

Cognitive and Semantic Characteristics of Somatic Phraseology in the Spanish Language

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Abstract

This article examines somatic phraseology in the Spanish language from a cognitive and semantic perspective, focusing on how body-related lexical components function as key conceptual tools in the construction of idiomatic meaning. Somatismos, understood as phraseological units containing names of body parts, represent one of the most productive and cognitively motivated domains of Spanish phraseology. The study explores the role of embodied cognition, conceptual metaphors, image schemas, and cultural models in shaping the semantics of somatic idioms. Particular attention is paid to how body parts such as *cabeza*, *mano*, *ojo*, *corazón*, and *lengua* participate in metaphorical mappings that structure abstract domains including emotion, intellect, morality, social relations, and communicative behavior. The analysis demonstrates that Spanish somatic phraseology reflects universal cognitive mechanisms while simultaneously encoding culture-specific patterns of conceptualization.

Keywords: Somatic phraseology, Spanish language, embodied cognition, conceptual metaphor, body-related idioms, semantic motivation, cognitive linguistics

Somatic phraseology occupies a central position in the lexical and conceptual system of the Spanish language, reflecting the deep connection between bodily experience and linguistic meaning. Idiomatic expressions that include names of body parts, commonly referred to as somatismos, constitute one of the most productive and semantically rich groups of phraseological units. From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, the prominence of somatic idioms is not accidental but arises from the embodied nature of human cognition. The human body serves as a primary reference point for organizing experience, structuring perception, and conceptualizing abstract domains. As a result, body-related expressions function as fundamental cognitive tools through which speakers of Spanish interpret emotions, mental states, social behavior, and moral values.

The theoretical foundation of the study of somatic phraseology lies in the principle of embodied cognition, which holds that cognitive processes are grounded in bodily experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980;

Barsalou, 1999). According to this view, meaning is not an abstract, disembodied entity but emerges from recurrent patterns of interaction between the body and the environment. Linguistic expressions, particularly idioms, encode these patterns in conventionalized forms. In Spanish, somatic idioms such as *perder la cabeza* ("to lose one's head"), *tener buen corazón* ("to have a good heart"), or *echar una mano* ("to give a hand") exemplify how bodily organs and actions are metaphorically extended to express psychological, emotional, and social meanings.

One of the most salient body parts in Spanish somatic phraseology is *cabeza* (head), which is closely associated with intellect, reason, control, and decision-making. Expressions like *tener la cabeza fría* ("to keep a cool head") or *meter algo en la cabeza* ("to get something into one's head") reflect the conceptual metaphor *THE MIND IS A CONTAINER* and *REASON IS PHYSICAL CONTROL*. The head is conceptualized as the seat of rational thought, and its physical properties—such as stability, orientation, and containment—

are mapped onto cognitive processes. Losing control or rationality is metaphorically represented as losing the head, as in *perder la cabeza*, where the absence of the physical organ symbolizes a breakdown of mental regulation.

The body part *corazón* (heart) occupies a central role in the conceptualization of emotions and moral character in Spanish phraseology. Idioms such as *hablar con el corazón* (“to speak from the heart”), *tener el corazón de oro* (“to have a heart of gold”), or *romper el corazón* (“to break someone’s heart”) illustrate the metaphor *EMOTIONS ARE LOCATED IN THE HEART*. This metaphor, widely attested across languages, reflects a culturally entrenched model in which the heart functions as the locus of feelings, empathy, and sincerity. In Spanish culture, the heart is not merely an emotional center but also a moral one, as evidenced by expressions that associate the heart with kindness, generosity, or cruelty. The semantic richness of *corazón* idioms demonstrates how bodily organs become symbolic anchors for abstract evaluative concepts.

Another highly productive somatic component in Spanish phraseology is *mano* (hand), which is closely linked to action, agency, control, and assistance. Expressions such as *tener algo en la mano* (“to have something under control”), *echar una mano* (“to help”), and *lavarse las manos* (“to wash one’s hands of something”) reveal multiple metaphorical mappings involving the hand. The hand is conceptualized as the primary instrument of action and manipulation, leading to the metaphor *CONTROL IS MANUAL POSSESSION*. In the case of *lavarse las manos*, the idiom draws on a culturally and historically grounded image of physical cleansing to express moral disengagement or refusal of responsibility. This expression illustrates how somatic idioms often combine embodied experience with cultural and

intertextual knowledge, in this case with biblical and legal traditions.

