

The proverb as a cultural cognitive macrostructure: Syntactic, conceptual, and anthropological analysis of "Camarón que se duerme, se lo lleva la corriente" (*The shrimp that falls asleep is carried away by the current*).

El refrán como macroestructura cognitiva cultural: Análisis sintáctico, conceptual y antropológico de "Camarón que se duerme, se lo lleva la corriente".

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Abstract:

This article analyses the proverb *Camarón que se duerme se lo lleva la corriente* (*The shrimp that falls asleep is carried away by the current*) from the perspective of cognitive linguistics and cognitive anthropology. The aim of this article is to analyse the proverb in order to explain how the cognitive mechanisms that organise shared knowledge work: mental spaces, image schemas and conceptual metaphors, to demonstrate that the proverb operates as a cultural cognitive macrostructure. The study adopts a qualitative and descriptive-interpretative approach, integrating syntactic, cognitive and cultural analysis. First, the syntactic structure of the proverb, the phenomena of ellipsis and the function of pronominal verbs are examined as a point of access to the conceptual organisation of the proverb. Subsequently, through the theory of mental spaces (Dancygier and Sweetser, 2005), the theory of image schemas (Johnson, 1987; Peña, 2012; Dodge and Lakoff, 2005, and Barrajón, 2018), and conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff and Johnson, 2009), we explain how these cognitive elements structure the proverb and how it projects a physical bodily experience from the natural realm onto the social plane, where passivity implies loss or failure. Finally, the results obtained are linked to the conception of the proverb as shared knowledge.

Keywords: Proverb. Syntax. Cognitive linguistics. Cognitive anthropology.

Resumen:

En este artículo se analiza el refrán *Camarón que se duerme se lo lleva la corriente* desde la lingüística cognitiva y la antropología cognitiva. El objetivo de este artículo es analizar el refrán

para explicar cómo funcionan los mecanismos cognitivos que organizan el conocimiento compartido: espacios mentales, esquemas de imagen y metáforas conceptuales, para demostrar que el refrán opera como una macroestructura cognitiva cultural. El estudio adopta un enfoque cualitativo y descriptivo-interpretativo, integrando análisis sintáctico, cognitivo y cultural. Primeramente, se examinan la estructura sintáctica del refrán, los fenómenos de elipsis y la función de los verbos pronominales como un punto de acceso a la organización conceptual del refrán. Posteriormente, a través de la teoría de los espacios mentales (Dancygier y Sweetser, 2005), de la teoría de los esquemas de imagen (Johnson, 1987; Peña, 2012; Dodge y Lakoff, 2005 y Barrajón, 2018) y de la teoría de la metáfora conceptual (Lakoff y Johnson, 2009), se explica cómo estos elementos cognitivos estructuran el refrán y cómo en este se proyecta una experiencia física corporal del ámbito natural hacia el plano social, donde la pasividad implica pérdida o fracaso. Finalmente, los resultados obtenidos se vinculan a la concepción del refrán como conocimiento compartido.

Palabras clave: Refrán. Sintaxis. Lingüística cognitiva. Antropología cognitiva.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to analyse the proverb in order to explain how the cognitive mechanisms that organise shared knowledge work: mental spaces, image schemas and conceptual metaphors, to demonstrate that the proverb operates as a cultural cognitive macrostructure. To achieve this objective, the proverb *Camarón que se duerme, se lo lleva la corriente* (The shrimp that sleeps is carried away by the current) is taken as a case study and analysed on three levels (syntactic, cognitive and cultural) to show how the sentence patterns of the proverb respond to stable cognitive configurations that reproduce the way in which social subjects conceptualise the relationships between passivity-loss or failure.

In most cases, paremiological and phraseological research has focused on the semantic and pragmatic study of proverbs, while the syntactic dimension has been addressed in a secondary and general manner to discuss their sentence structure, which is used to mention their syntactic autonomy or structure (Riera, 2008), which some researchers agree can be mostly two-member or multi-member, such as Riera Rubio (2008) and Castillo Carballo (1998). Other authors observe syntactic anomalies without analysing them in depth, such as García-Page (1993), who points out that the most representative phonetic aspect of the proverb (the rhyme) causes alterations in the syntax.

The lack of syntactic analysis not only implies a gap in knowledge, but also has an impact on the treatment of proverbs in relation to other semantic or pragmatic aspects. If we look at Corpas's (1996) classification of phraseological units, we can see that the first two spheres have a syntactic treatment that leads to classifications for both collocations and idioms, but this is not the case with proverbs. Pérez Martínez (1996) presents a contrary, but not exhaustive, case of syntactic analysis for

classification purposes. Nevertheless, given that his analysis focuses on 'the syntactic structure that forms the first part of the proverb' (Pérez, 1996, p. 198), it cannot be used systematically to establish comparative analyses between proverbs or comparisons between syntactic and semantic aspects.

Given this lack of studies, this paper proposes that syntactic analysis functions as a point of access to the conceptual organisation of the proverb. This paper will address the relationship between syntax and cognitive linguistics in proverbs, based on the assumption that the syntactic structure of the proverb cannot be understood as a mere formal support, but rather as a manifestation of the conceptual processes that organise shared experience and knowledge.

On the other hand, the proverb is also approached from the perspective of cognitive anthropology, conceptualising the proverb as a unit of shared knowledge that behaves as a cognitive macrostructure, containing cognitive mechanisms such as mental spaces, mental schemas, image schemas, and conceptual metaphors.

Theoretical framework

Firstly, it is useful to provide a definition of what is meant by a proverb in this work. To do so, we start with the words of D'Andrea (2018), who mentions that "proverbs constitute authentic microtexts, a legacy of popular wisdom, endowed with syntactic and morphological autonomy and with a moral or 'therapeutic' purpose" (p. 187). Corpas Pastor (1996) adds lexicalisation, syntactic autonomy, textual autonomy, general truth value and anonymity as criteria for identifying a proverb, to serve as a possible guide for its delimitation, but in particular for the mention of its value and anonymity. On the other hand, the proverb can be defined from another perspective, as mentioned above, from cognitive anthropology, which proposes to define the proverb as a unit of shared knowledge, which will be useful for addressing its cultural function.

