

THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A FREE LUNCH: THE ACQUISITION OF NEGATIVE POLARITY IDIOMS IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE¹

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Abstract

In this study I will try to show, through a learner corpus-based investigation, the low frequency of use of negative polarity idioms (NPIDs) – idiomatic constructions which always occur in the negative form and express a negative meaning – in the interlanguage (IL)² of Spanish learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). I will also try to analyse whether they use knowledge of their native language (L1) – Spanish/Galician – to comprehend and produce idioms in the foreign language (FL). I have chosen 15 English NPIDs – 5 identical in form and meaning to the corresponding constructions in Spanish, 5 similar to their correspondents in Spanish and 5 totally different from the corresponding Spanish idioms. The subjects are advanced, female Spanish Learners of English. The comprehension and production of these NPIDs were tested through a multiple-choice exercise and a translation task, respectively. Finally, I wanted to compare the differences in the use of these negative idioms by Spanish EFL learners with data from other Spanish learners of English, extracted from SULEC (The Santiago University Learner of English Corpus).

Keywords: *Second Language Acquisition (SLA), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), language transfer, negative polarity idioms (NPIDs), Interlanguage (IL).*

1. WHAT IS AN IDIOM?

A traditional definition of an idiom is the following: an idiom is a conventionalised expression, whose meaning cannot be inferred from the meanings of its parts when these are not part of idioms, i.e. *to pull someone's leg*. This idiom has a conventionalised meaning; we cannot guess its meaning (“to make fun of somebody”) from the separate meanings of the parts that constitute the idiom. According to Weinreich (1969), an idiomatic construction, in order to be considered as such, should have the following five properties: (i) its meaning is not the compositional sum of its constituents, (ii) it is a unit that either has an homonymous literal counterpart or at least individual constituents that are literal, although the expression as a whole would not be interpreted literally; (iii) it is transformationally deficient in one way or another; (iv) it forms part of a set of expressions in a given language; and (v) it is institutionalised. Witness the following syntactic unit:

- (1) *There's no such thing as a free lunch* (English)
Non ha ita lousa coma un xantar gratuito (Galician literal translation)
Non hai pesos a catro pesetas (Galician equivalent idiom)

Firstly, its meaning (“not to trust easily available things because everything costs an effort; if it is easy to get, you must be suspicious of it”) is not clearly the sum of the meaning of its constituents. Secondly, a possible alternative construction, such as “nobody gives anything for free”, can effectively convey the same idea. Thirdly, it constitutes a fossilised chunk and functions in the language as a unit; that is, it is not liable to alterations of any kind, and if we insert or add any new word(s), the meaning of the expression changes completely. Finally, this unit can be easily classified

within the group of idiomatic constructions of the language, as it shares with them a series of grammatical and lexical properties.

2. WHAT IS LANGUAGE TRANSFER?

This concept is based on the idea that previous learning affects subsequent learning. That is, the forms and patterns of the native language are imposed on the foreign language (transfer from the L1).

Odlin (1989: 27) defines transfer as follows: “Transfer is the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired.”

According to Ellis (1994: 711), two kinds of transfer are commonly identified: (i) borrowing transfer (where the L2 influences the L1) and (ii) substratum transfer (where the L1 influences the L2).

Transfer can also be positive or negative. Positive transfer means that the forms and patterns of the native language are identical in the foreign language and learners use the L1 in producing the L2 forms. If transfer is negative, *interference errors* may occur because when these patterns are different, learners may use those of the L1 to produce the correspondent form or pattern in the L2.

3. IDIOMS AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

A distinction between foreign language (FL) and second language (SL) is made. In the case of second language acquisition (SLA), the language plays an institutional and social role in the community (i.e. it functions as a recognised means of communication among members who speak some other language as their mother tongue). This is the case, for instance, of immigrants. They have a mother tongue different from the official language of the country in which they are living. In contrast, foreign language learning (FLL) takes place in settings where the language plays no major role in the community and is primarily learnt only in the classroom, for instance, English learnt in Spain (*cf.* Ellis, 1994).

Despite the fact that idioms are difficult for L2 learners, historically, idiom acquisition has not received adequate attention in L2 research because of what Ellis (1985: 5) considers to be a traditional emphasis on the acquisition of grammatical systems while lexis has been neglected.

