

WhIAW constructional idioms in Spanish and German. A corpus-based study

Pedro Ivorra Ordines

University Center of Defence (Zaragoza)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2353-1002>

Ana Mansilla Pérez

University of Murcia

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4264-1159>

DOI: 10.54103/milanoup.233.c762

ABSTRACT

This study contributes to the field of contrastive linguistics in the context of Construction Grammar. Adopting a corpus-based methodology (esTenTen18 for Spanish and deTenTen20 for German, in Sketch Engine), the objective of the study of the WhIAW constructional idioms (e.g., *¿Qué cojones haces aquí?*, *lit.* ‘What bollocks do here’, meaning ‘What the heck are you doing here’, or *Was zum Teufel machst du hier?*, *lit.* ‘What to hell do you here?’, meaning ‘What the hell are you doing here’) in Spanish and German is twofold. First, to explore the “pragmatic point” of the constructions, taking into account their illocutive function(s) and their inherent incompatibility between form and interpretation (cf. Kay and Fillmore, 1999). Second, to describe the nature of the slot fillers by means of the use of vulgarisms and euphemisms, borrowings from other languages, and hapax and creative language use.

Keywords: constructional idioms; WhIAW; contrastive approach; pragmatic point; slot fillers; corpus-based study.

1. Introduction

Contrastive approaches have received a major impetus in the last few years in the context of Construction Grammar (Boas, 2010; Boas and González-García, 2014), particularly in the intersection with Phraseology. This development is evident in the growing number of recent publications on the topic (Cotta Ramusino and Mollica, 2020; Ivorra Ordines, in press; Mellado Blanco, 2022; Mellado Blanco, *et al.*, 2022; among others). Construction grammarians indeed found in the notion of “grammatical construction” a useful theoretical tool for conducting holistic descriptions of formal as well as semantic-functional

idiosyncrasies. It helps reveal parameters that might remain hidden when analysing a single language. As Boas and González-García (2014, 20) argue, the semantic description –including discourse-pragmatic factors– “can be regarded as a first step towards a *tertium comparationis* that can be employed for comparing and contrasting the formal properties of constructional counterparts in other languages.”

In studies on contrastive constructional idioms, scholars have proposed various parameters for identifying a *tertium comparationis* that serves as the basis for contrastive analysis (Esteban-Fonollosa and Ivorra Ordines, 2023; Mansilla Pérez, 2020). For example, Mellado Blanco, *et al.* (2022) show how comparing and contrasting the constructional idioms [NP_{subject} (no) NP_{object} IMPORTAR NP_{tabooed or of little value object}] in Spanish, [NP_{subject} (non) NP_{ind_object} IMPORTARE/FREGARE NP_{tabooed or of little value object}] / [(non) IMPORTARE/FREGARE NP_{tabooed or of little value object} di NP] in Italian and [NP_{subject} INTERESSIEREN NP_{Object} (einen/nicht/keinen) NP_{tabooed or of little value object}] in German is possible. These semi-schematic patterns share a comparable structure, allowing for a parallel analysis of their slots.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the contrastive analysis to the constructional idioms under study, in which two subsections can be distinguished. On the one hand, the meaning pole of both constructional idioms in Spanish and German is outlined, shedding light on their pragmatic point. On the other hand, the nature of the slot fillers is scrutinized from a contrastive point of view. To this end, three different aspects are described, i.e. the use of vulgarisms (and, consequently, euphemisms), borrowings from other languages and creative language use. Section 3 summarizes the main findings and points to further research lines.

2. WhIAW¹ interrogative constructional idioms in Spanish and German

WhIAW constructions have been under study for a few decades already (Akiyama, 2014; Fillmore, 1985; Martin, 2021; Schafroth, 2022; Schoonjans, 2023; Stefanowitsch, 2011; Pesetsky, 1987; among others) and can be attested in most of the European languages: Eng. *what the fuck / the hell / the devil / etc. are you doing here?*; Germ. *was zum Teufel / zum Kuckuck / zum Hölle / etc. machst du hier?*, *lit.* ‘what to hell / to cuckoo / hell / etc. do you here’, meaning ‘what the hell / devil / hell are you doing here’; Fr. *mais que diable / merde / bordel / etc. fais tu ici?*, *lit.* ‘but what devil / shit / warehouse / etc. do you here’, meaning ‘what the devil / shit / heck are you doing here?’; It. *ma che cazzo / diavolo / cacchio / cavolo / etc. fai?*, *lit.* ‘but what dick / devil / heck / cabbage do’, meaning ‘what the

1 Term coined by Stefanowitsch (2011, 189).

fuck / devil / heck / on earth are you doing?; Sp. *¿qué demonios / cojones / mierda / etc. haces aquí?*, *lit.* ‘what devils / bullocks / shit / etc. do here’, meaning ‘what the devil / fuck / shit are you doing’; among others. The use of this type of constructions is intricately tied to a cathartic function for the speaker, in that it serves to alleviate stress stemming from a situation characterized by confusion, disagreement, or surprise.

