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Grado en Lingua e Literatura Inglesas

The acquisition of English Phrasal Verbs by Spanish Advanced Learners of English

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1. Introduction

During the past few decades, many researchers have changed their focal point in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) from syntax to vocabulary, as Laufer (1997: 147) states: “After decades of neglect, lexicon is now recognized as central to language acquisition process, native or non-native”. A growing interest in multiword vocabulary items, such as idioms, stock phrases, prefabs, and the focus item in this paper, phrasal verbs (hereafter PVs) emerged and along with the help of technology, linguists have been able to collect more information about these issues by working with powerful computers and electronic databases called *corpora*.

PVs – often called *multiword verbs* or *verb + particle constructions* – are one of the most relevant features of the English language, since “they add a definite richness to the language” (Gardner and Davies 2007: 339) and help English learners to develop native-like proficiency. They are notoriously abundant in all areas of language, as Gardner and Davies (2007: 339) pointed out that readers can find one PV in every 192 words of English, or roughly two per page of a written text (based on the 100-million-word British National Corpus (BNC)).

However, they are considered to be a source of frustration and confusion for foreign learners of English, not only by students but also by teachers. Marks (2005: 1) pointed out some of the most common misunderstandings considered to be true by students:

1. Phrasal verbs are illogical, or random or unpredictable
2. Phrasal verbs are unique to English
3. Phrasal verbs are necessarily informal or colloquial
4. Phrasal verbs necessarily have 'proper', non-phrasal equivalents

5. Phrasal verbs are a ramified area of English lexis, separate from the rest

These misunderstandings arise due to the fact that it is difficult to see any system or pattern in them. Instead of this, they seem to be constructed in an arbitrary way and therefore students tend to refuse to use them. Furthermore, PVs are usually polysemous, that is, there are many different meanings for one PV, which makes them even more difficult (Kovács 2007: 141). For example, according to the Cambridge dictionaries online (2015), the PV ‘put off’ has four different meanings:

- (1) to switch off (a light etc)

*Please **put** the light **off**!*

- (2) to delay; to postpone

*He **put off** his departure till Thursday.*

- (3) to cancel an arranged meeting etc with (a person)

*I had to **put** the Browns **off** because I had flu.*

- (4) to cause (a person) to feel disgust or dislike (for)

*The cheese looked nice, but the smell **put** me **off**.*

Moreover, besides the semantic complexity, PVs are governed by unpredictable rules, so that, in some cases the base verb and the particle are separated, such as ‘off’ in sentences (1), (3) and (4), and in other cases the PV cannot be split up, as shown in sentence (2).

Due to all these complexities, students often misuse PVs or even avoid them when they write or speak in English (Dagut & Laufer, 1985; Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989; Liao & Fukuya, 2004). Either they repeatedly use the same basic common PVs, such as ‘come on’, ‘go out’, ‘look forward to’ or ‘wake up’, or they use them

semantically or syntactically improperly. This difficulty leads them to avoidance. As Schachter (1974: 213) noted, “if a student finds a particular construction in the target language difficult to comprehend, it is very likely that he will try to avoid producing it”. In other words, learners tend to avoid using in the English language those structures that they cannot find in their mother tongue. Thus, since learners cannot find *translation-equivalents* for the English structures they choose “less appropriate but more L1-equivalent structures” (Dagut & Laufer 1985: 73).

However, although there is an extensive collection of research on their structure, grammar, semantics and teaching and learning problems (Bolinger 1971; Fraser 1976; Dagut & Laufer 1985; Quirk et al. 1985; Hulstijn & Marchena 1989; Laufer & Eliasson 1993; Sjöholm 1995; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 1999; Liao & Fukuya 2004; etc.), only few studies focus on L1-Spanish learners of English (cf. Alejo-González 2010; 2012).

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to compare the use of PVs by Spanish non-native speakers (NNS) and native speakers (NS). The first section will provide a review of the literature on the acquisition of English PVs by NNS paying special attention to the difficulties this area presents for them (such as mistakes). The next section consists of an overview of the different corpus-based studies on questions like avoidance, overuse and underuse of PVs. In the third section, the dissertation will include a brief corpus-based study comparing the frequency of use of ten PVs (selected from the list of the 100 most frequent PVs in the BNC provided by Gardner and Davies (2007)) by L1-Spanish learners of English and NS in written and oral media. This empirical study tries to answer 3 research questions focusing on the frequency of use and avoidance of PVs by Spanish students, their semantic component and the differences found between

written and oral media. It includes a methodology section in which the corpora used and the process followed to complete it are presented and finally discusses not only quantitative results, but also qualitative ones, by analysing the multiple meanings of the PVs and highlighting differences of usage by both NNS and NS. The last section includes the conclusions and suggestions for further research.

2. What are PVs?

2.1. Definition and Classification

In order to understand why PVs are considered to be one of the most difficult topics when foreign students learn English, it is necessary to be provided with an accurate definition and classification. PVs are included in a sub-type of multi-word verbs which consists of a lexical verb and an adverbial particle (Claridge 2000: 46). But although they are two-part verbs (there is another category, *phrasal prepositional verbs* such as ‘look forward to’, also called *three-part verbs*), they function as a single lexical unit. Therefore, in most of the cases, being familiar with the meaning of the lexical verb and the particle themselves does not guarantee the comprehension of the meaning of the combination. On the contrary, it makes it even more complicated to deduce it. In order to understand this explanation, the example provided below (5) tries to reflect the thinking process of an English student when faced with an *opaque* PV (a concept developed by Laufer & Eliasson, (1993) which will be discussed below), that is, whose meaning is not easy to deduce. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary* (2005), the meanings of the separate parts of the PV ‘give up’ are:

(5) - **give**: freely transfer the possession of (something) to (someone)

- **up**: towards a higher place or position

- **give up**: cease making an effort; admit defeat

In this case, the student would probably not have guessed the meaning provided by the dictionary, but he would have thought of a more literal meaning, such as ‘to lift something upwards to someone’.

Regarding the classification of PVs, it is clear that it has been a challenging issue for researchers and linguists, which Darwin & Gray (1999: 67) explain as “confusion among sources”. Historically, syntactic and semantic considerations have been the focal point for experts, classifying PVs into categories like single-word replacement, separability, literal versus figurative meanings, etc. (Gardner & Davies 2007: 341).

On one hand, one of the most mentioned classifications by researchers and linguists is the one provided by Quirk et al (1985) which focuses on the semantic level of PVs. They classify PVs into two main categories based on idiomatic status: (a) *highly idiomatic* and (b) *semi idiomatic* constructions. By *highly idiomatic* PVs they mean that “there is no possibility of contrastive substitution: bring up/down; come by/past/through; turn up/down; etc.” (Quirk et al. 1985: 1163). The second category is constituted of *semi-idiomatic* PVs defined as “constructions which are variable but in a more limited way” (Quirk et al. 1985: 1162).

