

FIGURATIVE VS LITERAL MEANING IN IDIOMS. A COMPARATIVE STUDY ENGLISH-SPANISH



María Luisa Díez Arroyo
Universidad de Oviedo

This paper¹ sets out my approach to the comprehension of idioms both in English and Spanish. The study focuses on the use that advertisers make of these expressions in their slogans. The investigation springs up from the belief that when a reader comes across an idiomatic phrase he just computes its figurative meaning, the only one stored in his memory. The consideration of a literal meaning will be possible if the context has been manipulated by the sender of the message. As it will be illustrated, even in this latter case, the relevance of the literal interpretation will not minimize the importance of the figurative one, so usually the coexistence of both readings is necessary for the correct understanding of the slogan.

I. INTRODUCTION

Idiomatic phrases have been favourite topics for analysis in the fields both of psycholinguistics and linguistics. For the former discipline emphasis has been on the comprehension of these phrases, whereas the latter approach has centred on the semantics, the syntax or the universality of such expressions (Fernando & Flavell 1981). What is missing, however, is some research that simultaneously aims at studying idioms from the processing point of view and from the semantic-pragmatic one. This is necessary given the fact that the way in which the receiver of a message processes information depends very much on the context that frames it.

Therefore, the focus of the present work will be on the computation and contextualization of idioms. Specifically, it addresses the use of these phrases in advertising slogans written both in English and Spanish. The number of advertisements that contain this device has turned out to be remarkably high in both languages, so, hopefully, this will permit to draw conclusions at a two-fold level. On the one hand, comparison can indicate that similitudes found apply to general processes of language understanding. On the other hand, advertising rhetoric can well prove to know little about language borders.

In an offhand appreciation, the high occurrence of fixed expressions in advertising can be attributed to the indefatigable quest for novelty that guides creation in this particular field of communication. The power of attraction that idioms exert over readers is confirmed by Dyer (1992) and Labov (1972), since such phrases seem to have the property of making a message worth listening to. The fact that fixed expressions can be understood idiomatically or non-idiomatically may be at the heart of a possible explanation for their frequent use in advertisements. But this needs to be backed up with theoretical arguments. Before we come into any depth, however, it seems most reasonable to define what is understood by the term idiom.

¹ The conclusions we present here are in part the result of a project work financed by the University of Oviedo under the title *Análisis contrastivo del inglés y del español* DF/95-202-1.

2. IDIOMS: THEIR NATURE AND INTERPRETATION

According to Schweigert and Moates (1988: 281) idioms are common expressions used in colloquial speech with accepted, figurative meanings that differ from their present-day literal meanings.

The definition as it stands lends itself to noteworthy comments, namely the domain of idiomatic expressions, their meaning and, last but not least, what can be classified as idiom. First of all, in agreement with the mentioned authors, the exclusive domain of idiomatic phrases is speech, to be more accurate, colloquial speech. Drew & Holt (1992) have highlighted that the function of idioms in everyday conversation is more often than not closing one topic and going onto another. A less extreme view is found in McCarthy (1992: 57), who explains that

There is an underlying assumption that idiomatic expressions are merely rather informal or colloquial alternatives to their nearest synonymous literal free-forms. This may well be true inasmuch as the kinds of data where idioms abound reflect a high degree of the informality at the interpersonal level between speaker/writer and listener/reader.

These approaches coincide in assigning to idiomatic phrases a colloquial turn, a feature of great interest in so far as it allows us to defend that advertising language (even when written down) tries to resemble spoken informal language, or, in other words, advertisers make an effort to address the customer in a colloquial, personal and informal way.

Secondly, Schweigert & Moates definition confronts literal meaning with figurative meaning, suggesting that the latter prevails over the former. But this is far from being a straightforward matter, in fact, it constitutes one of the biggest issues in the discussion on the nature of formulaic expressions. What goes without questioning is that the intended meaning of idioms is comprehended usually without difficulty. Yet how this comprehension process occurs is still unclear.

The research carried out on idiom comprehension over the last fifteen years can be outlined in three approaches. The literal view (Glass 1983) emphasises peoples predisposition to process the idiom literally, providing that meaning is inappropriate for the context, and idiom processing mode is activated. This model is referred to as the Literal Processing Model (Schweigert & Moates 1988: 282). On the other hand, the defenders of the Idiomatic Processing Model (Gibbs 1980) argue that certain forms of language are computed directly in a figurative or nonliteral sense and only if such meaning proves inappropriate for the context is it processed literally. Somewhere in between, the Simultaneous Processing Model (Swinney & Cutler 1979) points out that although idioms are stored as single lexical items, their figurative and literal meanings are processed simultaneously, hence its name.