Methodologically speaking, we used the corpus esTenTen18 for Spanish and deTenTen20 for German (Sketch Engine), and adopted the CQL query, which is very useful in this case because it allows to detect discontinuous patterns. Since the construction had many slots to be filled, we ran a random query filling the pronoun slot *Qué* ‘what’ in Spanish and *Was* ‘what’ in German together with a random number of taboo words. We thus could observe which were the most prototypical verbs in both languages, i.e. *ser* ‘to be’, *hacer* ‘to make’ and *significar* ‘to mean’ in Spanish and its correspondences in German, *sein* ‘to be’, *machen* ‘to make’ and *sollen* ‘to be meant to’, correspondingly.

Although our core analysis centers on constructions with *qué* in Spanish and *was* in German for reasons of space and focus, it is important to note that different interrogative pronouns can fill in the interrogative-pronoun slot. Spanish, for example, shows attested instances of *¿Por qué carajos le ocultaba que se veía con Jane?*² (esTenTen18, 3100930380) and *¿Cuándo cojones nos van a dejar en paz?*³ (esTenTen18, 464881082), while German allows for examples such as *Warum zum Teufel gerade Watt?*⁴ (deTenTen20, 39381671) or *Wo zum Kuckuck waren sie?*⁵. In the case of German, Schoonjans (2025, 330) shows that the most frequently interrogative pronoun is *was* ‘what’, followed by *wo* ‘how’ and *warum* ‘why’. The author, however, notes that the unequal distribution among the interrogative pronoun slot fillers may be due to the productive distribution among the IAW groups. For example, [*zu* X] appears 48.36% with the interrogative pronoun *was* ‘what’, which is an indicator that some IAW phrases are more strongly attracted to particular interrogative pronouns than others are.⁶

It must be noted that the German discontinuous pattern has two slots between the pronoun and the verb, whereas in Spanish there is only one (compare examples 3 and 4). What departs the Spanish construction from the German one concerning the nature of the slot fillers is that the Spanish lexical items constitute improper interjections outside of the construction that have undergone

2 *Lit.* ‘Why dicks him hiding that seeing with Jane?’, meaning ‘What the heck was he hiding he was seeing Jane?’.

3 *Lit.* ‘When bullocks us go to leave in peace?’, meaning ‘When the fuck are they going to leave us in peace?’.

4 *Lit.* ‘Why to hell even Watt?’, meaning ‘Why the hell Watt?’.

5 *Lit.* ‘Where to cuckoo were they?’, meaning ‘Where the devil were they?’.

6 Future studies should explore how productive the different interrogative pronouns are in Spanish and other languages.

a process of pragmaticalization. Once these are inserted within the constructional idiom under study, another process of pragmaticalization takes place, in that the meaning of the improper interjections is diluted in favor of the constructional meaning (Herrero Ruiz de Loizaga, 2023). On the contrary, the slot fillers in German already constitute idioms:

(1) *Zum Teufel!*⁷ Guckt man drei Minuten nicht aufs Handy, prasseln oftmals zirka 189 neue Nachrichten mit 95 Tippfehlern pro Satz auf einen ein. (deTenTen20, 15406294926)

‘*Damn it!* When you don’t look at your phone for three minutes, often around 189 new messages with 95 typos per sentence come flooding in.’

In the following, we will delve into the pragmatic aspects evoked by the WhIAW constructions in German and Spanish, as well as the nature of their slot fillers, placing special emphasis on certain parameters that are of interest at a contrastive level, namely (a) the use of vulgarisms, (b) borrowing from other languages, and (c) hapax and creativity.

2.1. Pragmatically speaking

The case study presented here concerns the construction corresponding to the syntactic pattern “*Qué X*_{taboo.word} *V*” in Spanish (examples 2–3) and its German equivalent WhIAW construction (examples 4–5) (cf. Stefanowitsch, 2011), as exemplified by the following occurrences from the esTenTen18 and deTenTen20 corpus (Sketch Engine), respectively.

(2) *¿Qué carajo haces aquí a estas horas?*⁸ –preguntó el menor tan pronto vio a su hermano plantado en la entrada. (esTenTen18, 47569530)

‘*What the hell are you doing here at this hour?*’ The younger one asked as soon as he saw his brother standing at the entrance.’

(3) *¿Qué diablos significa esto?*⁹ –pregunta el hombre, atontado. (esTenTen18, 24363696)

‘*What the hell does this mean?*’ the man asks, bewildered.’

(4) Genauso wie ich dachte, ich sitz im falschen Film, als klar wurde, dass Uhura und Spock ein Pärchen sind. Was zur Hölle soll das denn?¹⁰ (deTenTen20, 13816138)

Just as I thought I was in the wrong movie when it became clear that Uhura and Spock are a couple. *What the hell is that supposed to be?*

7 *Lit.* ‘To hell’.

