(under)graduate journal
LingUU
linguistics

¿ESTAMOS EN LAS NUBES, O QUÉ?
ARE WE IN THE CLOUDS, OR WHAT?
EXPLORING THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE TRANSPARENCY AND FLEXIBILITY OF IDIOMS IN MEXICAN SPANISH

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KEYWORDS
Mexican Spanish
Idioms
Compositionality
Transparency
Flexibility

INFO
Received: Dec. 6, 2025 ■
Accepted: May 16, 2026 ■

ABSTRACT
Idioms have been studied by linguists over the years, in order to understand how the meaning of these phrases is constructed and whether they allow modifications. In this sense, it is important to consider an idiom's transparency (whether it is easy to determine its meaning and use from the words themselves) and its flexibility (the possibility of modifying the expression via adjectives, quantifiers, topicalization, VP ellipsis etc., while preserving the core meaning). Nunberg, Sag and Wasow (1994), O'Grady (1998) and Horn (2003) have explored these properties in English idioms and found a connection between the two, with more transparent phrases (like "spill the beans") allowing additional terms or altered forms, while opaque expressions (like "kick the bucket") do not. This study explores whether the link exists in Mexican Spanish, a language not previously researched from the perspective of idiomaticity. It uses a battery of tests inspired by existing literature to see whether transparent idioms are more flexible in this language variety. A small number of expressions was modified and served as examples and a native speaker assessed the grammaticality of the new forms and their meaning. The results reflect a connection between transparency and flexibility similar to the one found in English.

1. INTRODUCTION
Idioms have long drawn the attention of linguists, who analyzed their semantic and syntactic properties (Katz, 1973; Chomsky, 1980; Ruwet, 1991; Nunberg et al., 1994, Horn, 2003). Despite some difficulty in agreeing on a definition for idiomaticity, there is a consensus that it involves phrases whose meaning is not immediately accessible from the literal interpretation of the words (Nunberg et al., 1994; O'Grady, 1998). An important parameter when studying idioms is transparency, the ease with which one can recover the significance and potential use of a phrase (e.g. "kick the habit" is fairly transparent in its meaning of getting rid of a habit, but making the connection between "saw logs" and snoring is more difficult). Conversely, researchers have worked with English idioms from the perspective of flexibility and mobility, verifying how far from its original form an idiom can be pushed before it loses its metaphorical value (Nunberg et al., 1994; Horn, 2003).
This paper investigates how well the existing theory applies to Mexican Spanish and explores whether there might be a connection between the transparency and the flexibility of verbal idioms (verb + object, e.g. "pull

strings") in this language variety. The link has been argued to exist in English, and this study probes whether that is the case across languages, especially those from different language families. Mexican Spanish, a Romance language spoken primarily in Mexico, North America, has not been previously researched from the perspective of idiomaticity, making this the first study to address the topic.

The paper is structured as follows: section 2 outlines the diagnostics used for flexibility and transparency, with backing in existing research on the topics, section 3 presents the data collected and its analysis and section 4 discusses the patterns observed and the limitations of the study.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Flexibility

Flexibility is the property of an idiom that allows it to be modified in various ways while retaining the core meaning and, in this study, it will be assessed using a battery of tests, inspired by previous studies, that includes conjugation, adjectival modification, relative clause starting from the NP, passive form, topicalization,[1] VP ellipsis [2] and cleft sentences (of the form "it is NP that Subject VP").