Arguments are far from conclusive, since the different authors can provide evidence to support their own theses. More recently though, Cronk & Schweigert (1992) and Cronk, Lima & Schweigert (1993) have developed a more considered account of the simultaneous processing model, drawing attention to the importance of familiarity, literalness, and word frequency in the comprehension of idiomatic expressions. Schweigert (1991: 313) reminds us that it is time to acknowledge that none of these simple descriptions of processing (contemporary psycholinguistic models) will adequately describe idiom comprehension.

One aspect closely connected with the discussion between literal and figurative meaning of idioms is how these phrases are represented in the lexicon. In agreement with Sch-

raw et al. (1988), we assume that idiomatic meanings gradually develop wordlike properties in lexical memory while literal versions do not. The figurative meaning reflects the meaning of the whole phrase, not its individual words, and cannot be constructed from the meanings of the individual words in the phrase. This process is technically known as lexicalization.

Bearing in mind the opposed positions that can be identified in the field, one would intuitively expect that the point of view just outlined is not unanimous. From a moderate literalism, Dascal (1987) and Forrester (1995) support the idea that although the literal meaning might not necessarily be part of the final interpretation

it seems to play a crucial role in the process of interpretation, namely the role of leading the hearer to the identification of the relevant items of contextual information which have to be used in order to come up with an interpretation. (Dascal 1987: 263)

We shall find evidence for Schraw et al.'s conclusions in the data on which this investigation is based. Moreover, some tests can be applied in support of the idiomatic hypothesis (Moon 1994): flexibility of the expression, referenciality and rhythm.

Idiomatic phrases lack flexibility since any substitution operated on any of their components causes a change of meaning.

- (1) a. A pain in the neck # a pain in the back.
b. Tirar de la madeja # tirar del cajón.

Fixed expressions also receive this name because they present a fixed order and do not admit any change in the position of their constitutive elements to convey emphasis, for instance:

- (2) a. *It was in the neck where she had the pain.
b. *Fue de la madeja de lo que tiró.

The displaced position of the elements shown in (2.a) and (2.b) breaks the idiom (so the asterisk) and the decontextualized sentence is likely to be interpreted as literal. It is also of interest to note that idiomatic expressions frequently contain a grammatical object preceded by the article *the*, signalling given knowledge, but the antecedent must be inferred through knowledge of the meaning of the idiom as a holistic unit.

Parallely, idioms are not easily substituted in the context in which they occur by a synonymous expression without loss of connotation. This characteristic together with the rhythm inherent to them confer to formulaic phrases a level of expressiveness that disappears when any change is effected upon them.

There is now much evidence to support the hypothesis that idioms present both lexical and syntactic frozenness, which implies that they behave as single lexical units and that their meaning is non-compositional.

Before this section is concluded we must make a further comment to Schweigert & Moates definition of idioms. They assert that idioms are common expressions (1988: 281), however, this is not enough to delineate the precise nature of these phrases. McCarthy (1992: 56-57), applying similar tests to the ones presented here, comes to the conclusion that the fixedness referred to can also be found in other expressions: constructions with verb+object (*pull strings / rizar el rizo*); phrasal verbs (*look down on someone / tomar por*); irreversible combinations (*black and white / blanco y negro*); frozen similes (*as dark as pitch / frio como el hielo*); compounds (*backbone / sabelotodo*); restricted collocations (*auburn hair / amasar pan*) and cultural allusions.

As it can be inferred from the classification above, the concept of idiom defended by McCarthy is much broader than the traditional one, in that this author includes expressions such as compounds or even proverbs. We adhere to this proposal based, as already stated, on the fossilized nature of the combination of words and the possibility of an alternative defossilized reading.

Our next step will be to examine the consequences of the decisions adopted here for the language of advertising.

3. IDIOMS AND ADVERTISING

As it has already been mentioned in the Introduction, advertisers are compelled to a continuous and eager search for change in order to attract the public's interest. The question now is to explain how they use idioms to gain this interest.

The usage of idioms offers a myriad of chances to surprise the reader provided that it is possible to activate both readings of the expression at once: the figurative and the literal. This confrontation of meaning is the essence of idiomatic phrases not only for theoretic discussions, as we have seen, but also for the interest they have in the language of advertising. We hope that the way in which they are presented both in English and Spanish sheds some light on a better understanding of them. Bearing in mind our choice on the nature of fixed expressions, we are duly committed to assume that the figurative meaning is stored in memory and is the most accessible one, the one that is retrieved with the least possible effort by the reader.