This work is based on the principles proposed by cognitive linguistics (hereinafter CL), whose most important premise is that "language is a capacity integrated into general cognition, as it is understood as the result of general cognitive abilities such as memory, reasoning, categorisation, or attention" (Ibarretxe-Antuñano, 2013, p. 248). From this perspective, lexicon, phraseological units, and grammatical structure reflect ways of conceptualising experience. Unlike structuralist or formalist theories that separate form from meaning, CL proposes that language emerges from use (Ghalebi and Sadighi, 2015), meaning that syntactic structures reflect patterns of thought that speakers consolidate

culturally. Therefore, studying the syntax of proverbs involves analysing how grammatical form encodes culturally shared conceptual schemas.

Similarly, one of the fundamental concepts for this work is the conceptual metaphor, proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (2009). Its difference from classical metaphor theory lies in the fact that this mechanism is not only a stylistic or literary device, but also a cognitive mechanism that allows abstract domains to be understood on the basis of concrete domains or experiences¹. Everyday expressions such as *being on the right track*, *dead end*, and *staying afloat* reveal metaphorical projections where spatial and bodily dimensions structure the understanding of social and emotional phenomena. In the case of proverbs, these metaphors are condensed into fixed syntactic structures that represent generalised thought patterns, conditionality, causality, and opposition, for example.

Additionally, Johnson (1987) proposes, as part of Idealised Cognitive Models, the concept of image schemas, defined by Valenzuela et al. (2012) as "mental structures that are abstracted from recurring interactions with the environment" (p. 46), that is, recurring patterns of bodily experience, such as MOVEMENT, COMPULSION, HORIZONTALITY, FORCE, among others, which organise conceptualisation. Peña Cervel (2012) mentions, in this regard, that these schemas: are preconceptual (the subject knows them, even if they do not have labels to name them), are corporeal (they emerge from physical experience), are schematic (they encompass a large number of experiences), and are structured (they have a structure).

These image schemas are particularly important to analyse, as some tend to be the basis on which metaphors and concepts are constructed. As a specific example, in proverbs, image schemas can be seen to translate into grammatical relationships, i.e., a schema such as MOVEMENT can be expressed through verbs of displacement, causal structures, or the schema COMPULSION, which implies movement through the application of force. In this way, syntax not only articulates the structure of the proverb, but also reproduces a bodily logic of thought.

In addition, Langacker (2004) mentions that "Cognitive grammar, by contrast, claims that lexicon, morphology, and syntax form a continuum of symbolic units serving to structure conceptual

¹ However, García Serrano and Escareño Davalos (2023) have pointed out that "conceptual metaphors do not only occur in cases where the concrete constructs the abstract" (p. 33), but that concrete and abstract concepts can also be related in other ways: the abstract structures the concrete, the concrete structures the concrete, and the abstract structures the abstract.

content for expressive purposes"² (p. 35). In the words of López Olea (2020), "a symbolic structure is the union between a semantic structure, or conceptual meanings, and a phonological structure, or linguistic expressions" (p. 67). Syntactic constructions, therefore, serve to structure conceptual content. In this way, syntactic structure acts as a conceptual mould that organises experience in linguistic terms.

Finally, the interrelation between phraseology and cognitive linguistics allows us to integrate the levels of analysis with the concepts mentioned above in order to study phraseological units, which are based on these cognitive models. The proverb, as a fixed unit, is not limited to reproducing a linguistic structure, but projects a conceptual scheme that has been collectively validated and shared. Analysing its syntax is therefore equivalent to exploring how the community of speakers has fixed its modes of reasoning within highly conventional linguistic structures. Taken together, these approaches allow us to observe, in the proverb, the syntactic (form), cognitive (mental spaces, image schemas and cognitive models) and cultural (shared knowledge schemas and models) levels.

Methodology

As explained in the previous section, this study adopts a qualitative and descriptive-interpretative approach, based on the postulates of CL and phraseology. The object of analysis is the proverb *Camarón que se duerme, se lo lleva la corriente* (The shrimp that sleeps is carried away by the current), which is widely documented in the paremiological repertoire of Mexican Spanish (Palomar, 2021; CONALITEG, 2020; Flores-Huerta, 2016) and also present in other variants of Spanish (Carbonell, 2002; Sevilla and Zurdo, 2009).

This proverb was chosen based on three criteria: 1) its frequency and vitality in oral and written usage, 2) its two-part structure with implicit causality, characteristic of a wide range of Spanish proverbs, and 3) its cognitive potential, as it condenses a network of conceptual metaphors and image schemas, in addition to its conditional structure implying mental spaces.

The analysis procedure is carried out in three stages:

1. **Syntactic analysis:** this consists of analysing the syntactic structure of the proverb and explaining the syntactic relationships between the different parts of the sentence, as well as explaining how the mechanism of ellipsis of certain sentence elements is presented in the proverb. Syntax is conceived from a cognitive perspective based on the proposal by Smith and Kosslyn (2008).

² Cognitive grammar, on the other hand, maintains that lexicon, morphology, and syntax form a continuum of symbolic units that serve to structure conceptual content for expressive purposes.

- The analysis is based on the approaches of Toledo Botaro (1999), Flores-Huerta (2016), Hernando Cuadrado (1997), Pérez Martínez (1999), Pérez Martínez (1996), Vega Rodríguez (2014-2015), Torres González et al. (2018), El Colegio de México (2024)
2. **Cognitive-conceptual analysis:** this consists of detecting the cognitive elements present in the proverb through the theory of mental spaces (Dancygier and Sweetser, 2005), the theory of image schemas (Johnson, 1987; Peña, 2012; Dodge and Lakoff, 2005, and Barraji3n, 2018) and the theory of conceptual metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson, 2009).
 3. **Cognitive-cultural analysis:** this consists of linking the results of the previous analyses with their cultural function and nature, based on the cognitive anthropological conception of the proverb as a unit of shared knowledge. To this end, the theory of Morin (1988) and Geertz (2003), Bobbie et al. (n.d.) is used.