The research done on English expressions [3] suggests that opaque idioms are more restrictive in the forms they function in, while transparent phrases show varying degrees of flexibility, permitting other words to separate their components, different movements and additions. Nunberg et al. (1994), for instance, support the flexibility of idioms by arguing for their compositionality. They claim that sections of meaning reside in certain words, due to the possibility of modifying those words with adjectives, relative clauses, quantifiers, topicalization, VP ellipsis or featuring them in passive constructions, while maintaining the same message. Their paper contains the following examples, which are still interpretable metaphorically, regardless of alteration: "leave no legal stone unturned", "Pat got the job by pulling strings that weren't available to anyone else", "touch a couple of nerves", "those strings, he wouldn't pull for you", "my goose is cooked, but yours isn't", "the beans were spilled by Pat". Despite not focusing on transparency, the scholars provide cases of idiomatic expressions that do allow modification, like "kick the habit", "pull strings", "touch a nerve", putting them in opposition with those they deemed opaque, like "saw logs" and "kick the bucket", which do not display much flexibility. The findings are consolidated by O'Grady (1998), who additionally considers the substitutability of idiomatic components, whether lexical items can be replaced within idioms without losing the metaphorical interpretation ("pack a wallow/punch", "hit the hay/sack", "lose one's mind/marbles"). Transparent idioms allow these permutations with little impact on meaning, while opaque ones are rigid in their word choice. Lastly, Horn (2003) studies the mobility of idioms and notes that opaque idioms, like "kick the bucket", are fixed and impervious to change into passive voice ("the bucket was kicked by Bill" does not mean Bill died), while transparent expressions allow passive forms ("the beans were spilled by Fred" is fine), raising structures ("the line seems to be drawn"), NP as head of relative clauses ("the strings that were pulled") or tough-movement ("the ice is difficult to break").

2.2. Transparency and some considerations

Transparency refers to how easy it is to decipher an idiom's meaning, but it was difficult to judge whether idioms had this property based on my consultant's introspection alone. The literature on language acquisition proved useful in tackling the issue, with its discussion of how idioms are acquired by second-language speakers (Keysar and Bly, 1995; Boers and Webb, 2015; Cieślicka, 2015). For an approximate evaluation of a phrase's transparency, I will refer to the possibility of realizing the action described, the compositionality of the phrase, the reliance on metaphors or conceptual mapping and the need for etymological information. An idiom will be labelled as transparent if the literal action hints at its figurative meaning, there is compositionality, its metaphorical mappings are accessible, and knowledge of etymology is not needed. It will be deemed opaque when it fails at these tests.

Previous research suggests that, when encountering foreign figurative language, people try to understand the abstract by finding correspondence with concrete elements, so idioms whose literal meaning is plausible help them grasp the associated concepts better (Boers and Webb, 2015; Cieślicka, 2015). For instance, “skate on thin ice” is a possible action, which makes the figurative interpretation “to do something risky” more transparent due to arising associations of danger. An idiom is also inherently more understandable if it is compositional, that is, if the meaning of the expression can be derived from the individual parts and the way they are combined (Nunberg et al., 1994, Keysar and Bly, 1995). With “pull the strings”, each component can be metaphorically matched to a section of meaning: “pull” can be seen as “exploit” and “strings” as “connections”, thereby reconstructing the interpretation of manipulating social connections to achieve something. Moreover, for an idiom to be interpretable, people need to be familiar with the underlying conceptual metaphor (Keysar and Bly, 1995; Boers and Webb, 2015): in English, anger is often associated with heat, like in “to be hot-headed” or “lose one’s cool”, so knowing this link makes decoding “to be hot under the collar” easier. Lastly, knowledge of a phrase’s etymology helps in understanding: hearing something be called “a white elephant” makes sense if we know the story where the king of Siam gifted this animal to attendants who displeased him, because the costs of maintaining it were immense, yet no profit could be derived.

3. THE DATA AND FINDINGS

The data was collected through elicitation sessions with an 18-year-old native speaker of Mexican Spanish, who grew up in Mexico City and later became proficient in English and French. First, the consultant was asked to indicate from a list of Peninsular Spanish examples (abridged from Gavilán et al., 2021) which idioms he had seen used in the Mexican context. The resulting 15 expressions were used in judgement tasks, where the participant modified them in different ways and decided whether that sounded natural, acceptable and if the metaphorical meaning was preserved. The findings were glossed [4] (“?” marks cases which are possible only in particular contexts) and four of the idioms are analyzed below by the researcher, having been chosen for their variation in transparency and flexibility, which would better illustrate the potential link between the two features (see Appendix for remaining data).