To achieve surprise, the advertiser needs the coexistence of the two readings. If, as just stated, the figurative one is, so to speak, given, he has to create the means to obtain from it the literal reading. In other words, the sender of the message manipulates the sentence in which the idiomatic phrase appears to make both meanings possible. In so doing the advertiser falls foul of the Principle of Least Effort that rules any communicative act. This communicative anomaly, however, benefits advertising since the reader is forced to spend more time on deciphering a message that in usual circumstances he would understand at a simple glance. In order to elicit the literal reading some requirements are called for. On the one hand, we should take into account what Cronk & Schweigert (1992) have termed the literalness effect. They point out that idioms can vary on a dimension of literalness in that some idioms, such as *by and large*, appear to be semantically anomalous when attempts are made to interpret them literally; that is, they have idiomatic meanings but no sensible literal meanings. On the contrary, dual-meaning idioms, like *kick the bucket*, can clearly be a literal phrase. Only the latter can undergo a componential analysis to satisfy the literal interpretation, thus constituting ideal candidates to form part of a slogan.

On the other hand, it is necessary to consider a factor that has received little attention in the idiom literature: the context. In an early study, Gibbs (1980) controlled the effect of the context to emphasise the conventional nature of idiomatic phrases and how this influenced comprehension. Similarly Schweigert & Moates (1988) have suggested a familiarity response, since according to them, idioms are more easily recognised when preceded by paragraph rather than sentence contexts. More recently, Forrester (1995) defends that the traditional distinction between literal and figurative meaning of idioms should be abandoned in favour of a continuum.

The aim here is to analyse the role of the context where these phrases appear in advertising slogans and to identify how this affects the comprehension of idioms. It is our belief that advertisers pursue the creation of a certain tension between the syntactic fro-

zenness of these expressions and the context in which they are encountered by readers in order to make coexist the figurative interpretation and the literal one. This manipulation is connected to the presence of elements that either preceding or following the idiom will activate in the readers mind a componential analysis of the expression. The elements we refer to can have very different nature in that they can be lexical items, images or even textual information.

It does not matter which of them is put to use, the effect is always the same: to bring about a word-by-word analysis in the formulaic expression. The fact that the effect sought is identical in the two languages studied brings support to our thesis that idioms are naturally understood as single lexical items. It is not a question of individual languages but of a general mechanism of comprehension.

The use of idiomatic phrases in advertising can be enlightening in other respects as well. Grice (1981) reminded us that the recognition of intention is a prerequisite for any communicative act. *Once admitted that idioms are above all interpreted figuratively, what is central is the role of implicature.* The recognition of an alternative (literal) interpretation of the idiom leads the reader to establish associations in trying to make sense out of the unexpected turn of the message. The reader gets involved in a cognitive task that is more effort-consuming and time-consuming than the usual one. But it is this process of making the receiver active that confers the slogan rhetorical force, and thus interest.

The thing is, as it will be proved through the examples, that readers seem strongly biased towards computing the conventional (figurative) meaning of the idiom, even when the context biases them toward a literal interpretation. This is usually corroborated in the body text of the ad, where the reader can find a perhaps slight reference about the most common interpretation of the message.

Given the manner in which we consider that idioms satisfy the cognitive process, it is tempting to conclude that the use of idioms in advertising language is a case of vagueness rather than ambiguity. According to Weinreich (1966: 411) if a word can be understood as ambiguous in a neutral context, it has two dictionary entries, if it cannot be understood as ambiguous in a neutral context, but different meanings seem possible, it is vague.

We cannot forget that all the fixed expressions slogans are made up of have a high degree of literalness. This is why we consider that the advertising message is vague and gives rise to several implicatures. But previous to the analysis of the examples, we'd better look at the theory within which we are going to study the implicit meaning.

4. INFERENCE COMMUNICATION

Grice (1981) suggested that communication is inferential in nature, that is, that there is a gap between what a sender says and what he really means. In general terms, a sentence means much more than the meaning of the words it contains. A sentence takes shape in the readers mind during the reading process. A sentence world is built by combining sentence information with inferences to form a coherent whole. In this view, inferences are understood as information that is necessarily added to sentence information in order to create meaning.

What are inferences? Sperber and Wilson (1986: 68) define inference as the process by which an assumption is accepted as true or probably true on the strength of the truth or probable truth of other assumptions. This quotation implies that communication is basically inferential, in other words, language used to communicate cannot be totally explicit. The majority of the inferences drawn from a sentence are the result of combining senten-

ce elements with themselves and with contextual elements. Hence the final interpretation differs from the interpretation of elements in isolation, out of context. From this perspective, Sperber and Wilson (1986: 174) add that

Human intentional communication is never a mere matter of coding and decoding... Linguistically encoded semantic representations are abstract mental structures which must be inferentially enriched before they can be taken to represent anything of interest.

