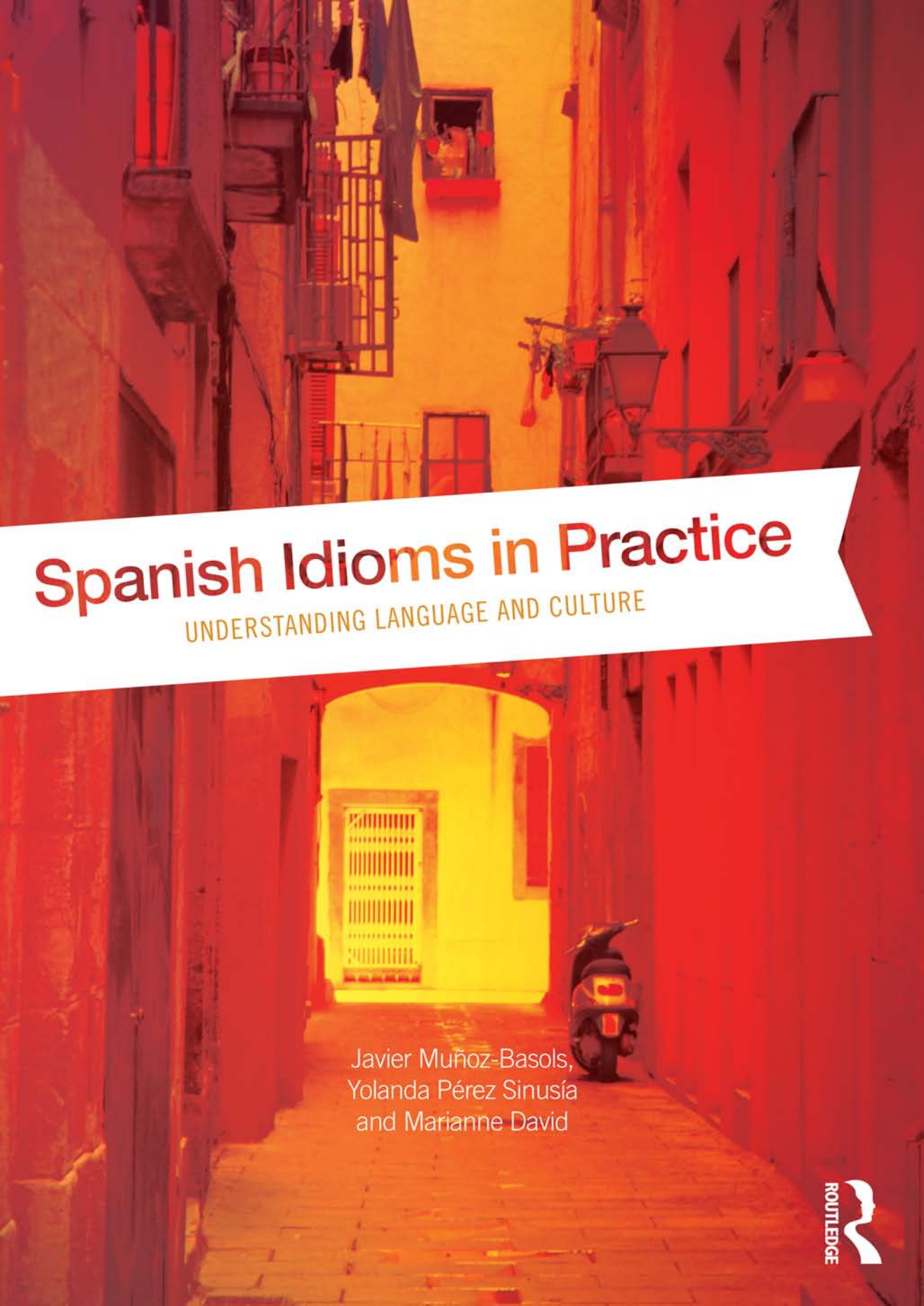




Spanish Idioms in Practice

UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Javier Muñoz-Basols,
Yolanda Pérez Sinusía
and Marianne David

Spanish Idioms in Practice

Idiomatic expressions are the “salt and pepper” of any language. They give Spanish its color and imagery, its richness and variety.