The proverb "The shrimp that falls asleep is carried away by the current"

With regard to the structure of the proverb, it has already been mentioned that some authors point out that a characteristic that often appears in proverbs is the two-part nature of the structure. Authors such as Garc3a-Page (2008) confirm this idea, although he extends this structure to idioms. However, a more exhaustive analysis could reveal possible differences between the two units, as the "two-part structure" can only be clearly defined on the basis of a syntactic analysis and in relation to the proverbial or sententious aspect of proverbs. For this reason, it is particularly important not to separate syntax as a meaningful structure from the proverb.

With regard to the previous point, it should be clarified that the proverb under study in this work has a two-part structure; however, this may not be apparent if the proverb is consulted in sources where it is not recorded with a comma. As an example, Flores-Huerta (2016) records the proverb four times in two ways: 1) '*Camar3n que se duerme se lo lleva la corriente*' (p. 65 and p. 124) and 2) '*Camar3n que se duerme, se lo lleva la corriente*' (p. 130 and 167). Although it does not offer a meaning as such, the first example appears in the categories 'Confident' and 'Embellished language', while the second example appears in the categories 'Sailors, men of the sea' and 'Rules of the game in the struggle for power'. In essence, although the comma allows us to observe the two members, the category "two-member" with which these two parts are referred to in the proverb is very general, so it is advisable to analyse the syntactic structure.

On the other hand, with regard to the meaning of the proverb analysed in this article, not all dictionaries or reference sources offer a definition, as some are thematic or contain commentary-type notes rather than definitions. Sevilla Muñoz and Zurdo Ruiz-Ayúcar (2009) explain its meaning as follows: "It criticises the lack of diligence of someone who has to bear the consequences, mainly for himself" (n.p.), and they record it as currently in use with an assertive, estimative and persuasive intention.

Syntactic structure of the proverb

Syntax, in the words of Smith and Kosslyn (2008), "is the way of representing the structure of the sentence, and many psychologists and linguists believe that it is also part of our mental representation of the sentence" (p. 512). They also point out that it involves relating types of words in a linear and hierarchical manner. From a syntactic point of view, the proverb *Camarón que se duerme, se lo lleva la corriente* (The shrimp that falls asleep is carried away by the current) consists of a sentence made up of a subject (the current) and a predicate (*the shrimp that falls asleep is carried away*). The proverb begins with the direct object complement (DOC) consisting of a noun phrase *Camarón que se duerme*, composed of a noun core (*camarón*) and a specific adjective clause (*que se duerme*), which modifies the noun *camarón* and delimits its extension (see Table 1). This subordinate clause restricts the meaning of the noun by indicating the condition that determines the action expressed in the main clause.

Table 1

Syntactic structure of the proverb

Shrimp	que se duerme	se	it	takes	the	current
PREDICATE					SUBJECT	
COD		Pronominal verb	COD duplication inserted in the verb	Pronominal verb	Modifier	Core
Noun phrase Nucleus + Modifier		Pronominal particle that provides aspectual	Pronoun	Verb with the main meaning	Article or determiner	Noun

		elements				
Noun	Adjective clause					

Source: Own work

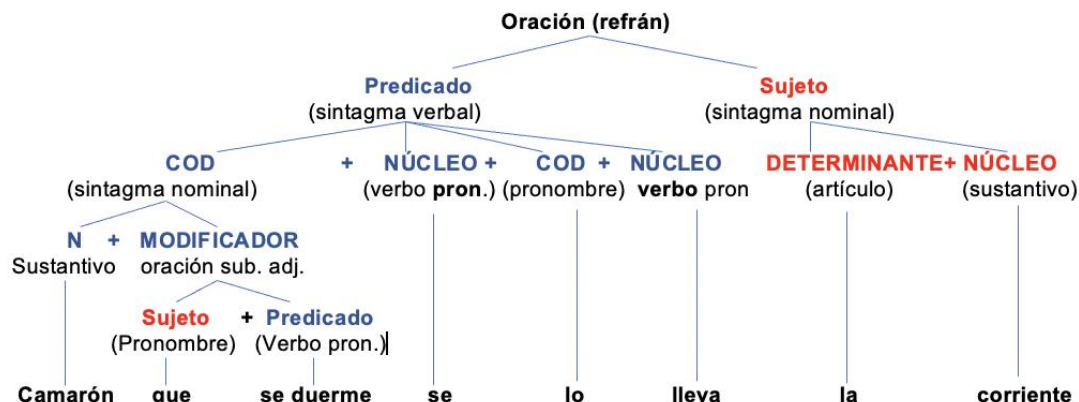
The phrase *Camarón que se duerme* (Shrimp *that sleeps*) acts as the direct object of the pronominal verb *llevarse* (to take away), whose referent is duplicated in the pronoun "lo". In this regard, Toledo Botaro (1999) points out that this is common in proverbs:

Verbal complements, especially direct or governed complements, become preverbal in most cases; they even tend to occupy the first place within the proverb, where they are emphasised, which necessarily causes their reduplication in a pronoun immediately preceding the verb. (p. 715)

Smith and Kosslyn (2008) state that syntactic structure trees generate mental representations of the hierarchy of relationships between words and that these representations are a key element in determining the meaning of a phrase (or sentence). The syntactic analysis explained above yields the following syntactic structure tree for the proverb *Camarón que se duerme se lo lleva la corriente* (see Figure 1):

Figure 1.

Syntactic structure tree of the proverb *Camarón que se duerme se lo lleva la corriente*



Source: Prepared by the author based on a proposal by Smith and Kosslyn (2008)

It can be seen that the proverb begins with the predicate and ends with the subject of the sentence. The distinctive feature is that, although it begins with the predicate, the first element that appears is a noun phrase: *Camarón que se duerme* (Shrimp that falls asleep). A similar structure can be seen in the proverb *Perro que ladra no muerde* (Barking dogs don't bite) (Flores-Huerta, 2016, p. 75). This type of beginning creates the illusion of being a sentence subject due to its nominal structure.

