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## **Desautomatization of Spanish verbal idioms: an application to language teaching**

**Abstract.** Due to their acknowledged relative fixedness, phraseological units are likely to be subject to both institutionalized variations stored in dictionaries and creative modifications in discourse. Focusing on the second type of variation, this paper first analyses the manipulation of Spanish idioms by means of morphosyntactic procedures that lead to the desautomatization of their form (Corpas Pastor & Mena Martínez 2003; Penadés Martínez 2014). Secondly, it suggests key guidelines for teaching idiom desautomatization as part of the grammar contents included in the foreign language curriculum. The ultimate goal is to provide learners with the necessary tools to interpret idiom modifications in discourse correctly and improve their communication skills by increasing their proficiency in Spanish language.

**Key words:** *idioms, idiom variation, desautomatization, Spanish as a foreign language*

### **1. Introduction**

In phraseological research, *reproducibility*, also termed *institutionalization* or *conventionalization* (Corpas Pastor 1996: 21), is the property by which phraseological units behave as prefabricated chunks in discourse. Thus, they are not generally produced, but reproduced (Zuluaga 2001: 71). This property is related to that of fixedness, as the repetition of a given form leads to its fixedness in the mental lexicon, which sometimes also involves a semantic change. However, fixedness in phraseological units is understood as a gradual property, as there is evidence that they may undergo variations (Langlotz 2006; Moon 1998).

Some Spanish authors suggest the existence of a continuum with different points of fixedness ranging from the most fixed units, at one end,

to the most variable ones at the other (Martí Sánchez 2005: 69–70; Mellado Blanco 2013: 317). Contrary to what one may think, it is claimed that these two phenomena, fixedness and variation, do not conflict, but rather, always go together (Montoro del Arco 2005: 127). What is more, as stated by Corpas Pastor (1996), the phenomenon of variation is possible, precisely, because of fixedness and reproducibility:

La modificación en contexto de las UFS, además de constituir un uso característico de las mismas, no está reñida con la estabilidad (semántica y formal) de la que gozan estas unidades, es más, precisamente depende de ésta y del conocimiento previo de las unidades originales que les sirven de base. (Corpas Pastor 1996: 233)

Literature proves that the variation of idioms is addressed in most handbooks of phraseology and has been investigated from several approaches<sup>1</sup>. As a result, different proposals describing the alternative types of idiom variation are found in literature. From all of them, for the purpose of our study, we are especially interested in that of Burger (1998), which is set out in Corpas Pastor & Mena Martínez (2003: 185–193). First, two types of idiom variation are distinguished: on the one hand, the so-called *variants* cover institutionalized and systematic variation that can be recorded lexicographically in dictionaries, and, on the other, *modifications* involve occasional variation related to the use of idioms in discourse.

Second, variants may be lexical (e.g. *acudir/entrar al trapo*) (lit. to come/get into the cloth), structural (e.g. *irse a/de picos pardos*) (lit. to go out on grey-brown corners), or perspective-based (e.g. [alguien] *poner de los nervios* [a alguien]/[alguien] *ponerse de los nervios*) (lit. to put someone on the nerves/to put oneself on the nerves). Furthermore, modifications may affect the canonical surface structure, both when there is a change in the form of the idiom with no shift in meaning, and when there is a modification both in its form and meaning. Alternatively, they may impact the internal semantic structure, when idioms modify their meaning with no alteration of the base form. This paper focuses mainly on the first type, i.e. modifications which involve only a change in the canonical form of the idiom.