8 *Lit.* ‘What bullock do here at these hours?’.

9 *Lit.* ‘What devils means this?’.

10 *Lit.* ‘What to hell mean that then?’.

(5) Dann sah er wie Kakashi auf ihn zu gestürmt kam Sanji??? sagte er erstaunt und blieb stehen. Was zum Teufel machst du denn hier?¹¹ (deTenTen20, 950143)
 ‘Then he saw Kakashi rushing towards him. Sanji??? He said, surprised, and stopped. *What the hell are you doing here?*’

These two patterns constitute a clear example of a ‘marginal’ Argument Structure Construction, in that they are “constructions that never give rise to a fully schematic schema but remain partly lexically filled and considerably more restricted in their meaning” (Hoffmann 2020). These can also be characterized according to what Goldberg (2019, 63) informally labels “niche constructions”, i.e. argument structure constructions with a concrete meaning that are highly productive within their specific domain of use (cf. Colleman, 2020; Perek, 2016).

The “*Qué X_{taboo_word} V*” construction in Spanish as well as the WhIAW construction in German are two-argument-structure interrogative constructions that typically serve to intensify and usually accommodate two-participant verbs in its V position. Intensification here functions pragmatically to heighten emotional involvement, stance, or speaker commitment. As such, it plays a central role in shaping the illocutionary force of the construction. In line with a constructionist perspective, intensification constitutes a conventionalized pragmatic function associated with a specific formal pattern (cf. Finkbeiner, 2019), so that these constructions embody intensified speaker evaluation and stance marking, reinforcing their use in contexts of emotional escalation (example 1), rhetorical questioning (examples 3 and 5), or face-threatening acts (example 2).

Their interpretation is pragmatically or discursively marked, whether because they express a certain attitude of the speaker –usually negative– towards the context, or they have a particular discursive status. To put it differently, the speaker is not completely neutral about the propositional content of the sentence, but explicitly favors a certain interpretation (Escandell Vidal, 1999, 3985). Depending on their context of use, these constructions have an illocutive function of SURPRISE, in which the speakers express their astonishment when finding out that his brother was at the entrance (example 2) or seeing Kakashi running towards him (example 5), as well as DISAPPROVAL or DISAGREEMENT (examples 3–4) with what has happened. This is in harmony with the fact that “unlike normal *wh*-questions, *wh-the-hell* sentences are used generally when the speaker has some particular attitude about them (being impatient, annoyed, etc.)” (Huang, 2004, 208).

The difficulty or impossibility of obtaining a response characterizes the nature of these constructions, which places them close to rhetorical questions. Indeed, the unknown introduced by the interrogative pronoun is not accessible

11 *Lit.* ‘What to hell do you then here?’

to the speaker within the discourse universe (Sánchez López, 2019, 521), leading to an opposite polarity response that is often perceived as discourteous. On top of that, the absence of elements of the sentence that could be clarifying –i.e., cannot be deduced from the context– makes these expressions irregular, since they go against the expectations of the speaker (Stein and Hernández 2007, 302). Whether directed at an interlocutor (examples 1, 2 and 4) or oneself (example 3), these constructions challenge one’s image and contribute to hostile conversational dynamics –of reproving nature. In any case, these kinds of inquires represent hostile conversational tactics that disqualifies them from constituting a statement that is, in fact, a request for confirmation of information rather than a question strictly speaking (cf. Kay and Fillmore, 1999 on the *What’s X doing Y?* construction).

2.2. The nature of the slot fillers

This study departed from the assumption that the patterns under study are a type of constructions: constructional idioms, i.e. pairings of form and meaning with lexically filled elements, while other constitute slots that must be updated in discourse (cf. Dobrovolskij, 2011). Constructional idioms thus occupy an intermediate position between the lexicon pole –comprising lexically filled constructions– and the grammar pole –made up of grammatical constructions with no lexical specification. They comprise instances that are more or less close to the lexicon pole depending on their frequency, conventionality and idiomaticity (Ivorra Ordines, in press). Consequently, a corpus-based analysis enables the description of how slots are lexically filled in the discourse, along with the semantic constraints that constructions adhere to. Table 1 shows the twenty most frequent types of the constructional idiom “*Qué X_{taboo_word} V*” in Spanish, together with their token frequency, and their corresponding representation in percentages within the sample.