The mechanism of ellipsis in the proverb

In the structure of this proverb, a phenomenon of ellipsis of three syntactic elements can be observed:

1. **Prepositional ellipsis:** The direct object (*Camarón que se duerme*) does not have an introductory preposition (*a*). The absence of the preposition 'a' may be due to two things: a) a process of depersonalisation: *La corriente se llevó (el) camarón que se duerme*, instead of *La corriente se llevó (al) camarón que se duerme* (the latter form could be classified as the most common) or b) a mechanism of linguistic economy, which occurs in a large number of proverbs. This omission intensifies the immediacy between the acting force (*the current*) and the affected patient (*the shrimp*), reinforcing the image of direct contact between inaction (implied by the verb 'falls asleep') and its consequence, underlined below: *Camarón que se duerme, se lo lleva la corriente*.

2. **Ellipsis of article or determiner:** In the COD, there is also no article (*el*) that determines the core noun *Camarón*. This is a phenomenon that occurs in several proverbs. In this regard, Hernando Cuadrado (1997) points out that "there are many proverbs in whose structure, especially at the beginning, a noun without a determiner appears ('A man of good law has the word of a king')" (p. 328). This fact also responds to the principle of linguistic economy for communicative optimisation that proverbs possess.
3. **Ellipsis of the conditional link or conjunction:** Overall, the structure of the proverb embodies a thought pattern that can be represented as condition → consequence or antecedent → consequent. The antecedent is expressed by the noun phrase (*Camarón que se duerme*), and the consequent is expressed by the main clause (*se lo lleva la corriente*). The economy of form or saving of structural elements reflects the automatic inference made by the speaker, who infers the connector between antecedent and consequent: If A then B (see Table 2).

Table 2

Two-part conditional structure of the proverb

Member 1	Member 2
<i>The shrimp that falls asleep</i>	<i>is carried away by the current</i>
if A	then B
Antecedent	Consequent
If the shrimp falls asleep	then it is carried away by the current

Source: Own elaboration.

Syntax, understood in this way, not only organises linguistic expression, but also encodes a culturally shared form of reasoning. Thus, it is clear that the proverb has a surface structure that must be completed by the listener and an underlying structure that is inferred:

- **Surface structure of the proverb:** *Shrimp that fall asleep are carried away by the current*. It involves hyperbaton. The parts of the sentence are not in the traditional order.
- **Complete surface syntactic structure:** *The shrimp that falls asleep is carried away by the current* or *The shrimp that falls asleep is carried away by the current* (since it can be used with or without a preposition). In the traditional subject + predicate order, these structures would be: *The current carries away the shrimp* or *The current carries away the shrimp*, where it can be seen that the pronoun that duplicates the direct object would no longer be required.

- **Underlying syntactic structure:** *If the shrimp falls asleep, then it is carried away by the current.*
- It can be seen that the underlying structure is a conditional structure, so the hyperbaton that appears may be due to the purpose of bringing the form of the saying closer to the conditional structure (placing the condition or antecedent first and then the consequence). The ellipsis of *si..entonces* (conditional link) shows an economy of form that implies the conditional relationship: the speaker does not need to make the condition explicit because it is already part of shared knowledge. The two-part or bipartite structure of the proverb is part of this process (see Table 3):

Table 3

Two-part or bipartite structure of the proverb

PART 1	PART 2
The shrimp that falls asleep	The current carries it away
COD	NP+ COD+ SUBJECT
CONDITION OR PRECEDENT	CONSEQUENT

Source: Own elaboration

This structure gives rise to the mental schema: $A \rightarrow C$, which follows a temporal order:

Antecedent \rightarrow Consequent

Time 1 \rightarrow Time 2

Pérez Martínez already pointed out the argumentative structure of proverbs to acquire the form of law or absolute truth, pointing out a difference between deep and surface structure:

[...] in the superficial structure of a proverb there are a series of marks that reveal a series of operations carried out within the paremiological phrase and which ultimately refer, as Greimasian semiotics has shown, to fundamental postulates of either experience or ideology [...] The argumentative elements of the deep structure are projected, in effect, onto the surface structure by a series of markers, usually lexical, which allow the proverb not only to be inserted into a larger discursive context but also, of course, to construct its figurativeness and thereby unleash its argumentative effectiveness. (Pérez, 1999, p. 393)

In the case of *Camarón que se duerme se lo lleva la corriente*, this proverb acquires its argumentative structure and its character as a law from the conditional structure that underlies it.

As can be seen, the ellipsis of syntactic elements in the proverb fulfils several functions within it. The ellipsis is surely related to the inherently brief nature of the proverb. Pérez Martínez (1996) points out that proverbs are "sententious, concise, sharp expressions of various forms, hardened by use, brief and incisive because they are so well coined, which encapsulate situations, are passed from mouth to mouth, and function in everyday speech as small doses of knowledge attached to larger discourses" (p. 82). It is for the sake of this brevity that words are omitted. Such brevity serves a purpose. In this regard, Vega Rodríguez (2014-2015) points out that the effectiveness of the proverb as a text is based on the use of the least amount of resources and the minimum effort in order to achieve the best possible communicative result. Therefore, it is usually presented as a short statement, which facilitates its memorisation and incorporation into longer texts.

Pronominal verbs: 'se lleva' and 'se duerme'

With regard to the pronominal verb "se lleva", Torres González et al. (2018) point out that "*llevarse* no longer means the same as *llevar*. For this reason, we saw the need to delimit a differentiated area for verbs whose lexical content is affected when accompanied by the reflexive pronoun" (p. 9). Therefore, the verb "*llevar*" in its non-pronominal form expresses a directed movement or a transitive action of transfer (taking something from one place to another), for example: *la corriente lleva al camarón* (the current carries the shrimp). Torres González et al. (2018) also point out that in:

[...] the case of the verbs *llevarse*, *olvidarse* and *dejarse*, these verbs fit perfectly into the group of aspectual change verbs, but unlike the rest of the verbs in their group, they maintain the same actants as in their simple version (p. 16).

