Phraseological Complexity or Clarity. Readability Comparison of Literal and Figurative Spanish Texts[1]

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Abstract: The article analyses the effect of Spanish phraseological units — such as idioms, proverbs, and fixed expression — on the readability of written texts. While these expressions are key to native communication and cultural identity, they can challenge comprehension, as their meanings often cannot be deduced from individual words. The research analyses 44 Spanish text pairs: one version of each includes phraseological units, while the other conveys the same content without them. Using three Spanish-specific readability formulas — the Fernández Huerta Readability Index, Gutiérrez de Polini's Formula, and the Szigriszt-Pazos Perspicuity Index — the study measures the linguistic complexity of each version. Contrary to the initial hypothesis, results show that texts with figurative language are not less readable. In fact, they consistently scored higher in readability than their literal counterparts. These findings suggest that phraseological expressions may enhance rather than hinder comprehension, possibly due to their familiarity and cultural resonance within native Spanish contexts. However, the study could motivate formula creators to develop a system and principles to measure emotionally and culturally loaded language.
Keywords: Phraseology. Literal language, Phrasemes, Spanish.

Título: «Complejidad fraseológica o claridad: una comparación de la legibilidad de textos literales y figurativos en español».
Resumen: Este artículo analiza el efecto de las unidades fraseológicas del español —como modismos, refranes y expresiones fijas— en la legibilidad de los textos escritos. Aunque estas expresiones son fundamentales para la comunicación nativa y la identidad cultural, pueden dificultar la comprensión, ya que sus significados a menudo no se pueden deducir de las palabras individuales. La investigación analiza 44 pares de textos en español: una versión de cada par incluye unidades fraseológicas, mientras que la otra transmite el mismo contenido sin ellas. Utilizando tres fórmulas de legibilidad específicas para el español —el Índice de legibilidad de Fernández Huerta, la Fórmula de Gutiérrez de Polini y el Índice de perspicuidad de Szigriszt-Pazos— el estudio mide la complejidad lingüística de cada versión. Contrario a la hipótesis inicial, los resultados muestran que los textos con lenguaje figurado no son menos legibles. De hecho, obtuvieron de manera constante puntuaciones más altas en legibilidad que sus equivalentes literales. Estos hallazgos sugieren que las expresiones fraseológicas pueden potenciar, más que obstaculizar, la comprensión, posiblemente debido a su familiaridad y resonancia cultural dentro de los contextos nativos del español. Sin embargo, el estudio podría impulsar a los creadores de fórmulas a desarrollar un sistema y unos principios para medir el lenguaje cargado emocional y culturalmente.
Palabras clave: Fraseología. Lenguaje literal. Frasema. Español.

Titre: « Complexité phraséologique ou clarté: comparaison de la lisibilité de textes espagnols littéraux et figurés ».
Résumé : L'article analyse l'effet des unités phraséologiques espagnoles — telles que les idiomes, proverbes et expressions figées — sur la lisibilité des textes écrits. Bien que ces expressions soient essentielles à la communication des locuteurs natifs et à l'identité culturelle, elles peuvent compliquer la compréhension, car leurs significations ne peuvent souvent pas être déduites des mots pris individuellement. La recherche analyse 44 paires de textes espagnols : dans chaque paire, une version inclut des unités phraséologiques, tandis que l'autre transmet le même contenu sans elles. En utilisant

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trois indices de lisibilité propres à l'espagnol — l'Indice de lisibilité de Fernández Huerta, la Formule de Gutiérrez de Polini et l'Indice de perspicuité de Szigriszt-Pazos — l'étude mesure la complexité linguistique de chaque version. Contrairement à l'hypothèse initiale, les résultats montrent que les textes avec langage figuré ne sont pas moins lisibles. En fait, ils obtiennent de manière constante des scores de lisibilité plus élevés que leurs équivalents littéraux. Ces résultats suggèrent que les expressions phraséologiques peuvent faciliter, plutôt qu'entraver, la compréhension, probablement en raison de leur familiarité et de leur résonance culturelle dans les contextes natifs espagnols. Cependant, l'étude pourrait inciter les créateurs de formules à développer un système et des principes permettant de mesurer le langage chargé d'émotion et de culture.
Mots-clés : Phraséologie. Langage littéral. Phrasème. Espagnol.