From set phrases and idioms to metaphorical expressions and proverbs, these essential components enable users to add humor and spice to their language, vividly embodying Hispanic culture while naturalizing their communication style to more closely resemble that of native speakers.

Key features:

- Includes a selection of the most widely used idioms from Spain and Latin America;
- Idioms are classified into specific and easy-to-reference categories;
- Creative activities, exercises, mnemonic devices, and learning strategies facilitate the acquisition and mastery of idiomatic language;
- Connections between the Spanish language and Hispanic culture are explained and illustrated;
- Reference tables at the end of each section highlight similarities between English and Spanish usage of idiomatic language;
- Original samples, including fragments from various Spanish-speaking countries and well-known literary works, are included to expose students to the use of idioms in journalistic and literary writing.

Practical, informative, and highly entertaining, this is the ideal text for all intermediate and advanced learners of Spanish.

Javier Muñoz-Basols is Senior Instructor in Spanish at the University of Oxford.

Yolanda Pérez Sinusía teaches at the Official School of Languages and at the Universidad Carlos III in Madrid.

Marianne David is Adjunct Professor of Spanish at Pace University in New York.

Praise for this edition

“Engaging from its very first page, this outstanding book allows students to master the intricacies of Spanish idiomatic language. The authors have created a unique resource that will help students learn hundreds of idiomatic expressions and, most importantly, practice and understand them in context. Carefully crafted learning activities, and varied samples of literary and journalistic texts from different Spanish-speaking countries, illustrate the meticulous research into the use of idiomatic expressions conducted by the authors prior to writing the book. Professors and teachers of Spanish will be delighted to include this exceptional resource in their course syllabi as a means of teaching students to use the Spanish language with the same vividness as native speakers do. I would also recommend this book to native and bilingual Spanish speakers who are interested in expanding their familiarity with idiomatic language and learning about its origins.”

Professor Domnita Dumitrescu, *California State University, Los Angeles, USA*

“I found this to be an excellent guide to Spanish idioms, their meanings and their uses. A combination of good, clear explanations (for example the origins of some idiomatic expressions), impressive illustrations and thoughtful exercises should enable students to remember and use the host of everyday idioms featured. This most difficult of areas for the non-native speaker is cleverly and memorably broken down so that students of Spanish will feel able to make use of a rich array of expressions which may previously have been only passively registered.”

Dr Jonathan Thacker, *Merton College, University of Oxford, UK*

“This book provides students and teachers with an excellent, up-to-date guide to Spanish idiomatic language. Carefully documented and drawing on diverse sources, it offers a rich selection of the most widely-used idioms in both Spain and Latin America. Students will find a large number of idiomatic expressions usefully classified into semantic fields (food, the human body, clothes, nationalities, historical and cultural references, etc.), as well as a wealth of linguistic and cultural information. The inclusion of an answer key to all the exercises and activities makes the book suitable for independent study. Thanks to activities with a strong visual component, useful chapter summaries, engaging self-assessment activities and opportunities for writing practice, students will learn to speak and write Spanish with vividness and clarity. *Spanish Idioms in Practice* is an essential resource for achieving genuine fluency in the language.”

Professor Leonor Ruiz Gurillo, *University of Alicante, Spain*

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Understanding language and culture

**Javier Muñoz-Basols,
Yolanda Pérez Sinusía
and Marianne David**

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Dedication

**A mi hermana Marta, por transmitirme su creatividad lingüística
y sentido del humor.**
Javier Muñoz-Basols

**A mi familia más cercana y a mis amigos, que forman parte de
ella. A ti.**
Yolanda Pérez Sinusía

A la familia Ortiz de Toronto por todo su apoyo.
Marianne David

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Introduction

Spanish Idioms in Practice offers the student a unique selection of the most popular and widely used idiomatic expressions in both Spain and Latin America. Encapsulating the distinctiveness and authenticity of Hispanic culture, these linguistic building blocks are a “must” for the student of Spanish who wishes to speak and write with vividness and clarity, as well as humor and pizzazz.