The difference between *the current carries the shrimp* and *the current takes the shrimp* is that the former has a durative aspect and the latter has "a new situation (absence), and in the same way that, compared to the more durative meaning of *subir*, we find a more specific meaning in *subirse* with a new situation (it is already up), and the same with *llevar*, *montar*, *bajar*, etc." (Torres et al., 2018, p. 10). Therefore, when it becomes "to take away," the verb acquires a resultative and totalising value, which implies the completion of the process. Not only is the action of moving something performed, but the movement is completed and a new final situation is produced: that which is "taken" is removed from its place of origin. Thus, "*se lo lleva la corriente*" (the current takes it away) does not simply mean "the current moves it", but rather that it completely drags it away, removes it from its environment, loses it.

On the other hand, Torres González et al. (2018) in their study on "se", point out that the verb "dormirse" (to fall asleep) has an inchoative aspectual nuance, that is, it indicates the beginning of the action. This inchoative character has a function within the proverb: to indicate that at the first sign of carelessness, 'beginning to fall asleep', the current carries the shrimp away. It is very interesting to observe how even these minimal elements have their own function within the proverb.

With regard to verbal aspects, the pronominal verb "se lleva" marks a specific change in opposition to the durative "lleva":

- Llevar → ongoing process
- Llevarse → completed result

The shrimp that 'falls asleep' activates a frame of carelessness or lack of action or attention; the action of the current that 'carries it away' represents the inevitable loss or natural punishment for inaction. Thus, "se lo lleva" condenses a physical experience (being swept away by the current) that is metaphorically projected onto the moral and social realm (being displaced or surpassed by others when one is careless). The *Diccionario del Español de México* (DEM) records the pronominal verb "llevarse"³ and defines it as follows: "To drag or pull from its place, usually with violence or speed; to steal: 'The current *carried away* several animals...'" (El Colegio de México, 2024, p. 1225).

On the other hand, the inchoative value of the verb "dormirse" plays a key role in the conceptual dynamics of the proverb. According to the interpretation of Torres González et al. (2018), "dormirse" does not designate a complete state, but rather the beginning of the process that leads to sleep. In aspectual terms, it marks a point of transition: the passage from wakefulness to drowsiness.

- Sleeping → ongoing process
- Falling asleep → beginning of the action

Within the proverb, this aspectual nuance takes on a structural role. The event of 'beginning to fall asleep' does not describe prolonged sleep, but rather the precise moment when attention or alertness is lost. This usage is confirmed by the *Diccionario del Español de México* (DEM), which defines

³ There is also another meaning of "llevarse" in the DEM: "To fail, end badly, come to an end or die" (El Colegio de México, 2024, p. 1225) associated with expressions such as "llevarse el diablo, el demonio el tren, la trampa, la tostada, la trompada, la chingada, la tristeza". (El Colegio de México, 2024, p. 1225), where the pronominal verb directly means to fail or end badly.

'dormirse' as 'to be careless or do nothing in the face of a situation' (El Colegio de México, 2024, p. 736)⁴

It is precisely at that moment (and not later) that the consequence is activated: "se lo lleva la corriente" (he is swept away). Thus, the saying does not construct a broad temporal sequence, but rather an immediate causal relationship between the onset of carelessness and the resulting loss.

From a cognitive perspective, the proverb articulates two complementary patterns: one inchoative (falling asleep) and the other resultative (being carried away). Together, they form a network of meaning in which the slightest alteration in the state of vigilance produces a change of location or the disappearance of the environment. The warning value of the proverb is based precisely on this grammatical economy: just beginning to fall asleep already implies the fatal consequence. In short, the aspectual structure of both verbs reproduces, on a linguistic level, the logic of cause and effect that organises the physical and moral experience conveyed by the proverb (see Table 4).

Table 4

Conceptual implications of the verbs in the saying

<u><i>se duerme</i></u>	<u><i>se lo lleva</i></u>
inchoative (beginning of the action)	resultative (completed result)
Tense 1	Tense 2
condition/cause ⁵	consequence/effect
Physical experience that conceptually metaphorises inactivity, passivity or carelessness, distraction, laziness	Physical experience that conceptually metaphorises displacement or being surpassed or loss or failure on a social or moral level (as a form of symbolic regulation of behaviour).

Source: Own elaboration

⁴ In colloquial Mexican Spanish, it is common to use expressions such as "*se durmió*" or "*se le durmió*" to refer to a person who did not perform an action at the right time and, therefore, lost the opportunity to obtain or achieve something.

⁵ Later on, we will explain how the conditional tense implies a causal relationship.

Conditional structure of the proverb and mental spaces

As explained above, the syntactic structure of the proverb implies the cognitive scheme of conditionality on both a conceptual and cultural level (see Table 5):

Table 5

Syntactic, conceptual and cultural levels of the proverb *The shrimp that falls asleep is carried away by the current*

Level	Element	Function
Syntactic	COD [noun core + adjective clause] + PRONOMINAL VERB + COD [is carried away] + SUBJECT [the current]	Implied condition + result
Conceptual	"Falling asleep" → "being swept away"	Antecedent → Consequent
Cultural	Inactivity or carelessness or laziness → loss of opportunity or social position, failure, missing out on opportunity, being surpassed	Element of value (-) in culture → moral consequence

Source: Own elaboration.

The relationship between the two parts of the proverb is conditional, as the proverb formulates a general rule based on experience: *if the shrimp falls asleep, then the current will carry it away*. The conditional value remains implicit, and it is this conditionality that gives the proverb its universal character: inactivity or carelessness creates vulnerability to external forces. The current symbolises the inevitable dynamics of the environment that sweep away those who do not act. All passivity leads to loss, whether of opportunity, position or existence itself (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Diagram of shrimp displacement by dynamic force



Source: Own idea rendered as an image using an AI tool (Chat GPT)

Dancygier and Sweetser (2005) state that there are five types of conditionality: content, epistemic, metalinguistic, speech act, and meta-metaphorical. The proverb does not fit into just one of these. It is neither metalinguistic nor a speech act. Nor is it meta-metaphorical, since, according to Dancygier and Sweetser (2005), this consists of structuring a comparative reasoning between two simultaneously active metaphors, for example: If the beautiful Golden Gate is the thoroughbred of bridges, the Bay Bridge is the workhorse⁶ (Dancygier and Sweetser, 2005, p. 132). In *"The shrimp that falls asleep is carried away by the current,"* there is only one basic metaphorical mapping, not a relationship between two. The metaphor is unidirectional: from the physical to the social domain. It does not compare with another domain, nor does it establish two contrasting metaphors. Therefore, there is no meta-metaphoricity, because there is no reflection or crossover between mappings, but rather a single coherent projection.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the proverb implies a special type of conditionality that operates on two levels proposed by Dancygier and Sweetser (2005): content conditionality and epistemic conditionality, whose characteristics are summarised in Table 6 below:

⁶ If the beautiful Golden Gate Bridge is the "thoroughbred" of bridges, the Bay Bridge is the "workhorse".