INTRODUCTION

This study aims to examine how the inclusion of phraseological units (PUs), such as phrasemes, proverbs, locutions, idioms and fixed expressions, affects the readability of Spanish written texts. Although these units are vital for cultural and communicative language competence, their comprehension can be difficult not only for foreign learners but also for native Spanish as they are sometimes inconsistently integrated into instructional materials; moreover, their use in everyday communication is declining.

The term "phraseology" probably has its origin in Greek or Latin being found in many Latin texts of the 16th century. The 20th century was marked by Bally´s (1909) and Vinogradov´s (1944) investigations into phraseological units and classifications. The meaning of "phraseology" changed throughout history, including the specification of particular languages or manners of conveying information, such as *ways of speaking; communicating; religious language; medical language*; *etc.* (Autelli, 2021). Phraseology and its definitions have developed over the years and the applied phraseological studies have become central to cultural identity studies, psycholinguistics, pedagogy and education, second language teaching, translation, and its relation to artificial intelligence, etc.

In the Spanish context the *Diccionario de colocaciones del español DICE* (http://www.dicesp.com/) deserves special mention which follows previous world research carried out in publications on colocations (Benson et al., 1986; Mel'čuk & Polguère, 2007). Moreover, Corpas´s (1996) three-pillar taxonomy - spheres I, II and III, classifying colocations, locutions, and phraseological statements, introduced a systematic distinction among phrasemes in linguistics and phraseodidactics. Recent contributions to Spanish phraseology (Gutiérrez Rubio, 2024) have delineated the essential conception of contemporary phraseological studies in Spanish. Alongside the studies mentioned above, other investigations underscore the relevance of phraseological units, not only in the native language but also emphasize their role in fostering native-like fluency and cultural literacy in foreign language methodology (Holikova & Nurboboyeva, 2020).

Scholarly interest in readability was originally directed toward recognizing hard-to-understand words in educational writing (Lively & Pressey, 1923). Over time, readability research has broadened to examine a range of textual features such as word frequency, sentence length, syntactic complexity, and lexical abstractness, which significantly influence comprehension (Dubay, 2004).

Although modern readability research is primarily conducted in English (Vajjala & Lučić, 2018; Rubesova, 2023), other languages such as French (Lee & Vajjala, 2022), Italian (Azpiazu & Pera, 2019), German (Dressler *et al.*, 2024), and Czech (Rubesova, 2025) have also been studied.

Research on Spanish readability originated with Spaulding's (1956) seminal formula, developed by this foreign scholar, which utilized sentence length and lexical familiarity as principal measures. Similar transnational trends are observable in other contexts; for instance, in Czech, the Slovak researcher Jozef Mistrík (1968) formulated the first tool for evaluating textual readability.

Building on Spaulding's pioneering formula, subsequent research further advanced Spanish readability studies, including formulas developed by Fernández Huerta (1959). Later, it was Gutiérrez de Polini (1972) and Patterson (1972) who extended this line of inquiry by analysing the Spanish language spoken by children in the United States, Crawford (1984) and Szigriszt-Pazos (1993). In the 1980s investigations employing the Fry graph (Gillian, Peña & Mountain, 1980) contributed to the methodological diversification of the field. During the 1990s, Rodríguez Diéguez et al. (1992) carried out comprehensive evaluations of school textbooks and formulated predictive models for readability. More recently, research has continued to expand across multiple domains, including administrative texts, physician-patient handouts, educational materials, etc. (Vásquez Rodríguez et al., 2022; Rubesova, 2024). Although the significance of these linguistic elements is widely recognized, little empirical research has yet examined how the inclusion of emotionally and culturally loaded language might influence readability. This lack of research prompted the present study to examine whether the use of phraseological expressions enhances or diminishes readability. The working hypothesis is that passages incorporating idiomatic and fixed expressions would prove less accessible, i.e., more demanding than their literal equivalents. To evaluate this, the study applied three recognized readability metrics for Spanish: the Fernández Huerta Index (1959), Gutiérrez de Polini's Readability Formula (1972), and the Szigriszt-Pazos Perspicuity Index (1993). Each of these instruments measures textual difficulty by considering factors such as sentence length, syllabic density, and word length.