On the other hand, Dagut & Laufer (1985: 74), expound a classification based on Fraser (1976), in which they distinguish three different types of PVs - *literal*, *completive* and *figurative*:

1. Literal PVs whose meaning is a straightforward product of their semantic components, e.g. ‘go out’, ‘take away’, ‘come in’, ‘get up’

2. Figurative PVs in which a new meaning has resulted from a metaphorical shift of meaning and the semantic fusion of the individual components, e.g. ‘turn up’, ‘let down’, ‘put up with’, ‘mix up’, ‘look up to’, ‘give in’, ‘show off’, ‘go into’
3. Completive PVs in which the particle describes the result of the action, e.g. ‘cut off’, ‘burn down’, ‘shoot down’.

Similarly, Laufer and Eliasson (1993: 37) dealt with three types of PVs: *semantically transparent* (the meaning of the whole verb-particle combination can be inferred from the meaning of its components), *semitransparent* (which become transparent when put into context), and *figurative* or *semantically opaque* (which have a lexicalized meaning).

Finally, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999: 432-433) provided a similar but more comprehensive account of PVs and categorized them into three semantic categories- *literal, idiomatic and aspectual*:

1. Literal PVs: the two elements, verb and particle, constitute a single unit whose meaning does not differ too much from that of the lexical verb and the particle. One of the examples they provided was ‘sit down’, in which the meanings of ‘sit’ and ‘down’ can be easily deduced.
2. Idiomatic PVs: the meanings of these units are almost impossible to figure out from the separate meanings of the verb and the particle that form the PV, such as ‘catch up’.
3. Aspectual PVs: this category is in between the other two categories mentioned above. The meanings of aspectual PVs are more transparent than those of idiomatic PVs but still not as transparent as those of literal PVs. These aspectual PVs can be further subdivided into semantic classes “depending on the semantic

contribution of the particle” (p. 432), such as *inceptive*, *continuative*, *iterative* or *completive* (literal and figurative PVs for Gardner & Davies 2007: 341-342).

The table below reflects in a compressed and well-defined way a summary of the above mentioned semantic types of PVs the different linguists have pointed out in their studies.

Quirk et al. (1985)	semi idiomatic		highly idiomatic
Dagut & Laufer (1985)	Literal	Completive	Figurative
Laufer & Eliasson (1993)	Semantically transparent	Semitransparent	Semantically opaque
Celce - Murcia & Larsen – Freeman (1999)	Literal	Aspectual	Idiomatic

Table 1: Semantic categories of PVs in the different classification studies

Although all the classifications proposed by these researchers are similar and reliable, for our corpus-based study, we decided to follow the classification provided by Laufer & Eliasson (1993), since it is one of the most mentioned and accepted in many different studies and is, in our view, the most accurate one.

Interestingly, other linguists focus not only on the semantics of PVs as single units but on the independent elements that constitute them. In most cases, one of the deepest problems for L2 learners when facing PVs is to remember the particle that

accompanies the lexical verb, because they seem to be chosen randomly (Side 1990: 145).

Taking into consideration some approaches to the meaning of particles, Bolinger (1971: 113-114) divides them into two main groups. On the one hand, one group composed of verbs whose particles convey literal meaning; on the other hand, a group referring to particles with figurative meaning. In order to understand this division, we will provide an example with the particle 'in':

(6) *If you want to **get in**, you'll need to buy a ticket.*

(7) *The roof **gave in** because of the weight of the snow.*

In the first example (6), the meaning of the PV is obvious and the particle 'in' has no specific function, whereas in the following example, (7), it would be difficult for foreign students to deduce the figurative meaning of this PV without a dictionary, to understand that the roof collapsed and fell because of the snow.

Yet, Lipka (1972) has a different perspective concerning the meanings of particles in verb particle constructions like PVs. In his view, there are cases in which particles carry some meaning, for example, in PVs where the lexical verbs have no precise semantic features (such as 'get up'), and other cases in which they do not hold any meaning, like in:

1. Verb particle constructions where the verb expresses the same meaning with and without particle, (so the particle is considered to be optional): e.g. 'tighten (up)'
2. Verb particle constructions where the verb originates from an adjective: e.g. 'black out' (Neagu 2007: 123)

In general, the meanings of verb particles are considered to be arbitrary and based on chance. For some researchers, particles do not play an important role in the meaning of PVs: “We are assuming here that there is no need to associate any semantic feature with the particle, only phonological and syntactic features” (Fraser 1976: 77).

On the other hand, contradicting the previous position, Lindner (1983: 73) reckons that particles are useful to understand the meaning of most of the PVs: “most established VPCs are analyzable, at least to some degree”.

2.2. The use of PVs in PDE

It is often said that PVs are commonly used in informal spoken English (Cornell 1985: 269). According to Biber et. al (1999) PVs are used most commonly in informal and conversational contexts, but they are rarely used in academic writing:

Overall, conversation and fiction show much greater use of the most common phrasal verbs than news and academic prose. The difference is especially noteworthy for intransitive phrasal verbs, which are extremely common in conversation and fiction, but extremely rare in news and academic prose. One reason for this is that most phrasal verbs are colloquial in tone. (Biber et. al 1999: 409)

A similar view is shared by Liu (2011), who carried out a study in which he revealed the most frequent PVs of British and American English, basing his analyses on data from the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (COCA) and the BNC, as well as using the list of the 100 most frequent PVs provided by Gardner and Davies (2007: 358-359). After these analyses, he concluded that phrasal verbs are more common in spoken language than in newspapers, magazines and academic writing (Liu

2011: 675). Regarding the results of his study, these are the 30 most frequent PVs in British and American English: ‘check out’, ‘come out’, ‘come up’, ‘figure out’, ‘get out’, ‘go ahead’, ‘grow up’, ‘hang out’, ‘hold up’, ‘lay out’, ‘pick up’, ‘pull out’, ‘show up’, ‘shut down’, ‘take off’, ‘end up’, ‘turn out’, ‘take on’, ‘turn around’, ‘wake up’, ‘build up’, ‘carry on’, ‘fill in’, ‘get on’, ‘set out’, ‘set up’, ‘sort out’, ‘take over’, ‘take up’, ‘turn up’ (671).

Following Thim (2012), occurrences of PVs in registers such as conversation, fiction, news, and academic prose, found in Biber et al (1999), seem to determine that many PVs tend to be colloquial:

The distribution patterns of phrasal verbs closely matches that for lexical verbs generally ... except that academic prose has fewer than would be expected. Thus, rather than being a marked feature of conversation, phrasal verbs are notably rare in academic prose. In their place, academic prose shows a much greater reliance on derived verbs and more specialized verbs generally.” (Biber et al. 1999: 409,).

Jacobsen (2013) also carried out a study where he analysed the frequency of use of some phrasal verbs in spoken and written language. Observing the table below, taken from his study (Jacobsen 2013: 5), we notice that his results are similar to Liu’s ones: the average use of PVs is significantly higher in spoken language than in written texts.