Idioms give the Spanish language its fullness and depth by manifesting the artistic imagination and expressive capacity of what Miguel de Unamuno called the *intrahistoria*, or inner history, of the Spanish people and the numerous cultures of the Hispanic world. Often traceable to specific regions, periods, and events, idiomatic expressions represent an important cultural dimension of language. Indeed, no other aspect of the Spanish language can embody Hispanic culture as effectively. No other linguistic component can transmit history and local character, mores and mindsets with so much distinctiveness and resonance.

Integral to the Spanish language, idioms thus constitute a rich source of linguistic and cultural information shared today by over 21 Spanish-speaking nations around the world. Rarely taught in a focused way in Spanish classes, idiomatic expressions are important linguistic features which make frequent appearances in journalistic texts, literature, film, and everyday speech.

The repertoire of idiomatic language in this book is both ample and varied. Idioms are classified into semantic fields to facilitate learning, and each is clearly illustrated with a wealth of examples. Similarities between English and Spanish expressions are highlighted, and both literal and equivalent translations are given where possible, along with a wide range of exercises and activities designed to guide the student in using idiomatic Spanish. By completing these practical exercises, learners make new connections and associations that enhance their understanding of Hispanic culture, as well as their proficiency in the Spanish language.

Approach

The purpose of this book is to enable students to use the Spanish language in the spontaneously colorful and lively way that its native speakers do. While it is not our intention to include all the idiomatic expressions that exist in Spanish—an impossible task—we offer an important selection of the most widely used idioms in the Spanish-speaking world, giving information about regional differences in usage, where appropriate, and providing significant cultural information.

To confirm the accuracy and representative nature of the information we provide in this book, we have surveyed native speakers of Spanish from Argentina, Cuba, Mexico, Peru, Puerto Rico, and Spain. Given the impossibility of including the varieties of idiomatic language used in all 21 Spanish-speaking countries, we have had to set limits. It became clear to us, while conducting our research, that the use of idiomatic expressions varies not only from country to country, but also from region to region within the same country, and even from family to family, and is often a matter of personal preference.

Some of the complexity involved in the writing of this book can be illustrated by the Varilex project (*Variación léxica del español en el mundo*), coordinated in Japan, which has studied Spanish lexical variation in many countries and linguistic settings (including the Spanish-speaking population living in the United States). This study found, for example, 31 different ways of saying *equivocarse*, one of the most popular idiomatic ones being *no dar pie con bola*, while the others included *meter la pata*, *levantarse con el pie izquierdo*, *no pegar una*, and *no levantar cabeza*. Our conclusion is that idiomatic language usage appears to be inextricably related to personal preference. In addition, with mass media informing and shaping language, our global culture is continuously exposed to many varieties of idioms from different countries, with the result that new expressions are being created and disseminated at a rapid rate and in ever greater abundance.

To make our corpus of expressions representative of this global trend, we have used excerpts from newspapers, magazines, and literature from different Spanish-speaking countries that contain idiomatic expressions identified and legitimized by the Real Academia Española's CREA (*Corpus de Referencia del Español Actual*) and CORDE (*Corpus Diacrónico del Español*).

In short, this book is a pedagogical resource that introduces and familiarizes students of Spanish with a large variety of current idiomatic expressions from Spain and Latin America, at the same time as it enhances and consolidates their mastery of the Spanish language at intermediate and advanced levels. Given that idioms possess both literal and figurative meaning, to facilitate the learning process we have divided the expressions by category—for example, parts of the body, animals and plants, objects, cultural references—with exercises designed to train the student to use the expressions contextually. Specifically, we have:

- carefully selected a number of idiomatic expressions to introduce and illustrate the importance and usefulness of idiomatic language;
- classified common, everyday idiomatic expressions into specific and easy-to-reference categories;
- used both a cognitive and an intuitive approach that, through varied and creative exercises and activities, encourages students to find enjoyment in language creation;
- identified, explained, and illustrated the connection between the Spanish language and Hispanic culture;
- guided students through a step-by-step process of creative activities, exercises, strategies, and visual information to facilitate the acquisition and mastery of idiomatic language;
- included a strong visual component, with drawings featured throughout the book and in some of the exercises, as well as mnemonic devices to help students to recall information;
- tested the material with students in order to ascertain its effectiveness in making learners more confident speakers and writers in the Spanish language.

