy in the art of war. You can't leave your moves exposed.*

In all the examples, the mentioned stereotypical comparisons activate rational evaluations (quantitative and qualitative) that tend toward the negative pole: cunning is associated with deception, concealment, malice, and even boastfulness. Consequently, a strong feeling of rejection and disapproval toward the referent emerges in the emotional and attitudinal assessment block. However, in certain contextual circumstances, the implicatures, initially negative, derived from the first semantic level of phraseological meaning are mitigated or even canceled, as confirmed by the following examples:

- (8) **Qué lagarto eres.** Ya veo que te imaginabas que vendríamos a pescar a este sitio (DDFH2).

*What a lizard [sly fox] you are.* I can see that you imagined we would come fishing to this spot.

- (9) [...] Cam Coyote Gonsales no pegaba a Zuro Millor, el cholo de la mierda, o le pegaba muy poco, Cam Coyote Gonsales le estaba muy agradecido porque le hacía las cuentas, Zuro Millor **es como un lagarto** pero sabe de cuentas, los lagartos no siempre son desgraciados (...) (CREA, C. José Cela, *Cristo versus Arizona*, Barcelona: Plaza y Janés, 1993).

*Cam Coyote Gonsales did not hit Zuro Millor, the damn cholo, or he hit him very little. Cam Coyote Gonsales was very grateful to him because he did the math for him. Zuro Millor is like a lizard [is sly like a fox], but he knows about numbers; lizards are not always unfortunate.*

- (10) Pero bueno, siempre nos quedará, también, Conrado Escobar. Hoy lo hemos elegido Senador del Reino de España, en representación del Parlamento de la Comunidad Autónoma de La Rioja [...]. Conrado es uno de esos políticos con los que cuesta mucho llevarse mal. Y no porque sea flojo o sin sustancia, ¡todo lo contrario! Es un político bragado y astuto que, detrás de su hábil retórica florida y su amabilidad, **esconde más conchas que un galápago** y una habilidad proverbial para sobrevivir y salir a flote de todos los enredos políticos en los que, voluntaria o involuntariamente, ha podido meterse en estos años [...] (<http://www.gonzalezdelegarra.es/?p=924>; fecha de consulta: 08/12/2024).

*However, we will always have Conrado Escobar. Today, we have elected him as a Senator of the Kingdom of Spain, representing the Parliament of the Autonomous Community of La Rioja [...]. Conrado is one of those politicians with whom it is hard to fall out. And not because he is weak or lacking substance — quite the opposite! He is a seasoned and astute politician who, behind his skillful and florid rhetoric and friendliness, **hides more shells than a tortoise [is as slippery as an eel]** and possesses a proverbial ability to survive and emerge unscathed from all the political*

*entanglements in which, whether voluntarily or not, he has found himself over the years [...]*

(11) Plata, **astuto como un zorro**

El delantero, clave en el triunfo lebrijano

El fútbol es de listos, de jugadores que llevan la astucia por bandera. Plata se encargó ayer de enarbolarla en el Bellavista-Lebrijana. El delantero, el más listo de la clase, dio un manual de inteligencia sobre el campo. En primera instancia, con su equipo cayendo 2-1 en el marcador, se aprovechó del despiste y pasividad local, sacando con rapidez una falta y, posteriormente, materializando el empate a dos (<http://www.diariodesevilla.es/article/deportes/1057633/plata/astuto/como/zorro.html>; fecha de consulta: 08/12/2024).

*Plata, **clever as a fox***

*The Forward, Key to Lebrijano's Victory*

*Football is a game for the sharp-minded, for players who make cunning their hallmark. Yesterday, Plata took charge of showcasing this at the Bellavista-Lebrijana match. The forward, the smartest in the game, delivered a masterclass in intelligence on the field. First, with his team trailing 2-1, he capitalized on the local side's distraction and passivity, quickly taking a free kick and subsequently securing the 2-2 equalizer.*