Phrase	Frequency per million BNC spoken	Frequency per million BNC written
Break up	14.59	13.78
Bring up	58.55	34.14

Call back	4.69	6.28
Calm down	4.35	8.06
Carry on	87.33	37.66
Check in	0	0.87
Chop up	1.67	0.81
Clean up	9.03	5.58
Come back	250.62	96.58
Come on	79.65	52.27
Total	383.46	169.62

Table 2: Frequency of use of phrasal verbs in spoken and written language (Jacobsen 2013: 5)

However, other authors defend that PVs can also be used in formal writing. Marks (2005: 1) states that “some phrasal verbs, are decidedly formal and/or literary, for example: ascribe to, cast down, complain of, consign to, impinge on, renege on”. This makes students feel confused about whether it is appropriate or not to use PVs when they write a formal text.

A recent study on this topic was conducted by Trebits (2009). She explored the use of PVs in English language documents of the European Union (EU) by building an EU English Corpus of approximately 200,000 running words “using texts which are representative of the fields of activities of the EU.” (Trebits 2009: 470). Her findings show that about half of the verbs on the list of the 25 most frequent phrasal verbs in the Corpus of EU English (CEUE) coincide with the verbs among the 20 most frequent

lexical verbs forming phrasal verb combinations in the BNC Written (set, carry, put, make, find, move, take, work, break, bring, go, point) (Trebits 2009: 477).

3. The use of PVs by L2 learners

3.1. SLA research on vocabulary. PVs and other multiword constructions

During the past few decades, it has become increasingly apparent that vocabulary and multiword expressions (or *formulaic sequences*) are an important part of fluent and natural language use (Cowie 1998; Schmitt 2004; Wray 2002). However, it is also widely acknowledged that multiword constructions present particular difficulties for foreign learners of English (Granger 1998; Schmitt 2004). An explanation to this problem is given by Wray (2002), who argues that L2 learners, since they are not familiar with what she calls formulaic sequences, tend to focus on individual words, acquiring and learning separate words rather than whole phrases (Wray 2002: 206).

Therefore, interest in multiword lexical items, such as PVs, prepositional verbs, phrasal prepositional verbs, free combinations, etc., has been growing in SLA (Folse, 2004; Laufer, 1997), and a large amount of theoretical and empirical works were carried out, mainly since the 1990s (cf. Sinclair 1991; Moon 1997; Cowie 1998; Biber et al. 1999; Wray 2002; Nation 2008; Condon 2008; etc.)

3.2. SLA research focusing on mistakes

As it has been already mentioned before, since PVs are one of the most problematic aspects of English language for NNS, it is very common to find L2 English learners making mistakes when they use them. Pye (1996) presented a research she carried out using the *Cambridge Corpus of Learner English*, in which she listed the most

commonly occurring errors that learners of English seem to make in the use of PVs (Pye 1996: 698).

The first most common mistake she found was that learners occasionally chose the wrong PV, such as ‘hung up’ instead of ‘held up’ when talking about the traffic. Along with the wrong choice of PV, her findings revealed that the wrong choice of particle was also a problem for students of English (e.g. ‘hand out’ instead of ‘hand over’). Using a phrasal verb when it is not necessary or correct (as in, ‘join in a club’ instead of ‘join a club’), can also be seen, apart from an usual error, as a case of *overuse* of PVs (a concept that will be discussed in section 3.3.1.). She carried on with the idea of overuse, as she mentioned that learners also tend to overuse forms that are less frequent in native speaking English, for example, ‘hang up the phone’ is used more often by learners than ‘hang up’,). A further mistake that NNS make was to use the PV with the incorrect subject or object, for instance, the PV ‘carry on’ can only apply to activities which involve talking, such as ‘carry on a conversation’, so it could not be used with a general activity, like for example ‘carry on a trip’).

Furthermore, grammatical mistakes are also very common regarding these constructions. The results in her study showed that learners make use of incorrect grammar, as in ‘the electricity cut off’, rather than ‘the electricity was cut off’ and also struggle with collocating grammar (e.g. ‘give up with smoking’ instead of ‘give up smoking’). Finally, her findings revealed that NNS seem reluctant to split the verb from its particle, for example, they prefer to use ‘hang up your coat’, instead of ‘hang your coat up’, despite being the last option more used by NS. After analysing the results, she arrived at the conclusion that the use of PVs by English learners seemed to be restricted because of “a general lack of confidence in the use of phrasal verbs” (Pye 1996: 698).

However, (Darwin and Gray 1999: 65) stated that those learners with a Germanic first language usually made fewer mistakes. Jacobsen (2013) supported this statement with a study about L1-Swedish students (there exist PVs in Swedish), in which she analyzed, among other things, the mistakes made by these learners when using PVs. The results showed that Swedish students use these constructions generally correctly and with near native-like frequency. Most of the errors she found were not specific to PVs, but they were likely to make other grammatical mistakes too. The only error she highlighted was that, although they did not use particles incorrectly, they did not move them as often as natives would do, possibly because in Swedish the movement of particles can modify the meanings of PVs.

3.3. Corpus-based SLA research. Contrastive Interlanguage Analysis

In the last few years, there has been a growing interest in corpus analysis and its “potential in computer-assisted language learning, research, and teaching” (Cotos 2014: 202). As explained by Granger (2003: 538), a computer learner corpus is an electronic collection of texts produced by second language learners, and since the early 1990s, linguists interested in SLA started to investigate characteristics of learner language, as they had access to large collections of L2 data.

The method most commonly used in corpus-based researches is *Contrastive Interlanguage Analysis*, “an approach that consists in carrying out either a comparison of learner data with native speaker data (L2 vs. L1) or a comparison between different types of learner data (L2 vs. L2)” (Granger 2003: 541). Since PVs are considered to be one of the most intriguing multiword items, there are a vast amount of studies upon different aspects of this construction, such as *frequency of use*, *overuse* and *underuse*.

3.3.1. Overuse and underuse

Waibel (2007), following this two-way comparison suggested by Granger (2003), carried out a study that focused on the comparison of the written productions of two different learner groups - Italian and German students – and then compared them to a native corpus. The results showed that, overall, German learners used more phrasal verbs than Italian students and, surprisingly, than NS too. Moreover, German students not only overused PVs, but also made an increased use of Germanic verbs, whereas Italian students' underuse was related to a preference of Latin-based verbs. Since PVs are based on Germanic verbs, the underuse of PVs in Italian learner texts was not entirely unexpected, especially because Italian, in contrast to German, does not have PVs equivalents.

A slightly different corpus-based research is the one by Alejo-González (2010). He compared the use of 'out'-PVs in Spanish, Swedish and native English speakers, and found out that both groups of foreign learners underused these kind of PVs compared with their native counterparts. However, among Spanish and Swedish students, the second group used PVs more often, probably because "Spanish lacks this category of verbs while Swedish does not." (158).