Regarding some meanings as matters of inference has one important consequence. It implies that the sentences we hear/read are in some ways unclear or underdetermined. In drawing inferences the addressee determines which is the most suitable interpretation for the message, in other words, which one has been intended by the sender. Then, the correct understanding of the sentence is the readers responsibility.

Needless to say, the study of inferences presents certain difficulties. By definition, inferences are not in the text but are the outcome of textual interpretation. They are elusive because they are mental constructs. However, as Shiro (1994: 177) observes, since inferences are based on a text, they can be taken as more or less acceptable, coherent or fitting into the textual world. A further problem is to discriminate between what is stated explicitly and what is inferred. This point will be dealt with in the next section.

4.1. Explicit and Implicit Information

A first step to distinguish inferences from what is stated consists in identifying what is explicit and what is implicit information in a text. Most studies take this distinction for granted, but no sufficiently accurate criteria can be found to differentiate the explicit content from the implicit one. Sperber and Wilson (1986) draw a line between the explicatures and the implicatures. According to them, an assumption is an explicature when it is derived from the explicit information in the text. Implicatures, on the other hand, are interpreted on the basis of the addressers intentions. There are problems with this analysis, as Shiro (1994: 171) notices:

It is problematic to describe the comprehenders behaviour in terms of the addressers intentions as the entire comprehension process consists of the presumed understanding of these intentions.

The explicit information is closer to the propositional content of a sentence, whereas the implicit information is not confined to it, but can be recovered from parts of the sentence combined with contextual elements (for instance, the readers world knowledge). This in turn implies that the implicit content is not so dependent on the linguistic conventions that govern the structure of the sentence as is the explicit one.

Although the distinction explicit/implicit is a potentially useful one, we are going to assume that there is not a clear-cut division between the two. However, it becomes clear that there are degrees of explicitness or implicitness, therefore we consider it more appropriate to regard the difference as a matter of degree, closer to the textual information when more explicit and relying more on the readers contextual knowledge when less explicit.

Another aspect that asks for some comment is variation in inferencing. As Grundy (1995: 53) notices, the explicature fleshes out the logical form of the original sentence whereas the implicature takes a new logical form. This is a convenient way of explaining how different readers understand the same sentences to different extents, since it allows

for the possibility that different readers might complete neither, or only the first, or both stages of the inferencing process.

Other variables which account for variation in inferencing are the readers previous knowledge, motivation or concentration. The question that naturally arises is whether there is a way to control the number and the kind of inferences drawn by the various readers. Contrary to what could be thought, the advertiser is not in the least troubled by this lack of specificity. The more inferences the slogan is able to elicit, the better it is.

To this respect we cant forget that the length of a slogan is highly constrained by space and economic conditions as well as memory ones. Therefore the advertiser aims at creating a slogan that catches the readers attention and that will, so to speak, give way to imagination. From this perspective, the fact that each reader is likely to activate his own inferences is a long way from being taken as a drawback.

Changing to the analysts point of view, we should investigate how the message is used as input by the reader to produce inferences and what role these inferences play in the processing of information. We have defended that all communication entails an inferencing process but what matters now is to make readers aware of it. The receiver of a message will know that he is drawing an inference only when his interpretation of that message requires unusual effort, otherwise inferencing would go unnoticed.

5. FIGURATIVE AND LITERAL MEANING

In this part we are going to address two main questions. First, how the manipulation of the context forces upon the reader the literal interpretation of an idiom. Secondly, that readers show a strong inclination towards computing the figurative meaning of an idiom, even when the context biases them towards a literal interpretation. The discussion will be illustrated with examples of slogans written in the two languages under study, English and Spanish.

5.1. *The Elements that Precede the Idiom*

The placement of key elements in a position previous to the presence of a fixed phrase has important consequences for its interpretation. The strategic situation of a lexical item or the inclusion of a big picture are useful resources to make the reader consider a componential analysis of the idiomatic expression that will appear later on.

The power of the image is well-known. Images capture the eye easier and quicker than words, so in this paper we shall assume, for working purposes, that the picture of an ad has influence over the words of a slogan.

Lets examine some examples:

- (3) Para que el sol no te traiga frito. <Federpticos> *El Suplemento Semanal* 14 May 1995.

A funny picture of a man wearing two fried eggs as glasses is enough to elicit in the reader the literal interpretation of the idiomatic expression traer frito. Inferences related to the power of the sun or its heat are activated. However, the figurative meaning has not been washed away. It is compatible and reinforces the idea that the sun can be highly annoying for the eyes.