Table 6

Basic characteristics of content conditionality and epistemic conditionality

Aspect	Content conditional	Epistemic conditional
Cognitive domain	World of facts (content space)	World of knowledge (epistemic space)
Type of relationship	Causal or hypothetical (X causes Y)	Inferential or logical (if I know X, I conclude Y)
Function	Describe or predict a fact	Reason or justify a conclusion
Cognitive basis	Causal model of the world	Cognitive model of reasoning
Mental spaces	Space of real or possible events	Speaker's thought space

Source: Prepared by the author based on the theory of Dancygier and Sweetser (2005).

Below, we explain these two levels at which conditionality is used in the proverb.

The conditional content (physical-causal level) in the proverb:

Literally, the proverb describes a causal relationship in the natural world:

- Protasis: *Shrimp that fall asleep* (event of inaction or carelessness).
- Apodosis: *is carried away by the current* (physical result).

On this level, it is indeed a conditional of content, because it establishes a physical and predictable causal relationship between two events: If a shrimp falls asleep → the current carries it away. In other words, there is a prototypical causal model (patient object + dynamic force) that is fulfilled in the aquatic world. However, the proverb is not linguistically expressed in causal terms: *The current carried the shrimp away because it fell asleep*, because it would lose its normative character and instead take on an explanatory function.

Dancygier and Sweetser (2005) state that the conditional structure activates mental spaces (the hypothetical space and the consequential space). Although it does not present the conjunction 'if', as already explained, the structure of this proverb is implicitly conditional, since the subordinate adjectival clause '*falls asleep*' fulfils the function of an *if-clause* or protasis (Dancygier and Sweetser, 2005). Therefore, member 1 activates a hypothetical or conditional mental space: a possible space or world in

which the shrimp falls asleep. In this space, a condition is posed within the domain of experience. The speaker and listener share a knowledge of the world (the shrimp, the river or sea, the current) that fills that space with visual and dynamic information.

Member 2 of the proverb, *carried away by the current (then-clause or apodosis)*, creates the consequential space, within which the consequence derived from the condition is represented. According to Dancygier and Sweetser's (2005) theory of mental spaces, this space is constructed within the first. The mental spaces implied by the conditional at the literal level of the proverb would be:

- Hypothetical or conditional mental space: sleeping shrimp.
- Consequential mental space: current exerting its force and dragging it away.

The epistemic conditional (cultural level) in the proverb:

However, the proverb is not used to talk about real shrimp, but to reason about human behaviour. Through conceptual metaphor, the physical scheme is projected onto a social and moral domain, where:

- "Falling asleep" = being careless, not acting, losing attention or initiative.
- "Current" = social force, destiny, circumstances, competition.
- "Being carried away" = failing, losing position, being displaced.

At this level, a physical relationship is not described, but rather a moral or social consequence is inferred from a behaviour. Therefore, at this level, the saying functions epistemically: *if a person is careless*, (it is concluded that) *they will suffer the consequences*. This is no longer a causal model of the world, but a cognitive model of reasoning (a culturally shared inference).

At the metaphorical-conceptual level, in which A PERSON IS A SHRIMP, LIFE IS A FLOW/A CURRENT, and LOSING POSITION OR OPPORTUNITY IS BEING TAKEN AWAY, a conditional scenario is constructed and projected onto an epistemic space (Dancygier and Sweetser, 2005): a person who does not act, misses opportunities or is careless will suffer consequences. The epistemic space is constructed from the literal through metaphorical projection. The proverb, therefore, maps a relationship of conditionality that is then metaphorically projected onto the social or moral domain.

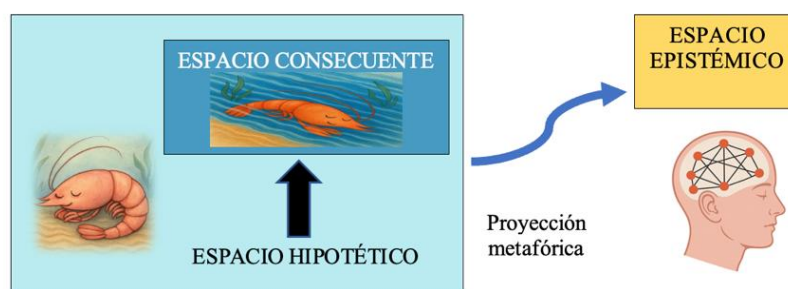
Therefore, it can be concluded in this section that content conditionality involves two mental spaces (hypothetical-conditional space and consequential space—the second within the first) related to

physical experiences, and epistemic conditionality involves an epistemic space, which is a cognitive construction (see Figure 3).

Figure 3.

Mental spaces in the proverb

ESPACIOS MENTALES EN EL REFRÁN



The images of the shrimp

and the head were created with an AI tool (Chat GPT)

Source: Own work

Conceptual metaphors and image schemas in the proverb

Before beginning the analysis, it should be noted that conceptual metaphors will be presented in capital letters in sentence expressions with the verb "to be" and concepts will also be presented in capital letters, in accordance with the proposal by Lakoff and Johnson (2009). It is important to note that conceptual metaphors belong to the conceptual level and image schemas to the preconceptual level.