These examples do not evoke the same sensation in the listener toward the referent as those previously analyzed. The illocutionary force of the PUs is not limited to the need for caution or distrust, and the evaluations of the respective blocks take on a positive tone. In other words, the semantic negativity of the analyzed PUs is cancelled out by a context – inside an utterance. In (8), the meanings of sharpness and intellectual insight prevail; the locution *ser un lagarto* [to be a lizard] highlights someone's cleverness and sagacity, their ability to predict what others will do or want to achieve. In the following example (9), the negativity of the situation is toned down, meaning that due to the reference to the positive quality (knowledge of accounts), the cunning or craftiness appears to be mitigated. Therefore, Zuro Millor is not presented as an unfortunate or opportunistic person whose behavior would provoke a strong rejection in the listener, but as someone who stands out in a particular area, thus being seen as “useful”. The PU in example (10) does not refer to a sly and reserved person for their own benefit, but instead highlights their great experience, intellectual agility, and wide-ranging knowledge. In other words, Conrado Escobar's “cunning”, acquired over many years of political service, is presented as a positive trait that allows the Senator to manage any situation, even the most difficult one. As for the last example (11), the evaluative implicatures also lean toward the positive pole since cunning is associated with sagacity. In this specific

communicative context, the stereotypical comparison *astuto como un zorro* [Eng. *as cunning as a fox*] refers to a quick-witted and lively person who handles difficult situations with skill and agility and acts cautiously. These qualities help Plata, the forward from Lebrija, achieve a good final result.

As a result, the listener's feeling of dissatisfaction with the situation, which was observed in the examples (5), (6) and (7), disappears. Even if, as mentioned in previous excerpts, a tendency to evaluate negatively the Spanish PUs *ser (un) lagarto o tener/esconder más conchas que un galápago*, *ser un zorro/astuto como un zorro* may exist, the contextual environment can turn the qualitative assessments into positive ones. As can be observed, the implicatures within the emotional and attitudinal assessment block are less conventionalized. They can be adapted at the second (pragmatic) level of phraseological meaning to achieve various perlocutionary effects, which depend on the contextual environment of the utterance. These effects may range from rejection and disapproval to fascination, admiration, or sympathy.

A similar situation regarding divergences in the emotional and attitudinal assessment block of the second level of phraseological meaning occurs in the case of PUs whose figurative meaning can be defined as HAVING A LOT OF EXPERIENCE: *Tener más espolones que un gallo* [to have more spurs than a rooster/ Eng. *To be as old as the hills*] 'to have a lot of experience, a lot of knowledge. To have hardened by dint of living' (DDFH) 'to be very old' (DLE); *Ser un lobo de mar* [To be a sea wolf/ Eng. *To be a sea dog*] 'An old and experienced seaman in his profession' (DLE)<sup>7</sup>.

Let us consider the following examples:

- (12) [...] la iniciada renovación por parte del líder popular Rajoy, que ha dado un sonoro golpe de autoridad sobre la mesa al elegir como portavoz en el Congreso a una de sus más estrechas colaboradoras. Y es que, cambiando de estrategia, ha preferido optar arriesgadamente por una tan brillante como joven diputada, en lugar de por el enorme colectivo de experimentados políticos que tiene en sus filas, los cuales **tienen más espolones que un gallo** (<https://www.elperiodicodearagon.com/opinion/2008/04/05/lectores-47940254.html>, 16/05/2023).

[...] the renewal initiated by popular leader Rajoy, who has asserted his authority by choosing one of his closest collaborators as spokesperson in Congress. And the fact is that, by changing his strategy, he has chosen to riskily opt for a brilliant and young deputy, instead of the vast group of experienced politicians in his ranks, who **have more spurs than a rooster [are as old as the hills]**.

<sup>7</sup> In contemporary Spanish, this PU appears more frequently when referring to someone highly experienced and knowledgeable in a particular field, not necessarily an old sailor.

- (13) Manix Mandiola **es un lobo de mar**. Uno de esos entrenadores a los que da gusto escuchar por la cantidad ingente de batallas que acumula en el disco duro de su memoria. Dos décadas después de comenzar a impartir clases desde ahí abajo y con más de medio millar de partidos dirigidos, el entrenador del Atlético Baleares afronta este domingo en Málaga su octava presencia en los playoffs de ascenso a la Segunda División, la segunda de forma consecutiva con el conjunto blanquiazul (<https://www.ultimahora.es/deportes/atletico-baleares/2020/07/18/1181673/senor-playoffs.html>, 16/05/2023).