Lets see more examples:

- (4) Para todos los bolsillos. <Renault> *Blanco y Negro* 26 March 1995.

This slogan is preceded by eleven small photographs of denim pockets of different sizes and forms. Such a presentation opens two possibilities for the reader: the figurative one that implies that the car advertised is not expensive, and the literal one due to the image, that is, the word *bolsillos* is no longer considered as part of an idiomatic phrase but on its own. This literal meaning, however, is not fully specified in the advertisement, since the only explanation found is the sentence *Y además un regalo Chipie muy especial*. The reader can understand that on buying this car he will be offered any denim clothes by Chipie.

The image also influences the next slogan:

- (5) Venga, no me pongas los dientes largos y dame un Ballantines...! *Blanco y Negro* 2 April 1995.

The sentence is superimposed on a picture of three sea lions with big tusks swimming towards a bottle of the whisky promoted. The insertion of this image makes the reader think of large teeth, although the meaning that prevails is the figurative one.

Another illustrative example:

- (6) Hay gente que por slo 0,24 ptas se juega la cabeza. <Fischer> *El Suplemento Semanal* 5 Nov. 1995.

The idiom *jugarse la cabeza*, which means to take risks, can be read literally thanks to the presence of the stuffed head of a deer that breaks off the wall on which it was. Both interpretations are justified in the text of the ad where the reader is informed that Fischer nails are the safest ones.

Advertisements written in English also show this strong influence of the image:

- (7) Were happy to be giving the British economy a hand. <BNFL> *The Economist* 24 August 1994.

The idiom to give a hand can be analysed componentially owing to the picture of a gloved hand, but the meaning that prevails is the figurative one according to which the company BNFL helps to boost up Britains industrial benefits.

The following slogan is likewise preceded by a picture:

- (8) A network that can open more doors to opportunities in China. <Standard Chartered> *The Economist* 5 Nov. 1994.

The fixed phrase to open doors can have a literal interpretation since an image of several doors that are being opened breaks the idiom. Both readings of the expression are possible, the figurative one activates inferences about the growing number of opportunities, and the literal one about the number of offices that this bank has in China.

Lets consider now another one:

- (9) Keeping production on course is childs play with Siemens Automation. *The Economist* 5 March 1994.

A literal reading of the expression *childs play* is activated by a picture of a plastic toy ship, which allows the reader to draw inferences about Siemens manufactures for children, reliability of those products, etc. The figurative reading survives perfectly well in the understanding of the slogan, the implication is that technology is not in the least complicated for Siemens, they know the key to success.

The following slogan illustrates coexistence too:

- (10) Where we are, you wont miss the boat. <Singapore Unlimited> *The Economist* 3 Sept. 1994.

The idiomatic interpretation of to miss the boat, that is, fail to take advantage of a chance, implies that the company advertised has a huge infrastructure and is competitive. In addition, thanks to a picture of several boats, the reader effects a componential analysis of the expression, activating inferences about the ships available with this company, its coverage, etc. This is corroborated in the body text, which offers figures to justify these inferences.

So far we have seen how the image can influence the processing of an idiomatic expression. In what follows we are going to examine in which way the placing of certain lexical items previous to the idiom affects the interpretation of this expression. As before, the first group of examples analysed are written in Spanish.

- (11) Magín Revillo te cuenta todo lo que necesitas saber para pasar un fin de semana fuera de lo normal. <RNE Radio 1> *Blanco y Negro* 16 April 1995.

The phrase under consideration is fuera de lo normal, that idiomatically understood means unusually good. Nevertheless, the idiom is preceded by expressions such as todo lo que necesitas saber and fin de semana that give a turn to its interpretation, namely, that the weekend is not part of the weekly routine. Obviously, the advertiser intends both readings at once and coexistence is the result of lexical insertion.

Lets see a slightly different case:

- (12) ABS CD EE DA CC AA AE CCA ¿Quién ha dicho que los jóvenes no saben de letras? <Renault Clio> *El Pas Semanal* 1 Oct. 1995.

Groups of big letters come before the expression saber de letras, what produces a literal interpretation of this expression. Such groups of letters turn out to be the acronyms of the modern equipment of a car: some of them are standard (as ABS) but the majority have been invented by the advertisers (for instance EE stands for elevadas eléctrico). The effect is to provoke fun since the figurative interpretation of the expression refers to the youths knowledge of Art studies. This figurative interpretation is implicit and the sender is sure that it will be activated in virtue of the Idiomatic Processing Model. The inferences drawn are varied in nature but the advertiser tries to give a good image of young people.