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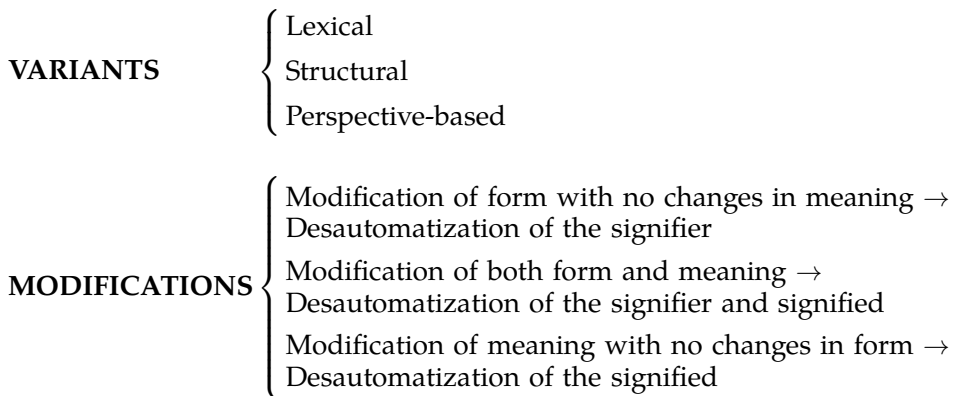
<sup>1</sup> Significant contributions are found in the phraseological research carried out in the European tradition (Burger 1998; Moon 1998; Zuluaga 1980), and in American linguistics, the latter being strongly influenced by Chomsky's generativism (Chafe 1968; Fraser 1970). Moreover, interesting proposals for idiom variation also come from the field of cognitive linguistics and psycholinguistics, based on various assumptions about the processing and interpretation of idioms (Cacciari & Glucksberg 1991; Langlotz 2006; Nunberg et al. 1994; Omazić 2008). References to the aforementioned works are made simply to mention a few examples.

## 2. The phenomenon of desautomatization

Related to the property of variation, the phenomenon of desautomatization, taken from Russian formalism, refers to the breaking up of the structural fixedness of phraseologisms<sup>2</sup>. This means that, in the case of idioms, some of them may undergo syntactic transformations, just as free strings of words do. This reveals, therefore, the existence of some sort of syntactic relationship between the constituents of the idioms, and goes against the classical view of idioms as frozen units that function as long words.

According to Penadés Martínez (2014: 287–297), idioms can be desautomatized in three different ways, which, in our view, can be studied by direct analogy with the three types of idiom modification mentioned above. Following Saussure's distinction between signifier and signified, idioms can undergo desautomatization of the signifier; desautomatization of both the signifier and the signified; and desautomatization of the signified (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Classification of idiom variation in correlation with desautomatization



Source: own research based on Corpas Pastor & Mena Martínez (2003) and Penadés Martínez (2014).

As previously stated, this paper focuses on cases where only the form of an idiom is modified, so that its meaning is not directly addressed and does not change. However, it should be borne in mind that some of the grammatical processes involved in desautomatization may lead to changes in

<sup>2</sup> Montoro del Arco (2005: 146) gives a brief outline of differences in the terminology used to cover this linguistic phenomenon. Some popular terms are *deslexicalization*, *modification*, *manipulation* or *break* (from the Spanish *ruptura*).

the discursive meaning (e.g. topicalization) or in the meaning of the sentence (e.g. passivization), as in the following example:

- (1) *Sea honesto consigo mismo, si ella tiene otro hombre, ella debe decírselo y usted debe proceder a dejarla, recuerde que el orgullo debe ser echado a un lado cuando se presenta, pero es que esto no es cuestión de orgullo, es asunto de dignidad.* (Kociancich 1982)

The Spanish idiom  *echar a un lado* (lit. to put aside) (*'no prestar atención o consideración a una cosa'*<sup>3</sup>) is desautomatized in (1) by taking the passive voice as in *ser echado a un lado*. While the meaning of the idiom remains the same, the active/passive distinction enables the speaker to construe the same situation from two different perspectives, resulting in a modification in the meaning of the sentence. Besides, prominence is given to the noun phrase *el orgullo* by shifting the direct object in the active sentence ( *echar a un lado el orgullo*) to the subject position or sentence topic. In addition to passivization, idioms can also be desautomatized due to other morphosyntactic transformations such as pronominalization, topicalization, relativization, and anaphoric ellipsis<sup>4</sup>. Each of these will be discussed in detail in § 4.1.1. to § 4.1.5.

### 3. Reasons to include idiom variation and desautomatization in the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language

The body of research on how variation and desautomatization are addressed from an applied perspective to second language acquisition is far less extensive than its theoretical approach. While it may be partially understandable, this situation has left a gap in the research on proposals for teaching idiom variation and desautomatization in foreign language teaching, and

<sup>3</sup> All idioms in examples (1)–(6) are obtained from the *Diccionario de locuciones verbales para la enseñanza del español* (Penadés Martínez 2002), a pedagogically-oriented dictionary including verbal idioms which are appropriate for teaching Spanish as a foreign language. Idiom definitions are taken from Penadés Martínez's *Diccionario de locuciones idiomáticas del español actual* (2019).