Table 1. Twenty most frequent types of the constructional idiom “*Qué X_{taboo_word} V*” in Spanish

Types	Tokens	%
<i>demonio(s)</i> ‘demon’	3352	29.33%
<i>diablos</i> ‘devil’	1868	16.34%
<i>coño(s)</i> ‘cunt’	1393	12.19%
<i>carajo(s)</i> ‘fuck’	982	8.59%
<i>cojones</i> ‘testicles’	829	7.25%
<i>narices</i> ‘nose’	795	6.95%

<i>rayos</i> ‘darn’	671	5.87%
<i>mierda(s)</i> ‘shit’	508	4.44%
<i>leche(s)</i> ‘milk’	239	2.09%
<i>puñetas</i> ‘shit’	187	1.63%
<i>diantre(s)</i> ‘heck’	115	1%
<i>bostias</i> ‘damn’	57	0.49%
...	55	0.48%
<i>puta(s)</i> ‘bitch(es)’	51	0.44%
<i>pollas</i> ‘dicks’	23	0.21%
<i>caramba(s)</i> ‘goodness’	21	0.18%
<i>chingados</i> ‘fucked up’	21	0.18%
<i>corno(s)</i> ‘damn’	21	0.18%
<i>porras</i> ‘heck’	20	0.17%

From Table 1, we can observe that the Spanish construction exhibits limited lexical diversity, with a highly skewed frequency distribution among its slot fillers. Specifically, the ten most frequent types account for nearly 90% of all occurrences, comprising a small, conventionalized set of taboo terms. The most common fillers –*demonios* ‘demons’ (29.33%), *diablos* ‘devils’ (16.34%), *coño(s)* ‘cunt(s)’ (12.19%), and *carajo(s)* ‘dick(s)’ (8.59%)– highlight the dominance of religious and sexual references, which are often used in exclamatory interjections to express intense emotion such as anger, surprise, or frustration. Many of these terms function as conventionalized expletives in colloquial Spanish, reinforcing the idiomatic and formulaic nature of the construction. Additionally, the presence of body-related words (*cojones* ‘bollocks’, *nariz* ‘nose’, *pollas* ‘dicks’) and euphemistic expressions (*rayos* ‘lightnings’, *diantres* ‘oh, hell’, *caramba* ‘damn’) further illustrates how the construction integrates both strong and softened taboo language.

Table 2. Twenty most frequent types of the constructional idiom WhIAW in German

Types	Tokens	%
<i>zum Teufel</i> ‘to the devil’	219	43.4%
<i>zur Hölle</i> ‘to the hell’	165	32.7%
<i>zum Geier</i> ‘to the vulture’	44	8.7%
<i>zum Henker</i> ‘to the executioner’	35	6.9%
<i>zum Kuckuck</i> ‘to the cuckoo’	9	1.8%

<i>in aller Welt</i> ‘all over the world’	4	0.8%
<i>um Himmelswillen</i> ‘for goodness’ sake’	4	0.8%
<i>in Gottes Namen</i> ‘in God’s name’	4	0.8%
<i>verdammst nochmal</i> ‘damn it’	4	0.8%
<i>bei allen Höllen</i> ‘by all hells’	4	0.8%
<i>verflucht noch mal</i> ‘damn it’	3	0.6%
<i>in Beliares Namen</i> ‘in Beliar’s name’	1	0.2%
<i>bei Andrastes brennendem Arsch</i> ‘by Andraste’s burning ass’	1	0.2%
<i>in allen drei Teufels Namen</i> ‘in all three devil’s names’	1	0.2%
<i>zu Fick</i> ‘to fuck’	1	0.2%
<i>bei Barte Gurombalos</i> ‘at Barte Gurombalos’	1	0.2%
<i>um alles in der Welt</i> ‘for all the world’	1	0.2%
<i>bei Bellums Bart</i> ‘at Barte Bellums’	1	0.2%
<i>bei Ariels Licht</i> ‘by Ariel’s Light’	1	0.2%
<i>beim Schläfer</i> ‘by the sleeper’	1	0.2%

Table 2, for its part, presents the twenty most frequent types of the constructional idiom WhIAW in German, together with their token frequency, and their corresponding representation in percentages within the sample. The German construction shows a clear preference for conventional expressions. The most frequent fillers are *zum Teufel* ‘to the devil’ with 43.4% and *zur Hölle* ‘to the hell’ with 32.7%, together accounting for over three-quarters of all occurrences. Other moderately frequent idioms like *zum Geier* ‘to the vulture’, *zum Henker* ‘to the executioner’, and *zum Kuckuck* ‘to the cuckoo’ reflect familiar but less dominant alternatives. A long list of rare and often creative variants –including humorous, fictional, or religious references *in Beliares Name* ‘in Beliar’s name’, *Bei Ariels Licht* ‘by Ariel’s light’, or *Zu Fick* ‘to fuck’– demonstrates the construction’s creative flexibility. These low-frequency expressions reveal the construction’s capacity for emotional nuance, and cultural references.

Contrastively speaking, it can be observed that nearly 90% of the types detected in German fall within the religious sphere, and hapax legomena are only recorded when vulgarisms or lexical items related to the sexual domain are used. Interestingly, both languages share the figure of the devil, which appears in first place (*demonio/diablo, Teufel*). Notably, in German, there is a tendency to use literary or mythological figures or characters (*Gurombalo, Ariel, Andraste...*). In contrast, in Spanish, there is a marked use of vulgarisms, terms from the scatological contexts, or dysphemisms such as *coño* ‘cunt’, *cojones* ‘testicles’, *carajo* ‘fuck’.