Very little work has been done on the acquisition of idioms in English as a foreign language in opposition to the second language. Since the late 1980s and 1990s a few studies in L2 idiom comprehension and acquisition have appeared. There are some works about the role of transfer in the acquisition of these lexical units such as Irujo's (1986). She analysed, in a study reported in *TESOL Quarterly*, “the differential effects of transfer” on the comprehension and production of English idioms by 12 Venezuelan advanced learners of English. However, very little work has been done on the study of the learning of idioms by Spanish learners of English. Most of these studies are centred on second language learners, cases of immigrants and the like, which are more in contact with the L2 than foreign language learners are.

4. THE STUDY

4.1. Objectives

The purpose of this paper is the study of the acquisition of negative polarity idioms by Spanish students, that is, idiomatic expressions which always appear in the negative form and express a negative meaning. This should be regarded as a preliminary account and it is corpus based. In addition to the data in the corpus, I also collected information from university students and compared it with the data extracted from a learner corpus – The Santiago University Learner of English Corpus (SULEC) which is being compiled at the University of Santiago de Compostela under the direction of Dr. Ignacio Palacios (<http://sulec.cesga.es>). This paper is a cross-sectional study, it is not longitudinal. That is, I will analyse the production and comprehension of NPIDs in the IL of Spanish learners of English at a particular point in time, not through a long period. I am not going to focus on the identification of developmental stages of acquisition nor in the evolution of their IL, as it occurs in longitudinal studies. I will try to explain the sources of the ungrammatical productions of the learners who participated in this study.

I expect this study will contribute to the location and better understanding of the weaknesses and difficulties faced by students when dealing with idioms, particularly those which always occur in the negative form. We can orientate language teaching towards the errors learners make more frequently, paying attention to those idiomatic constructions learners fail to produce and understand.

4.2. Subjects

The subjects who filled in the questionnaires are 16 advanced Spanish learners of English from the University of Santiago de Compostela. They were in their fifth and final year of the English philology degree. The data in SULEC are taken from intermediate and advanced Spanish and Galician learners of English as an FL.

4.3. Materials and procedures

I have chosen a total number of 15 idiomatic constructions which always occur in the negative form (see appendices 1 and 2). They were selected from the *Collins Cobuild Dictionary of Idioms*. Most of them are studied by students in the degree of English philology. Five of them are identical in form and meaning to their Spanish correspondents; the other 5 are similar to their corresponding idioms in Spanish, and the last ones are totally different from the corresponding Spanish ones. The subjects in this study were given a questionnaire consisting of two parts (see appendix 3). The first part tested production of the same 15 idioms by means of a translation task. The second part was dedicated to test comprehension of these NPIDs through a multiple-choice test. With the intention of comparing the data of other Spanish students, *The Santiago University Learner of English Corpus* (SULEC) was used. In this corpus, students either talk or write about a given topic – it contains spoken and written data–, they are not asked to fill in questionnaires referring to a particular grammatical structure or lexical item. Compositions are relatively free. By the time this paper was done, the corpus contained 353.306 words, but new data are continually being added.

4.4. Results

The results extracted from the translation task were scored as ‘correct’, ‘incorrect’ or ‘avoided’³ (no answer). The results extracted from the comprehension test were scored as ‘correct’, ‘incorrect’ and ‘incorrect with interference’. In this study, ‘interference’ or ‘negative transfer’ refers to the incorrect use of an idiom in English due to the influence of the mother tongue (L1). For the purpose of this paper I followed Richards (1971) classification of errors³. He distinguished three types:

1. *Interference errors*: They are errors due to the influence of the L1 in the L2.
2. *Intralingual errors*: They reflect the general characteristics of rule learning, such as faulty generalisation, incomplete application of rules and failure to learn conditions under which rules apply (Ellis, 1994: 58).
3. *Developmental errors*: They occur when learners try to construct hypotheses about the L2 based on limited experience.

In this paper I will focus on the first two types, leaving aside developmental errors as my study is not longitudinal but cross-sectional. I will analyse the IL of Spanish learners but not focusing on its evolution.

In table 1 we can appreciate the percentage of errors found in the different types of idioms. The data are presented in percentages because their frequency can, in this way, be easily appreciated. In the following table no distinction between interference and avoidance errors is made, as attention is paid only to the percentage of errors as compared to the correct answers.

Table 1. Distribution of NPIDs produced by Spanish learners of EFL.