The body part *ojo* (eye) plays a crucial role in Spanish phraseology related to perception, attention, vigilance, and evaluation. Idioms such as *echar un ojo* (“to take a look”), *no pegar ojo* (“not to sleep”), or *tener buen ojo* (“to have a good eye”) reflect the metaphor *KNOWING IS SEEING*. Visual perception serves as a dominant sensory modality for structuring knowledge and awareness, and this dominance is linguistically encoded through eye-related expressions. The semantic extension from physical sight to cognitive insight illustrates a fundamental cognitive pattern whereby perceptual experience is mapped onto epistemic domains. Spanish somatic phraseology thus aligns with broader cognitive tendencies while manifesting language-specific lexical realizations.

The role of *lengua* (tongue) and *boca* (mouth) in Spanish idioms highlights the conceptualization of speech, communication, and social behavior. Expressions such as *tener pelos en la lengua* (“to speak bluntly”), *morderse la lengua* (“to bite one’s tongue”), or *cerrar la boca* (“to shut up”) rely on physical actions involving the mouth and tongue to represent communicative restraint or expressiveness. These idioms are grounded in the embodied experience of speech production, where the tongue and mouth function as articulatory organs. The metaphor *SPEECH IS PHYSICAL ACTION* underlies these expressions, reinforcing the idea that communicative behavior is conceptualized through bodily mechanisms.

Somatic phraseology in Spanish also makes extensive use of image schemas, such as CONTAINER, PATH, FORCE, and BALANCE, which structure meaning at a preconceptual level. For instance, the expression *sacar algo del pecho* (“to get something off one’s chest”) employs the

CONTAINER schema, where emotional burden is conceptualized as a substance located inside the chest that can be removed. Similarly, *caerse la cara de vergüenza* (“to be extremely ashamed,” literally “for one’s face to fall from shame”) combines the FORCE and DOWNWARD schemas to represent emotional collapse. These image schemas provide cognitive coherence and facilitate the interpretation of abstract meanings through embodied patterns.

Cultural factors play a significant role in shaping the semantics of somatic idioms. While many body-based metaphors are grounded in universal human experience, their specific linguistic realizations reflect culturally specific values and social norms. In Spanish-speaking cultures, expressiveness, emotional openness, and interpersonal closeness are often emphasized, and these cultural tendencies are mirrored in the richness of heart- and mouth-related idioms. The frequent use of somatic expressions in everyday discourse contributes to a communicative style that is vivid, affective, and metaphorically dense. Thus, somatic phraseology serves not only as a cognitive phenomenon but also as a marker of cultural identity.

From a semantic perspective, somatic idioms exhibit varying degrees of transparency and motivation. Some expressions, such as *echar una mano*, are relatively transparent and easily interpretable through their underlying metaphorical mappings. Others, such as *importar un comino* (“to not care at all,” literally “to matter a cumin”), are more opaque and require cultural or lexical knowledge beyond somatic reference. The degree of semantic transparency influences how idioms are processed and acquired, particularly in second language learning. Cognitive approaches to phraseology emphasize that even seemingly opaque idioms often have historical or metaphorical

motivations that can be uncovered through semantic analysis.

Psycholinguistic research suggests that somatic idioms are processed efficiently due to their strong grounding in embodied experience. The activation of body-related concepts facilitates mental imagery and conceptual integration, making these expressions cognitively salient and memorable. This salience explains their high frequency and stability in the lexicon. Moreover, the emotional and sensory richness of somatic idioms enhances their expressive power, allowing speakers to convey complex meanings succinctly and vividly.

In applied linguistics, the study of somatic phraseology has important implications for language teaching and translation. Learners of Spanish often struggle with idiomatic expressions due to differences in metaphorical mappings across languages. A cognitive-semantic approach that highlights embodied metaphors and conceptual correspondences can aid in overcoming these difficulties. By understanding how body parts function as conceptual anchors, learners can develop deeper semantic competence and cultural awareness. In translation studies, awareness of somatic metaphors helps translators find functional equivalents rather than literal renderings, preserving pragmatic and emotional meaning.

In conclusion, somatic phraseology in the Spanish language represents a paradigmatic example of how cognition, embodiment, and culture interact in the construction of meaning. Body-related idioms are not arbitrary linguistic ornaments but structured cognitive expressions that reflect fundamental patterns of human experience. Through conceptual metaphors, image schemas, and cultural models, somatisms provide access to abstract domains such as emotion, intellect, morality, and social interaction. The

cognitive and semantic analysis of Spanish somatic phraseology thus contributes to a broader understanding of language as an embodied, culturally situated, and meaning-driven system.

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