<sup>4</sup> These types of modifications may receive different names depending on the author, and can be expanded by adding other processes involved in changing the lexical organization and the morphosyntactic structure of an idiom (see Corpas Pastor 1996: 240–256; Jaki 2014: 19–31; Langlotz 2006: 226–229; Naciscione 2010: 73; Penadés Martínez 2014: 283–284). Some of the transformations investigated in these works, which are likely to affect the meaning of an idiom, are not addressed in this paper.

more particularly, in the field of Spanish as a foreign language. Nevertheless, there are enough reasons to support the inclusion of these phenomena in the foreign language curriculum<sup>5</sup>. First and foremost, it is known that idioms constantly need to be integrated in context and actualized in discourse according to the syntactic rules of each language, for which the previous grammatical transformations (i.e. passivization, pronominalization, topicalization, relativization, and anaphoric ellipsis) and other processes are required. As the base form is modified, students may be prevented from recognizing the idiom and interpreting it correctly, which seems to justify the affirmation that language learners need to become familiar with the specific modifications that idioms may undergo.

A second reason is that teaching idiom modifications and desautomatization would reconcile phraseological units with freely-formed grammatical constructions in discourse, providing evidence that systematicity may also be found in phraseology. In fact, example (1) proves that some idioms may be subject to basically the same grammatical processes as free word combinations. This approach to phraseology, being in accordance with proposals within the cognitive-linguistic framework (Langacker 1987: 25; Langlotz 2006: 93–98), can bring benefits to learners of Spanish, who are likely to find multiwords units like idioms more accessible, due to their systematic patterns of syntactical behaviour.

The third and final reason is that teaching idiom desautomatization aims at helping learners to foster their knowledge of Spanish grammar and develop their linguistic competence. By doing this, learners are expected to improve their language proficiency, which ultimately provides them with skills to communicate effectively. This is an attempt to engage with the notions of ‘metaphorical competence’ (Acquaroni Muñoz 2008; Danesi 2016; Littlemore & Low 2006) and ‘idiomatic competence’ (Liontas 2017), and their potential association with linguistic and communicative competences in second language acquisition (Danesi 2016: 150; Liontas 2017: 8). Learners’ metaphorical and idiomatic competences would be enhanced by teaching them how figurative language and phraseology are manifested in real discourse, where desautomatization of idioms takes place.

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<sup>5</sup> General reasons for teaching idioms in second language courses are found in Liontas (2017). For teaching Spanish idioms in particular, see Penadés Martínez (2017) and Solano Rodríguez (2007).

#### 4. Pedagogical guidelines on the teaching of desautomatization of Spanish idioms

In an effort to make a real impact on the practice of teaching desautomatization of Spanish idioms, this paper provides a set of specific guidelines, where three main ideas are suggested:

- integrating the teaching of idiom desautomatization into the Spanish course contents, basically in grammar and pragmatic contents,
- starting at advanced levels of language instruction<sup>6</sup>,
- and making use of authentic materials.

##### 4.1. Integration into the Spanish language programme

In accordance with the first guideline, it is recommended that the teaching of desautomatization of idioms be integrated across the entire Spanish language curriculum, which we assume to be designed following the *Common European Framework for Reference of Languages* (Council of Europe 2001) and the Instituto Cervantes' *Plan Curricular* (2006). The main point here is to take the specific grammar contents that are considered appropriate for teaching in Spanish courses, in order to link them with the kind of grammatical transformations that idioms undergo when being desautomatized. This means that the grammar contents to be taught are not only applied to simple lexical units and freely-formed grammatical constructions, but also to multiword units like idioms. Consequently, this ensures the provision of a systematic treatment and proper methodological organization when teaching idioms.

Therefore, we offer (below) a general overview of the types of grammatical transformations that idioms can experience at clause level, leading to the desautomatization of their form. Every grammatical process is first exemplified by an excerpt containing a desautomatized idiom, and subsequently linked to a specific grammar or pragmatic content covered by the *Plan Curricular* (Instituto Cervantes 2006)<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Note here that this assumption is unrelated to the fact that the teaching of some idioms may be appropriate for lower-intermediate levels of instruction. There is no agreement among experts on the starting point for teaching idioms: some authors (Gómez Molina 2000: 121; Leal Riol 2011: 44–58) contend that the teaching of idioms should start at basic levels, and then sequence their learning according to features like morphological complexity and semantic transparency. On the contrary, there are some others (Ettinger 2008: 102; Penadés Martínez 2004: 53; Ruiz Gurillo 2000: 263) that place the starting point at more advanced stages of learning, although some routine formulae and a few idioms can indeed be taught earlier.