	Identical idioms		Similar idioms		Different idioms	
	P ⁵	C ⁵	P	C	P	C
Correct	25.58%	40.31%	8.58%	14.72%	12.50%	21.87%
Incorrect	24.80%	9.30%	40.49%	36.19%	27.50%	28.75%

The participants in this investigation behave differently as regards the type of the given NPID. They found those idioms which were similar in form and meaning to the L1 as the most difficult (*cf.* Table1). The highest number of errors while producing and understanding NPIDs was found in idioms similar in form and meaning to the L1. This seems to be surprising at first but then, we realise it is logical because, as they are very similar – although not equal–, learners may confuse them. Learners think these NPIDs are equal to the corresponding construction in the L1 because they are similar. However, it is not so and they produce an incorrect idiom. Sometimes, learners suspect this similarity between the NPID in the L2 and the L1 correspondent; they become suspicious of it and think the Spanish equivalent must be different because it is too easy. When this happens, learners either produce a different idiom instead or avoid the use of it. This is related to what Kellerman (2000:21) calls *homoiofobia* (to be afraid of the similarities between the L1 and the L2).

Table 1 shows that the number of errors made in the comprehension and production of NPIDs which have a different correspondent in Spanish is higher than the number of errors in the NPIDs which are identical in form and meaning to the corresponding idioms in the L1. This may be due to the fact that memorising seems to be the only possible way to learn different idioms and they are internalised as different units which have to be learnt by heart. They are not similar to the corresponding constructions in the L1, so that both idioms cannot be confused. Identical idioms are the easiest structures to learn because they have an equal corresponding construction in the L1.

However, learners, sometimes, mistrust the similarity between the L2 idiom and the L1 corresponding construction and produce an incorrect idiom.

As it can be seen from tables 2, 3 and 4 below, learners sometimes avoid the use of idioms because they find them too difficult to use. On some occasions, they left a blank space instead of translating the idiom. If the idiom is lacking, rare or differently expressed in the L1, it is a good candidate for avoidance. As I said before, according to Kellerman (2000: 21), learners tend to avoid structures in their L1 which they consider to be too similar to the L2; yet, these structures are target-like.

On some other occasions, learners use knowledge from the L1 in order to produce the L2 NPID. This usually results in interference errors due to the differences between the idiomatic construction in the L2 and the L1. An example which illustrates this reads as follows: when a learner said **not for all the gold in China* instead of *not for all the tea in China*, it is clear that an influence from the L1 is present as in Spanish the corresponding idiom is *ni por todo el oro del mundo*.

In the following tables, we can see a number of errors made in the different kinds of NPIDs classified by types (intralingual, interference and avoidance errors).

Table 2. Distribution of errors committed in NPIDs which are identical to the corresponding idioms in Spanish.

	CORRECT	INCORRECT			
		Intralingual	Avoidance	Interference	TOTAL
Production	33	5	25	5	35
Comprehension	52	5	7	0	12
TOTAL	85	10	32	5	47

In table 2 we can see that there are 25 tokens of idioms which are not translated in the production task, that is, avoided. In the comprehension test there are 7 occasions in which learners answered that they did not know the answer and left a blank space. Avoidance is the most frequent feature in the use of NPIDs which are identical to their correspondents in the L1 by Spanish learners of EFL. In this kind of idioms there are the same number of tokens (5) of both intralingual and interference errors in the production task. However, in the multiple-choice exercise which tested comprehension, no instance of interference was found.

Table 3. Distribution of errors committed in NPIDs which are similar to the corresponding idioms in Spanish.

	CORRECT	INCORRECT			
		Intralingual	Avoidance	Interference	TOTAL
Production	14	17	49	14	80
Comprehension	24	17	27	15	59
TOTAL	38	34	76	29	139

In NPIDs which have a similar correspondent in the L1, avoidance is also significant as we can see from table 3 above. It is the most recurrent feature found in the incorrect tokens. A total of 76 units which show avoidance in the use of NPIDs were identified. This represents 54.6% of the total number of errors found in the data analysed. However, it is more frequent in idioms which are identical to their Spanish correspondents (68%). Interference errors represent 17.5% of the total number of errors. They are the least frequent type of errors. Errors of the intralingual type are also less frequent than the rest; they represent 21.25%.

Table 4. Distribution of errors committed in NPIDs which are different to the corresponding idioms in Spanish.

