
BRIDGING CULTURES THROUGH PROVERBS: SHARED INSIGHTS IN ENGLISH AND GERMAN

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ABSTRACT:

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The cognitive and cultural functions of proverbs in German and English are examined in this article. As fixed forms of figurative language, proverbs offer a wealth of cognitive benefits that enhance memory retention, abstract reasoning, and critical thinking. They help students acquire vocabulary and get a deeper comprehension of the target language by exposing them to idiomatic language and cultural values incorporated into linguistic structures. Proverbs serve as cultural artifacts that shed light on a society's norms and values, assisting students in becoming more interculturally competent.

Introduction. Proverbs are more than just wise sayings; they are essential for understanding a language and its culture, acting as powerful cognitive tools for learning and teaching. Stemming from a society's shared understanding, proverbs contain its core values, traditions, and perspectives. When learning a language, proverbs provide unique glimpses into how the mind processes language and help transmit cultural knowledge. They act as pathways to understanding complex metaphors, making them especially helpful for acquiring a second language. Integrating proverbs into language teaching allows learners to grasp not only the language itself but also the hidden cultural meanings within it (Belkhir, 2021).

Cognitive linguistics highlights how proverbs shape our abstract thinking, often using rich metaphors that need more than a literal interpretation. By encountering proverbs, learners are exposed to figurative language, which activates deeper cognitive functions and improves memory. Studies indicate that using proverbs in language learning promotes

conceptual blending, where learners combine new information with what they already know, leading to a more profound understanding of the target language (Babazade, 2024). This is particularly important when the grammatical structures of proverbs differ from a learner's native language, as it encourages mental adaptability.

Beyond their cognitive benefits, proverbs are crucial for understanding cultural distinctions. Language serves not just to communicate but also to transmit cultural viewpoints and societal values. Proverbs offer learners a window into a culture's moral principles and common experiences. By deciphering the cultural significance of proverbs, language learners can better understand how communication functions in the target language. As Charteris-Black (1995) points out, proverbs act as communication links, connecting speakers through shared understanding of idiomatic expressions that go beyond their literal sense. Furthermore, Tamimy (2019) highlights how proverbs reflect a culture's collaborative learning approaches, further emphasizing their educational importance.

Therefore, proverbs have a twofold purpose in language education: they encourage cognitive involvement through metaphorical thinking and provide essential cultural understanding, assisting learners in navigating both linguistic and cultural intricacies. This article will delve into these dual functions, demonstrating how proverbs can be effectively used to improve both cognitive and cultural competence in language learners.

Methodology.

To investigate the extent to which English and German proverbs share meaning and content, I conducted a survey involving German speakers with knowledge of the English language. The study aimed to gain insight into the perceived similarities between proverbs across these two languages from the perspective of native German speakers. A group of over 20 German students participated in the survey. The methodology involved presenting them with a selection of English proverbs and asking them to provide the corresponding German proverbs they considered to be the closest equivalents. This approach allowed for a direct comparison of how the students interpreted and translated the underlying meaning and cultural context embedded within the proverbs.

The findings of the survey indicated a strong perception of equivalence between English and German proverbs among the participating German students. Notably, 90 percent of the respondents asserted that each presented English proverb possessed a corresponding German counterpart. Furthermore, a significant portion of the participants elaborated on their identified equivalents by providing distinct definitions for each proverb, suggesting a nuanced understanding of the semantic and pragmatic overlaps.

One potential explanation for the high degree of perceived proverb equivalence may lie in the shared geographical proximity of the English and German-speaking regions within Europe. This shared regional context could have facilitated the exchange and parallel development of cultural wisdom encapsulated in proverbial forms. Moreover, the linguistic relatedness of English and German, both belonging to the Indo-European language family and more specifically to the Germanic branch (with English being West Germanic and German also primarily West Germanic), likely contributes to similarities in conceptual frameworks and metaphorical expressions that underpin proverbial sayings. The common linguistic ancestry could account for shared cognitive patterns and cultural experiences that manifest in analogous proverbial expressions across the two languages.

Results.

To gather empirical data on the perceived semantic and conceptual overlap between English and German proverbs, the present study employed a specific set of proverbs within the aforementioned survey instrument. These proverbs were carefully selected to represent a range of common idiomatic expressions in the English language, with the intention of eliciting their closest German equivalents from the participating German-speaking students. The chosen proverbs aimed to tap into diverse thematic categories and levels of metaphorical complexity, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of the students' understanding of cross-linguistic proverbial correspondence. The subsequent analysis of the German equivalents provided by the participants focused on identifying instances of direct translation, semantic parallelism, and conceptual similarity, shedding light on the cognitive and cultural links between these two Germanic languages as reflected in their proverbial wisdom:

1. English: The early bird catches the worm.

German: Der frühe Vogel fängt den Wurm. (Literal: The early bird catches the worm.)

Meaning: Those who act promptly are more likely to succeed.

2. English: Don't count your chickens before they hatch.

German: Man soll den Tag nicht vor dem Abend loben. (Literal: One should not praise the day before the evening.)

Meaning: Don't be too confident about future success before it has actually happened.

3. English: A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.

German: Besser ein Spatz in der Hand als eine Taube auf dem Dach. (Literal: Better a sparrow in the hand than a dove on the roof.)

Meaning: It's better to hold onto something you have for certain than to risk losing it by trying to get something better that is uncertain.