In addition to the various categories, we have also included at various junctures in the book specially designed sections to help the learner use and master idiomatic language in Spanish.

ACTIVIDADES (Activities) are practical exercises offering informative and entertaining ways to help the student practice using idioms in both speaking and writing. In some of the activities, the contrast between the English and the Spanish linguistic structure enables students to recognize and understand similarities and differences in the use of idiomatic expressions, while avoiding typical mistakes in usage.

LA HISTORIA DETRÁS DE LA EXPRESIÓN (The story behind the expression) traces the etymology or origin of specific idioms, enabling students to appreciate idiomatic expressions as rich sources of linguistic and cultural information.

POR SI LAS MOSCAS (Just in case) is a summary of all the expressions practiced in the individual sections of each chapter. Highlighting similarities and differences between English and Spanish usage, this section offers a literal and/or an equivalent translation, as appropriate. It also serves as a point of reference by including other expressions related to the same semantic field to expand the student's repertoire.

¡DE PE A PA! (From beginning to end), featured towards the end of each chapter and after completion of the various exercises, consists of self-assessment activities that evaluate what the student has learned by means of multiple-choice questions and exercises based on journalistic and literary passages.

¡MANOS A LA OBRA! (Let's get to work!) is a section at the end of each chapter that enables students to practice their writing skills by selecting the appropriate idiomatic expressions for what they wish to express.

Chapters

Each of the six chapters in this book focuses on a different type of idiomatic expression and its usage, and contains four or five sections arranged by semantic field. The book is therefore designed to help the learner tackle the material in small units by means of a variety of exercises and activities.

Capítulo 1: Expresiones idiomáticas con la comida, animales, árboles y plantas, y otros elementos de la naturaleza

Chapter 1 deals with idiomatic expressions related to food, animals, trees, plants, and other elements in nature. Through the use of such idioms students are taught to be creative. For example, in describing someone's physical appearance, expressions such as *está como un fideo* (he's as thin as a rake) or *se puso rojo como un tomate* (he blushed) come in handy. Alternatively, one can characterize someone's intellectual habits by saying: *es un ratón de biblioteca* (literally: he is a library mouse), an expression very different from the English "bookworm." The chapter illustrates how such word choices, nuances, and details can be used to add vividness and humor to a conversation.

Capítulo 2: Expresiones idiomáticas con las partes del cuerpo

Chapter 2 features expressions related to different parts of the human body. The purpose of this chapter is to create an awareness of how effective such idioms can be for characterizing people's qualities and feelings. For example, to brand someone as not very bright one can say: *no tiene dos dedos de frente* (he's as thick as two short planks). On the other hand, *estoy hasta las narices* (I am fed up) expresses one's anger. Remarkably, a part of the body can be used both in the singular, e.g. *estar al pie del cañón* (he's on guard), and in the plural, e.g. *andar con pies de plomo* (to proceed very carefully), to express different meanings. The self-assessment section also includes images to help the student make fine distinctions while stimulating visual memory.

Capítulo 3: Expresiones idiomáticas con partes de la casa, objetos, ropa y colores

Chapter 3 centers on idiomatic expressions that use parts of the house and other related objects, clothes, and colors to describe everyday situations. Students

practice these expressions in context, often using literal meaning in a metaphorical way. For example, the idioms *ponerse morado* (to stuff oneself) and *ponerse las botas* (to stuff one's face) have similar meanings, yet are constructed in different ways. Other colorful expressions with domestic objects are *tener la sartén por el mango* (to call the shots) and *perder el hilo* (to lose one's thread).