Another example:

- (13) Problemas de caspa, picores y seborrea ...
Quítate los de la cabeza. <Neutrogena> *El Suplemento Semanal* 26 Nov. 1995.

The idiomatic expression quitarse algo de la cabeza is biased by the terms caspa, picores and seborrea, some problems that originate and affect your scalp. This is why the reader processes the literal meaning of the expression together with the figurative one, which indicates that the product advertised will leave you at peace, free of problems.

The idiom can also be influenced by a proper noun:

- (14) Ramón Roteta pone las cartas sobre la mesa. <Restaurante La Fragata> *Blanco y Negro* 3 Dec. 1995.

Ramón Roteta is a relevant chef, therefore the reader finds a connection between this man and the item cartas understood as mens. Since Roteta has the intention of explaining

how he has cooked the different dishes, both interpretations of the idiomatic expression *poner las cartas sobre la mesa* survive in the example.

Advertisements written in English also show the importance of the lexical items inserted before the idiom.

- (15) Two simple exercises to keep your hair on its toes. <Kerastase> *Marie Claire* Feb. 1990.

The idiomatic expression *on its toes*, which means ready for action, is influenced by the presence of exercises, what immediately establishes a link between this term and the literal reading of the idiom. The text of the ad refers to bodies in good shape and the need for our hair to look and feel good. But the literal effect is not so powerful as to do away with the figurative interpretation, which is also confirmed in the text (the hair needs to retain its balance to stay full of energy and vigour).

Consider the next slogan:

- (16) With Kraft Fat Free on top, you can finally leave fat on the side. *Marie Claire* August 1991.

The example above contains two idiomatic phrases *on top* and *on the side*, each preceded by lexical items that will impose on them a word-to-word analysis. *On top* is interpreted literally thanks to the words *Kraft Fat Free*, the reader draws inferences about the low calories of this sauce. Parallely, the second idiom, *on the side*, can be understood literally because of the presence of the item *leave* and also in opposition to the expression *on top*.

Lets examine another one:

- (17) A big hand for those who gave us a hand. <Kuwait Airways> *The Economist* 23 March 1991.

The expression *to give a hand*, whose figurative meaning is to help, is preceded by the polysemous term *hand* that due to the other words that go with it is taken as applause. The double presence of *hand* introduces a play on words at the same time that opens up the possibility of a literal reading of the idiom.

There is yet a further group of examples related to the ones seen so far, in that the idiomatic phrase is preceded by a term that belongs to the same semantic field that one of the words that form the fixed phrase, thus invoking a literal analysis of such expression. Nevertheless, this strategy constitutes a mere play since, generally speaking, the literal reading does not fit in the context.

- (18) Sport mana. Damos más juego. <Canal Satélite> *Blanco y Negro* 12 May 1996.

The reader identifies the fixed phrase *dar juego*, idiomatically understood as offering more possibilities. In all certitude this is what Canal Satlite has been created for. Nonetheless, the first item encountered is *sport*, which can be regarded as a specification of the more general term *game*, thus imposing a literal reading on the idiom. Hence the reader activates inferences concerning the bigger number of opportunities to be found in this new channel that thanks to the literal reading are specified as sport entertainment.

Lets see the next example:

- (19) Chrysler Nen. Brilla con luz propia. *El Suplemento Semanal* 28 May 1995.

Nen, a lighting system, forms part of the denotation of *luz*, making the reader aware of the components of the idiom *brillar con luz propia*. The intention of the advertisement

is not to pursue the literal interpretation any further but to focus on characteristics such as safety, power, comfortability, space, economy and environmental respect, enough to make of this car the ideal automobile.

A similar method can be discovered in:

- (20) Su silencio dar que hablar. Laguna Diesel. <Renault> *Blanco y Negro* 29 January 1995.

The fixed expression *dar que hablar* is preceded by the item *silencio*, which is related to it in so far as *silencio* and *hablar* can be regarded as opposites. Obviously, the only intended reading is the figurative one. However, the decision of introducing a word that maintains a relationship with the idiom enriches the interpretation of the slogan, adding flavour to it.

Advertising written in English is also fairly keen on this method.

- (21) Our financial skills helped one gold mining company find the light at the end of the tunnel. <AIG> *The Economist* 6 August 1994.

The term mining or even the combination gold mining is placed before the expression to find the light at the end of the tunnel, which makes more relevant the word tunnel. This strategy involves some teasing but the interpretation of the idiom to be maintained is the figurative, most accessible one. That is, AIG helped the mining company sort out difficulties, in the same way than miners rejoice from underground by the presence of light.

A similar reasoning underlies the following slogan:

- (22) Seven thousand journalists are at the World Cup. Our job is to make sure no one gets a scoop. <EDS> *The Economist* 9 July 1994.