According to Lakoff and Johnson's theory (2009), the subject uses metaphor to understand the abstract in terms of a concrete experience. Conceptual metaphor consists of structuring one concept in terms of another concept. The conceptual metaphors present in proverbs are cultural in nature:

Cultural conceptual metaphors are contained in linguistic expressions that are fixed in the language and form part of the cultural or shared knowledge of social subjects, such as phraseological units, which are the focus of this work. This is because phraseological units are preserved over time or undergo few changes, remain in use, and retain conceptual metaphors. Also, because when studied from a cognitive perspective, they allow us to detect how cultural concepts are formed. (García and Escareño, 2023, p. 18)

On the other hand, image schemas, as explained in the theoretical framework based on Valenzuela et al. (2012) and Peña Cervel (2012), are mental structures that correspond to patterns of bodily

experience abstracted from the dynamic relationship between the subject and their environment, and one of their functions is to support conceptual metaphors. Image schemas have a defined structure:

For Johnson, schemas have a very defined internal structure as a result of the abstraction of experiences. The structure is the essential part of these and consists of a series of interrelated parts. These are a set of entities and elements that are articulated through causal relationships, temporal sequences, part-whole patterns, relative locators, etc. (Peñalba, 2005, p. 10)

Johnson (1987) points out that bodily experiences such as strength and movement shape abstract concepts. The saying "*The shrimp that falls asleep is carried away by the current*" activates the COMPULSION image schema (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Compulsion image schema

Representación del esquema conceptual de compulsión

FIGURA



Source: Image taken from Barraji3n L3pez (2018, p. 8).

This schema is defined by Pe3a Cervel (2012) as follows:

⁷ 's **definition**: sometimes a force or entity compels another entity to move.

Structural elements: starting point, destination, directionality, an entity, and an external force that drives that entity.

Basic logic: if an external force has sufficient power, that force will be able to move a passive entity and exert control over it; if an entity moves from a source to a destination along a path, the intermediate points along the path must be covered; the closer an entity is to its destination, the more time will have elapsed since the movement began.

Example: *the force of the wind blew the leaves from the trees to the river.* (p. 79)

One of the components of this compulsion schema is the FORCE schema. Regarding the FORCE schema, Pe3a Cervel (2012) offers the following description: "forces have a directionality, describe a trajectory of

⁷ The bold type is mine.

movement, have origins, and can reach different destinations" (p. 78). This author does not present an image of this schema, which would only represent force (\rightarrow), as she points out that the aspect of movement remains implicit because it depends on the directional aspect.

Complementing the above, Barraón López (2018) explains the relationship between the force image schema and the trajectory schema:

The first schematic image subsidiary to the conceptual schema of trajectory is the schematic image of force (Johnson, 1987, p. 126). If the figure moves along a trajectory, there may be a cause or force that motivates its movement (Talmy, 2000, p. 413). This type of force has been called "compulsion." (p. 8)

Based on the schemes reviewed above, an image scheme will be developed corresponding to the proverb *"The shrimp that falls asleep is carried away by the current."* In the proverb, *being carried away* implies a DISPLACEMENT-MOVEMENT of an ENTITY propelled by a FORCE (the current), and the TRAJECTORY will be that of said FORCE. From this, we can deduce the mental diagram that organises the physical experience in the environment present in the proverb:

Current/social life (FORCE)

Sleeping shrimp/passive person (ENTITY)

Being carried away/social displacement (MOVEMENT)

From this physical basis, the saying projects this framework (see Figure 5) onto the social and moral domain.

Figure 5

Image scheme that organises the physical experience of the saying



The image of the shrimp was created using an AI tool (Chat GPT).

Source: Created by the author in Word.

In the case of this proverb, we can talk about two other possible image schemas: that of HORIZONTALITY (proposed by Peña, 2012), activated by "current", in conjunction with that of SOURCE-PATH-GOAL (proposed by Dodge and Lakoff, 2005), since there is a spatial presupposition in which the shrimp moves as a result of having fallen asleep. This gives us the following correspondences between the schemas, the content of the saying and the syntax:

SOURCE: initial state → the sleeping shrimp (passive-inactive)

PATH: horizontal trajectory⁸, the current as a force affects a passive entity and moves it horizontally.

GOAL: consequence → being swept away.

CONDITIONAL SCHEME: INACTIVITY/PASSIVITY → BEING MOVED.

This scheme is activated when a situation can be understood in terms of movement with a point of origin (SOURCE), a trajectory (PATH) and a goal (GOAL). In this regard, as Johnson (1987) mentions, "Every path presupposes a force or energy that moves an entity along that path; conversely, every force manifests itself as movement or resistance in a given direction"⁹ (p.114). The aforementioned schemes can serve as a basis for the configuration of conceptual metaphors. On this point, Peña Cervel (2012) mentions that "These cognitive models can provide the source domain of some metaphors, specifically the so-called orientational metaphors" (p. 91). In this particular proverb, a relationship

⁸ Since the pronominal verb "llevarse" is resultative and not durative, it implies very rapid movement rather than a path or journey.

⁹ Every path presupposes a force or energy that moves an entity along that path; conversely, every force manifests itself as movement or resistance in a given direction.

would first have to be established between the mental spaces that are activated in the animal realm and that meaning transferred to the human realm, since it is in that relationship that we can begin to establish that the source domain (the movement of the shrimp in an aquatic environment) allows us to understand the target domain (the movement of a person in social life). In the saying, the process of metaphorical projection from the physical plane to the social plane follows the logic of conceptual metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson, 2009), generating a map or system of correspondences between conceptual metaphors (Lakoff, 1993):

A PERSON IS A SHRIMP
SOCIAL LIFE IS A FLOW/A CURRENT
TO MISS AN OPPORTUNITY IS TO BE CARRIED AWAY BY THE CURRENT
EFFORT IS RESISTANCE
PASSIVITY IS BEING CARRIED AWAY
A CURRENT IS A FORCE
INACTIVITY/PASSIVITY/DISTRACTION IS FALLING ASLEEP

In this type of projection, physical experience (bodily motor skills) structures the understanding of cultural knowledge. The listener does not interpret the physical event literally, but rather activates a cultural inference: if a person is inactive or careless or distracted, they will be overcome or displaced in some sense, that is, they will be subjected to an external force acting upon them in a moment of passivity: that is the experience conveyed by the proverb, and it conveys it in physical terms from the natural world:

- **Source domain:** aquatic nature
- **Target domain:** social or working life

This is why the brief and visual structure of the proverb *A shrimp that falls asleep is carried away by the current* has such communicative power: it reactivates a shared bodily experience to express a principle of popular wisdom.