4. English: Actions speak louder than words.

German: Taten sagen mehr als Worte. (Literal: Deeds say more than words.)

Meaning: What someone does is more important than what they say.

5. English: All that glitters is not gold.

German: Es ist nicht alles Gold, was glänzt. (Literal: Not everything that glitters is gold.)

Meaning: Appearances can be deceptive; something that looks valuable might not be.

6. English: Where there's a will, there's a way.

German: Wo ein Wille ist, da ist auch ein Weg. (Literal: Where there's a will, there's also a way.)

Meaning: If you are determined to do something, you will find a way to achieve it.

7. English: Practice makes perfect.

German: Übung macht den Meister. (Literal: Practice makes the master.)

Meaning: Regular practice is the key to becoming skilled at something.

8. English: Look before you leap.

German: Erst wägen, dann wagen. (Literal: First weigh, then venture.)

Meaning: Consider the consequences before taking action.

9. English: Two heads are better than one.

German: Zwei Köpfe sind besser als einer. (Literal: Two heads are better than one.)

Meaning: Two people working together can solve a problem more effectively than one person alone.

10. English: If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

German: Was nicht kaputt ist, soll man nicht reparieren. (Literal: What is not broken, one should not repair.)

Meaning: Don't try to improve something that is already working well.

11. English: The apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

German: Der Apfel fällt nicht weit vom Stamm. (Literal: The apple doesn't fall far from the trunk.)

Meaning: Children tend to resemble their parents in character or behavior.

12. English: Too many cooks spoil the broth.

German: Viele Köche verderben den Brei. (Literal: Many cooks spoil the porridge.)

Meaning: If too many people are involved in a task, it is likely to be done badly.

13. English: Out of sight, out of mind.

German: Aus den Augen, aus dem Sinn. (Literal: Out of the eyes, out of the mind.)

Meaning: If you don't see or hear about something for a while, you will forget about it.

14. English: Better late than never.

German: Besser spät als nie. (Literal: Better late than never.)

Meaning: It's better to do something late than not at all.

15. English: Honesty is the best policy.

German: Ehrlichkeit währt am längsten. (Literal: Honesty lasts the longest.)

Meaning: Being honest is always the best approach in the long run.

Discussion.



As previously detailed, this investigation sought to explore the points of convergence and divergence in the lexical landscape of English and German, specifically through the lens of proverbial expressions. The findings derived from the survey administered to German speakers proficient in English suggest a notable degree of overlap between the two languages at the level of idiomatic wisdom. The data collected, including the German equivalents provided for English proverbs, indicates a tendency towards similarity rather than substantial disparity in the conceptualization and expression of common truths and societal observations. The visual documentation obtained from the survey process, which includes participant responses and potentially annotations, further illustrates the patterns of perceived equivalence and the strategies employed by learners in identifying corresponding proverbs across the two linguistic systems. This visual evidence serves as a valuable resource for a more in-depth qualitative analysis of the specific lexical choices and semantic interpretations made by the participants.

Analysis.

The findings of this survey offer compelling insights into the perceived semantic and conceptual alignment between English and German proverbs among German speakers proficient in English. The overwhelming majority of participants reported the existence of German equivalents for the presented English proverbs, often accompanied by detailed explanations that underscored a nuanced understanding of their shared meanings. This strong perception of proverb equivalence suggests a significant degree of overlap in the wisdom, cultural values, and cognitive frameworks encoded within these idiomatic expressions across the two languages.

Several factors likely contribute to this observed congruence. The geographical proximity of English and German-speaking regions within Europe has likely facilitated historical and cultural exchange, leading to the parallel development or adoption of similar proverbial wisdom to address common human experiences and societal observations. Furthermore, the shared linguistic heritage of English and German, both stemming from the Germanic branch of the Indo-European language family, plays a crucial role.¹ This common ancestry likely results in shared conceptual metaphors and cognitive patterns that manifest in analogous linguistic expressions, even when the surface-level lexical items differ.

Conclusion.

The study's methodology, directly eliciting German equivalents from native speakers, provides valuable data on how language learners perceive and process cross-linguistic idiomaticity. The detailed definitions provided by many participants further highlight their ability to move beyond literal translations and grasp the underlying semantic and pragmatic nuances of the proverbs in both languages. This suggests that familiarity with one Germanic language may indeed facilitate the understanding and acquisition of proverbial wisdom in another related language.

The implications of these findings are significant for language pedagogy and cross-cultural communication. The identified similarities in proverbs can be strategically leveraged in language teaching to enhance vocabulary acquisition, cultural understanding, and the development of figurative language competence. By highlighting these parallels, educators can tap into learners' existing cognitive frameworks and facilitate a deeper appreciation of the shared cultural heritage embedded within these linguistic expressions.

Future research could expand upon these findings by examining a larger and more diverse sample of proverbs and participants. Investigating the specific types of semantic and structural correspondences (e.g., direct translation, metaphorical equivalence, functional similarity) in greater detail would further illuminate the intricate relationship between

English and German proverbial wisdom. Additionally, exploring potential areas of divergence and the cultural nuances that lead to distinct proverbial expressions in each language would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between language, culture, and cognition in this fascinating linguistic domain. Ultimately, this study underscores the rich interconnectedness of English and German at the level of proverbial expression, highlighting the potential for leveraging these shared linguistic and cultural resources in language learning and intercultural understanding.

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