Once more the reader is able to identify two connected items, first cup and secondly scoop. This identification implies an awareness of the possibility of decomposing the idiomatic phrase to get a scoop, which nevertheless maintains its figurative reading. The existing relationship between cup and scoop does not have any bearing in the intention of the ad, so the effect produced is merely a funny one.

Connected items are also found in:

- (23) When a finger on the pulse of the market matters, you are in safe hands with UBS. *The Economist* 18 March 1995.

Elements such as finger, pulse and hands can be said to belong to the same universe of reference. On meeting them the reader may elicit inferences referring to health, as the pulse can be checked placing a finger against the inside of the wrist (hence the hand). The ad is not about human health, but is metaphorically applied to the share markets health. The expression *safe hands*, not so much an idiom, as a collocation, continues to be processed as a block, that is, understood as secure. But again, it must be said that the incorporation of these other elements helps to establish new associations, to mollify the atmosphere.

5.2. *The Elements that Follow the Idiom*

This section provides more evidence to our approach to idiom comprehension. The fixed phrase, initially considered figuratively, is subject to a literal reading in virtue of the items placed after it. It is our belief that part of the success of this strategy is due to the

fact that the reader is caught off-guard. The comprehension of slogans built up on this method involves an additional processing effort since the reader has to go backwards in order to adapt to the context the interpretation of the idiomatic phrase. Usually the element responsible for this non-idiomatic reading is the body-text, which has two immediate implications. First, that the slogan should be appealing enough to attract the receiver and to make him go on reading. Secondly, the type of products or services advertised through this method are those that need explanations, otherwise this backwards effect is not triggered by the body text but by information contained in the slogan itself.

The advantage of such a practice is that the adaptation process generally means that new inferences come to form part of the universe of inferences already activated. The side-effect consequence is that some of the previously elicited ones will have to be cancelled if there is any danger of clash.

As before, we shall start with the analysis of examples written in Spanish.

- (24) La cultura no ocupa lugar. <ABC Cultural> *Blanco y Negro* 22 January 1995.

This slogan paraphrases the well-known Spanish saying *El saber no ocupa lugar*. This identification permits the reader activate inferences relating to the role of culture in society, its importance when it comes to understanding or taking decisions, etc. However, the intention of the advertisement is to inform the public that culture, apart from being fundamental, does not take up space, since digital technology encapsulates more than 3,000 pages, 3 million words and 4,000 pictures in a CD-ROM. The non-idiomatic reading of the slogan is not incompatible with the idiomatic one. Therefore, rather than cancelling inferences the reader has to enlarge the already existing context.

Lets move to:

- (25) Quedarse sin Blanca. <Blanca de Navarra> *El País Semanal* 29 Oct. 1995.

The idiom *quedarse sin blanca*, which means to be in the red, constitutes the slogan of this ad. The idiomatic interpretation, however, does not seem to fit into the context, since the presence of the trademark Blanca de Navarra together with the picture showing an empty bottle upside down point at a literal interpretation of the idiom: Blanca de Navarra is so fine a liqueur that everybody loves drinking it. It could be suggested that the figurative reading is maintained as a side-effect, that is, you will have to buy so many bottles of Blanca de Navarra that you will find yourself spending your money on liqueur to please your friends. In any case, the activation of this type of inferences will depend on the reader.

We are going to examine one more example written in Spanish:

- (26) En el fondo nada te impide tener el frigorífico más grande del mundo. <General Electric> *El País Semanal* 11 June 1995.

The expression *en el fondo* is initially idiomatically processed, but when the reader discovers the terms *frigorífico* and *grande* he is able to reinterpret literally the fixed phrase. Both readings are licensed by the bodytext, the first is supported by the enormous advantages offered by this model (adaptable to any design, equipped with the latest technology, etc.). The second reading, that is, the literal one, is supported by the new size of the refrigerator, which makes it appropriate for nearly any space.

We will consider some more examples written in English.

- (27) A butter-like taste without the butts. (No wonder the knives are out for us.) <I Cant Believe Its Not Butter> *Woman* 6 July 1992.

Within the context created by the ad, the expression the knives are out is understood as ready to use (the spread has the nice taste of butter but it is low in fat, it does not contain cholesterol, etc.). However, after reading the body text the reader attributes to the phrase a literal meaning: the knives are the symbol of a campaign against this firm that has managed to launch such a nice product.

In the following example, the literal meaning of the idiom is activated when the reader comes to the body text.

(28) There's more to it than meets the eye. <Volvo> *The Economist* 24 Sept. 1994.