Capítulo 4: Expresiones idiomáticas con nacionalidades, lenguas y culturas, personajes de la historia y de la literatura, lugares y tradiciones culturales

Chapter 4 focuses on idioms that function as cultural references—places, historical figures, characters from literature, nationalities, and cultural traditions—demonstrating how much cultural information can be gleaned from this kind of idiomatic expression. For instance, to characterize someone's overly optimistic plan, a literary reference comes in handy: *es el cuento de la lechera* (you are counting your chickens before they are hatched). Similarly, to speak about something that takes time one can reference Spanish history: *no se ganó Zamora en una hora* (Rome wasn't built in a day). The exercises provided are designed to help the student recall the appropriate expression, in some cases with a short overview of the story behind it. The self-assessment section includes excerpts from newspapers and magazines from various Spanish-speaking countries (Colombia, Costa Rica, Chile, Cuba, Honduras, Mexico, Peru, Spain, and Uruguay) so the learner can appreciate the use of such expressions in journalistic writing.

Capítulo 5: Expresiones introducidas por preposiciones

Chapter 5 presents set phrases and expressions that are used with certain prepositions, while exposing students to other widely used expressions that may not be purely idiomatic, and yet are part of the linguistic currency of native speakers. To help the student tackle the material in small units, this chapter is subdivided by preposition: *a*, *con*, *de*, and *en*. Equivalent meanings and differences in English and in Spanish are included, such as *a duras penas* (with great difficulty), *con antelación* (in advance), *de sol a sol* (from dawn to dusk), and *en líneas generales* (broadly speaking). Because many of these expressions cannot be translated literally, they are rarely dealt with in traditional grammar texts. Yet they are of common and everyday usage, constituting essential knowledge at both intermediate and advanced levels of Spanish.

Capítulo 6: Refranes populares

Chapter 6 illustrates the transmission of verbal and cultural information through Spanish proverbs and sayings. Students will discover how figures of speech

reinforce, complement, intensify, or develop an oral or written argument for maximum effect. Classified here according to semantic field, such expressions have many applications: *contigo pan y cebolla* (I will stick with you through thick and thin), *más vale maña que fuerza* (brain is better than brawn), *la avaricia rompe el saco* (greed doesn't pay), *en abril, aguas mil* (April showers). Included in the self-assessment section are literary excerpts from Latin American and Spanish writers of different periods (Camilo José Cela, Jorge Edwards, Benito Pérez Galdós, José Milla y Vidaurre, Horacio de Dios, Miguel de Unamuno, Emilia Pardo Bazán, Wenceslao Ayguals de Izco, Félix de Azúa, Luis E. Rangel M., José Jiménez Lozano, Borita Casas, Miguel de Cervantes, Antonio Rojas Gómez, and Carla Montero Maglano). By reading these passages, students learn to appreciate proverbs and sayings used in a literary context. They also distinguish between literal and figurative meaning, while picking up interesting pieces of linguistic and cultural information about the Hispanic world.

Answer Key

The Answer Key at the back of the book provides solutions to the exercises and activities in each chapter.

It is our hope that *Spanish Idioms in Practice* will serve teachers and students as a practical tool, either as a supplementary classroom text or as self-study material. Practical, informative, and visual, this book can be used for in-class instruction at both high school and university levels to complement grammar texts, reinforce the typical Spanish curriculum, or serve as a separate teaching unit. Self-explanatory and user-friendly, it is also a perfect resource for self-learners keen on sharpening their Spanish language skills.

Capítulo 1

Expresiones idiomáticas con la comida, animales, árboles y plantas, y otros elementos de la naturaleza

1.1. EXPRESIONES CON LA COMIDA



2 Comida, animales, árboles y plantas

Existen numerosas expresiones idiomáticas relacionadas con la comida. Fíjate bien en la estructura de cada una, en su significado y también en la lógica que se desprende de muchas de ellas. Por ejemplo, la expresión **“ponerse rojo como un tomate”** hace referencia al matiz rojizo que adquiere la piel cuando una persona tiene vergüenza.