Based on the conceptual metaphor A PERSON IS AN ANIMAL, which allows one entity to be transposed onto another, we can understand the metaphor LIFE IS A FLOW/A RIVER/A CURRENT, since the current represents the course of life and circumstances. Under this metaphor, the person (metaphorised as a shrimp) is a being who must move actively in order not to be swept away by that

flow. This metaphor is linked to the MOVEMENT-FORCE scheme, as it is only through this that the metaphorical relationship between LIFE and CURRENT can be understood.

On the other hand, with regard to the notion of 'falling asleep', this action is linked to the same MOVEMENT-FORCE scheme and the aforementioned domains, since the concepts of DREAM or SLEEP are linked to little or no movement. In this sense, we can observe the metaphor SOCIAL INACTIVITY IS SLEEPING, which implies the annulment of the entity's MOVEMENT-FORCE pattern. When this pattern is deactivated, passivity is generated and the entity is subject to the MOVEMENT-FORCE of the current/life (SOCIAL LIFE IS A FLOW/A CURRENT), thus generating the causality observed above in syntactic terms, since, in the absence of movement, the person (shrimp) is carried away by that flow/current (social life).

Causality expressed in syntactic and conceptual terms is not only manifested schematically and metaphorically in terms of movement, but there is also a strong link between movement and social success and failure. Osorio's study (2011) draws attention to this relationship, observing in various expressions the metaphor SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR IS MOVEMENT, which expresses that only those who 'move' are capable of being successful. In a similar way, in this proverb, being passively carried away by the current implies losing position or being carried away from the goal, which can imply metaphors such as FAILURE IS INVOLUNTARY DESCENT/DISPLACEMENT.

Finally, given the sententious nature of the saying, the animal-natural (the shrimp in the aquatic environment) has a didactic aspect, as it implies the expression of a natural and social order at the same time. In this regard, Escareño Davalos (2024) points out that theriomorphism, understood as the metaphorical transformation of a person into an animal, functions as "a model of ideas and values specific to each culture to represent the departure from social laws and obligations and their punishment" (p. 180). In this particular case, the theriomorphism in the proverb analysed allows us to state the negative consequences (punishment) of social behaviour characterised by inaction, carelessness or passivity.

Shared knowledge and cultural projection

Cognitive anthropology is the field that relates culture to cognition:

Through the use of schemas, culture could be located in the mind, and the parts became cognitively formed units: traits, prototypes, schemas, propositions, and cognitive categories. Culture could be explained by analysing these units, or components of culture. (Bobbie et al., n.d.)

In the words of Morin (1988):

Culture contains collective knowledge accumulated in social memory. If it is the bearer of principles, models, and knowledge schemas, if it generates a worldview, if language and myth are constituent parts of culture, then culture does not only have a cognitive dimension: it is a cognitive machine whose praxis is cognitive. (p. 74)

Based on these theoretical approaches and Van Dijk's (1999) proposal on shared knowledge, it is possible to approach the proverb from a cultural-cognitive perspective and conceive of it as a unit of knowledge shared by social subjects.

The analysis carried out in this work allows us to observe that, on a cultural level, the proverb *Camarón que se duerme se lo lleva la corriente* (The shrimp that falls asleep is carried away by the current) is framed in an environment where water and movement are everyday frames of reference that can be extracted from our experience or knowledge of marine animals and the specific problems they face. With this knowledge, Colombi (1989) would allude to the perception of the literal meaning of the proverb (since it makes sense), however, its use in a human situational context implies that a figurative reading of its content must be made, which must be applied to the human level based on its configuration in the animal level.

In this way, the proverb reflects, through a linguistic structure, a model of shared knowledge that values action, movement and even attention as principles of social survival. Life, understood metaphorically as a current, culturally symbolises the circumstances in which one must remain in motion. For its part, the shrimp represents the subject who must remain alert, in action and motion to avoid being socially displaced. Seen in this light, the proverb conveys a moral message (it implies a judgement: passivity is valued negatively in society and activity is valued positively).

The proverb condenses experiential patterns that have already been analysed and discussed, and which can only be visualised through cognitive analysis. In this sense, it operates as a cognitive macrostructure that integrates grammatical structure, physical experience (animal and human) and cultural value into a single symbolic unit. It operates as a cultural schema, functioning as "a pattern or model for organising social processes" (Geertz, 2003, p. 189).

Conclusions

The analysis confirms that syntax not only fulfils a structural function, but also acts as a means of encoding conceptual and cultural relationships. The phenomena of ellipsis, the presence of hyperbaton and the aspectual values of pronominal verbs reveal a linguistic economy that condenses, in a few elements, an immediate causal relationship between inaction/passivity and its consequence. On a cognitive level, the scheme resulting from the FORCE-MOTION proverb allows us to understand how the dynamics between cause and effect are represented in experiential terms. The implicit conditional structure activates mental spaces that link the physical experience of movement with a moral or social consequence. From a cultural perspective, the proverb functions as a model of shared knowledge, a type of cultural schema that reproduces values and serves to organise social experience.

- Overall, the analysis shows that proverbs are cognitive macrostructures in which mental spaces, image schemas and cognitive models (such as conceptual metaphors) operate to express the way in which a community organises social knowledge (a law of popular wisdom) in terms of physical-bodily experience.
- From a theoretical point of view, the work reaffirms the relevance of CL as a framework for the study of proverbs. The articulation between conceptual metaphor, image schemas, and mental spaces demonstrates that grammar not only organises sentence structure, but also encodes culturally shared modes of conceptualisation and pre-conceptualisation. In this way, grammatical form is revealed as a symbolic component that encodes socially shared knowledge of different types (cognitive and normative).
- This study opens up new lines of research in the cognitive analysis of proverbs and invites us to study the relationship between syntactic structures, models of cultural knowledge, image schemas and cognitive models in order to continue revealing how the syntactic, the cognitive and the cultural are intertwined in popular wisdom.

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