Against this background, we explore three different parameters –i.e., the use of vulgarisms, borrowings from other languages, and nonce instances and creative language use– to observe similarities and discrepancies between the Spanish and German slot fillers.

a. The use of vulgarisms

Among the most prototypical and recurrent lexical items in Spanish, there are *coño* ‘pussy’ (1393 occurrences), *carajo* ‘fucking’ (982 occurrences) or *cojones* ‘bollocks’ (829 occurrences), among others. These express the highest degree of rejection and can be seen as salient because “the utterance type they instantiate has an inherent attention-grabbing potential” (Schmid, 2020, 79)¹². On the contrary, slot fillers such as *diablo/demonio* ‘devil’ have lost their expressive load and nature of taboo element. This is in harmony with the idea that different degrees of aggressivity can be observed (compare examples 6 and 7).

(6) *¿Qué demonios pasa?*¹³ ¿Sabes lo preocupado que he estado? ¡Has estado dos semanas encerrado! (esTenTen18, 1054280414)

‘*What the heck is going on?* Do you know how worried I’ve been? You’ve been locked up for two weeks!’

(7) Ana se enamora de su circunstancia en cada momento. *¿Qué coño significa eso de enamorarse de lo que uno hace en cada momento?*¹⁴ (esTenTen18, 5245502064)

‘Ana falls in love with her circumstances at every moment. *What the hell does it mean to fall in love with what one does at every moment?*’

In the case of German, there are very few attested occurrences belonging to the sexual domain, constituting in most cases nonce instances, since these elements are not widely used in German. Even if these vulgar elements are desemanticized in the language and have lost their rude character, it is not very common to find them in the German constructional idiom, in which the scatological domain predominates (cf. Esteban-Fonollosa and Ivorra Ordines, 2023). An example of vulgarism is *Fotze* ‘pussy’ (example 8), in which an ironic component is observed, with a clearly offensive and aggressive load that is only attested once in corpora. Besides, the playful reelaboration of such a statement is aimed at creative effects to say something memorable, or “to draw special

12 It is noteworthy noting that violations of expectations can happen for many reasons. In this context, the fact that the slot fillers have high token frequency contributes clarity to differentiating between extravagance and expressivity. Expressive language emphasizes what is conventional or entrenched, while extravagant expressions often involve noticeable departures from the norm and usually constitute nonce occurrences (cf. Ivorra Ordines and López Meirama, 2025).

13 *Lit.*, ‘What devil happens?’

14 *Lit.*, ‘What pussy means that of falling in love of what ones does in each moment?’

attention to some aspect of the constructions we choose to use” (Goldberg, 2019, 142).

(8) Und wer sich jetzt denkt: „Was zur verfuckten Fotze meiner durchgefickten Hure von Mutter soll denn das jetzt!?“¹⁵, der hat genau verstanden auf welcher Ebene sich der Humor von „Bad Santa 2“ abspielt. (deTenTen20, 44133120)

‘And whoever is thinking right now, ‘*What the fucking cunt of my fucked whore of a mother is this now!?*’ has understood exactly on what level the humor of ‘Bad Santa 2’ operates.’

Besides being slot fillers of emphatic nature, these are swearwords that denote entities or beings that should not or cannot be named without causing offense, hence they are often replaced by euphemisms. Using slot fillers that should not be spoken to mark a response that cannot be given is still a curious way of putting lexicon at the service of syntax (Sánchez López, 2019, 525). Among the mechanisms of euphemisms, there is the lexical substitution of *demonio* ‘demon’ by means of *diantres* ‘the hell’ (example 9) or the use of an abbreviation with asterisks, in which the lexical items *Scheiße* ‘shit’ and *Ficken* ‘fuck’ are avoided (examples 10 and 11, respectively).

(9) ¿Qué diantres hacía un treintañero a las ocho y pico de la mañana de un sábado paseando por la Casa de Campo con un ramo de flores? (esTenTen18, 21238596)

‘What on earth was a thirty-something doing at eight-something in the morning on a Saturday, walking around Casa de Campo with a bouquet of flowers?’

(10) Wie werden solche Kapazitäten in der Realität erreicht?! Grüße Muuu. Was für eine sh**** soll das denn werden?¹⁶ (deTenTen20, 39461638)

‘How are such capacities achieved in reality?! Regards, Muuu. *What kind of crap is this supposed to be?*’

(11) Mir fiel wortwörtlich die Kinnlade runter. “WAS ZUM FI ** IST DAS?!“¹⁷, ich scrollte durch die Bilder. (deTenTen20, 10458018)

‘Literally, my jaw dropped. ‘*WHAT THE F*** IS THIS?!*’ I scrolled through the pictures.’