<sup>7</sup> The *Plan Curricular* addresses grammar contents in chapter 2. *Gramática*, while pragmatic contents are discussed in chapter 6. *Tácticas y estrategias pragmáticas*.

#### 4.1.1. Pronominalization

- (2) *Todos los proyectos que se hicieron en torno al ferrocarril en la última campaña continúan immaculados. ¿Será tan difícil ofrecer ponderables sin que parezca política barata?, ¿tenemos acaso cara de pedir la luna a quienes no la tienen?* (El norte de Castilla 1999)

In example (2) the Spanish idiom *pedir la luna* (lit. to ask for the moon) (*'pedir una cosa imposible'*) has the noun phrase *la luna* substituted by the pronoun *la* in *la tienen*. Besides, the verb *pedir* (to ask for) keeps its original meaning, which requires the presence of the verb *tener* (to have), in the construction to ask [somebody] for [something] that he has. From the perspective of teaching practice, the process of pronominalization in desautomatization of idioms can be linked to the teaching of the grammar content: 3<sup>rd</sup> person direct object pronouns with grammatical gender and number inflection *lo, la, los, las*, established by the *Plan Curricular* at level A2 (section 7.1.2.).

#### 4.1.2. Passivization

- (3) *En ese cuadro, la tercera figura a la derecha del general es un joven alto, pelirrojo, delgado, muy pálido, que con la mirada baja se concentra y procura reunir entereza y superar su estupor ante el hecho inminente de ser pasado por las armas sin juicio previo, defensa legal ni sentencia firme.* (Cascales 1984)

Example (3) shows that the idiom *pasar por las armas* (lit. to pass through the weapons) (*'fusilar a una persona'*) takes the passive voice as *ser pasado por las armas*, whereby no prominence is given to the agent. On the contrary, the perspective of the sentence is changed by focusing attention on the receiver of the action. The teaching of this process can be integrated into the study of the grammar content: the passive voice in action verbs and past participle uses, appropriate for level B2 according to the *Plan Curricular* (section 9.4.3.).

#### 4.1.3. Topicalization

- (4) *No veas cómo me duele la pierna. – ¿La pierna? –le digo–. Saltos tentás que estar dando de alegría.* (Amilibia 1982)

Here the usual order of the sentence *tenías que estar dando saltos de alegría*, containing the idiom *dar saltos de alegría* (lit. to jump for joy) (*'sentir o manifestar una gran alegría'*), is modified by fronting the noun *saltos*, thus breaking

up the unity or integrity of the idiom. The process of topicalization in example (4) is used to put emphasis on the speaker's view that the other person has enough reasons to feel very happy. In terms of teaching practice, topicalization is included in the *Plan Curricular* at level C1 as a pragmatic strategy consisting of fronting the direct object in a sentence (section 1.4.2.), which can be used as the basis for teaching desautomatization of an idiom by fronting one of its component elements.

#### 4.1.4. Relativization

- (5) *Cardín había estudiado con los jesuitas y para jesuita. Quizá siempre lo fue. Pero, entre las órdenes menores y mayores, llegó a la conclusión de que sus heterodoxas inclinaciones sexuales, su vocación y su terrible carácter tenían difícil acomodación, así que ahorcó los hábitos que ya iba a tomar y se fue a terminar Filosofía con Gustavo Bueno, en Oviedo.* (Jiménez Losantos 1995)

The idiom *ahorcar los hábitos* (lit. to hang one's habits) ('*abandonar la vida eclesiástica*') is desautomatized in (5) by a postmodifying relative clause. Accordingly, the noun phrase *los hábitos* performs as the antecedent of the relative clause introduced by the pronoun *que*, which functions as the direct object of the verbal periphrasis *iba a tomar*. The teaching of relativization applied to idiom desautomatization can be linked to the grammar content covered by the *Plan Curricular* at level B1 focusing on the relative pronoun *que* used in defining relative clauses (sections 7.2. & 15.2.).

