

Exploring Cultural Identity through Proverbs and Idioms in English, French and Spanish

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Abstract

This paper will analyze cultural identities by studying, comparing and contrasting proverbs and idioms in English, French and Spanish. Agents of American, French, Costa Rican, and Spanish nationalities will be explored by analyzing these verbal expressions in their respective native languages. Elements such as word choice, imagery and tone will be revealing factors of traditions, values, and cultural traits. The significance of this study lies in the fact that national identities can be better understood by the comparison and contrast of these popular expressions.

Key words: cultural identity, national identity, proverbs, idioms, language as a manifestation of culture

Resumen

Este artículo analiza identidades culturales al estudiar, comparar y contrastar proverbios y expresiones idiomáticas en inglés, francés y español. Aspectos de las nacionalidades estadounidense, francesa, costarricense y española serán explorados al estudiar estas expresiones verbales en sus respectivas lenguas nativas. La importancia de este estudio radica en la propuesta que las identidades nacionales pueden ser mejor comprendidas mediante la comparación y contraste de estas expresiones culturales.

Palabras claves: identidad cultural, identidad nacional, diversidad cultural, proverbios, expresiones idiomáticas, lengua como expresión cultural

Arguably one of the most interesting and perhaps difficult parts of language learning is exploring the sayings and expressions that are a part of every language. Proverbs and idioms, then, play a key role in language studies. A proverb is defined as a short pithy saying in frequent and widespread use that expresses a basic truth or practical precept. An example in English is “All that glitters is not gold” meaning that some things are not as valuable as they appear to be. An idiom or idiomatic expression is defined as common phrases or sayings whose meanings cannot be understood by the individual words or elements. An example in English is “Forty winks” which means a short nap, and has nothing to do, in reality, with winking forty times.

Idiomatic expressions, colloquialisms, slang and proverbs can motivate language students in their learning process because these expressions are colorful and often very different from the standard language. They can make students feel as if they are learning more than just the basic vocabulary of the language. In addition, proverbs and sayings can be an insight into the culture and the society of the country they originate from or are used in (Beacco 138). One can even say that they make up a part of intercultural communication, which has been defined as verbal and nonverbal communication that exists between the members of different cultures (Abdallah-Preteille 102-103). When sayings, expressions and proverbs are used by a native speaker, in essence they can actually have the function of giving practical instruction of the language and its culture (Zuluaga).

Where do slang, colloquialisms, idiomatic expressions and proverbs come from or how did they originate? The obvious answer is that they come from the culture itself. Proverbs, for example state “basic principles of folk wisdom” of a given culture (Collis, Risso ix). It is precisely for this reason that analyzing them can show revealing elements about culture. Idioms and/or sayings come from many different sources including the Bible, well-known authors such as Aesop and Shakespeare, Native-American customs (in the case of the United States), the ancient Greeks and Romans and even from horse racing. Many idioms owe their popularity to the fact that they rhyme, and probably even originated because of this. An example is *Birds of a feather flock together* [Terban, introduction]. Sayings, expressions or phrasal verbs have also been categorized as phrases that contain an operating verb, which is often not the same verb in different languages. To illustrate, Jean-Claude Beacco gives us the following example: one asks a question in English, but in French the verb is not “to ask” but rather “poser” (to put). In Spanish one “makes” a question using the verb “hacer” (Beacco 140).

Before analyzing and comparing the following proverbs and idioms, it is important to state that even though this type of study can turn out to be quite revealing, it is dangerous to actually make judgments about a culture based purely on an expression that comes from this culture. The racist expressions that exist in most languages, such as *Indian giver* in English, the *Belge* jokes in French and *Trabajar como un negro* in Spanish are no longer politically or socially correct, or at least they should not be, and this fact in itself shows something positive about the culture as well as its dynamism. To let a racist expression die out

of the language is probably more important than to know how the expression first originated. This study has no pretensions of drawing any solid conclusions about a culture based on its expressions, but rather to explore them, analyze their significance, and to enjoy and celebrate the diversity of languages.