These euphemistic slot fillers allow for a certain intensification of the interrogative particle without being words generally considered offensive, and can be used, with a gradualness difficult to specify, in less vulgar registers or relatively more formal situations. Such euphemistic use, however, aligns with the idea

15 *Lit.*, ‘What the fucking cunt of my fucked whore mother is this supposed to mean?’.

16 *Lit.*, ‘What the sh**** is this supposed to be?’.

17 Euphemistic mechanisms can be accompanied by the use of capital letters, which is an indicator of greater emphasis to signal expressivity (cf. Ivorra Ordines and López Meirama, 2025). *Lit.*, ‘What the fu**... is that?’.

that “a difference in syntactic form always spells a difference in meaning, and [...] that the various lexical and syntactic variants that the construction exhibits correlate with a variation in their intensity” (Bolinger, 1968, 127).

b. Borrowings from other languages

Although not used in everyday language with high frequency, these constructional idioms borrow lexical items from English, French or Italian. In the realm of German phraseology, the presence of the English construction “what the fuck X” is more noticeable, while in the Spanish-speaking context, it is more prominent in Latin American Spanish and less so in Peninsular Spanish. The consulted websites confirm this fact, as the majority of examples comes from Mexico, Argentina, or Uruguay (example 13).

(12) Highlight Ihnen ist schon klar, dass das tatsächlich in der Realität mit Millionen von Menschen gemacht wurde. *Was zum fuck ist daran lustig?*¹⁸ (deTenTen20, 15245481)

‘Highlight: Are you aware that this was actually done in reality with millions of people? *What the fuck is funny about that?*’

(13) *¿Qué fuck?*¹⁹ *hiciste cuando me trajeron aquí, te fuiste a buscar bitches?*²⁰ –Pregunté con media sonrisa una vez que me separé. (esTenTen18, 47651526)

‘“*What the fuck did you do when they brought me here, did you go look for bitches?*” I asked with a half-smile once I pulled away.’

These examples are a clear proof that there are no *a priori* language boundaries in the input/output or in the overall cognitive principles governing the organization of constructional networks. This is in harmony with one of the main tenets of Diasystemic Construction Grammar, insofar as the grammatical description of a language in a multilingual context “must include structures of all languages or varieties involved, and the social establishment and individual acquisition of such a system must be inherently multilingual” (Höder, 2014, 140).

18 *Lit.*, ‘What the fuck is funny about that, damn it to hell?’

19 The use of *fuck* is not incidental, since it can be inferred from the example that we are dealing with a visit to a whorehouse. This highlights the importance of adopting a sociocultural approach to the study of linguistic creativity, since some creative language use can be primed by the immediate context (cf. Hoffmann, 2022; Ivorra Ordines and López Meirama, 2025).

20 *Lit.*, ‘What fuck you did when me brought here, you went to find bitches?’

c. Hapax and creativity

A relevant factor that affects the productivity of the Spanish and German constructions is the presence of hapax legomena, which often involves constructs showcasing creative language use (Ivorra Ordines, 2023; Ivorra Ordines and López Meirama, 2025). One of the most striking morphological procedures is blending, in that in (example 14) *cojoños* emerges as the result of the blend of the words *cojones* ‘testicles’ and *coño* ‘pussy’, leading to a more intensified construct, since both words already constitute intensifying lexical items.

(14) ¿Qué cojoños estás haciendo en la categoría de “*Qué cojoños hacéis con la música*”²¹? (esTenTen18, 14263100)

‘What the hell are you doing in the “*What the hell are you doing with the music*” category?’

Another creative mechanism, in the case of German, is the more-or-less productive use of the subschema [*bei Xs Bart*], which yields numerous nonce instances (cf. Schoonjans, 2023, 2025). This phenomenon could be seen as a way of innovatively using new schemas within the more abstract construction, while adding new uses. Creations, in this regard, are not created ex nihilo but the outcome of constructs within the constructional network (Goldberg, 2019).

(15) *Was beim Barte Gurombalos*²² *ist hier los, verdammt nochmal?!*²³ (deTenTen20, 43876580)

‘*What in the name of Gurombalos’ beard is going on here, damn it?*’

These examples constitute clear examples of the fact that intensification is an important characteristic of both constructions, and in those cases where the construction has lost its intensifying effects, the speaker tries to find new ways to counteract such a wear-off. Here lies the tension between convention and innovation (cf. Ivorra Ordines and López Meirama, 2025).

3. Concluding Remarks

This paper aligns with the current trend of adopting a constructionist approach to the study of constructional idioms from a contrastive perspective, shifting towards a more holistic description of linguistic phenomena across languages. With the notion of constructional idiom as a dynamic theoretical entity at hand, the semi-schematic constructions “*Qué X_{taboo word} V*” in Spanish (e.g.,

21 *Lit.*, ‘What testicles-pussy do with the music’.

22 This alludes to the name of a character of a comic.

23 *Lit.*, ‘What by Gurombalos’ beard is going on here?’.

