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The current world economic crisis: phraseological equivalents and variants in English, Spanish and French

Ramón Martí Solano
University of Limoges, France

Abstract

The 2007 world economic crisis has given rise to a specific phraseology which is common to several European languages and which functions at different syntactic and pragmatic levels depending on the language. We claim that solely specifically designed corpora for each multi-word unit can yield empirical results for contrastive phraseology. This paper explores total and partial phraseological equivalents in English, Spanish and French and mainly focuses on the string *the bubble bursts*, its variants and its loan translations. Our main hypothesis is that it is a high degree of lexicalisation of the nominal constituent of some predicate phraseological units that allows the wide-ranging scope of lexico-syntactic variation of the canonical forms.

1. Introduction

The current world economic crisis started in 2007 in the United States and was largely the result of financial and real estate speculation. The crisis rapidly spread to many other countries and just one year later it developed into a worldwide phenomenon. The enormous amount of texts produced principally in the media was unquestionably characterised by a common phraseology. Economic crises lend themselves to the use of metaphors, imagery and figurative language which are not only pervasive and recurring but which are also shared by a considerable amount of languages and are definitely motivated by “intertextual phenomena” (Dobrovolskij & Piirainen, 2006: 34).

2. Contrastive phraseology

Having as a general background the research done by Dobrovolskij and Piirainen on contrastive phraseology, we subscribe to the concept of cross-linguistic uniformity of idioms in European languages (Piirainen, 2005: 45). Three different types of sources of total or partial phraseological equivalents must be taken into consideration when describing and analysing such a phenomenon, namely loan translations, common metaphorical source domains and common cultural tradition. Table 1 presents a selection of idioms from the same thematic group shared by the three languages in question. Although they may look like full or absolute equivalents at a first glance, a detailed corpus analysis shows that their syntactic, pragmatic and collocational behaviour differs from one language to another. These partial equivalents are “idioms of L1 and L2 which have identical or near-identical meanings, but do not fully correspond in syntactic and lexical structure, or imagery basis.” (Dobrovolskij, 2000: 372). Many other idiomatic expressions related to this topic have obviously been encountered during the course of this study. Expressions such as *a sinking ship*, *go belly up* or *go to the wall* are simply very scarcely represented or not represented at all in the English

corpus and for that reason they have not been considered for inclusion¹. The same situation applies to the equivalent expressions in French and in Spanish.

Table 1. Common phraseological units from the same thematic group, i.e. economic crisis

English	Spanish	French
<i>the bubble bursts</i>	<i>estalla la burbuja</i>	<i>la bulle éclate</i>
<i>tighten your belt</i>	<i>apretarse el cinturón</i>	<i>se serrer la ceinture</i>
<i>kill the goose that lays the golden eggs</i>	<i>matar la gallina de los huevos de oro</i>	<i>tuer la poule aux œufs d'or</i>
<i>green shoots</i>	<i>brotos verdes</i>	<i>pousses vertes</i>

3. Corpora and research methodology

Given the prevalence of this type of phraseology in the written press, we decided to use corpora coming from newspaper articles from the British daily *The Guardian*, the Spanish newspaper *El País* and the Belgian daily *Le Soir*. For searching the corpora we have used *Concgram 1.0.*, a programme recently developed by Chris Greaves for the automatic identification of phraseological variation. This programme allows to “identify all the co-occurrences of two or more words irrespective of constituency and/or positional variation in order to more fully account for phraseological variation and provide the raw data for identifying lexical items and other forms of phraseology.” (Greaves, 2009: 2). This piece of research is therefore a corpus-based analysis of the main and relevant lexical and grammatical associations of a sub-group of multi-word units related to this topic and their co-occurrence patterns.

3.1. The English corpus

The research started with the creation of a corpus of English texts by using the filters provided by the electronic archives of *The Guardian*. The idea was to have a very specific corpus spanning a period of one year², limited to the business section of the newspaper and using the lemma BUBBLE as the target word. The result is a corpus of over 130,000 words specifically designed to analyse the string *the bubble bursts* (its canonical form, the potential variants and the main collocations of the nominal constituent) in business and financial contexts. By doing so it was easy to avoid possible occurrences of other related but semantically different

¹ There are no occurrences of *a sinking ship* in our corpus. There is only one occurrence of *go belly up* and two occurrences of *go to the wall*.