1. METHODOLOGY

The research strategy involved the comparison of Spanish synthetic texts constructed for experimental purposes. The standardized machine-generated written passages were designed to contain either phrasemes or comparable texts without them, maintaining identical content. The specific method of producing the dataset was not relevant to the readability analysis itself. The written extracts were divided into pairs, each pair consisting of one version containing several types of phraseological units, while the other covered the same topic but employed literal, non-idiomatic language. To analyse these textual pairs, three readability formulas previously mentioned, were used, specifically developed to measure reading difficulty in the Spanish language; such as the Fernández Huerta Readability Index, Gutiérrez de Polini's Readability Formula, and the Szigriszt-Pazos Perspicuity Index. The aim was to determine whether the language enriched with phraseological units affects, increases or decreases, textual complexity and readability in comparison with their counterparts.

1.1. Data set of text corpus

The study worked with the text corpus comprising 44 written texts in the Spanish language, constituting 22 pairs. The comparative analysis was conducted on 22 texts characterized by the use of figurative language; phrasemes, locutions, proverbs, sayings, colloquial collocations and other set phrases; and the same amount of 22 literal texts duplicating the identical content of the non-literal ones in each analysed pair but omitting the phrasemes. The length of emotionally

charged texts denominated FIGLa (figurative language), ranged between 173 and 104 words (μ.=133.82, Me=130.5, σ= 15,38), while the literal texts, denominated LITLb (literal language) ranged between 97 and 171 words (μ=118.09, Me=112.5, σ=18.09). Each FIGLa cotained between seven and fourteen phraseological units, classified into:

> Locutions, such as *el alma de la fiesta; estar en la cuerda floja; estar hasta el cuello; poner los pies en la tierra; no echar leña al fuego; quemarse las pestañas; no perder el hilo; arrimar el hombro; estar con la soga al cuello; a mil por hora*; etc.
> Proverbs, such as *dime con quién andas y te diré quién eres; más vale prevenir que lamentar; no hay mal que por bien no venga; más sabe el diablo por viejo que por diablo; la unión hace la fuerza; más vale pájaro en la mano que ciento volando; al mal tiempo, buena cara*; etc.,
> Coloquial expressions, such as *meter la pata; tirar la toalla; no es cuestión de un día para otro; no es enchílame otra; ponerse las pilas; es pan comido; echar la toalla*; etc.

1.2. Instruments

As the primary instruments, three readability formulas were employed. Those were designed for readability evaluations of the Spanish language based on linguistic variables and scoring the ease or difficulty values. The Fernández Huerta Readability Index works with the average number of syllables per word and words per sentence. The Gutiérrez de Polini's Readability Formula also considers sentence length and syllable density. Finally, the Szigriszt-Pazos Perspicuity Index considers sentence and word length, and syllable count, widely used in pedagogical and medical contexts.

1.3. Procedure

The total of 44 (FIGLa/LITLb) texts, divided into 22 pairs and labelled 1FIGLa/1LITLb to 22FIGLa/22LITLb were subjected to scrutiny through the automated readability assessment tool (*www.legible.es).* Each of the formulas generated a numerical score, which was subsequently interpreted and associated with predefined verbal categories such as levels of difficulty, educational grades, and age groups. The following charts present a classification of these readability levels. The first chart shows the Fernández Huerta Readability Index scores and their assignment to corresponding Spanish education levels and age groups.

Chart 1) Fernández Huerta Readability Index

Scores	**Readability Levels**	**Educational levels in Spain/(age)**
101-	Extremely easy	1st-3rd Primary (6-8)
90-100	Very easy	4th Primary (9-10)
80-89	Easy	5th Primary (10-11)
70-79	Somewhat easy	6th Primary (11-12)
60-69	Average	1st-2nd Lower Secondary (12-14)
50-59	Slightly difficult	3rd-4th Lower Secondary (14-16)
30-49	Difficult	1st-2nd Higher Secondary (16-18)
Less than 30	Extremely difficult	University (18+)

Gutiérrez de Polini's Readability Formula provides score ranges that can be matched with Spanish education grades and age ranges.