First, dataset (1) revolves around *tragarse sus palabras*, literally “swallow one’s words” and similar to English “eat one’s words”; both have the interpretation of retracting something one has said. Examples (1a) and (1b) show conjugation for the past simple and near future tense, while (1c) is the sentence in passive form. Adjectival modification is featured in (1d), followed by relative clause in (1e) and VP ellipsis in (1f).

(1) *Tragar-se* *sus* *palabras.*
swallow.INF-REFL POSS.3 words.
'To swallow one’s words.'
Intended meaning: 'To retract/ take back something one said.'

a. *Me* *tragué* *mis* *palabras.*
REFL.1SG swallow.PST.1SG POSS.1SG words.
'I swallowed my words.'
Intended meaning: 'I took back what I said.'

b. *David* *se* *va* *a* *tragar* *sus* *palabras.*
David REFL.3SG go.PRS.3SG to swallow.INF POSS.3SG words.
'David is going to swallow his words.'
Intended meaning: 'David is going to take back what he said.'

c. *# Las palabras fueron tragadas por David.*
The words be.PFV3PL swallow.PTCP by David.
'The words were swallowed by David.'
Intended meaning: 'What was said was retracted by David.'

d. *David se tragó sus ignorantes palabras.*
David REFL.3SG swallow.PST.3SG POSS. 3SG ignorant words.
'David swallowed his ignorant words.'
Intended meaning: 'David took back his ignorant words.'

e. *David se tragó las palabras que nos ofendieron.*
David REFL.3SG swallow.PST.3SG the words que 1PL.ACC offend.PFV.3PL.
'David swallowed the words that offended us.'
Intended meaning: 'David retracted the words that offended us.'

f. *?Él se tragó sus palabras pero yo no.*
He REFL.3SG swallow.PST.3SG POSS. 3SG words but I not.
'He swallowed his words, but I didn't.'
Intended meaning: 'He took back what he said, but I didn't.'

As an exercise of imagination, it is possible to consider that words gain a physical form when spoken and a person swallowing them is a way to take them back. It can also be argued that the idiom is compositional, because "swallow" matched the idea of taking and putting away in "retract", while the conceptual mapping of words to speech as a whole clarifies the second half. Lastly, one is not dependent on the origin of the expression and, for these reasons, I believe the idiom is transparent.
It is possible to conjugate *tragarse sus palabras* for the past and future-adjacent tenses (1a, 1b), but the consultant found it strange in the present form, "# he is swallowing his words right now", or as something done routinely, "# he swallows his words after every meeting". It was considered incorrect in the passive voice (1c), because the agent, the person performing the action, is an element valued in the sentence and is preferred in the sentence-initial position. Removing the agent altogether was deemed even worse, since its absence would make the phrase impersonal and lack meaning. It is possible to describe *palabras* in different ways (1d), since "words" is a stand-in for the content of one's speech; most things that can qualify speech are also compatible with *palabras* (e.g. ignorant, interesting, moving). Adjectival modification of this sort is usually seen as dramatic and exaggerated, but if so inclined, one can still use the sentence and it would be grammatical. Similarly, it is allowed to add a relative clause attaching to the NP "words" (1e), but this was seen as very "baroque", as the consultant put it, and thus, more uncommon. Example (1f) shows VP ellipsis, which would technically be fine, but was considered questionable, because a scenario could not be found where someone would use the sentence.
In (2), there is *estar en las nubes*, literally "be in the clouds", an expression much like the English "have one's head in the clouds", meaning "be distracted, daydreaming or lost in thought". Sentences (2a-c) display conjugations of the idiom for present simple, past simple and near-future tenses. (2d) includes adjectival modification, (2e) is an example of a cleft sentence, and (2f) and (2g) show differences in VP ellipsis.