Similarly to Alejo-González, Gilquin (2011) compared the use of PVs with the particle 'up' in NS and NNS. The results revealed an overuse of PVs in writing by foreign learners, but a heavy underuse in speech. Furthermore, by analyzing the different components of the learner corpus, she also found a great diversity among learners with different mother tongues (as shown in Figure 1, (Gilquin 2011: 640)). These differences can be explained not only by the influence of the mother tongue (i.e. it is easier for speakers of Germanic languages to use PVs because they have PVs in

their mother tongue) but also by “the degree of exposure to the target language” (Gilquin 2011: 640), as it is the case of Tswana learners, who are taught in English from the fifth grade in primary school.

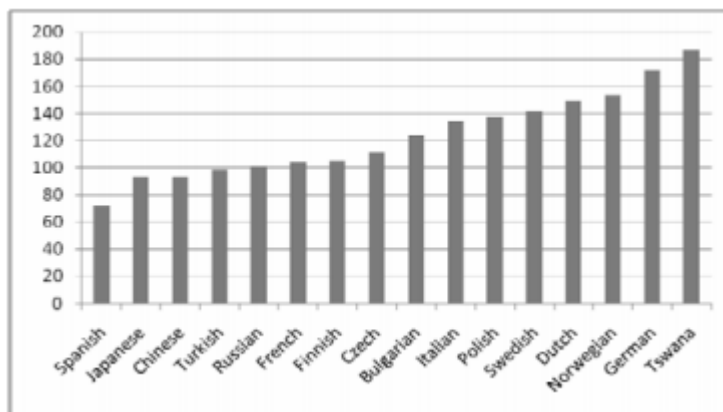


Figure 1: Frequency of PVs with ‘up’ in ICLE (relative frequency per 100,000 words) (according to Gilquin 2011: 640)

On the other hand, Chen (2013) carried out a research based on L1-Chinese learners of English and compared their use of PVs with British and American students. The findings did not coincide with the results found in the previous mentioned studies by Waibel (2007), Alejo-González (2010) or Gilquin (2011), since Chinese students, despite not having this construction in Chinese, used PVs regularly in writing. Interestingly, the study revealed differences between native British and American speakers. Consequently, American students, not only tended to use PVs more frequently than British students, but they also used a larger variety. Hence, there was not a fundamental difference in the use of PVs between Chinese and British students, but compared to the American writers, L1-Chinese learners of English tend to use fewer PVs.

3.4. The question of Avoidance

According to Schachter (1974: 213), PVs are one of multiword items that learners tend to avoid the most when learning English. In order to explain the concept of avoidance by L2 learners, it is important to point out two ideas: (1) avoidance occurs when there are structural differences between L1 and L2 (Laufer and Eliasson 1993: 37); (2) avoidance occurs because of the semantic difficulty of L2 forms (Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989, p. 251).

Avoidance is usually defined as the “natural tendency to avoid using what they (NNS) do not properly understand and to prefer the more familiar one-word verb” (Dagut & Laufer 1985: 78). In other words, instead of using English PVs, L2 learners choose equivalent one word verbs that sound more familiar to them. Alejo-González (2012: 39) states that “avoidance does not mean lack of knowledge but strategic behaviour on the part of the learner, who perceives these units as difficult and opts for those he or she considers to be easier”.

As this concept became a much investigated feature of PVs, many important studies have been carried out by well-known linguists, such as Dagut and Laufer (1985). They conducted the first contribution to research on the avoidance of PVs by looking at Israeli learners’ use of English PVs. They found out that, paying attention to the frequency of avoidance of literal, figurative and completive PVs, the majority of Hebrew learners avoided especially figurative PVs, such as ‘let down’ preferring the one-word equivalent ‘to disappoint’. Since PVs do not exist in Hebrew, learners do not find anything similar to this structure in their L1, so they prefer to avoid them rather than to use them incorrectly.

Similarly, Hulstijn and Marchena (1989) based their study on the conclusions of the previous one by Dagut and Laufer (1985). Hulstijn and Marchena (1989) provided Dutch intermediate and advanced learners with the same kind of tests than Dagut and Laufer did in their study: multiple choice, memorization, and translation. Each test was composed by 15 sentences, in order to bring out as a result their preference for either PVs or one-word synonyms. They hypothesized that Dutch learners would not avoid PVs, since they also exist in Dutch. Surprisingly, the findings showed that, although they did not avoid English PVs, they tended to avoid those idiomatic PVs that they regarded as too Dutch-like. So in this case, the reason that leads learners to avoidance is not the contrast between learners' L1 and L2, but the similarity that exists between the two languages. Furthermore, Hulstijn and Marchena (1989: 241) conclude that Dutch learners prefer "one-word verbs with general, multi- purpose meanings over phrasal verbs with specific, sometimes idiomatic meanings".

Laufer and Eliasson (1993) carried out a study focused on the frequency of avoidance of Swedish learners of English. The learners were given a multiple-choice test and a translation test, which consisted of 20 sentences each, and where they had to show preference between PVs or single-word verbs. According to the results provided, Swedish learners do not avoid PVs, not even the figurative ones. In fact, as the results were compared to the Hebrew learners' ones from the study by Dagut & Laufer (1985) before mentioned, it could be marked that Swedish learners used significantly more PVs than the Israelis did, especially figurative ones.

By comparing Hulstijn and Marchena's study and the one carried out by Laufer and Eliasson, some particular peculiarities can be noted. Since multi-word verbs are a feature of Germanic language, such as English, Dutch or Swedish, it is curious that

Dutch learners in Hulstijn and Marchena's (1989) study avoid idiomatic PVs whereas Swedish learners in Laufer and Eliasson's (1993) did not. The contradiction could arise due to the types of PV analyzed: while Laufer and Eliasson (1993) regarded PVs as a whole, Hulstijn and Marchena (1989) worked on detailed analysis on different types of PV (idiomatic and non- idiomatic). Moreover, in contrast to the findings of Laufer and Eliasson (1993), they also pointed out that similarity between L1 and L2 can cause learner avoidance too, while Laufer and Eliasson note that L1-L2 difference is the most common reason of PVs avoidance.

A follow-up study by Sjöholm (1995) was based on native Finnish- and Swedish-speaking students in Finland, between the ages of 16-25. They were expected to do a multiple-choice test with each sentence containing two correct options (a PV and a one-word equivalent) and two wrong answers that worked as distracters. According to the results, Finns significantly avoided PVs much more than Swedes, especially in the early stages of learning. Whereas, as in the previous study by Laufer and Eliasson (1993), Swedish students did not avoid PVs at all, because of the similarity they share with native language pattern.