To say that something that is easily done is an idea that has a variety of expressions in English. For example, there are the sayings *As easy as pie*, and *A piece of cake*, which probably come from the fact that dessert was easier to make than other dishes. Another possible meaning is that eating a piece of cake or pie is something quite easy to do. A similar expression, *A cakewalk* comes from the game or contest where a cake was the prize and also refers to a particularly one-sided contest, such as a sporting event. *As easy as rolling off a log* originates from the logging culture and the extremely dangerous job of standing on groups of logs while transporting them down a river. This job evolved into a contest where the contestants would walk on logs in water to see who could stay on the longest without falling off. It was very easy to fall off the log, thus the expression. The issue of time is a common denominator, since the actions of eating and falling can be very fast.

Another expression for something that is easily done is *Like taking candy from a baby*. The meaning is clear, a baby cannot fight back and taking his or her candy would be very easy to do. The expression *Duck soup* which also means something easily done, dates back to a cartoon by a man named Tad Dorgan in 1902, but the reason why duck soup is something easy is unknown. It is not easy to make soup from a duck, at least not one that will taste good. It might refer to the expression *To be a sitting duck* where a duck sitting on water was easy to shoot. (<http://www.worldwidewords.org/qa/qu-doc2.htm>). After one analyzes these last two examples the idea of doing activities easily is attributed to the lack of obstacles, the baby is innocent and will not fight back, the duck won't move, so it can be shot.

Two of the corresponding French expressions also involve the image of cake and pie in the sayings *C'est du gâteau* which means "It's cake" and *C'est de la tarte* or "It's pie." Obviously these expressions are very similar to the English expressions seen before, but the French language also has another expression that emphasizes communication, which is *Simple comme bonjour* meaning "As easy as hello." The Spanish versions of this expression are *Ser pan comido* or literally "To be eaten bread" and *Ser un queque* or "To be a cake" and again, are very similar to the English and French cake and pie expressions. It is easy to eat bread or cake. So the three languages emphasize eating certain foods since the action here does not demand a lot of time.

Another expression concerning food is the expression *To sell like hotcakes*, which refers to something that sells well, something that the public readily buys. This expression in English dates from the 1600s when hotcakes or pancakes were popular selling food items at fairs and other events (Terban). The French expression also refers to food and is *Se vendre comme des petits pains* or literally "To sell like small loaves of bread." The two equivalent Spanish expressions also refer to food, and they are, *Vender como pan caliente* in Costa Rica, which

means “To sell like warm bread” and *Venderse como rosquillas* in Spain, which means “To sell like doughnuts.” This expression is culturally almost identical in the three languages. The image of something that sells quickly being something that is good to eat refers to man’s basic need for food. What is interesting is to analyze what is being sold or eaten in the three cultures. The American dish of hotcakes can be considered more elaborate than just plain bread. The French opt for small loaves of bread which were of finer quality than the large loaves of bread that were cheaper and more commonly consumed. The Spanish expressions insist on warm bread and doughnuts, which are more pleasing than just cold bread. Foods used in the phrases, either sweet or warm, help present the idea of comfort and pleasure, and the examples are used in the three languages. In sum, the belief that activities are easily done in a pleasant ambiance prevails in the three cultures.

An interesting expression in the three languages is used when someone does not show up for a date or an appointment. In English the sentence is *To stand someone up*. The meaning of this expression probably comes from the fact that the person was left “standing up” waiting for someone to come who would never arrive. The corresponding French expression is *Poser un lapin à quelqu’un* which means “To give someone a rabbit.” This expression has an interesting origin. In the 1880s, this same expression signified “not to pay for the favors of a young woman” and “the rabbit” was the refusal of payment. The actual meaning of this expression evolved around 1890 among students and likely came from *laisser poser* which meant “to make someone wait” (http://www.linternaute.com/dictionnaire/fr/liste_usage/).

One of the most common equivalents for this expression in Spanish, quite similar to the English version is *Dejar plantado a una persona*, which literally means “To leave someone planted.” However the image is more powerful in Spanish than in English, since the person who is left waiting in the Spanish language is not only standing up, but actually “planted.” So even though in the three languages the resulting action is the same, that is, to not show up for a date, we have three different images, “To stand someone up”, “To leave someone planted”, and “To give someone a rabbit.” With the French expression, the origin is rooted in tradition and the phrase has evolved as shown before. With the English and Spanish examples, the issue is time. To be standing or waiting is reproachable for the American, but in the Spanish speaking cultures there is more tolerance, so the person has to be planted on the ground.