² For practical reasons we chose what has been described as the highest peak of the crisis, a period somewhere between the summers of 2008 and 2009.

bigrams such as *burst someone's bubble*, which is defined in the *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* as follows: “shatter someone’s illusions about something or destroy their sense of well-being”. The latter is rather infrequent and tends to be used in fiction whereas the former is extremely frequent and appears mainly in newspapers, according to a search carried out in the *British National Corpus*³.

Table 2. Results of the English corpus *the bubble bursts*

Categories	Examples	N° of tokens
lemma	<i>bubble</i>	221
bigram	<i>bubble burst</i>	49
collocations	<i>housing bubble</i>	34
	<i>property bubble</i>	17
	<i>dotcom bubble</i>	11

3.2. The Spanish corpus

The same criteria were used for the other two corpora. For the Spanish corpus, exactly the same filters were applied. The lemma BURBUJA was used to create a corpus of over 130,000 words, limited to the business section of the newspaper and for the same period of time. Here are the results which are, by the way, strikingly similar both quantitatively and qualitatively showing practically no frequency differences across both languages (Colson, 2008: 198):

Table 3. Results of the Spanish corpus *estalla la burbuja*

Categories	Examples	N° of tokens
lemma	<i>burbuja</i>	196
bigram	<i>estalla burbuja</i>	47
collocations	<i>burbuja inmobiliaria</i>	55
	<i>burbuja de la vivienda</i>	4
	<i>burbuja de Internet</i>	3
	<i>burbuja de las puntocom</i>	1

³ There are only 4 occurrences of *shatter one's bubble* compared to 23 occurrences of *the bubble bursts*, 15 of which are to be found in the newspaper/magazine section of the corpus.

3.3. The French corpus

Unfortunately articles cannot be accessed in the electronic archives of the main French national newspapers *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*, which would have provided a similar corpus to the English and Spanish ones. The national Belgian newspaper *Le Soir* has been used instead to create the French corpus. As the amount of articles was substantially and comparatively low, the time span was widened to the years 2008 and 2009 and a text database was created of about half the size of the other two databases totalling approximately 65,000 words. The lemma BULLE was used as the target word to search for strong patterns and the analysis of lexical collocations.

Table 4. Results of the French corpus *la bulle éclate*

Categories	Examples	N° of tokens
lemma	<i>bulle</i>	114
bigram	<i>bulle éclate</i>	53
collocations	<i>bulle immobilière</i>	28
	<i>bulle internet</i>	22
	<i>bulle monétaire</i>	5

The interlinguistic comparison of the results of the three corpora (Tables 2, 3 and 4) shows a striking homogenization of the use of the same multi-word unit. The number of lemmas is similar in both the English and the Spanish corpus (221 and 196 respectively), whereas it is much higher in the French corpus (a total of 144) if we consider the fact that the latter is half the size of the other two. The *property/housing bubble* and the *dotcom bubble* are the two main collocations to be found in the three corpora, which accounts for the standardisation of these co-occurrences across languages.

4. The lexicalisation of the nominal constituent *bubble/burbuja/bulle*

Some nominal constituents become lexicalised and are used independently from the string to which they formerly belonged. Our main hypothesis is that it is a high degree of lexicalisation of the nominal constituent of some predicate phraseological units that allows the wide-ranging scope of lexico-syntactic variation of the so-called canonical forms, at least in English. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* in its 1989 edition, *bubble* is defined as “Anything fragile, unsubstantial, empty, or worthless; a deceptive show. From the 17th c. onwards the term is often applied to delusive commercial or financial schemes, such as *the*

Mississippi bubble or *the South Sea bubble*⁴.” The word thus came to mean a kind of financial hoax at that early stage to gradually approach the sense, as is the case today, of the word *boom*, a period of sudden economic growth.

This is clearly not the case with the other two languages. As far as Spanish is concerned, the word *burbuja* is registered in the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* with only one figurative sense as illustrated by the only example supplied in the dictionary entry “Los poderosos viven en una burbuja de impunidad”, which literally translates as “People in power live in a bubble of impunity”. However, the comprehensive *Diccionario de uso del español* by María Moliner in its 2008 edition registers the loan translation with the same meaning as it has in English although this new sense was not still registered in, for instance, the 2000 edition of the same dictionary. So we are to infer that the word must have been used in Spanish with this new sense some time between these two dates. The only seven examples of *burbuja inmobiliaria* (property bubble) found in the CREA⁵ are all from newspaper sources and are attested in the years 2002, 2003 and 2004, which definitely corroborates the lexicographic hypothesis.