	CORRECT	INCORRECT			TOTAL
		Intralingual	Avoidance	Interference	
Production	20	12	24	8	44
Comprehension	50	9	26	11	46
TOTAL	70	21	50	19	90

When dealing with NPIDs which have a different counterpart in the L1, learners also avoid their use when they are not sure of their meaning. A total of fifty tokens of avoidance were found in the production and comprehension of this kind of idioms. They represent 55.5% of the final amount of errors, slightly more frequent than NPIDs which have a similar counterpart in the L1. However, interference errors only represent 18.18%. In fact, interference errors are the least frequent type of errors in the three types of NPIDs selected for this study. This finding opposes the belief that most of the errors produced in FLL were due to language transfer. There are other resources that may cause errors in the learning of an L2. However, it must be borne in mind that the results apply only to the specific subjects and tasks of the present study. Further research is needed with more subjects and also with subjects of other language backgrounds.

As regards data extracted from the learner corpus (SULEC), we cannot say much, since only 2 NPIDs were found. It is necessary to say that the number of NPIDs in both English and Spanish is relatively high if compared with the number of idiomatic constructions (of any kind) existing in both languages. Palacios (1999: 66) found that NPIDs in English constituted about the 5% of the total.

The only 2 idioms which appear in the negative form in the SULEC were: *Much ado about nothing* and *Rome was not conquered in a day*. Both of them are used according to the standard grammatical rules of the English language, so we cannot analyse them in terms of ungrammaticality. We can only point that the student used “conquered” instead of “built” in the idiom maybe this shows transfer from the L1. However, this very small sample indicates that learners avoid the use of idiomatic structures if they have the opportunity to do so. They do not use L2 idioms because they do not have a good command of them. In addition, idioms are rarely taught at primary school. Advanced students may know them because they learnt them at university or on their own (in the lyrics of their favourite songs, etc.). However, intermediate students do not use them, maybe because they do not know them or because they are not very sure about how to express them and as a result, they prefer to avoid their use. Analysing the answers learners gave in the questionnaires, I could deduce that less proficient learners resorted more to the L1, while more proficient learners used more the knowledge of the L2. Paibakht’s study of communication strategies found two strategies related to idioms that were used exclusively by one group or the other. In a concept-identification task, only the less proficient learners used “idiomatic transfer” (reference to some semantic or syntactic feature of an L1 idiom), while the more proficient group made use of target language idioms and proverbs to refer to a specific context where the target item was used (Paribakht, 1985).

5. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The results in the present study support the notion that advanced learners of a second language whose first language is related to the second one can use their knowledge of idioms in their L1 to understand and produce idioms in the L2.

There is also support for the hypothesis that structures which are very similar in both the L1 and the L2 will foster more interference than structures which are different.

This research also suggests that similarities between languages encourage interference and that idioms are not always considered *non-transferable*. In addition, it is possible that subjects would avoid using idioms if they had the choice of using them or not.

Finally, the findings of the present study can be applied to the teaching of idioms in ESL and EFL classes. Through a deeper study of the frequency and patterns of use of English idioms it would be interesting to look at the important question of which idioms ESL students should learn first. This study suggests that different and identical idioms should be learnt first as they proved to be the easiest for learners to acquire.

Notes

¹ This paper was presented in the Congreso Internacional de Fraseología y Paremiología, celebrated from 19 to 22 September 2006 in Santiago de Compostela.

² *Interlanguage* is a term coined by Selinker (1972) and, although it may be understood in different ways, it refers to the systematic knowledge of a second language which is independent of both the learner's mother tongue and the target language.

³ Certain structures in the L2 (such as idioms) are 'avoided' when learners decide not to produce them because they are found to be too difficult (*cf.* Schachter, 1974).

⁴ By 'errors' it is meant the students' productions which are not grammatically correct. They are typical features of the learners' interlanguage. Nowadays, in the interlanguage theory, the IL is considered to be a different system – with its own rules.

⁵ In the tables, P stands for errors committed in the production tasks and C stands for errors in the comprehension exercise.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. List of NPIDs selected for the questionnaires.

Identical NPIDs:

1. He doesn't lift a finger/turn a hair.
2. He wouldn't hurt/harm a fly.
3. I wasn't born yesterday.
4. If Mohammed will not go to the mountain, the mountain must go to Mohammed.
5. Rome wasn't built in a day.