*Manix Mandiola is a sea wolf [a sea dog]. He is one of those coaches anyone would enjoy listening to because of the huge amount of battles he has accumulated in his hard drive. Two decades after he began giving lessons and with more than half a thousand games under his belt, the Atlético Baleares coach faces this Sunday in Malaga his eighth presence in the playoffs for promotion to the Second Division, the second in a row with the blue-and-white team.*

- (14) Por lo que se ve nuestra clase política está hecha unos zorros. ¡Vamos, que son un espejo donde mirarse!. Y además no es que la cosa sea sólo de un lado, sino que allá donde mires salen estos próceres **con más espolones que un gallo** y más cosas que ocultar que un ladrón (<http://blogs.libertaddigital.com/index.php?action=showcomments&id=65718>; 16/05/2023).

*As far as we can see, our political class is in shambles. Come on! Aren't they a mirror to look into? And it is not that the problem is only on one side – everywhere you look, you see these proclaimed leaders **with more spurs than a rooster [as old as the hills]** and with more things to hide than a thief.*

- (15) No era fácil callar a Boj ni eludir su solicitud, porque en el supuesto de que el perseguido esquivara el asalto, penetrara con sus pertenencias en el ascensor, cerrara la cabina para zafarse del acoso y tras sentarse en el diván intentara poner tierra por medio con la arrogancia del **lobo de mar** cuando corta amarras desde la cubierta del buque con la novia que deja en cada puerto, es probable que no se desplazara un palmo por más que manipulara el cuadro interno de mandos ya que Boj abortaba su fuga al retener la verja de la jaula (CREA, M. Longares, *Romanticismo*, 2002).

*It was not easy to silence Boj or to avoid his request because if the person being followed dodged the assault, entered the elevator with his belongings, closed the cabin to escape the harassment and, after sitting on the couch, tried to get away from it all with the arrogance of a **sea wolf [sea dog]** cutting the moorings from the deck of the ship while leaving*

*a bride behind in each port, it is likely that he would not move an inch, no matter how much I manipulated the internal control panel, as Boj would abort his escape by holding the cage gate.*

At first glance, we could think that the locutions above develop positive evaluative implicatures fixed in both blocks (the rational and the emotional/attitudinal) of their first-level meaning, for the idea of experience/knowledge as something that helps someone to avoid fraud or deception is considered a positive quality. However, as observed in the examples, when such PUs are embedded in a larger utterance, their evaluative nuance may change or adjust to the context. For instance, (12) and (13) carry positive evaluations, while in (14) and (15) the evaluative inferences are rather close to the negative end. In the first two examples, a great deal of experience in sports or politics, sound knowledge/life wisdom and skills acquired over many years are considered positive characteristics. They allow good decisions to be made and thus contribute to personal or professional success. The illocutionary force of the remaining examples is different; experience is associated with other qualities judged as unfavorable: deceit/lying/cunning and arrogance/pride, respectively. As a consequence, in the emotional and attitudinal assessment block, a feeling of disapproval towards the referent is produced. The implicature, in principle positive, which was derived from the meaning of the locutions in (12) and (13) is mitigated and even disappears in (14) and (15).

In general, all the PUs mentioned above display both a quantitative (more than others) and qualitative (having more experience/more skills is positive for oneself) rational evaluation in their semantics. However, they differ with respect to the emotional and attitudinal assessment block: the first two examples evoke a rather approving attitude, while the next two express rejection or dislike towards the object they denote. As mentioned by Timofeeva (2008: 396), “the ascription of the denotee expressed by the PU to one or the other qualitative pole depends on the empathic position adopted by the speaker or the hearer in the choice or perception of the phraseological sign”. Therefore, the evaluative inferences concerning the sentiment block respond to the pattern of ICGs since the initial positive load derived from the locutions analyzed at the first level of the phraseological meaning (preferential inference) is modified according to the specific contextual circumstances.

The excerpts from (8) to (15) also support Timofeeva's observation (2008: 398): while a PU encapsulates a set of evaluative values at the first level of its phraseological meaning, these values can be altered or even nullified in some way when this PU is incorporated into a larger utterance<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, these inferences follow the GCI pattern, which in some cases results in them becoming

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<sup>8</sup> As for the analyzed Spanish PUs [*ser (un) lagarto*/ Eng. *To be a sly fox*; *ser un zorro/astuto*

“victims” of the context (ibid.: 429). In other words, the implicatures enclosed in diverse semantic blocks of the first level of phraseological meaning can present different degrees of conventionalization, shaping the behavior of PUs at the second (pragmatic) level.