Chart 2) Gutiérrez de Polini's Readability Formula

Scores	**Readability Levels**	**Educational levels in Spain/ (age)**
<= 20	Very difficult	University + (19+)
<= 33	Difficult	1st -2nd Higher Secondary (16-18)
<= 40	Slightly difficult	3rd-4th Lower Secondary (14-16)
<= 50	Average	1st-2nd Lower Secondary (12-14)
<= 60	Slightly easy	5th-6th Primary (10-11)
<= 70	Easy	3rd-4th Primary (8-9)
> 70	Very easy	1st-2nd Primary (6-7)

Finally, the interpretation of readability levels and scores was obtained using Szigriszt-Pazos Perspicuity Index which allowed their comparison with Spanish grade levels and age groups.

Chart 3) Szigriszt-Pazos Perspicuity Index

Scores	**Readability Levels**	**Educational levels in Spain/ (age)**
≤ 15	Very difficult	University (19+)
16-35	Difficult	Higher Secondary (16-18)
36-50	Slightly difficult	3rd-4th Lower Secondary (14-16)
51-65	Average	1st-2nd Lower Secondary (12-14)
66-75	Slightly easy	5th- 6th Primary (10-11)
76-85	Easy	3rd- 4th Primary (8-9)
> 85	Very easy	1st-2nd Primary (6-7)

In this study the following levels were taken into consideration: *muy fácil* (*very easy*), *fácil (easy), bastante fácil* (*slightly* easy), *algo fácil* (*somewhat easy*), *normal* (*average difficulty*), *algo difícil (somewhat difficult), bastante difícil (slightly difficult)* and *difícil (difficult)*. The observed inconsistency in these classifications between Szigriszt-Pazos and Huerta, corresponding to educational grade levels in the Spanish education system, was not ignored; e.g., *muy fácil (very easy)* by Szigriszt-Pazos equals the 1st–2nd grade of primary school education but *muy fácil (very easy)* by Huerta equals to the 4th grade. Moreover, score difficulties within each index are not verbally phrased in an equal manner. Building on this contrast, specifically the lower scores of the readability do not correspond across the indexes, so the difference was taken into account.

There are also discrepancies in verbal expressions of levels, Szigriszt-Pazos Perspicuity Index and Gutiérrez de Polini's Readability Formula use *slightly easy* which corresponds to *bastante fácil* by the analyser (*www.legible.es*) concurring with the 5th and 6th education levels while Fernández Huerta Readability Index employs *somewhat easy* corresponding to *algo fácil* in the same tool, which corresponds to the 6th educational level.

All these three indexes use only three verbal classifications on the scale of *difficult* texts, however, these do not correspond exactly to (*www.legible.es)* expressions, such as Fernández Huerta classifies *slightly difficult, difficult* and *extremely difficult* while Szigriszt-Pazos and Gutiérrez de Polini word them as *slightly difficult, difficult* and *very difficult.* The readability analyser (*www.legible.es)* works with Szigriszt-Pazos Perspicuity Index and Gutiérrez de Polini's Readability Formula literal expression *bastante difícil* corresponding to the 3rd – 4th education levels being stated in English in official Szigriszt-Pazos Perspicuity Index and in Gutiérrez de Polini's Readability Formula charts such as *slightly difficult* while Fernández Huerta´*s algo difícil* which also corresponds to the *3rd and 4th levels* carries the English equivalent of *somewhat difficult*.

The main aim was to compare the difficulty of all written texts focusing on the use of literal versus non-literal language, and to confirm or refute the assumption that texts containing phrasemes would receive lower readability scores - that is, be more difficult to read.

2. RESULTS

The obtained results of the level of difficulty were classified employing three formulas and a readability tool previously mentioned. Each numerical value was matched with a verbal expression of difficulty.