¿Qué cojones haces aquí?, lit. ‘What bullocks you do here?’ meaning ‘What the hell are you doing here?’) and WhIAW in German (e.g., *Was zum Teufel machst du hier?*, lit. ‘What to hell do you here?’ meaning ‘What the hell are you doing here?’) are pragmatically described. In a second step, special attention is given to the nature of their slot fillers, which in Spanish they constitute improper interjections that have undergone a process of pragmaticalization (and another process of pragmaticalization once inserted in the construction), and in German they are phrasemes with expressive value. Here the interest lies in the widely use of vulgarisms in Spanish and German, the borrowings from other languages, and the creative language use.

Further research, in this context, may point to other parameters that can be crucial to uncover more similarities and differences between Spanish and German constructional idioms (also other pairs of languages), as well as to the exploitation of the contrastive unilateral methodology (as within the context of the research project *Constridioms*: <https://constridioms.es/>) to find more constructions in the source/target language²⁴ –which can ultimately lead to a redefinition of the notion of constructional idiom in terms of formal and semantic/pragmatic properties.

Acknowledgements

This research was carried out within the framework of the research project ‘‘Creativity through the lens of Construction Grammar: a corpus and AI-based repository of constructional idioms in German, Spanish and English (CREACONSTRIDIOMS)’’ (PID2024-161338OB-100), funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation and led by Carmen Mellado Blanco. The research was also funded by the European COST-Action CA22115 ‘‘Building a Multilingual Repository of Phraseme Constructions’’.

24 Of special interest could be the subschema [*bei X Bart*] ‘by the beard of X’ in German (e.g., *Was beim Barte des Merlins nochmal, hast du vor?*, lit. ‘What by Merlin’s beard again, you plan’, meaning ‘What on Merlin’s beard again do you intend to do?’ (deTenTen20, 43834117)), which could help us find more semi-schematic constructions in Spanish (e.g., [*por las barbas de X*]: *¡¡¡Pero por las barbas de Kerry King, cómo se pueden decir tantas soplapolleces en tan poco texto!!!*, lit. ‘But for the beards of Kerry King, how can be told much bullshit in so little text’, meaning ‘But by the beards of Kerry King, how can so much nonsense be said in so few words!!!’ (esTenTen18, 12634967)).

References

- Akiyama, Joshua. 2014. “Wh-the-hell as a polarity-insensitive, speaker-oriented domain restrictor”. *Proceedings of SALT 30*: 334–354.
- Boas, Hans. 2010. *Contrastive Studies in Construction Grammar*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Boas, Hans, and Francisco González-García. 2014. *Romance Perspectives on Construction Grammar*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Bolinger, Dwight. 1968. “Entailment and the Meaning of Structures”. *Glossa* 2: 119–127.
- Cotta Ramusino, Paola, and Fabio Mollica. 2020. *Contrastive Phraseology: Languages and Cultures in Comparison*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholar Publishers.
- Colleman, Timothy. 2020. “The Curious Case of Ditransitive Pity, or the Productivity of an Unproductive Pattern”. *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 70 (3): 337–358. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa-2022-2068>
- Dobrovolskij, Dmitrij. 2011. “Phraseologie und Konstruktionsgrammatik”. In *Konstruktionsgrammatik III. Aktuelle Fragen und Lösungsansätze*, edited by Alexander Lasch, and Alexander Ziem, 111–130. Tübingen: Stauffenburg.
- Escandell Vidal, Victoria. 1999. “Los enunciados interrogativos. Aspectos semánticos y pragmáticos”. In *Gramática descriptiva de la lengua española*, coordinated by Violeta Demonte Barreto and Ignacio Bosque, 3929–3992. Madrid: Espasa Calpe.
- Esteban-Fonollosa, Maricel and Pedro Ivorra Ordines. 2023. “Hasta los huesos, bis in die Knochen. Construcciones fraseológicas somáticas en contraste a través de corpus”. *Revista de Filología Alemana* 31: 145–165. <https://doi.org/10.5209/rfal.88457>
- Fillmore, Charles J. 1985. “Syntactic Intrusions and The Notion of Grammatical Construction”. *Proceedings of the Eleventh Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society* 73–86.
- Finkbeiner, Rita. 2019. “On the Role of Pragmatics in Construction Grammar”. *Constructions and Frames* 11(2): 171–192.
- Goldberg, Adele. 2019. *Explain me this: Creativity, Competition and the Partial Productivity of Constructions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Herrero Ruiz de Loizaga, Francisco J. 2023. “Elementos intensificadores de las palabras interrogativas”. *Estudios de Lingüística Universidad de Alicante*. No. 39: 85–108. <https://doi.org/10.14198/ELUA.22034>
- Höder, Stefan. 2014. “Constructing diasystems. Grammatical organisation in bilingual groups”. In *The sociolinguistics of grammar*, edited by Tor A. Åfarli, and Brit Mæhlum, 137–152. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/slcs.154.07hod>