As for French, the situation is similar to that in Spanish. The *Trésor de la Langue Française informatisé* does not register any figurative sense of the word except for its use as a constituent of the rather infrequent expression *coincer la bulle* meaning to rest or to be idle. It is not until 2001 that the first occurrence of *bulle immobilière* can be found in the archives of the French national newspaper *Le Monde* in an article published on 16 January of that year in the business section entitled “L’euro reprend des forces avant l’échéance historique du 1^{er} janvier 2002” to be precise. The new sense can be found, however, in the French dictionary *Le Petit Robert* in its 2007 edition, which clearly shows a parallel lexicographic pattern similar to its Spanish counterpart.

5. Phraseological variants

The commonest and most obvious variant on the phrase *the bubble bursts* is, needless to say, the substitution of the verbal constituent. First of all, synonymous verbs show differences not only in focus or degree but also in register, which, by and large, accounts for a great deal of phraseological variation. The change of polarity is, in its turn, achieved by the use of alternating verbs such as *grow*, *develop*, *expand* or *inflate*. But what is most interesting is the use of *bubble* as the agent of a transitive verb as shown in (1) with the verb *to funnel*, which clearly shows an extremely high degree of syntactic complexity connected to the nominal constituent:

⁴ **Mississippi Bubble:** a financial scheme in 18th-century France that triggered a speculative frenzy and ended in financial collapse. The scheme was engineered by John Law, a Scottish adventurer, economic theorist, and financial wizard who was a friend of the regent, the Duke d’Orléans. **South Sea Bubble:** the speculation mania that ruined many British investors in 1720. The bubble, or hoax, centred on the fortunes of the South Sea Company, founded in 1711 to trade (mainly in Slaves) with Spanish America, on the assumption that the War of the Spanish Succession, then drawing to a close, would end with a treaty permitting such trade.

⁵ CREA stands for *Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual*, a synchronic corpus for Spanish of over 154,000,000 words.

(1) *There was nothing resembling an investment boom until the dot-com **bubble** at the end of the decade **funnelled** vast sums of capital into crazy internet schemes.* (The Guardian, 12/11/2008)

The range of verb variants is certainly narrower in the other two languages: *estallar*, *reventar*, *hincharse*, *romperse*, *formarse* and *desinflar* are the only six verbs used in Spanish with various degrees of frequency⁶. The same thing applies to related or unrelated nouns such as *estallido*, *pinchazo*, *reventón*, *explosión*, *formación* and *generación*. As regards French, the variation is even smaller: *éclater*, *exploser*, *péter* and *dégonfler* and their corresponding nouns *éclatement*, *explosion*, *pet* and *dégonflement* represent the limited number of variants on the canonical form of the string. The most recurrent collocations of *bubble/burbuja/bulle* both as the nominal constituents of the idiom and as independent lexicalised words coincide in the three languages. However, two special collocations seem to be specific to Spanish if compared to the other two: *burbuja educativa* (educational bubble) and *burbuja del ladrillo* (the brick bubble, a metonymic realisation of *burbuja inmobiliaria*, the housing bubble, a variant form which denotes a more informal language register). The overall results show across-the-board similarities between the three languages concerning this idiom although minor culture-specific and language-specific variants reveal interesting pragmatic or contextual adaptations.

6. *To tighten one's belt*

To tighten one's belt is another idiom that has been widely used, but definitely not as much as *the bubble bursts*, and which belongs to the common stock of European phraseology. Here are just a few examples of equivalents in other European languages: Spanish *apretarse el cinturón*, French *se serrer la ceinture*, German *den Gürtel enger schnallen*, Italian *tirare la cinghia*, Portuguese *apertar o cinto* or Greek *σφίγγω το ζωνάρι*. Nominalisation and adjectivisation of predicate phraseological units are extremely common in English unlike in Spanish or in French which show major grammatical constraints and, thus, normally tend to express the same sense by other linguistic means. *Trail-blazing* from *blaze a trail*, *whistle-blowing* from *blow the whistle* or *sabre-rattling* from *rattle your sabre* are but a few examples of this common practice. Examples (2) and (3) show the nominal forms of the idiom in the English corpus. No equivalent forms have been found either in the Spanish or in the French corpus.