The overall and the most frequent assessment, as proposed by the (www.legible.es) tool, among 22 FIGLa texts with phraseological units was average (normal) readability in 31 instances, followed by 14 instances of slightly easy (bastante fácil) and 13 of somewhat easy (algo fácil) across the three readability formulas. There were no difficult (difícil) ratings. On the contrary, the 22 LITLb literal texts achieved 42 average (normal) assessments within the formulas but almost no easy (fácil) classification; there was only one slightly easy (bastante fácil) and one somewhat easy (algo fácil) while the remaining texts were classified as somewhat difficult (algo difícil) in 12 times followed by slightly difficult (bastante difícil) seven times.

As demonstrated, the scores of literal texts LITLb tended to fall within the scale of average to difficult texts whereas the idiomatic language texts FIGLa fell within the scale from average (normal) to easy (fácil). The evidence proved that all texts FIGLa containing idiomatic language, within all analysed pairs, scored higher readability than literal passages LITLb, placing the literal texts LITL16b, LITL19b and LITL20b among the most difficult for reading and the LITL22b as the easiest one. Contrasting the most difficult LITLb texts with the most difficult FIGLa phraseological texts, we found that FIGL19a and LITL19b together with FIGL20a and LITL20b proved to be the most difficult ones within both types of texts - non-literal and literal ones (see Chart 4). Notwithstanding, the literal text LITL16b literal does not align in difficulty with its counterpart FIGL16a, as it dod not appear among the most difficult but was instead rated only somewhat easy (algo fácil).

Chart 4) The lowest readable texts

The lowest readable texts/ Equivalent counterparts	***Fernández Huerta***	***Gutiérrez de Polini***	***Szigriszt-Pazos***
LITL16b FIHL16a	**45.93 difficult** 75.38 somewhat easy	**34.25 slightly difficult** 43.87 average	**40.68 slightly difficult** 71.15 slightly easy
LITL19b FIGL19a	**49.61dificult** 63.11 average	**33,69 slightly difficult** 40.23 average	**44,17 slightly difficult** 40.23 average
LITL20b FIGL20a	**49.93 difficult** 62.62 average	**33.3 slightly difficult** 40.1 average	**44.72 slightly difficult** 57.76 average

Overall, the phraseological texts FIGLa were longer than their literal counterparts LITLb in all cases, but, FIGLa were characterized by higher readability, since length did not contribute to the level of reading difficulty. Drawing on the main variables the three employed readability formulas, by Fernández Huerta, by Gutiérrez de Polini, and Szigriszt-Pazos which use the average number of syllables per word and words per sentence we analysed in detail the most difficult texts LITL16b, LITL19b, LITL20b with their FIGLa counterparts.

2.1. Design and data analysis

The analysis of FIGL16a and LITL16b texts proved that LITL16b was more difficult than its paired text, containing on average more letters per word, more syllables per word, but, surprisingly fewer words per sentence (10.7) - than the easier text FIGL16a, which had (13) words per sentence.

Also, LITL16b contained two six-syllable and nine five-syllable words whereas FIGL16a did not contain any six-syllable words and consisted of only six five-syllable words. The non-literal FIGL16a comprised seven phrasemes with their literal interpretations in LITL16b, such as *no hay mal que por bien no venga – los errores a menudo generan oportunidades; poner los puntos sobre los íes – aclarar malentendido y ser precisos; salir de la zona de confort – salir de la comodidad; parecer un coco – parecer complicada*, etc.

Analogous results were observed in the texts FIGL19a and LITL19b. The non-literal, more readable text FIGL19a contained a higher average number of words per sentence (14.44) compared to its less readable literal counterpart LITL19b, which averaged (13.56) words per sentence. LITL19b included two six-syllable and eight five-syllable words, whereas FIGL19a contained no six-syllable words and only eight five-syllable words. FIGL19a incorporated eight phraseological units, with LITL19b containing their corresponding literal equivalents, such as *es un gustazo - es muy agradable; al mal tiempo, buen cara - aunque surjan inconveniente mantener una actitud positiva; quedar en el tintero - dejar algo*, etc.

The LITL20b written passage corroborated the previous findings. It contained more letters and syllables per word than in FIGL20a but fewer words per sentence, averaging (10.03) words in LITL20b compared to (12.9) words in FIGL20a. LITL20b contained eight five-syllable words, whereas FIGL20a contained six; no six-syllable words were present in either text. The FIGL20a included seven phraseological units, interpreted in literal LITL20b text, *poner manos a la obra – esforzarse; funciona como un reloj - funciona correctamente; tirar la toalla - rendir ante algún error; no dejarse llevar por la corriente - no dejarse influenciar; eres lo que comes - la alimentación influye en nuestra calidad de vida*, etc.