We would like to point out that, in our opinion, the locution *sea wolf* [*sea dog*] in example (15) also presents a semantic extension based on the metaphorical process (cf. Luque Durán 2004: 74; Ibarretxe-Antuñano and Valenzuela 2012, among others) and on a stereotype about sailors: [LOBO DE MAR/ SEA DOG]= [MARINERO LIGÓN/ SAILOR-WOMANIZER]. Therefore, it could be stated that we are dealing with particularized conversational implicatures (PCIs) which are generated in a particular contextual environment and are not based directly on the first-level meaning of the PU in question, despite their being related to some of the informative blocks of phraseological meaning (cf. Timofeeva 2008: 429-430, 454). This type of circumstantial inferences can also be found in the following examples:

(16) — Usted es de Babàkua.

Me enfureció. Seguía creyéndose un entendido en la materia. Por lo visto, pensaba que podía decidir a su antojo mi nacionalidad. Antes me había tomado por un ignorante y un estúpido viejo **lobo de mar**, ahora me veía como a un indígena de hueso en la nariz (CREA, E.Vila-Matas, *Suicidios ejemplares*, Barcelona: Anagrama, 1995).

— *You are from Babàkua.*

*It infuriated me. He kept believing himself to be an expert on the subject. Apparently, he thought he could arbitrarily decide my nationality. Earlier, he had taken me for an ignorant and foolish old sea wolf [sea dog]; now, he saw me as an Indigenous person with a bone through my nose.*

(17) Recuerdo que una vez me dijeron, “este hombre no es un hombre, **es un lobo de mar**” sintiéndome totalmente alagado, puesto que allá los depredadores máximos habituales, son los lobos de mar, queriéndome decir que sacaba mas pescado que aquellos animales (<http://javierhuichalaf.blogspot.com/2008/05/paraje-austral.html>, 16/05/2023)

*I remember once being told, “This man is not a man, he is a sea wolf [sea lion]”, feeling totally flattered since the usual top predators there are the sea wolves [sea lions], meaning that I had caught more fish than those animals.*

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*como un zorro*/ Eng. *To be sly like a fox, as cunning as a fox*], it is worth mentioning that only the masculine forms, in a specific contextual environment, can be interpreted in a positive sense; the feminine forms in colloquial language tend to develop conventionalized negative evaluations at both levels of phraseological meaning and are often used as insults: *ser una lagarta* (‘to use cunning to deceive, usually one’s husband’ [DDFH]); *ser una zorra* (‘to be a prostitute’ [DDFH]).

In example (16), a new PCI is generated and it can be defined as ‘a sea wolf is a sailor who lacks education and common sense’. This definition appears highly contradictory, as it lacks any connection to personal experience or extensive knowledge. In contrast, the following example (17) reflects the *ad hoc* inference that ‘a fisherman who takes out a large quantity of fish is like a sea wolf, a voracious and dangerous predator’.

It should be emphasized that in excerpts (15), (16) and (17), we observe the creation of an *ad hoc* inference that arises from a special contextual conjuncture and is codified by a lexical entry and a series of expectations or principles of a pragmatic nature. On the one hand, such a concept may be ephemeral, but on the other hand, it could well become a new meaning of the lexical entry due to frequent and widespread use. As such, it would be responsible for semantic change, that is, the process of grammaticalization<sup>9</sup> (cf. Wilson and Carston 2007: 14).