One of the most recent studies on this topic was carried out by Liao and Fukuya (2004), who examined the avoidance patterns of English PVs by Chinese learners of English who do not use PVs in their L1. A group of 70 Chinese intermediate and advanced learners took one of 3 tests (multiple-choice, translation, or recall), while 15 native speakers took the multiple-choice test. As it was expected, intermediate learners used PVs much less frequently than both advanced learners and native speakers. Surprisingly, advanced learners did not avoid figurative PVs as much as it would be expected from non native speakers, which Liao and Fukuya relate to the fact that "the

advanced Chinese learners' exposure to the L2 environment might have been an important factor in their non-avoidance of PVs in contrast with the intermediate learners" (Liao & Fukuya 2004: 97).

Furthermore, Liao and Fukuya (2004) came to the conclusion that not all the tests the learners did showed the same evidence; that is, while Dutch learners in Hulstijn and Marchena's (1989) study performed equally in all three types of tests, Liao and Fukuya (2004), found that Chinese learners only used less figurative PVs in the translation test in which there was no verb provided so that the students had to make an effort to reach the answer.

However, although these studies provide great and useful information, they are not exempt from criticism. Waibel (2007) states that Dagut and Laufer (1985) focused exclusively on their teaching experience when they had to choose the PVs for the test. Moreover, they were not aware of whether the learners actually knew the PVs that they were using in the tests. They also failed to eliminate factors other than L1-L2 difference before concluding that the learners' avoidance of PVs was caused by structural L1-L2 differences, and did not provide any statistical evidence to further validate their findings (Waibel 2007: 26). According to Liao and Fukuya (2004), they also failed to explain in detail why figurative expressions were avoided more than the literal ones.

In addition, both studies carried out by Liao and Fukuya (2004), and Laufer and Eliasson (1993) involved a small number of PVs and also a small number of learners (only about 15 to 20 PVs were investigated and only 70 and 87 learners participated in the studies).

3.5. Cognitive approaches to the acquisition of PVs

Although PVs are widely viewed as a source of particular difficulty for English language learners, mainly because of the lack of transparency of their meanings and the random nature of the particles (Side 1990: 145), “the thriving field of Cognitive Linguistics (hereafter CL) challenges the assumed arbitrariness of PVs in traditional view and argues that lexicon, at least in the case of particles, is systematically motivated, or simply put, principled and rule-governed.” (Sadri 2013: 1310). Thus, a CL-based approach considers that the particle is the semantic leader of the PV.

Amongst the various contributions to the framework of CL focusing on English PVs, we have to mention the dissertation by Susan Lindner (1981), who makes an in-depth analysis of the particles ‘out’ and ‘up’. On the other hand, Lakoff (1987) and Tyler & Evans (2003) examine the case of ‘over’, while Rudzka-Ostyn (2003) carries out an analysis of the following particles: ‘out’, ‘in’, ‘into’, ‘up’, ‘down’, ‘off’, ‘way’, ‘on’, ‘over’, ‘back’, ‘about’, ‘around’, ‘across’, ‘through’, ‘by’ and ‘along’.

Lakoff and Johnson, (1980) developed a theory they named *Conceptual Metaphor Theory*. They explained that our concepts structure our everyday life (what we perceive, or how we relate to other people). “If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor” (Lackoff and Johnson 1980: 5). According to Kecskés (2002: 102) “conceptual metaphors bring into correspondence two domains of knowledge: the source domain and a target domain. The source domain of metaphors is usually a familiar physical domain while the target domain is a less familiar abstract domain”. In other words, we use a familiar image to understand the hidden meaning of an idea.

Thus, when students face a PV with a figurative meaning, metaphors serve as a tool to help them to understand the semantics of this PV. The following pair of sentences, provided by Moon (2005: 1) serves as an example:

- (8) *Two planes were **shot down**.*
- (9) *Each proposal was **shot down**.*

The PV in the first sentence has a literal meaning and refers to a physical action whereas in the second sentence it is metaphorical and describes an action that shows some similarities to the first (Moon 2005: 1). That is, when someone shoots something down, they cause it to fall by hitting it with a shot; so the process is similar to the way in which a proposal, suggestion or theory is rejected for not being good enough.

Another suitable example is provided by Rundell (2005: 5), which considers the following pairs of sentences:

- (10) *The dog **dug up** an old bone. / We **dug up** some interesting facts.*
- (11) *Two planes were **shot down**. / Each proposal was **shot down**.*

In each pair, the first PV has a literal meaning referring to a physical action, whereas the second PV metaphorically describes an action that is similar to the first one. For instance, to ‘dig up’ means ‘to remove something from the ground’ (as a dog would do with a buried bone), so by ‘digging up’ information we mean to discover something.

The difficult part about conceptual metaphors for foreign learners is that they sometimes struggle to recognise the metaphor that is hidden behind the figurative meaning of the PV. For example, the idiomatic phrasal verb ‘breeze in’ means to enter a place confidently, which may remind us of the movement of a “breeze” (Kovács 2007: 146), although it would be a difficult image to recognize by NNS.

However, linguists like Rudzka-Ostyn (2003: 2) noticed that understanding the meaning of the verb is not always sufficient. In many cases, the major problem with PVs is to find out the meaning of the particles when they are used metaphorically, as shown in the following examples (Rudzka-Ostyn 2003: 5):

(13) *In the Middle Ages epidemics **wiped out** whole cities.* (destroyed completely)

(14) *As predicted John's initial enthusiasm **wore off** fast.* (diminished)

Similarly, Moon (2005) notes that not only are the verbs used in a metaphorical way, but also the particles. Although the metaphorical meanings of the particles are more difficult to recognise, there are clear connections between these metaphorical meanings and the literal extension of the particles. For example: the particle 'up' literally refers to a movement towards a higher position, so metaphorically it will be associated with increase in size, cost, etc.; on the other hand, the particle 'down' follows exactly the same pattern, since literally it describes a movement towards a lower position and metaphorically it refers to decrease in size, cost, etc.

4. The Study

4.1. Objectives and Research questions

In this paper, we try to compare the behaviour of L1-Spanish learners of English using PVs with NS. In this respect, the aim of the study will be to answer the following research questions:

1. Do the Spanish EFL learners use PVs as frequently as NS? That is, do NNS avoid using PVs as revealed by other researchers (Dagut and Laufer, 1985;

Hulstijn and Marchena, 1989; Laufer and Eliasson, 1993; Liao and Fukuja, 2004)?

2. Are there any differences between NS and NNS regarding the use of PVs in the oral and the written medium?
3. Do the Spanish speakers use PVs to express the same meanings as their native counterparts?