In English, the saying *Absence makes the heart grow fonder* is an expression that means when people are apart, they can feel more affectionate towards each other (Collis Risso 87). The corresponding French expression is *Loin des yeux, près du cœur*, which means “Far from the eyes, close to the heart.” The Spanish version of this expression is *La distancia agranda los sentimientos* which means “Distance increases feelings.” Here, one sees how the English emphasizes being absent, while the Spanish and French versions concentrate on distance. In English and in French they use the concrete image of the heart that is affected, while in Spanish the importance is given to feelings. In French they use specific parts

of the human body to express the idea, in English and Spanish they use abstract concepts or external factors such as absence or distance to intensify the affection.

In English, the opposite of this idea or expression is *Out of sight, out of mind*. This expression, which comes from Homer's *Odyssey*, a classic literary epic which, has been popular in English since the 1200s. The message is clear, that is, the person who is not near you is soon forgotten (Terban 140). The French expression says *Loin des yeux, loin du cœur*, that is, "Far from the eyes, far from the heart." The Spanish expression is *Ojos que no ven, corazón que no siente* which means "Eyes that don't see, heart that doesn't feel." Curiously enough, the three languages concentrate on visions in their expressions, even though the English expression refers to the sense "sight" instead of the part of the body, "the eyes." Interestingly, in English it is the mind that ignores the absence, while in French and Spanish it is the heart. Are the English speaking cultures less affectionate than the French and Spanish speaking cultures? Are the former more rational for naming "the mind" instead of "the heart?"

Another expression that is completely different in the three languages is *The squeaking wheel gets the oil*, or *The squeaking wheel gets the grease*. This statement signifies that "those who complain the loudest get the most attention" (Collis Risso 55). In French the expression is *Qui ne demande rien, n'a rien*, that is, "He who asks for nothing, has nothing." The Spanish language has several versions of this expression such as *El que no habla, Dios no lo escucha* in Spain, which literally means "He who doesn't speak, God doesn't listen to" and *El que no llora no mama* in Costa Rica, which means "He who doesn't cry, doesn't suckle." Thus, the English language concentrates on technology, or the wheel, and of quieting a noise with grease or oil, the French language uses the discrete verb "to ask" resorting to a dialogue and again emphasizing the communication issue. The two Spanish versions are very interesting. The first one uses religion, implying that when you are in need of something, you should express the need, to get God's help. The second expression demands more action from the individual, if one does not act, even by crying, their needs will not be satisfied. The last two examples are then kind of opposite in that one considers divine help after having exteriorized the situation and the other demands only human action to achieve certain goals.

The early bird catches the worm is an expression in English that originated in the 1600s and means that if you get up early or if you start a project early, you will have more chance of success (Terban). The corresponding French expression is *L'avenir appartient à qui se lève matin* or *Le monde appartient à ceux qui se lèvent tôt* which means "the future belongs to he who rises early." The Spanish language has three common versions of this saying which are *El que madruga coge oruga* in Spain, which means "He who rises early catches the caterpillar", which is almost identical to the English version cited before. The only difference is in the object that is being eaten, a worm in English and a caterpillar in Spanish, and the rhyme in Spanish can explain the choice of a caterpillar. The second expression is *El que madruga come pechuga* or literally, "He who rises early eats chicken breast," a very popular expression in Costa Rica. With this last example,

we are no longer talking about an early bird catching a worm or a caterpillar, but a person eating the supposed best part of a chicken, the breast. The third expression is *A quien madruga Dios le ayuda*, which means “He who rises early, is helped by God.” Here, one notices how the Spanish language concentrates on food and religion. It is interesting that with this expression, the French language differs from the English and Spanish in that even though rising early is a part of the saying, the idea of power, possession and the future are promoted instead of an immediate compensation like a worm or some food. Ironically, in this case, the French culture, which is known for its cuisine, does not refer to food, when the other cultures do.