As has happened in other previously analysed slogans, the text chosen by Volvo is in itself a figurative expression whose idiomatic meaning (an idea, opinion, etc. is more important, worthy of notice than at first it can be seen) is only half the interpretation intended. The text informs the reader that a technologically advanced engine, in addition to the highest level of safety and comfort hide under the beauty of the car. Obviously these qualities cannot be perceived at first sight, but once known they count in favour of the car and make it worth considering. Hence the inhibition of the previously activated inferences does not take place.

Finally, we are going to examine one of the finest examples that use the method under examination:

(29) When you're nuts about chocolate but your diet says no... Don't risk it! Bisk it!
<Bisks> 19 Oct. 1982.

The effect of reanalysis over the idiomatic expression is not the responsibility of the body text but of the lexical items contained in the slogan, namely chocolate, diet and the phrase bisk it. All these words can be regarded as belonging to a common universe of reference that permits the reader activate inferences about a biscuit (thanks to the sound of the phrase bisk it), whose basic ingredients are nuts and chocolate, with the added qualities of being low in calories...

6. CONCLUSION

Within the context of present results it seems clear that when the reader encounters an idiom the interpretation he first processes is the figurative one. Only when this reading is not appropriate or when the presence of some elements require it, will the reader compute the literal interpretation of a fixed phrase. Moreover, even in the examples where the context was strongly biased towards the literal meaning by an effect of precedence, the reader did process the idiomatic reading. This can be taken as evidence of the prevalence of the figurative over the literal meaning in the human mind.

Such a situation is taken advantage of by advertisers, who often include fixed expressions in their slogans. Through a manipulation of the context they manage to make the reader consider the two interpretations. Sometimes only one of them will be at issue, but the goal is to enlarge the number of inferences activated by a slogan, and consequently to arise the receivers interest in the message.

WORKS CITED

Cronk, Brian and Wendy Schweigert 1992: The Comprehension of Idioms: the Effects of Familiarity, Literalness and Usage. *Applied Psycholinguistics* 13: 131-146.

- Cronk, Brian , Susan Lima and Wendy Schweigert 1993: Idioms in Sentences: Effects of Frequency, Literalness and Familiarity. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research* 22, 1: 59-82.
- Dascal, M. 1987: Defending Literal Meaning. *Cognitive Science* 11: 259-281.
- Drew, P. and E. Holt 1992: Idiomatic Expressions and their Role in the Organization of Topic Transition in Conversation. Paper presented at the International Conference on Idioms, Tilburg.
- Dyer, Gillian 1992 (1982): *Advertising as Communication*. London: Routledge.
- Fernando, C. and R. Flavell 1981: *On Idiom: Critical Views and Perspectives*. Exeter: University of Exeter.
- Forrester, Michael 1995: Tropic Implicature and Context in the Comprehension of Idiomatic Phrases. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research* 24, 1: 1-22.
- Gibbs, R. 1980: Spilling the Beans on Understanding and Memory for Idioms in Conversation. *Memory and Cognition* 8: 149-156.
- Glass, A. 1983: The Comprehension of Idioms. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research* 12: 429-442.
- Grice, Paul 1981: Presupposition and Conversational Implicature. *Radical Pragmatics*. Ed. Peter Cole. New York: Academic Press. 183-198.
- Grundy, Peter 1995: *Doing Pragmatics*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Labov, William 1972: *Language in the Inner City*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- McCarthy, Michael 1992: English Idioms in Use. *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* 25: 55-65.
- Moon, Rosamund 1994: The Analysis of Fixed Expression in Text. *Advances in Written Text Analysis*. Ed. Malcolm Coulthard. London: Routledge. 117-135.
- Schraw, Gregory, Woodrow Trathen, Ralph Reynolds and Richard Lapan 1988: Preferences for Idioms: Restrictions due to Lexicalization and Familiarity. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research* 17, 5: 413-424.
- Schweigert, Wendy 1991: The Muddy Waters of Idiomatic Expression of Idiom Comprehension. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research* 20: 305-314.
- Schweigert, Wendy and Danny Moates 1988: Familiar Idiom Comprehension. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research* 17, 4: 281-96.
- Shiro, Martha 1994: Inferences in Discourse Comprehension. *Advances in Written Text Analysis*. Ed. Malcolm Coulthard. London: Routledge. 167-178.
- Sperber, Dan and Deirdre Wilson 1986: *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Swinney, D. and A. Cutler 1979: The Access and Processing of Idiomatic Expressions. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behaviour* 18: 523-534.
- Weinreich, U. 1966: Explorations in Semantic Theory. Quoted in Channell, Joanna 1994: *Vague Language*. Oxford: OUP.