(2) *Estar en las nubes.*
be.INF in the clouds.
' To be in the clouds.'
Intended meaning: 'To be distracted/ daydreaming.'

a. *Sofía está en las nubes.*
Sofia be.PRS.3SG in the clouds.
'Sofia is in the clouds.'
Intended meaning: 'Sofia is distracted.'

b. *Sofía estaba en las nubes.*
Sofia be.IPFV.3SG in the clouds.
'Sofia was in the clouds.'
Intended meaning: 'Sofia was distracted.'

c. *? Sofía va a estar en las nubes.*
Sofia go.PRS.3SG to be.INF in the clouds.
'Sofia is going to be in the clouds.'
Intended meaning: 'Sofia is going to be distracted [and not hear a thing].'

d. *Sofía estaba en nubes densas.*
Sofia be.IPFV.3SG in clouds dense.
'Sofia was in dense clouds.'
Intended meaning: 'Sofia was very distracted.'

e. *# Fueron las nubes en las que Sofía estuvo.*
be.PFV.3PL the clouds in which Sofia be.PFV.3SG
'It was the clouds that Sofia was in.'
Intended meaning: 'Sofia was distracted.'

f. *# Él estaba en las nubes, pero yo no.*
He be.IPFV.3SG in the clouds but I not.
'He was in the clouds, but I wasn't.'
Intended meaning: 'He was distracted, but I wasn't.'

g. *Él estaba en las nubes, pero yo estaba concentrando.*
He be.IPFV.3SG in the clouds but I be.IPFV.1SG concentrate.GER.
'He was in the clouds, but I was focusing.'
Intended meaning: 'He was distracted, but I was focusing.'

While it is physically possible to be among the clouds, given a flying device, it is ambiguous what the phrase refers to metaphorically, allowing interpretations of "transcendence" or "stroke of genius" due to the great height. The metaphor of clouds representing the idea that one is not mentally present is not accessible and we might need the etymology of the phrase to Figure out its meaning. I would therefore argue that *estar en las nubes* is mostly opaque.

The phrase can be conjugated freely for present and past tenses (2a, b) and even future tense (2c), assuming the scenario is clearly established, like in my case, a hypothetical ("What if you want to tell a friend about your day, but you think 'They'll just be distracted and not hear a thing, that's what they're like'"). It is possible to modify the NP and say someone is in "dense clouds" (2d) and it would be amplifying the metaphorical meaning of the idiom, indicating a greater degree of distraction. The exaggeration can be done for comedic effect and would be understood as such, but some of the musicality of the expression would be lost because the definite article is dropped when the adjective is added. The cleft sentence in (2e) was described as

very strange and not something someone would say, but it was still interpretable. VP ellipsis as shown in (2f) would technically be correct, but a native speaker might prefer to use a contrasting verb instead (''be distracted'' or ''focus''), like in (2g). As an alternative, one can describe a person as “being in space” (*estar en el espacio*), which also means “to be distracted”.

In (3), we have *estirar la pata* (literally “stretch the leg”), a rather informal, perhaps even vulgar, way to describe that someone has died, much like “kick the bucket”. Sentence (3a) shows the one available conjugation, for past tense, while (3b) presents the passive form of the idiom. (3c) and (3d) are modifications, with an adverb and an adjective, respectively; (3e) describes the possibility of topicalization, (3f) is a cleft sentence and (3g) shows VP ellipsis.

(3) *Estirar la pata.*
stretch.INF the leg/paw.
'To stretch the leg.'
Intended meaning: 'To die.'

a. *El pobre hombre estiró la pata.*
The poor man stretch.PST.3SG the leg.
'The poor man stretched the leg.'
Intended meaning: 'The poor man died.'

b. *# La pata fue estirada por David.*
The leg be.PST.3SG stretch.PTCP by David.
'The leg was stretched by David.'
Intended meaning: 'David died.'

c. *Repentinamente David estiró la pata.*
Suddenly David stretch.PST.3SG the leg.
'David stretched the leg suddenly.'
Intended meaning: 'David died suddenly.'

d. *# David estiró la pata larga.*
David stretch.PST.3SG the leg long.
' David stretched the long leg.'
Intended meaning: 'David died after a long life.'

e. *# La pata, David estiró.*
The leg, David stretch.PST.3SG.
'The leg, David stretched.'
Intended meaning: 'David died.'

f. *# Fue la pata que David estiró.*
be.PRF.3SG the leg that David stretch.PST.3SG.
'It was the leg that David stretched.'
Intended meaning: 'David died.'

g. *# Él estiró la pata, pero ella no.*
He stretch.PST.3SG the leg, but she not.
'He stretched the leg, but she didn't.'
Intended meaning: 'He died, but she didn't.'