4.2. Methodology

The investigation presented in this study adopted a Corpus Linguistics methodology and a Contrastive Interlanguage Analysis methodology. The data for this corpus based analysis were taken from two comparable written corpora and two comparable oral corpora:

- A) Written corpora: (1) the NNS corpus employed was the Spanish component of the *International Corpus of Learner English* (ICLE) (Granger et al. 2009). The Spanish subcorpus (SPICLE) comprises 260 essays totalling 200,376 words written by Spanish university students. (2) The NS corpus used was the LOCNESS (the *Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays*) (Granger et al. 2009), which contains essays written by American and British university students. With the purpose of making it comparable to the Spanish subcorpus of the ICLE, the study was limited to a subsection of the LOCNESS, a sample of 267 essays (with a total of 227,968 words) omitting essays produced by A-level students.
- B) Oral corpora: (1) the NNS oral corpus is the *Louvain International Database of Spoken English Interlanguage* (LINDSEI) (Gilquin et al. 2010). The Spanish subsection is composed of 50 informal interviews done to intermediate learners of English (talking about multiple topics and picture descriptions) and a total of

84,749 words. (2) The NS oral corpus is the *Louvain Corpus of native English Conversation* (LOCNEC) (De Cock 2004), the comparable corpus to LINDSEI, which comprises 51 informal interviews and contains 162,000 words produced by native speakers.

	SPICLE	LINDSEI	LOCNESS	LOCNEC
Words	200,376	84,749	227,968	162,000
No. of essays/ interviews	251	50	322	51
L1	Spanish	Spanish	BrE/AmE	BrE/AmE
Medium	Written	Spoken	Written	Spoken

Table 3. Profiles of the four corpora used in the study

Given the time constraints, it was not possible to examine the frequency of all PVs in the corpora. Hence, the study is confined to the ten most frequent PVs in the BNC from the list of the 100 most frequent PVs from Gardner and Davies (2007: 358-359). Gardner and Davies (2007) carried out a fact-finding corpus-based study of PV's in the large corpus of the BNC. In order to shed some light on the disagreement about the phrasal verb combinations commonly accepted by scholars, they found that over half of the PV's detected in the mega corpus could be conceived by combining 20 lexical verbs with 8 particles (Gardner and Davies 2007: 339). Pedagogically speaking, this study was completed with the purpose of answering "the where-do-we-start question so often asked by English language learners, teachers, curriculum designers, and materials developers" (Gardner & Davies 2007: 353).

The research began by extracting all the examples of the PVs we were analyzing in the four corpora with the help of the software *AntConc 3.4.1*. (Anthony, 2014). In this study, PVs were defined as the combination of a lexical verb and an adverbial particle (continuous or discontinuous) (Chen 2013: 423). Unfortunately, among the results *AntConc* automatically provided, not only PVs could be detected but also verb + preposition constructions, since many particles can act as both adverbs and prepositions. For instance, *go on* is a PV in (15), whereas in (16) it is a verb+ preposition.

(15) (...) in athletics. The list could **go on** and examples of inequality could (...)
(LOCNESS: 438USARGmrq.txt)

(16) (...) is whenever the players **go on** strike. The main reason why they (...)
(LOCNESS: 553USARscu.txt)

In the next step, each PV was introduced into the browser changing the tense, person and number of the main verb in each inquiry (i.e. **go on**, **goes on**, **going on**, **gone on**, **went on**). After the results were automatically retrieved by the software, the verb + preposition occurrences were manually discarded. The third step was to look up all the results in the *Longman Phrasal Verbs Dictionary* (Pearson-Longman 2000) to examine all the different meanings of each PV.

As a final step the data extracted from the corpora was stored in a database created on EXCEL composed of the following variables:

1. the medium, to clarify whether the example belongs to the written or oral corpus
2. the instance in which the PV appears
3. the name of the file
4. the kind of speaker, which determines if it is a NNS or NS

5. the PV
6. the meaning

4.3. Results

4.3.1. Quantitative analysis

One of the main aims of the study was to clarify whether L1-Spanish university students made use of PVs as frequently as native English university students and whether the frequency of use was higher in written or in oral media. The fact that the four corpora were different in size forced us to normalize the frequency of PVs per ten thousand words, (cf. Table 3).

	NNS				NS			
	Written		Oral		Written		Oral	
	Raw freq.	Freq. Per 10,000 words	Raw freq.	Freq. Per 10,000 words	Raw freq.	Freq. Per 10,000 words	Raw freq.	Freq. Per 10,000 words
Total	138	6.80	74	8.69	205	8.85	261	16.07

Table 4: Frequency of PVs in NNS and NS in written and oral corpora

Table 4 clearly shows that NNS tend to underuse PVs compared with NS both in written and oral situations, which supports findings of earlier studies (Waibel, 2007; Gilquin, 2011; Alejo-González, 2012; Chen, 2013). The most evident contrast can be observed in spoken English, as NNS use slightly more than half the amount of PVs NS use. In written texts the difference is not so prominent, even though natives still use PVs more frequently than their Spanish counterparts.

Although the evidence shown in Table 4 is considerably accurate, a Chi-Square test was carried out to determine whether the differences observed between natives and non-natives in both types of texts were statistically significant. As expected, the Chi-Square revealed that the use of PVs by NS and NNS speakers is significantly affected by the type of medium (written/oral) ($\chi^2=25.9596$; $p<0.05$).

Furthermore, we also can observe, that both NNS and NS introduce them more often in spoken English than in written texts. This finding also backs up the theory that PVs tend to be associated to informal spoken English rather than formal writing (Biber et al. 1999: 408-409). To sum up, it is notorious that the highest frequency of use of PVs is found in native English speakers, using them most often in informal or colloquial conversations.

Table 5 shows the frequency of use of the ten most frequent PVs found in Gardner and Davies (2007) in the different corpora under study. As mentioned before, NNS tend to use PVs less regularly than NS in either written or spoken English. However, there are some cases like 'come back' in written texts, and 'go out' in both written and oral situations, in which NNS use them moderately more than NS. Yet, for some PVs like 'set up', 'pick up', 'point out' and 'make up' there are absolutely no examples in the Spanish oral corpus. The lack of use of these PVs by NNS may be due to the fact that the topics chosen for the interviews were not suitable to introduce these verbs. A further reason could be that, since these PVs are the least transparent in meaning (Laufer & Eliasson 1993), they are more complicated for English students to understand.

	NNS				NS			
	written (N= 260)		oral (N= 50)		written (N= 297)		oral (N= 51)	
	Raw freq.	Freq. Per 10.000 words	Raw freq.	Freq. Per 10.000 words	Raw freq.	Freq. Per 10.000 words	Raw freq.	Freq. Per 10.000 words
Go on	24	1.19	3	0.35	53	2.32	42	2.59
Carry out	25	1.24	0	0	36	1.57	0	0
Set up	6	0.29	0	0	12	0.43	6	0.37
Pick up	2	0.09	0	0	7	0.30	14	0.86
Go back	7	0.34	15	1.76	16	0.70	65	4.01
Come back	17	0.84	25	2.94	7	0.30	51	3.14
Go out	13	0.64	29	3.42	12	0.52	49	3.02
Point out	24	1.19	0	0	40	1.75	3	0.18
Find out	17	0.84	1	0.11	19	0.83	10	0.61
Come up	3	0.14	1	0.11	3	0.13	21	1.29

Table 5: Frequency of use of ten PVs in NNS and NS in written and oral corpora

In order to get a clearer perspective of what PVs are the most used by L1-Spanish students and NS, a rank frequency list in the written and oral corpora has been created (cf. Tables 6 and 7).