Similar NPIDs:

1. Better the devil you know than the devil you don't.
2. Haven't seen hide or hair of someone.
3. Never in your wildest dreams.
4. Not for all the tea in China.
5. There's no such thing as a free lunch.

Different NPIDs:

1. Much ado about nothing.
2. Not sleep a wink/not get a wink of sleep.
3. Out of sight, out of mind.
4. You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear/pig's ear.
5. You can't teach an old dog new tricks.

Appendix 2. NPIDs extracted from SULEC.

Much ado about nothing

- *But I truly believe that university has to drastically change its teaching methods, and also think about what kind of subjects are really necessary and which are just much ado about nothing.* (Document number 136 in SULEC written data, from an advanced student.)

Rome was not built in a day

- *I know that Rome was not conquered in a day, so I am conscious that we cannot win the war in this moment.* (Document number 113 in SULEC written data, from an advanced student.)

Appendix 3. Production test (translation task) and comprehension test (multiple-choice exercise).

CUESTIONARIOS

EDAD:

SEXO:

CURSO:

TITULACIÓN:

LENGUA(S) MATERNA(S):

SEGUNDA LENGUA:

TERCERA LENGUA (si la hay):

NACIONALIDAD:

NACIONALIDAD DE LOS PADRES:

PERÍODO DE ESTANCIA EN PAÍS DE HABLA INGLESA:

NIVEL DE INGLÉS (escoja): Beginner Intermediate Advanced

EXÁMENES OFICIALES DE INGLÉS Y CUALIFICACIONES (si los tiene):

1. Traduce al inglés las siguientes oraciones:
 - Pensaba que era fantástico y resultó ser mucho ruido y pocas nueces.
 - No se le pueden pedir peras al olmo.
 - A: Yo no puedo ver eso. ¡Apaga el televisor!
B: ¡Claro! Ojos que no ven, corazón que no siente!
 - No hay duros a cuatro pesetas, que no te engañen.
 - No haría eso ni por todo el oro del mundo.
 - Roma no se construyó en un día, tómatelo con calma.
 - Si Mahoma no va a la montaña, la montaña irá a Mahoma.
 - No mueve un dedo para ayudar.

- Es incapaz de matar una mosca.
- Más vale malo conocido que bueno por conocer, asique no te arriesgues.
- No pude pegar ojo en toda la noche porque los nuevos vecinos dieron un fiesta.
- Hace mucho tiempo que no le veo el pelo a Marina.
- Ni en sueños me lo hubiera imaginado.
- Ya lo sabía. ¡No nació ayer!

2. Multiple Choice: Choose the right answer and fill in the idioms.

1. Much _____ about nothing.
 - a) ado
 - b) more
 - c) noise
 - d) I don't know.
2. He wouldn't _____ a fly.
 - a) kill
 - b) hurt
 - c) injure
 - d) I don't know.
3. You can't make a silk purse out of a _____.
 - a) rabbit's tail
 - b) sow's ear
 - c) donkey's ear
 - d) I don't know.
4. Out of sight, out of _____.
 - a) heart
 - b) mind
 - c) feelings
 - d) I don't know.
5. There's no such thing as a _____.
 - a) free lunch
 - b) free picnic
 - c) free dinner
 - d) I don't know.
6. Not for all the _____ in China.
 - a) gold
 - b) people
 - c) tea
 - d) I don't know.
7. _____ wasn't built in a day.
 - a) Rome

- b) Spain
 - c) Greece
 - d) I don't know.
8. I wasn't _____ yesterday.
- a) dead
 - b) born
 - c) here
 - d) I don't know.
9. If Mohammed will not go to the _____, the _____ will go to Mohammed.
- a) hill
 - b) river
 - c) mountain
 - d) I don't know.
10. Not lift a _____.
- a) finger
 - b) hair
 - c) nail
 - d) I don't know.
11. Better the _____ you know, than the _____ you don't.
- a) devil, devil
 - b) rude, good
 - c) bad, bad
 - d) I don't know.
12. You can't teach an old _____ new tricks.
- a) bull
 - b) dog
 - c) devil
 - d) I don't know.
13. Not get a(n) _____ of sleep.
- a) eye
 - b) wink
 - c) bit
 - d) I don't know.
14. Haven't seen hide or _____ of someone.
- a) hair
 - b) head
 - c) tail
 - d) I don't know.
15. Never in your _____ dreams.
- a) best
 - b) wildest
 - c) worst
 - d) I don't know.