The expression has the possibility of being literal, since stretching a leg is a common action. Still, this does not help in deciphering the idiom, because it is very much based on etymology, and without knowing the origin of the phrase, it is nearly impossible to make the connection between moving a limb a certain way and dying. It also cannot be said that there is compositionality or that a metaphor is present. Therefore, I claim *estirar la pata* is an entirely opaque idiom.
According to the consultant, this phrase is confined to the oral domain, not likely to be used in text form, and it is usually only conjugated for past tenses (3a); if one wanted to say someone is dying currently or predict that they will die, they would use the verb *morir* (to die). A passive construction like in (3b) is considered strange to create and makes it seem like David was stretching a leg that was not his own. Modifying the whole phrase is possible, using adverbs like "suddenly" or "out of nowhere" (3c), but describing *la pata* (the leg), like in (3d), made for a "weird sentence". It could be understood as a joke depending on the situation, but would sooner point to the literal meaning of stretching a long leg, rather than dying in a particular way. Topicalization in (3e) did not make for a good sentence and the consultant found it more intuitive to say *La pata que David estiró*, meaning "The leg that David stretched". It was not possible to create an acceptable cleft sentence using the expression (3f) and looking at VP ellipsis (3g), this particular idiom does not seem to allow it.
Lastly, in (4), *pedir la luna* is the Spanish equivalent of "ask for the moon", meaning to ask for something impossible or to make unreasonable demands. It was included in the analysis because it behaved atypically compared to most idioms. In (4a), we see a conjugation of the expression for past tense, followed by a different way of using the phrase in its infinitive form in (4b). (4c) shows the passive construction and (4d) is adjectival modification.

(4) *Pedir la luna.*
request.INF the moon.
'To request/ ask for the moon.'
Intented meaning: 'To ask for something impossible.'

a. *# Pedi la luna.*
request.PST.1SG the moon.
' I requested the moon.'
Intented meaning: 'I asked for something impossible.'

b. *Es pedir la luna.*
be.PRS.3SG request.INF the moon.
'That is to ask for the moon.'
Intented meaning: 'That is asking for something impossible.'

c. *# La luna fue pedida.*
the moon be.PST.3SG request.PTCP.
'The moon was requested.'
Intended meaning: 'Something impossible was asked for.'

d. *# Es pedir la luna académica.*
be.PRS.3SG request.INF the moon academic.
'That is to ask for the academic moon.'
Intended meaning: 'That's asking for something impossible in the domain of academics.'

Understanding this idiom requires knowledge of the underlying metaphor where the moon represents something valuable, but unobtainable. Perhaps imagining the literal action or knowing the origins of the phrase would help arrive at that association, but the composition does not aid in discovering the message. Hence, I suggest that *pedir la luna* is mostly opaque.
According to the consultant, this is a phrase typically used in its infinitive form in everyday speech, as shown in (4b). It would serve as response to something unreasonable an interlocutor has said, e.g. "I want to become the president."/ "Wow, that's asking for the moon.", but it is rarer to see a conjugated form like in (4a). Passive forms like *La luna fue pedida* (4c) were seen as strange, and so was modification with an adjective in (4d). While certainly interpretable by a native speaker in the correct context, it appears exaggerated and "too baroque".