- Hoffmann, Thomas. 2020. “Marginal Argument Structure constructions: the [V the Ntaboo-word out of]-construction in Post-colonial Englishes”. *Linguistics Vanguard*. No: 6 (1). <https://doi.org/10.1515/lingvan-2019-0054>
- Hoffmann, Thomas. 2022. “Constructionist approaches to creativity”. *Yearbook of the German Cognitive Linguistics Association*. 10(1): 259–284. <https://doi.org/10.1515/gcla-2022-0012/html>
- Huang, James. 2004. *Between syntax and semantics*. New York: Routledge.
- Ivorra Ordines, Pedro. In press. *Comparative constructional idioms in Spanish, English and French: A contrastive usage-based approach*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Ivorra Ordines, Pedro. 2023. “Por mí como si te operas. Constructional idioms of rejection from a constructionist approach”. *Yearbook of Phraseology* 14: 89–120. <https://doi.org/10.1515/phras-2023-0005>
- Ivorra Ordines, Pedro, and Belén López Meirama. 2025. “Vete a freír cristales. The interplay of convention and innovation in a constructional idiom of rejection in Spanish”. *Review of Cognitive Linguistics* 23 (2): 596–633. <https://doi.org/10.1075/rcl.00176.ivo>
- Kay, Paul, and Charles J. Fillmore. 1999. “Grammatical constructions and linguistic generalizations. The What’s X doing Y? construction”. *Language* 75(1): 1–33. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/417472>
- Martin, Joshua. 2021. “D-Linking and the Semantics of Wh-in-Situ”. *Proceedings of the Linguistic Society of America* 6(1): 448–462.
- Mansilla Pérez, Ana. 2020. “Gramática de construcciones y fraseología contrastiva alemán-español”. In *Das Leben in einem Rosa Licht sehen- Ver la vida de color de rosa. Festschrift für Rosa Piñel*, edited by Isabel García *et al.* 221–233. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Mellado Blanco, Carmen. 2022. *Productive Patterns in Phraseology and Construction Grammar. A Multilingual Approach*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Mellado Blanco, Carmen, Fabio Mollica and Elmar Schafroth. 2022. “Das interessiert mich einen X! Die intensivierende Konstruktionsfamilie der absoluten Interesselosigkeit im Spanischen, Italienischen und Deutschen”. In *Konstruktionen zwischen Lexikon und Grammatik. Phrasem-Konstruktionen monolingual, bilingual und multilingual*, edited by Carmen Mellado Blanco, Fabio Mollica, and Elmar Schafroth, 283-368. Berlin: De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110770209-011>
- Perek, Florent. 2016. “Using distributional semantics to study syntactic productivity in diachrony: A case study”. *Linguistics* 4(1): 149–188. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ling-2015-0043>
- Pesetsky, David. 1987. “Wh-in-situ: movement and unselective binding”. In *The representation of (in)definiteness*, edited by Eric J. Reuland, and Alice G.B. Ter Meulen, 98–129. Cambridge: MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.3765/plsa.v6i1.4981>

- Sánchez López, Cristina. 2019. “¿Qué demonios...? o las interrogativas malsonantes en español”. In *Estudios de la Lexicología, Lexicografía y Gramática en Honor a Manuel Álvar Ezquerro*, edited by Carmen Cazorla Vivas, María Ángela García Aranda, and María Pilar Nuño Álvarez, 515–529. Madrid: Editorial Axac.
- Schafroth, Elmar. 2022. “Phraseoschablonen interlingual – aus synchroner und diachroner Perspektive”. In *Konstruktionsgrammatik VII. Wandel im Sprachgebrauch*, edited by Alexander Lasch, and Alexander Ziem, 79–105. Tübingen: Stauffenburg.
- Schoonjans, Steven. 2023. Eine Typologie der IAW-Phrasen in Ergänzungsfragen. *Linguistische Treffen in Wrocław 23*: 151–164. <https://doi.org/10.23817/lingtreff.23-9>
- Schoonjans, Steven. 2025. On the internal and external productivity of IAW Phrases in German. In *How to do things with corpora. Methodological issues and cases studies on grammar*, edited by Torsten Leuschner, Anais Vajnovszki, Gauthier Delaby, and Jóhanna Barðdal, 313–351. Berlin: Springer-Verlag.
- Schmid, Hans-Jörg. 2020. *The dynamics of the linguistic system: usage, conventionalization, and entrenchment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stein, Nancy L. and Marc W. Hernández. 2007. Assessing understanding and appraisals during emotional experience. In *Handbook of Emotion Elicitation and Assessment*, edited by James A. Coan and John J. B. Allen, 298–317. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stefanowitsch, Anatol. 2011. “Keine Grammatik ohne Konstruktionen: Ein logisch-ökonomisches Argument für die Konstruktionsgrammatik”. In *Sprachliches Wissen zwischen Lexikon und Grammatik*, edited by Stefan Engelberg, Anke Holler, and Kristel Proost, 181–210. Berlin: De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110262339.181>