NNS		NS	
VERB	RANK	VERB	RANK
Carry out	1	Go on	1
Go on	2	Carry out	2
Point out	2	Point out	3
Come back	3	Find out	4
Find out	3	Go back	5
Go out	4	Set up	6
Go back	5	Go out	6
Set up	6	Pick up	7
Come up	7	Come back	7
Pick up	8	Come up	8

Table 6: Rank frequency of the PVs in the written corpora

Table 6 shows that most of PVs share the same (or almost the same) position in the ranking. The PVs ‘go on’ and ‘carry out’ are the most frequent ones used by both NNS and NS. However, there are some verbs that interestingly vary in the rank frequency. The most evident difference is the PV ‘come back’, which surprisingly is more often used by NNS than NS (3rd place vs. 7th place in the ranking). One of the reasons for this contrast may be this PV is a rather easy one for Spanish learners and thus they may overuse it instead of using the Latin-based equivalent ‘return’. A second reason (which is just a hypothesis) leads to think that it could be a case of hypercorrection. The same happens with ‘go out’, which also appears more frequently

in L2 learners' essays than in NS texts. On the contrary, the PV 'pick up' is employed more commonly by NS than NNS, probably because the various meanings of the verb (cf. Table 11) are not as transparent as the meanings of the PVs mentioned above.

NNS		NS	
VERB	RANK	VERB	RANK
Go out	1	Go back	1
Come back	2	Come back	2
Go back	3	Go out	3
Go on	4	Go on	4
Find out	5	Come up	5
Come up	5	Pick up	6
Set up	6	Find out	7
Pick up	6	Set up	8
Point out	6	Point out	9
Carry out	6	Carry out	10

Table 7: Rank frequency of the PVs in the oral corpora

The results presented in Table 7 show that most of the PVs share almost the same position in the ranking. Both NNS and NS use the PVs 'go out', 'come back' and 'go back' the most in spoken English, and utilize 'point out' and 'carry out' the least.

4.3.2. Qualitative analysis

In response to the third question posed at the end of section 2.1, we focused on the semantic compositionality of the PVs, to find out whether Spanish L2-English learners employed these PVs with the same meanings as NS.

In order to carry out this analysis, we selected only the first five PVs from Table 5, given that, unfortunately, time and space constraints prevented us from extending it to ten PVs (or more). As the following tables show, most PVs have multiple meanings but the frequency of use of these meanings differs for NNS and NS in written and oral texts.

4.3.2.1. Go on

The first PV we focused on was ‘go on’, which according to the *Longman Phrasal Verbs Dictionary* (2000), has 17 different meanings. However, the most important ones are the following:

1. to continue doing something without stopping or changing
2. if something is going on, it is happening, especially something strange, unusual, or confusing
3. to do or achieve something, after you have finished doing something else
4. used to encourage someone to do something
5. to spend money or time on something
6. if a light, machine, or piece of equipment goes on, it starts working

Even though there are a wide amount of meanings for this PV, our results extracted from the corpora only show the use of three of these meanings, although the

first two senses were the most common used by both kinds of speakers in both written and oral media (Table 8).

		To continue		To happen		To switch on		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Written	NNS	18	75	6	25	0	0	24	100
	NS	38	72	14	26	1	2	53	100
Oral	NNS	3	100	0	0	0	0	3	100
	NS	6	14	36	86	0	0	42	100
Total		65	53	56	46	1	1	122	100

Table 8: Senses of the PV ‘go on’ in written and oral corpora

We can observe that both NNS and NS use this verb most often in written medium with the sense ‘to continue’:

(17) We will **go on** sending parliamentaries to Strasburg (...)
(ICLESPA:SPM01010.txt)

(18) Clarence then **goes on** to tell his listener the story of his past life (...)
(LOCNESS: 344BRSUR1.txt)

Yet, in oral the oral corpus, the most common meaning for natives is ‘to happen’. Surprisingly, there were no results in the NNS oral corpus for this sense, which leads us to think that we may be facing a case of lack of semantic transparency. As Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1996) explained, PVs contain opaque (not evident) and transparent (deducible) meanings, and Dagut and Laufer (1985), Laufer and Eliasson (1993) and later Liao and Fukuya (2004) pointed out in their studies that L2 learners have more difficulties in using opaque PVs, since they cannot find any relation

between the verb and the particle. In this case, the sense ‘to continue’ is the transparent one, while ‘to happen’ is harder to deduce from the verb.

4.3.2.2. Carry out

The PV ‘carry out’ has only one meaning, as reported by the Longman Phrasal Verbs Dictionary (2000):

1. to do something that you have organized, planned, or promised; to do something that you have been told to do

As presented in the Table below, instances of this PV only appeared in the written corpora. Both NNS and NS use it quite abundantly, probably because it is a very common verb used in academic essays, and since it only has one meaning it is simple to remember and learn for English students.

(19) The negotiations were often **carried out** at a general, regional level which was (...) (LOCNESS: 352aBRSUR1.txt)

		Fulfill	Total
Written	NNS	25	25
	NS	36	36
Oral	NNS	0	0
	NS	0	0

Table 9: Senses of the PV ‘carry out’ in written and oral corpora

4.3.2.3. Set up

The Longman Phrasal Verbs Dictionary (2000) includes 6 different meanings for the PV ‘set up’:

1. to start a business or organization
2. to make the arrangements that are necessary for something to happen
3. to prepare equipment so that it is ready to be used
4. to put or build something somewhere
5. to deliberately make people think that someone has done something wrong or illegal when they have not
6. to provide someone with enough money to live well without having to work for the rest of their life

		Arrang e		Start business		Organiz e		Provide money		Build		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Written	NNS	1	17	4	66	0	0	0	0	1	17	6	100
	NS	3	25	4	33.3	4	33.3	1	8.3	0	0	12	100
Oral	NNS	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
	NS	0	0	1	16.6	2	33.3	1	16.6	2	33.3	6	100
Total		4	17	9	37.5	6	25	2	8	3	12.5	24	100

Table 10: Senses of the PV ‘set up’ in written and oral corpora

Unexpectedly, even though this PV is among the most frequently used, we did not find many instances of it in the corpora. As Table 10 shows, it is more commonly

used in written than in oral media, and both NNS and NS use it the most to express the meaning ‘to start a business’.