4. TOWARDS AN ANALYSIS

The idioms I found to be transparent, like *tragarse sus palabras* (to retract what one said) in (1), show a great degree of flexibility. Not only can they be conjugated for most tenses, but they allow adjectival modification, relative clause and VP ellipsis. Meanwhile, the more opaque idioms in the dataset, like *estar en las nubes* (to be distracted) in (2) and *estirar la pata* (to die) in (3), were found in more limited configurations. Although possible to conjugate them to an extent, they could not combine with adjectives or relative clauses, or be used in passive voice, cleft sentences or topicalization contexts. These findings tentatively suggest that there might be a link between the transparency of idioms and their flexibility in Mexican Spanish, which would be consistent with what Nunberg et al. (1994), O'Grady (1998) and Horn (2003) found for English. Several idioms behaved similarly to *pedir la luna* (to ask for the moon) in (4), in that they were preferred in infinitive form or became part of rationale clauses (to the effect of "in order to [idiom], do X"). Further investigation is needed to see whether this behavior is correlated with the phrase's opacity, i.e. if the expressions preferred in the infinite are opaque. Lastly, none of the idioms used in the study passed the topicalization test and only one passed the passive voice test; it would be valuable to gather more examples to verify if this is a pattern across idioms. Although not all my examples received the two tests, I gathered from the elicitation sessions that passive voice tends to cause idioms to lose their metaphorical interpretation, while the topicalization of idiomatic expressions was deemed 'unnatural' in Spanish by the consultant and he would rather create a relative clause starting from the NP in those cases.
The study has a number of limitations, the most pressing of which being the restricted range. Only 15 common idioms were surveyed and the judgements were all made by one speaker; this process does not allow for generalizations about how flexibility and transparency work in Mexican Spanish, since it might simply be picking up on the individual participant's intuition. Moreover, the consultant was 18 years old, fairly young, and from an urban area, factors which likely impact his understanding and use of idioms; his knowledge of English and French could have also influenced his assessments, but the extent of the interference is unclear. Other constraints of the study are the use of English flexibility tests, which might not be able to detect the ways flexibility manifests in Spanish, and the creation of transparency judgements in retrospect, relying on a language acquisition perspective and a non-native speaker's intuition. This possibly casts doubt on whether the assessments reflect how the idioms are truly understood at first sight by natives or language learners.
There are certainly many unknowns when it comes to idiomaticity and the possibilities of modifying idioms, but in this paper, I believe I was able to show a preliminary connection between the transparency and flexibility of expressions in Mexican Spanish, the tip of the iceberg, as it were. With the idioms considered

in the study, the more transparent they were, the more variety there was in the permutations they allowed. For future research, aside from increasing the range of the study, I would consider looking into Spanish-specific manifestations of flexibility, as well as committing to either a native or foreign-learner perspective of transparency and finding more tangible ways to assess it. I hope I am not asking for the moon there...

APPENDIX

Additional material can be found on the repository https://osf.io/d4g9f/

FOOTNOTES

1. Topicalization is the process by which an element of the sentence is moved to the beginning of the utterance for emphasis or to improve speech cohesion (Hietaranta, 1984). For the English sentence "I don't like beans", topicalization would be "Beans, I don't like". I followed a similar pattern in my prompts for Spanish.

2. VP ellipsis serves to avoid redundancy and improve cohesion and, in English, it works by eliding the VP in the second clause and leaving the auxiliary stranded, as a marker of the original full VP (e.g. my goose is cooked, but yours isn't ~~cooked.~~) However, Spanish VP ellipsis lacks the feature of auxiliary or V-stranding and, instead, simply uses the negation *no* to negate the VP that came before (Saab & Stigliano, 2023).

Dibujé un gato, pero tú no.
draw.PST.1SG a cat, but you not.
I drew a cat, but you didn't.

3. I refer exclusively to English research here, but studies have also been done for German (Fellbaum, 2019; Wierzba et al., 2023), and for French (Abeillé, 1995).

4. Glosses: 1, 2, 3 person, ACC accusative, DAT dative, FUT future, GER gerund, IMP imperative, INF infinitive, IPFV imperfective, PFV perfective, PL plural, POSS possessive, PREP preposition, PRS present, PST past, PTCP participle, REFL reflexive, SG singular.

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