Another expression that exists in the three languages, a perfect example of how sayings originated or became popular because of their rhyme, is based on one of Aesop’s fables called *The Tortoise and the Hare*. In English, *If you snooze, you lose* “means that if you let yourself get distracted from your goals, someone is going to beat you to them. This refers to the old story about the tortoise racing the hare. When the hare got cocky and took a nap, the tortoise passed him and won the race” (<http://wiki.answers.com>). When analyzing these types of expressions, quite often the possible or even erroneous theories concerning their origins are more colorful and interesting than the genuine origins themselves. This can be seen in the corresponding French version of *If you snooze you lose* which is *Qui va à la chasse, perd sa place* which translated means “he who goes hunting loses his place.” It is obvious that the rhyme is important in this expression, but beyond this there are several interesting possible origins for this saying, none of which can be confirmed or denied. They are going to be analyzed next.

The first possible origin is simply that the time-honored tradition, sport, or pastime of hunting, is more of a pleasure than a necessity for a passionate hunter, and a perfect example can be seen in Washington Irving’s classic tale *Rip Van Winkle*, where Rip went hunting when he should have been working. He fell asleep and lost 20 years of his life. Another possible and probable origin of this expression comes from the Bible. Isaac, who was blind, wanted to bless his eldest son Esau, who had gone hunting, and so Isaac was tricked by his wife Rebecca, who replaced Esau with his youngest son Jacob, who received the blessing. Another possible origin of this expression comes not from hunting but rather from the French game of “jeu de paume” which is the game that eventually evolved into not only tennis, but all games played with a racket. The favorable position of server was won after having made a particular point called the “chasse” (www.secouchermoinsbete.fr). Another interesting yet unlikely possible origin for this expression is that “chasse” does not come from hunting but rather from “chasse d’eau” or the toilet. Supposedly in 1923, an English member of Parliament left his seat to go to the toilet and when he returned he had been voted out of Parliament, which probably would not have happened had he been present (<http://www.linternaute.com/proverbe/461/qui-va-a-la-chasse-perd-sa-place/>).

The Spanish version of this expression is *Quien fue a Sevilla, perdió su silla* which means “He who went to Seville lost his chair” or more exactly, in this case, “He who went to Seville lost his archdiocese.” The second expression can

be explained as follows: a possible and probable origin of this expression comes from an event that happened during the reign of Henry the IVth of the House of Trastámara in Spain. Alonso de Fonseca was the archbishop of Seville. His nephew was the archbishop of Compostela. Because of numerous uprisings in Galicia, Alonso de Fonseca offered to help his nephew, and the two archbishops traded places. When the uprisings were over, Alonso de Fonseca's nephew refused to leave Seville for his own city of Compostela, and so King Henry and the Pope had to intervene to solve the conflict. In reality, the expression should be "He who *left* Seville lost his archdiocese" (<http://www.saberia.com>). The Costa Rican versions of this expression are *Quien se va para Limón pierde su sillón* which means "He who goes to Limón loses his armchair" and *Quien se va para Virilla pierde su silla* or "He who goes to Virilla loses his chair" are obviously regional variations of this same expression since the first one refers to a province and the second one refers to a river. Perhaps the two expressions refer to the fact that if you go to the coast or to a river for entertainment or for a vacation, you can lose an important position. After all, the image of the chair, a "silla" or a "sillón," can also be a position of power.

The expression in English that says *The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence* which means that "another place or situation is better than your own" (Collis Risso 114) is obvious to anyone who comes from the country and has seen a cow or horse sticking their head through a fence to eat grass on the other side, while standing knee-deep in fresh, green grass. The French language has two corresponding versions, the first of which is very similar to the English: *L'herbe est toujours plus verte dans la pré du voisin*, which means "the grass is always greener in your neighbor's meadow." The second expression is: *On jalouse le sort du voisin*, which literally translates to "One is jealous of the neighbor's lot." The French language here concentrates on the neighbor, while the English language only mentions "the other side of the fence." In essence, the French expression is more people-oriented than the English expression. There are also two corresponding Spanish expressions, the first of which is *Nadie está contento con su suerte* that translates into "No one is happy with his/her destiny," and a poetic version which says *Gusta lo ajeno más por ajeno que por bueno*, which literally translates to "One likes other people's possessions because they are other people's possessions more than because they are good possessions." Obviously the rhyme in this expression is important but it also more closely resembles the French version than the English version. Here, the French and Spanish languages are more concerned about what other people have; there are references to jealousy as well as implied references to envy and discontent. The expression in the English language concerns itself with getting resources of another place, "the grass" on the other side of "the fence." Is the English-speaking culture less concerned about other people than French and Spanish-speaking cultures? Is the American culture always looking for a better place, the land of success present in the myth of the American Dream?