(2) *Britain's consumers lost the spending habit last month as a combination of indifferent spring weather and **belt-tightening** to combat the recession kept them out of the shops.* (The Guardian, 18/06/2009)

(3) *The biggest US carmaker, General Motors, is implementing **belt-tightening** measures ranging from the factory floor to the boardroom as it scrambles to bolster its cash position by \$15bn (£7.5bn) to cope with plummeting car sales.* (The Guardian, 16/07/2008)

⁶ The English corpus yields a total of 18 different verb variants, namely *burst*, *prick*, *puncture*, *pop*, *explode*, *implode*, *blow up*, *go pop*, *create*, *grow*, *develop*, *expand*, *deflate*, *inflate*, *fuel*, *funnel*, *collapse*, *pump up*.

7. To kill the goose that lays the golden eggs

This idiom, which originated in one of Aesop's Fables and was later readapted in France by La Fontaine, and which exemplifies the common cultural and literary tradition of European languages, is the least used of the four selected in English whereas it seems to be favoured in the other two languages as found in the archives of the three newspapers. The idiom, which can be paraphrased as "Greed destroys the source of good", is illustrated in (4) by the use of a variant form in the Spanish corpus:

(4) *Y justo ahora, cuando **la burbuja ha estallado**, cuando se han acabado las ganancias multimillonarias, **cuando la gallina de los huevos de oro está muerta y enterrada**, qué casualidad.* (El País, 31/05/2009)

The above variant could be translated as "when the golden-egg goose is dead and buried". It should be noticed that it is used co-textually with *la burbuja ha estallado* ("the bubble has burst") and is inserted in the same syntactic frame, namely a temporal subordinate clause introduced by *cuando* ("when") as a sort of stylistic reiteration. The fact that no occurrences have been found in the English corpus and just one occurrence in the Spanish corpus and one in the French corpus clearly calls for the creation of specific corpora in order to empirically give evidence of across-language phraseological comparisons.

8. Green shoots

A very recent idiom in English and an even more recent loan shift in the other two languages, *green shoots* can somehow epitomise what can be referred as 'mass media intertextuality'. The original metaphor is associated to the renewal of life in deciduous trees in the spring. The conceptual correspondence works well in the three languages but the novelty of the phrase in Spanish and in French often makes necessary the addition of metalinguistic extensions of the type 'as they say', 'what's been called', etc.

(5) *A pesar de los **brotos verdes** que dicen ver algunos, el Fondo Monetario Internacional (FMI) aseguró ayer que Europa no **doblará la esquina** de la crisis hasta la segunda mitad de 2010.*⁷ (El País, 13/05/2009)

Example (5) from the Spanish corpus illustrates the inclusion in the same contextual environment of another loan shift from English *to turn the corner* ("doblará la esquina" in bold type in the text), which, not having the same metaphoric entailment in Spanish, loses part of its idiomaticity for the sake of clarity by the addition of the phrase "de la crisis" (of the crisis).

9. Conclusion

Special corpora need to be designed in order to address specific research questions. When observed in the light of these corpora, across-language phraseological equivalents show

⁷ "Despite the **green shoots** that some people say they can see, the International Monetary Fund announced yesterday that Europe will not **turn the corner** until the second half of 2010." (our own translation).

relevant association patterns which can be extremely similar from a quantitative and a qualitative point of view. Concerning the multi-word unit *the bubble bursts* and its Spanish and French equivalents, English shows a higher degree of verb variation which evidences what Gläser defines as phraseo-stylistics (Gläser, 1986). The processes of nominalisation and adjectivisation of the “belt-tightening” type seem to be particular to English. Parallel corpora in other languages would shed some light on the extent of this phraseological specificity. Although phraseological equivalents tend to share a common syntactic, pragmatic and collocational behaviour, minor culture-specific variants appear. Finally, whether some of the loan shifts will eventually become institutionalised and widespread in French and Spanish only time and meticulous research work will tell.

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