The upsurge of interest in the comparison of phrasemes and their literal expressions in the lowest readable texts LITL16b, LITL19b and LITL20b corresponding to the 1st-2nd levels of higher secondary school (age 16-18) and highest readable texts FIGL1a, FIGL3a and FIGL22a (see Chart 5) corresponding to the 4th -5th education levels (age 9-11) measured by the F. Huerta formula led to further comparative analyses.

In the study of the most readable texts, FIGL3a contained the most letters per word, on average (4.41) in comparison with FIGL1a (3.98) and FIGL22a (4.18) letters. In the same text, FIGL3a also had the highest number (1.8) syllables per word on average, and the most words per sentence (15.22) which were detected in the texts FIGL1a, where (1.68) letters per word and (14.7) words per sentence were present. FIGL22a contained only (1.78) letters per word on average and (14.44) words per sentence.

Despite the fact that FIGL22a text was one of the easiest based on the readability scores, it contained one 7-syllable word, which was not even found in the most difficult written texts LITL16b, LITL19b and LITL20b. FIGL1a and FIGL3a possessed one 5-syllable word each.

The same tendency as in the case of the most difficult written texts and their counterparts was discovered when comparing pairs of the easiest texts with their equivalents: all easier texts contained more words per sentence. LITL1b included more letters (5.29) and syllables (2.22) per word than FIGL1a, just as LITL3b with its (5.06) letters and (2.11) syllables per word versus FIGL3a. Finally, LITL22b covered (4.94) letters and (2.05) syllables per word whereas FIGL22a was characterized by (4.18) letters per word and (1.78) syllables per word.

Analogously balancing the findings of the non-literal texts FIGLa against the literal ones LITLb we found that LITL1b, LITL3b and LITL22b texts of lower readability contained more letters and syllables per word than FIGL1a, FIGL3a and FIGL22a but on the contrary fewer

words per sentence. LITL1b was also characterized by more long-syllable words than FIGL1a: there were five 5-syllable and one 6-syllable word, not finding a comparative difference in pairs FIGL3a and LILT3b, where in both texts one 5-syllable word was detected, and finally, regarding FIGL22a and LILT22b, both contained one 7-syllable word.

Chart 5) The highest readable texts

The highest readable texts/ Equivalent counterparts	***Fernández Huerta***	***Gutiérrez de Polini***	***Szigriszt-Pazos***
FIGL1a FIGL1b	**91.05 very easy** 60.48 average	**51.45 slightly easy** 39.33 average	**87.45 very easy** 55.33average
FIGL3a FIGL3b	**83.32 easy** 67.2 average	**47.11 average** 41.64 average	**79.75 easy** 62.41 average
FIGL 22a FIGL 22b	**85.31 easy** 71.49 somewhat easy	**49.55 average** 43.08 average	**81.21 easy** 67.27 slightly easy

Concerning the instances of employed phrasemes and their counterparts, FIGL1a comprised 14 set phrases with their literal meaning in LITL1b, such as *el alma de la fiesta - una persona alegre y sociable; andar de capa caída – parecer desanimado; estar en la cuerda floja – atravesar una situación difícil; no hay mal que por bien no venga – las situaciones malas a veces traen consecuencias positivas; estar hasta el cuello – sobrecargado de problemas; un callejón sin salida – que no tiene solución; poner los pies en la tierra – volver a pensar con claridad; después de la tormenta viene la calma – las cosas se mejorarán, etc*.

FIGL3a text was composed of ten phraseological units and was literally interpreted in LITL3b, such as *nos pone entre la espalda y la pared – en momentos difíciles; da la cara por ti – te apoya; más sabe el diablo por viejo que por diablo – escuchar a personas con experiencia puede ayudar; se quedan para los momentos de vacas flacas – permanecen a tu lado en momentos más complicados; quién tiene un amigo, tiene un tesoro – la verdadera amistad es un gran valor en la vida; etc*.