Once in a blue moon is an expression that refers to something that almost never or very rarely happens. This expression has two possible origins in English.

The first is that a blue moon is simply the second full moon of any given month, which is an occurrence that happens approximately every two and half years (<http://www.obliquity.com/astro/bluemoon.html>). The second possible origin of this expression is that supposedly when there is a crescent moon, people say that the dark part sometimes has a bluish color, which again, is quite rare. This theory and the expression “blue moon” both date back to the early 1500s (Terban 136). Another English expression that has a similar meaning is *When hell freezes over*. The origin of this expression is unknown, even though the meaning is quite clear: hell is never going to freeze over. *When pigs fly* is yet another expression with the same meaning. The image again is very descriptive since pigs will never fly. Why the pig was chosen instead of any other large nonflying animal is unknown.

There are four popular French versions of this expression, the first one being *Tous les trente-six du mois* that is, “Every 36th of the month.” On the modern western calendar, this is impossible, so it will never happen. The second expression in French is *Semaine des quatre jeudis* which means “A week with four Thursdays” which again, is not possible. The third expression in French, *Quand les poules auront des dents* which literally translated means “When chicken will have teeth” has an unknown origin, even though the image is quite clear; chicken do not have teeth. The fourth expression in French which is quite colorful is *À la Saint-Glinglin* which means “At Saint Glinglin.” Saint Glinglin, refers to a nonexistent saint whose origin probably dates back to the late 1890s and comes from the old French *seing* meaning “signal” and from an old eastern French dialect where the verbs *glinguer* and *ginglier* respectively mean “to ring” and “to sound.” In short, in this saying one perceives the signal of a nonexistent bell ringing (http://www.linternaute.com/dictionnaire/fr/liste_usage/).

The Spanish language also has two popular versions of this expression. The first is *de Pascuas a Ramos* or “From Easter to Palm Sunday” which changes the logical order of these events, but it is almost a year from one event to the other. The second expression is *Cada muerte de Obispo* which means “Every death of a bishop.” Both of these expressions have religious imagery and both imply the idea of long periods of time before something happens.

In analyzing the before mentioned expressions in the three languages, one sees that the English language looks at the moon, or astrology, and hell, a religious image, and an animal, the pig. The French language concentrates on the calendar, and an animal, the chicken or the hen. It also uses religion, with a saint, even if the saint does not exist. The Spanish language is more interested in the religious aspect, with the Easter season and the image of bishops. So the English language has an expression that allows the event to possibly happen, since there are occasionally blue moons; however the two other expressions leave no possibility for the event to happen, since hell will not freeze over and pigs will never fly.

None of the expressions in the French language allow any possibility for the event to happen since there is never a 36th of the month, there are never four Thursdays in a given week, chickens will never have teeth, at least not in our lifetime, and there is no feast of Saint Glinglin, since such a saint never

existed. The French language therefore eliminates any possibility of the event actually taking place. In contrast, the two Spanish expressions do not eliminate the possibility of the event happening, since bishops do die and the lapse of time between Easter and Palm Sunday does exist, and is long. One can ask the question: are the English and French-speaking cultures more negative, or are they simply more convinced that when they say something will not happen, it will never happen? Are the Spanish-speaking cultures more positive or does their religious faith give them some sort of support?

Another example of an expression in English where the possible or even false origins are more interesting than its real origin is *To cost an arm and a leg*, an expression that refers to something that is very expensive. The story goes that at the time of George Washington, before photography, when a person's portrait was painted, it was more difficult for the artist to include arms and legs in portraits. Therefore the portraits were more expensive if these parts were included. Thus, there are paintings of George Washington sitting down, or with an arm behind his back, or even with only half of his legs. The other paintings that show both arms and both legs were supposedly more expensive. However this is probably a false origin since it seems that the expression did not even exist at that time. So the probable origin of this expression dates from after World War II and refers to soldiers who were fighting and who often paid the price of losing their arms and legs in battle (<http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/arm-and-a-leg.html>).