#### 4.1.5. Anaphoric ellipsis

- (6) *Paco Umbral no era un tipo fácil y, desde luego, ni era un cualquiera ni era vulgar. Te entraba por el ojo derecho o no te entraba. Pero, te gustase o no, representó, durante bastante tiempo, la conciencia intelectual en un mundo yermo de intelectuales.* (Jauregui 2007)

The constituent elements *por el ojo derecho* in (6) are omitted when the idiom *entrar por el ojo derecho* (lit. to get into the right eye) ('*gustar a una persona*') is repeated. Instead, the entire idiomatic structure should be *Te entraba por el ojo derecho o no te entraba por el ojo derecho*. Anaphoric ellipsis is included in the *Plan Curricular* as a pragmatic content, suggesting the teaching of grammar tools, such as anaphoric reference and ellipsis, in the construction and interpretation of discourse. This is appropriate for levels A1, A2, B2 and C1, depending on the difficulty level of the grammatical structures involved (section 1.1.1.).



## 4.2. Advanced levels of language instruction

As a second guideline, with regard to the starting point for teaching desautomatization of idioms, at least three reasons can be identified to support its inclusion, especially at advanced levels. Firstly, the syntactic transformations involved in desautomatization address grammar contents appropriate for teaching at levels A, B and C. When grammatical alterations are applied to complex units like idioms, understanding the idioms' inner complexity of form and meaning may turn out to be even more difficult. Therefore, it would seem reasonable to exclude idiom desautomatization from teaching at the initial stage of learning when the learners' proficiency level is too low.

Secondly, learners need to have previously learnt the canonical form of the idioms which are then targeted as desautomatized units at advanced levels. This implies that, at the preliminary stage, learners should have acquired a good level of knowledge of the features of idioms in terms of form, meaning, semantic relationships, language register and culture-based information. Only after that would they probably be ready to move forward and learn how idioms are desautomatized by means of a wide range of syntactical operations. Morphosyntactical operations involving nominal, adjectival and verbal inflection can, nevertheless, be included at the initial stage, as these only entail some minor changes in the idiom's structure which are unlikely to prevent learners from recognizing and understanding the idiom.

Thirdly, as far as reading comprehension is concerned, learners need a good command of the Spanish language to be able to understand texts containing desautomatized units, as these often reflect real-life Spanish language use. Moreover, some authentic texts are "too culturally biased" (Berardo 2006: 65), requiring a good knowledge of the target culture which is often acquired some time after starting to learn a language.

## 4.3. Authentic materials

Related to the third reason given above, using authentic materials in the teaching of desautomatization of Spanish idioms may prove positive. In fact, examples (1)–(6) are taken from a corpus of real texts, compiled specifically for lexicographic purposes, which I have been allowed to use for this paper. Texts from different fields of knowledge can be used, especially from literature, journalism and advertising, as experts agree that manipulation and desautomatization of idioms are particularly frequent in these genres (Corpas Pastor 1996: 233–234; Copras Pastor & Mena Martínez 2003: 184; Parizosca & Rajh 2017: 50). It should be stressed, though, that grammatical

adjustments might not be considered to be truly creative and may therefore be less common in advertisements and newspaper headlines (Jaki 2014: 22).

As always when teaching languages, but most importantly in the case of teaching desautomatization of idioms, context is crucial. As examples (1)–(6) show, presenting idioms in context is absolutely necessary for learners to identify the desautomatized units and offer a correct interpretation. Furthermore, using teaching materials based on authentic examples is believed to increase learners' motivation for learning a language, as they are dealing with instances of real language (Berardo 2006: 64; Parizosca & Rajh 2017: 63). However, it is necessary to ensure that texts are appropriate for learners' reading levels in order to avoid the opposite effect, of de-motivation (Berardo 2006: 65), and to be successful in the teaching process.

## 5. Pedagogical implications and conclusions

From the general guidelines outlined in § 4., some pedagogical implications can be highlighted in terms of specific activities for learning desautomatization of Spanish idioms in the classroom. Based on the proposal by Martí Sánchez (2014: 106–109), a set of exercises targeting both the identification and the production of idiom desautomatization are suggested below. These involve the following tasks: 1) to identify the canonical form of idioms which appear in different sentences with changes in their base form; 2) to recognize the particular grammatical transformations involved in the process of desautomatization, i.e. passivization, pronominalization, topicalization, relativization, and anaphoric ellipsis; 3) to undertake some grammar practice to make sure that learners master these contents, using different types of exercises, such as gap-filling, error correction, multiple-choice, etc.; and 4) to raise awareness of possible shifts in discursive meaning and connotations. These activities may be followed by an additional activity 5), whereby learners are asked to desautomatize an idiom in context, and a general reflection on how desautomatization influences both the syntactic stability and semantic unity of idioms (activity 6).