(20)(...) lots of unemployed people have used their imagination to **set up** new business
(...) (ICLESIPA: SPM07008.txt)

Nevertheless, it seems to be a slightly more obscure verb for NNS, since we found numerous instances in which the meaning was difficult to deduce or they were just wrong as in:

(21) These small things, these small dreams have to be a constant in our lives, we have to **set up** aims and goals that motivate us to obtain them;(...).
(ICLE:SPM03019)

In this example, the phrase ‘set goals’ never admits the particle ‘up’ between the two words, but this learner considers that the verb ‘set’ and the PV ‘set up’ share the same meaning.

Furthermore, in the NNS oral corpus there were no findings of ‘set up’, maybe because the topics of the interviews were not suitable to introduce this verb in their conversations.

4.3.2.4. Pick up

According to the Longman Phrasal Verbs Dictionary (2000), the PV ‘pick up’ has 22 meanings, although the most important ones are the listed below:

1. to lift something or someone up, especially with your hands
2. to stop your car so that someone can get in and travel with you
3. to get or buy something, especially something you find by chance

4. to learn how to do something by watching or listening to other people, or by trying to do it yourself

Similarly to the previous PV ‘set up’, we did not find many occurrences of ‘pick up’ in the different corpora (Table 11), probably because it was not easy to use this verb to write or talk about the requested topics.

		Lift something		Take (in vehicle)		Learn		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Written	NNS	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
	NS	4	67	2	33	0	0	6	100
Oral	NNS	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
	NS	1	8	3	25	8	67	12	100
Total		5	28	5	28	8	44	18	100

Table 11: Senses of the PV ‘pick up’ in written and oral corpora

While in written texts, it usually appeared with the meaning of ‘to lift something’, in spoken English it was used as a synonym of ‘learn’, as in this example:

(22) I mean <X> I **picked up** a bit of Swahili <X> always keen to teach you
 <\B> (LOCNEC: AE12)

Yet, it is highly remarkable that NNS used this PV neither in written essays nor in oral conversations, which makes us think that another reason why this verb was barely used by them was because of the many non-transparent meanings it presents. We also had the chance to note that sometimes it can be confusing for English learners to

differentiate between the PV and the main verb *pick*, when trying to use it with the sense of ‘to choose’. For example:

(23) (...) "money is the root of all evil' has become in human history much more than a saying **picked up** by chance from an old song (...) (ICLESPE:SPM01013.txt)

4.3.2.5. Go back

The Longman Phrasal Verbs Dictionary (2000) provides the following most common meanings for this PV:

1. To return to a place where you have been before, or to the place where you were until recently
2. If something goes back to a time in the past, it started to exist then
3. If schools or students go back, the schools open and the students start studying again after the holidays

		Return (activity)		Return (place)		Return (time)		Return		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Written	NNS	1	17	0	0	4	66	1	17	6	100
	NS	0	0	4	28.5	6	43	4	28.5	14	100
Oral	NNS	0	0	14	93	1	7	0	0	15	100
	NS	9	14	51	78	1	2	4	6	65	100
Total		10	10	69	69	12	12	9	9	100	100

Table 12: Senses of the PV go back in written and oral corpora

‘Go back’ is an example of a frequently used spoken English PV, especially by NS. Both English natives and learners usually make use of this verb in conversations, always applying to the meaning of ‘return’. However, we have made a distinction between the different connotations of this sense (Table 12).

‘Returning to or from a place’ is regarded as the first sense most commonly used by both kinds of speakers, while ‘returning to an activity’ appears as the second most used sense only by NS. Although this verb can be considered to be transparent in meaning, NNS still struggle to use it naturally, as we can see that there are few or any occurrences for some of the meanings of the PV.

5. Conclusions

In the present study an attempt has been made to give a comprehensive analysis of the acquisition of PVs by foreign learners of English. Providing a review of the literature concerning different definitions and classifications presented in various studies, the paper continues with an overview of PVs in PDE, observing differences in the use of these items in written and spoken English. The study then focused on SLA research of aspects such as the mistakes made by NNS using PVs, before focusing on several corpus-based studies on avoidance, overuse and underuse of English PVs and reviewing cognitive linguistics approaches.

Moreover, we carried out a corpus-based research including the ten most frequently used PVs in the BNC (Gardner and Davies, 2007) by Spanish and English students in written and oral media, with the purpose of answering the following research questions:

A) Do Spanish EFL learners use PVs as frequently as NS?

The analysis of the overall frequencies in the different learner corpora reveals that, in general, and as expected, NNS tend to underuse PVs compared to NS. This finding coincides with the findings of previous studies, such as Waibel (2007), Alejo-González, 2010 or Gilquin (2011). One of the main reasons they give, and which this study agrees with, is that the absence of this structural feature in the L1 makes learners opt for safer choices and use more familiar alternatives. Yet, not only has the L1-L2 difference been a reason for avoidance, but the results also show that figurative or opaque PVs are the most avoided ones by learners, because of the semantic complications they present to them, as described in Dagut and Laufer (1985), Hulstijn and Marchena (1989) and Sjöholm (1995).

B) Are there differences between NS and NNS regarding the use of PVs in the oral and the written medium?

With regard to the medium in which PVs are used, the results show that NNS use PVs less frequently than their native counterpart in both written and oral media. This was a predictable outcome for Romance language speakers, like Spanish students, since Waibel (2007), Gilquin (2011) and Chen (2013) had also obtained the same result in their investigations. However, the findings reveal that L1-Spanish learners of English use PVs significantly less often specially in spoken situations.

Yet, comparing the data retrieved in the written and oral media, both speakers use PVs more commonly in spoken English. As a result, this may support the general belief that PVs are associated to informal or colloquial registers, as affirmed by Biber et al. (1999: 408-409).

C) Do the Spanish speakers use PVs to express the same meanings as their native counterparts?

In general, we found that both NNS and NS used the PVs with the same meanings. However, one of the possible reasons why there are differences in the number of instances for each meaning is the semantic transparency of the PVs. As mentioned before, English learners avoided PVs whose meanings were more opaque, while PVs with transparent meanings were easier to recognize for them. Dagut & Laufer (1985), Hulstijn & Marchena (1989) and Sjöholm (1995) reported the same results from their studies with Hebrew, Dutch, Finnish and Swedish students. Nevertheless, Hulstijn & Marchena (1989) found that Dutch students, although they have PVs in their mother tongue, did not avoid idiomatic PVs because of the semantic complexity, but because of the similarity to the Dutch ones.

6. Suggestions for further research

This paper is just a first step in the analysis of PVs acquisition by Spanish students, and due to time and space constraints, it was not possible to extend it. It would be necessary to increase the number of verbs analyzed, not only in the quantitative but also in the qualitative analysis.

Furthermore, it would be interesting to expand this investigation to deeper analysis of avoidance and the apparent reasons for this issue. Other important tasks would be to analyze the reasons for possible underuse and overuse, to review the likely errors or mistakes made by L2 learners and the one-word verb equivalents they choose instead of (opaque) PVs. These would be the next steps to accomplish a more exhaustive study of this complex issue of the English language.

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