Ej. Cuando el profesor le ha preguntado en clase delante de todo el mundo, **se ha puesto rojo como un tomate.**

Hay otras expresiones cuyo significado es más metafórico pero que igualmente están relacionadas con el ámbito culinario. Cuando decimos que nos toca **“sacarle a alguien las castañas / las papas del fuego”** quiere decir que tenemos que “solucionar los problemas de otra persona” y se utiliza dicho fruto seco o vegetal porque el proceso puede resultar un tanto complicado.

Ej. Si se mete en algún problema, siempre me toca a mí **sacarle las castañas / las papas del fuego.** A ver cuándo aprende a solucionar las cosas por sí mismo.

Actividad 1

- 1.a. Lee el siguiente correo electrónico y subraya las ocho expresiones idiomáticas relacionadas con la comida que aparecen.

De: angelps@yahoo.es

Para: josenp@hotmail.com

¿Qué tal, José? ¿Cómo han ido las vacaciones? Nosotros acabamos de volver de Menorca y lo hemos pasado fenomenal. Lo único que los últimos días ha llovido muchísimo y, claro, ¡nos pusimos como una sopa! Un día nos pilló una tormenta en medio de la playa y volvimos al hotel temblando como un flan. El servicio del hotel era pésimo. Todos, desde los camareros hasta los empleados de recepción, ¡tenían bastante mala leche! Parecía que estaban enfadados todo el tiempo, como si los turistas les molestáramos. Bueno, se entiende que es agosto y que todo el mundo quiere estar de vacaciones, pero no nos gustó nada ese comportamiento. En fin, espero que en este aspecto hayan ido mejor tus vacaciones. Eso sí, a Maite le ha encantado visitar la isla, estaba en su salsa: tomando el sol siempre que el tiempo acompañaba, nadando, paseando por la orilla del mar, leyendo novelas de esas interminables . . . Ya la conoces, le encantan todas estas cosas.

Y ahora la vuelta al trabajo. Ya sabes que no está el horno para bollos. Con esta crisis económica, me da miedo volver, ya que se rumoreaba que iba a haber despidos a la vuelta del verano, ¡a ver con qué me encuentro! Ya te he contado alguna vez que no soporto a mi jefe. Lo mandaría a freír espárragos, de verdad. Es un pesado que no sabe dirigir y siempre hay que sacarle las castañas del fuego, porque todo lo termina haciendo mal. Y ya me conoces en el trabajo, que me gusta poner toda la carne en el asador y hacer las cosas bien. ¡Qué paciencia!

Oye, quedamos esta semana, ¿no? Nos contamos el verano y te enseño las fotos, ¿vale?

Ya me dirás qué día te viene mejor.

Hablamos,

Ángel

1.b. Ahora fíjate en el contexto en el que han aparecido las expresiones y elige el significado equivalente.

Expresión idiomática	Sustantivo relacionado con la comida	Significado equivalente
1. Ponerse como una ...	 sopa	a. Mojarse mucho a causa de la lluvia b. Temblar de frío
2. Temblar como un ...	 flan	a. Tener un presentimiento b. Estar muy nervioso
3. Tener mala ...	 leche	a. Tener poco entusiasmo b. Tener mal genio
4. Estar en su (propia) ...	 salsa	a. Estar metido en un lío b. Estar haciendo uno lo que le gusta
5. No estar el horno para ...	 bollos	a. No tener suerte con las cosas b. No ser el mejor momento
6. Mandar a alguien a freír ...	 espárragos	a. Decirle a alguien que se pierda b. Decirle a alguien que coma mejor
7. Sacarle a alguien las ... del fuego	 castañas	a. Ayudar a alguien cuando tiene un problema b. Conseguirle algo a alguien gratis

8. Poner toda la ... en el asador



carne

- a. Agotar todos los recursos para solucionar un problema
- b. Solucionar los problemas rápidamente



Recuerda que pueden existir diferencias en el vocabulario culinario del dominio panhispánico. La expresión “sacarle a alguien **las castañas** del fuego” se utiliza de esta manera en España, mientras que en Argentina y en México se dice “sacarle a alguien **las papas** del fuego”. Es importante verificar si la palabra que forma parte de la expresión idiomática se utiliza de la misma manera en un país hispanohablante o en otro.