FIGL22a contained 11 phrasemes, one more than the previously mentioned text FIGL3a, and they were literaly transcribed such as *no da abasto – no puede cumplir con todo; la tienen entre ceja y ceja – la vigilan con desconfianza; le cuesta un ojo de la cara – resulta muy costoso; no da su brazo a torcer – no es flexible; más vale prevenir que curar – actuar con precaución; le da largas – evita hablar de; etc*.

Zooming in on the most difficult FIGLa texts, FIGL19a and FIGL20a belonged to the three least readable non-literal texts (see Chart 4), together with FIGL21a which was the most difficult *among phraseological texts with an average (normal) assessment within three formulas by Huerta (68.01), Gutiérrez de Polini (40.92) and Szigriszt-Pazos (63.18).*

Notwithstanding, LITL16b one of the most difficult literal texts and FIGL21a pertaining to the most difficult non-literal texts do not tally in terms of difficulty with their counterparts in analysed pairs, as FIGL16a and LITL21b do not appear among the most difficult ones.

Overall, the comparative analysis of texts of the highest and lowest readability detected that one of the most difficult texts, LITL20b, contained the highest number of letters per word (6.01), while the highest number of syllables per word (2.5) was detected in LITL16b, which also belonged to the three least readable texts. The highest average number of words per sentence (15.22) was found in one of the easiest texts, specifically in FIGL3a. Moreover, only FIGL22a and LITL22b contained one seven-syllable word.

CONCLUSIONS

The main objective of this comparative study was to measure the level of readability of Spanish written passages with the integration of phraseological units such as phrasemes, locutions, collocations, colloquial set phrases, sayings, proverbs, etc. and their literal equivalents.

The variable of length, such as sentence length and word length in the analysed written passages, contributed significantly to the comparative study. To embrace the inner composition of the texts, specific instances of phraseological units in the most and least readable texts with their literal counterparts were provided. In addition, this study sought to ascertain whether there was a concordance across the employment of each readability index, and whether they provided convergent scores or readability levels.

The analyses worked with 22 pairs of short extracts, complying with stated conditions, e. i. one of each pair should contain phraseological units meanwhile the second text of each pair transcribed the same content, omitting any phrasemes, but employing the literal language.

The underlying assumption that texts comprising figurative language will evidence lower readability was not confirmed, as all of the written samples containing phraseological units demonstrated higher readability than their counterparts composed in literal, non-figurative language. The study describes in detail the texts in their extreme readability values, i.e., those the most and least readable ones from the analysed corpus.

A collection of findings provided evidence of the most difficult texts written in non-figurative, literal language such as LITL16b, LITL19b and LITL20b regardless of the formula employed. All of these samples scored less than 50 on the readability score range, corresponding to *difficult* or *slightly difficult* appellation within Fernández Huerta and *Szigriszt-Pazos readability formulas and average by Gutiérrez de Polini*. Building on the contrast, it is important to highlight that the texts with the highest readability were all from the group of non-literal texts, containing between seven to 14 phraseological units of different kinds. The passages FIGL1a, FIGL3a and FIGL22a resulted in the easiest texts in reading, oscillating among 80 to 91 score range by Fernández Huerta and *Szigriszt-Pazos readability formulas, e. i. easy or very easy texts and among 47 and 51 on the scale of Gutiérrez de Polini pertaining among average and slightly easy texts.*

Moreover, the analysis underscores the nuanced interplay between linguistic density and sentence structure: while increased word length and syllabic complexity correlate with reduced readability, longer sentences appear to mitigate this effect by offering greater contextual clarity. *Examination of written passages has shown that there was a direct proportion among the lower readability and letters and syllables per word but inverse proportion between the difficulty and a length of sentences. The most* difficult texts in each analysed pair contained on average more letters per word, more syllables per word but fewer words per sentence.

These insights not only problematize conventional assumptions about figurative language and difficulty but also highlight the limitations of existing readability formulas. Consequently, this research invites further exploration into the development of more sensitive and adaptable tools capable of capturing the true impact of figurative language on text accessibility across diverse communicative contexts.

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