In connection with the last task, it has already been mentioned that theoretical studies on idiom variation, mainly inspired by a cognitive approach to phraseology, prove that most idioms do not function as long words that are syntactically frozen. On the contrary, their constituents can behave independently to some extent, following standard syntactic rules, and consequently, breaking up their structural fixedness. What is more, proposals have been made to explain the syntactic flexibility of idioms in semantic terms,

by relating their degree of syntactic versatility with their semantic features, mainly their semantic compositionality<sup>8</sup> (Cacciari & Glucksberg 1991; Nunberg et al. 1994):

The hypothesis examined in several recent studies was that people's intuitions about the syntactic versatility of idioms are affected by the analyzability or decomposability of these figurative phrases (Gibbs & Nayak, 1989). Results from a variety of experiments demonstrated that normally decomposable idioms (e.g., *pop the question*) were found to be much more syntactically productive than semantically nondecomposable idioms (e.g., *chew the fat*). Abnormally decomposable idioms were not found to be syntactically productive because each part does not by itself refer to some component of the idiomatic referent, but only to some metaphorical relation between the individual part and the referent. (Gibbs 2014 [1993]: 63)

In sum, despite differences between research approaches to idiom variation and desautomatization, we propose that results from theoretical and descriptive studies should expand their scope towards their pedagogical implications when teaching languages. It would be beneficial that teachers were aware of the pervasiveness of phraseology in language and were provided with more concrete proposals to be implemented in the classroom as teaching materials for learning idiom desautomatization. For this purpose, the teaching guidelines and pedagogical implications outlined in this paper may be used as a starting point to be elaborated on them in future research. After all, most learners wish to learn real life uses of the target language to ultimately achieve near nativelike proficiency, and idiom modification has been proved to have a fundamental role in this respect.

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<sup>8</sup> As Langlotz (2006: 30–36) reports, this view has been harshly criticized within the generative grammar framework. Yet some objections may also be found in research studies inspired by cognitive linguistics (Dobrovolskij 2007: 809–812, Langlotz 2006: 176–179) and other research paradigms (Bargmann & Sailer 2018: 1–29).

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## **Desautomatización de locuciones verbales del español: aplicación a la enseñanza**

### **Resumen**

El carácter gradual de la fijación formal de las unidades fraseológicas conlleva implícitamente la identificación de otro de sus rasgos definitorios: la variación. La capacidad de los fraseologismos para alterar su configuración formal se manifiesta,

bien a través de variantes institucionalizadas registradas en los diccionarios, bien mediante modificaciones derivadas de su uso en el discurso que, como consecuencia, pueden llevar a la desautomatización de la unidad. Este capítulo, que toma como objeto de estudio las locuciones verbales del español, aborda el proceso de desautomatización de la forma fraseológica, desde una doble perspectiva.

Por una parte, desde un punto de vista teórico-descriptivo, se exponen y ejemplifican los principales procedimientos sintácticos implicados en la desautomatización fraseológica, entre ellos, la pronominalización, la pasivización, la topicalización, la relativización y la elipsis anafórica. Por otra parte, desde una dimensión aplicada, se ofrecen una serie de pautas didácticas que orientan la enseñanza de la desautomatización de las locuciones en el aula de español como lengua extranjera. Estas directrices, que van acompañadas de indicaciones sobre actividades didácticas concretas para realizar en clase, se fundamentan en tres recomendaciones metodológicas: enseñar la desautomatización de manera integrada con los contenidos gramaticales y pragmáticos del currículo; reservar su enseñanza para niveles avanzados; y utilizar materiales auténticos adecuados al nivel de comprensión lectora de los aprendientes. Con esta propuesta se intenta arrojar luz a un campo de la investigación fraseológica, como es la desautomatización de las locuciones, que apenas ha sido explorado en sus aplicaciones a la enseñanza del español como lengua extranjera.