Nevertheless, we should also mention contextually ironic PUs, whose ironic value originates exclusively at the second level of phraseological meaning, within a larger utterance. In other words, irony appears as a PCI, for it does not constitute an element of the internal form of the PU (the first level meaning) but originates because of the specific contextual conditions that are conducive to an ironic reading of a given PU (cf. Timofeeva 2008: 441-443)<sup>10</sup>. Consider the following example:

- (18) La portavoz de Más Madrid en la Asamblea, Mónica García, ha pedido a la presidenta de la Comunidad de Madrid, Isabel Díaz Ayuso, que pida perdón por la “denuncia falsa” sobre sabotajes en el Hospital Enfermera Isabel Zendal [...] Por su parte, la presidenta regional ha recordado que a un hospital público lo catalogaron como “hospital fantasma o plató de televisión”. “**Vaya ojo clínico** tiene usted, porque ya han pasado 8.557 pacientes mientras estuvieron asustando a sanitarios y a pacientes dentro [...] (<https://www.europapress.es/madrid/noticia-mas-madrid-pide-comunidad-disculpe-denuncia-falsa-zendal-ayuso-incide-hubo-sabotajes-20211216112145.html>, 16/05/2023).

*The spokeswoman for Más Madrid en la Asamblea, Mónica García, has asked the president of the Community of Madrid, Isabel Díaz Ayuso, to apologize for the “false report” about sabotage in the Hospital Enfermera*

<sup>9</sup> According to the traditional definition, grammaticalization concerns “the regularity and unidirectionality of change: a process by which a lexical form or construction, in specific pragmatic and morphosyntactic contexts, takes on a grammatical function, or a grammatical entity or construction acquires an even more grammatical function” (Company Company 2004: 29).

<sup>10</sup> For further information on the issue of ironic PUs, see Alvarado Ortega (2006), Timofeeva (2005), Szyndler (2018), among others.



*Isabel Zendal [...] Likewise, the regional president has recalled that a public hospital was labeled as a “ghost hospital or television set”. “What a clinical eye you have! 8,557 patients have come in and out of the hospital while you were scaring health workers and patients inside.*

Due to the fact that the meaning of the PU (*tener*) *ojo clínico* [*to (have) a clinical eye*] can be defined either as ‘insight and shrewdness’ (DFDEA) or as ‘to be expert in some matter, to the point of immediately recognizing the values or defects of something and foreseeing the possible consequences’ (DDFH), its rational assessment block tends more to the positive pole, denoting a good ability of an individual. However, in example (18), we see a reversal of meaning, as the PU in question alludes to a lack of ability to understand or judge a circumstance or person. In other words, in this case, the nominal locution *clinical eye* acquires a particular ironic nuance and comes to express a critical attitude of the president of the Community of Madrid with respect to what her interlocutor said, whose observations are not very accurate.

### 3. Conclusions

Taking Timofeeva’s (2008, 2012, 2018) model of phraseological meaning as a starting point, the main objective of the present article was to investigate the relationship between two strands of phraseological meaning, complex by definition: first-level meaning, organized in different informative blocks, and second-level meaning, linked to contextual circumstances.

We have demonstrated the influence of the declarative dimension in the configuration of the meaning of a given PU. Sometimes, the integration of a PUs within a larger utterance leads to a series of implied meanings that originate from the interaction of their internal form with the given communicative context.

It should be emphasized that not all the PUs presented here are characterized by the same degree of conventionalization of the first-level implicatures. Thus, their influence on the larger utterance is also different. On the one hand, we can observe the PUs that develop fixed implicatures of conventional character (CIs), whose evaluative values, either positive or negative, dominate the overall tone of the utterance. As stated by Timofeeva (2018: 156), “the higher the degree of conventionalization identified in such implied values, the stronger their immutability and their influence at the second level of meaning”.

On the other hand, we can mention locutions that display the least conventionalization of first-level inferences, especially those belonging to the emotional and attitudinal assessment block. These locutions seem to be more susceptible to the contextual environment, since they admit certain adjustments, alterations and even cancellations of their meaning depending on the context (GCIs).

Our analysis also takes into consideration PUs whose implicatures appear in a specific context, are new or original and respond to the pattern of the PCIs, i.e. are generated under certain contextual conditions that do not start directly from the first level meaning of a given PU, and those which do not constitute uprooted facts because they are based on some informative block of the PU (Timofeeva 2008: 443).

In conclusion, there is an interrelation between both levels of phraseological meaning, which is “created” in a given context, but is updated and supported by it. As emphasized by B. García-Hernández (1997-1998: 298- 299), “(...) it is through [context] that meaning is made explicit and precise. Context is always a good way to understand the meaning, but it is not a safeguard for any interpretation, and even less an insurance against error”.

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