The most common French version of this expression is *Coûter les yeux de la tête* which literally means "To cost the eyes from the head." This expression dates from the 19th Century and was supposedly used by Balzac and other authors. The meaning is quite clear, that the eyes are very valuable for a person (<http://expresio.fr/expressions/couter-la-peau-des-fess-du-cul.php>). The Spanish language has two common versions of this expression which are *Costar un ojo de la cara* which means "To cost an eye from the face" and *Costar un riñón* which can be translated as "To cost a kidney." The first of these two expressions has a specific historical origin that is probably valid. Diego de Almagro was a Spanish conquistador that lost an eye during a siege against the Incas. When he saw King Charles the First, he reportedly said that the business of defending the interests of the throne had cost him an eye from his face (<http://www.xeouradio.com>). Another possible origin comes from mythology. Odin, the Norse God, said to Mimer, the guardian of the fountain of Mimer, that he would give an eye for a sip from the fountain, and Mimer immediately accepted the proposal. Odin ripped his eye from its socket and presented it to Mimer in payment, so as not to owe him anything (<http://losprodromos.blogspot.com>). The second Spanish expression, "to cost a kidney," simply means that a kidney is a valuable organ. One can live without eye, but one cannot live without kidneys unless one is always connected to a machine. It should be noted that there are other versions of this expression in the three languages that involve testicles and other private body parts, and that these are variations of the above versions. In English there is the image of arms and legs emphasizing

the idea of movement and action. In French and Spanish the emphasis is put on specific internal organs that lead to sensorial perceptions or primordial functions.

The final expression in this study is *To have other fish to fry* or *To have bigger fish to fry*, a sentence in English which means to have better things to do. This colorful expression has different versions in many languages, that use many different animals instead of fish. Unfortunately, the origin is unknown. It is also interesting and unfortunate that this expression has no Spanish version. The French version is *Avoir d'autres chats à fouetter* which means "To have other cats to whip." This saying dates back to the 17th century, and the original expression, which referred to someone who was wide awake, was that he or she was *Éveillée comme un chat qu'on fouette*, which means, "Awake like a cat that one whips." There was another expression at the same time also involving a cat that was used to refer to something of no importance or to a harmless mistake. *Il n'y a pas de quoi fouetter un chat* which means "It's not worth whipping a cat over." Here again, it is unfortunate that the origin is lost in time and why the poor cat was chosen instead of another animal, is also unknown (www.expressio.fr).

What conclusions can be made from this study? The expressions analyzed showed that sometimes they do not support people's perceptions of what a culture or country should be. For example, with some of their sayings, the French-speaking culture sometimes puts more importance on communication while the English and Spanish speaking cultures tend to emphasize food more than the French expressions do. This would support stereotypic ideas of the French and the pride that they take in the French language and therefore they emphasize communication. However, it directly opposes the stereotypical idea of the pride the French take in their food, and of the importance of French cuisine. If one of these three languages is to emphasize food in its expressions, one could easily imagine it being the French language, but the examples show the opposite. In analyzing some of these expressions, the French and Spanish expressions seem put more emphasis on feelings than the corresponding English expressions. This would support stereotypic ideas that English speaking cultures are colder than some other people from French and Spanish speaking cultures. Technology was emphasized in the English sayings, which again supports stereotypical ideas about the United States and technology, mass production, capitalism etc. Time is an important issue in the sayings in the three languages but it exhibits differences of impact or tolerance. After studying some of these expressions, it seems that the French-speaking culture is more absolute when saying that something won't happen than the English and Spanish cultures.

The origins of some of these sayings turn out to be quite colorful or revealing expanding then the view of a culture. The differences in lexicon, comparing and contrasting the words used in each language, expose interesting differences in cultural identities. However, as stated at the beginning of this study, even though it is extremely interesting to try and judge a culture or to say how nationalities may or may not act based on the expressions seen in their respective languages, it is probably neither fair nor advisable to do so. People are far too

complicated to perceive them as replicas of their language or faithful representative of their culture.

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