Actividad 2

2.a. Lee la respuesta al correo electrónico anterior y subraya las siete nuevas expresiones idiomáticas que aparecen.

De: josenp@hotmail.com

Para: angelps@yahoo.es

¡Hombre, Ángel! ¡Cómo me alegro de tener noticias tuyas! Por supuesto que quedamos esta misma semana, ¿qué tal te viene el viernes? Necesito hablar contigo de la chica aquella de la que te hablé antes del verano. Pues mira, al final me ha dado calabazas, así que estoy fatal. Cuando me dijo que no quería salir conmigo, no pude responder nada, me puse rojo como un tomate y me fui corriendo. ¡Y tú que me decías que esto de ligar con chicas era pan comido! Ya ves que para mí no lo es.

La verdad es que estoy con un estado de ánimo muy bajo. Román, uno de mis compañeros de trabajo (que ya sabes que es el perejil de todas las salsas y siempre tiene que opinar de todo), me dice que soy demasiado cauto con las chicas y que parece que voy pisando huevos todo el día, y que para ligar es todo lo contrario: hay que ser directo y lanzado.

También me ha aconsejado que vaya al gimnasio para ver si saco un poco de músculo porque siempre me dice que estoy como un fideo y que tendría que comer más. Razón no le falta porque, coma lo que coma, no engordo. Me ha dicho varias veces que me llamaría para ir con él a todas las fiestas que va, pero nada, de momento ni una llamada. Ya sabes eso de mucho ruido y pocas nueces.

En fin, que te veo el viernes entonces.

José

2.b. Elige el significado equivalente de las expresiones y comprueba si las has entendido.

Expresión idiomática	Sustantivo relacionado con la comida	Significado equivalente
1. Darle ... a alguien	 calabazas	a. Traerle a alguien buenas noticias b. Rechazar a alguien
2. Ponerse rojo como un ...	 tomate	a. Ruborizarse b. Tranquilizarse
3. Ser ... comido	 pan	a. Ser muy rápido b. Ser muy fácil
4. Ser el ... de todas las salsas	 perejil	a. Estar enterado de todo b. Estar ocupado
5. Ir pisando ...	 huevos	a. Ir con demasiada cautela b. Ir con tranquilidad
6. Estar como un ...	 fideo	a. Estar muy delgado b. Estar muy enfermo
7. Mucho ruido y pocas ...	 nueces	a. Hacer las cosas que a uno le interesan b. Hablar mucho pero no hacer nada



Utiliza la memoria visual como estrategia para recordar las expresiones idiomáticas y piensa en la lógica que poseen muchas de ellas. Por ejemplo, “ponerse rojo como un tomate” es una expresión lógica si la asociamos al color rojo del tomate, o “estar como un fideo” si la relacionamos con que este tipo de alimento es muy fino.

La historia detrás de la expresión

“Darle calabazas a alguien”

(To turn someone down; to fail someone in an exam)

Es una expresión que se puede utilizar principalmente de dos maneras: cuando alguien rechaza amorosamente a una persona o bien recibe una mala nota después de haber suspendido un examen. Las calabazas son, en general, de gran tamaño y llamativas por su apariencia, pero con un interior vacío, de poco peso, y no son fáciles de cocinar. Antiguamente, se les colgaban calabazas a los estudiantes que sacaban malas notas para diferenciarlos en la escuela de los que eran buenos estudiantes. De ahí que se diga metafóricamente que a alguien “le han dado calabazas” cuando le han “dado un suspenso”, ya que las calabazas tienen poco valor.

- Ej. Ya es la tercera vez que **le da calabazas** la misma chica. No quiere ni ir al cine con él.
- Ej. Otra vez **me han dado calabazas** en el examen de historia. ¡No voy a aprobar nunca!