



THE ROLE OF SOMATIC IDIOMS IN CHARACTER SPEECH IN GERMAN NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

*This article examines the role of somatic idioms in character speech in German novels, highlighting their significance in characterization, emotional intensification, and socio-communicative interaction. Somatic idioms, understood as idiomatic expressions involving body parts, are deeply rooted in embodied cognition and cultural metaphors. Drawing on examples from works such as Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, Erich Maria Remarque's *Arc de Triomphe*, and Günter Grass's *Die Blechtrommel*, the study demonstrates how these idioms reflect social class distinctions, intensify psychological portrayal, and enrich dialogue with irony and humor. The findings suggest that somatic idioms serve not only as linguistic ornaments but also as powerful tools that make character speech more authentic, emotionally charged, and culturally grounded.*

Introduction. Language in literature functions not only as a tool of communication but also as a mirror of cultural cognition and social reality. Within this framework, idioms have attracted considerable scholarly attention, particularly because they embody the relationship between language, thought, and culture. As Harald Burger emphasizes, idioms represent “fossilized metaphors” that carry historical and cultural knowledge within their structure [1]. Among idioms, somatic idioms — expressions involving body parts — occupy a special position due to their close connection with embodied human experience.

According to Lakoff and Johnson, the human body serves as a primary source domain for metaphorical mapping, shaping the way people conceptualize abstract notions such as love, morality, or rationality [6]. This theoretical perspective is echoed by Wolfgang Fleischer, who underlines that somatic phraseologisms are particularly rich in emotional and evaluative meanings, making them highly effective in literary texts [4]. Furthermore, scholars in German literary studies stress that idioms are more than stylistic ornaments; they function as socio-communicative markers.

Consequently, the analysis of somatic idioms in character speech becomes a valuable avenue for understanding how German authors depict individuality, emotion, and cultural values. By focusing on works by Thomas Mann, Alfred Döblin, Erich Maria Remarque, and Günter Grass, the following discussion will demonstrate how somatic idioms operate as



powerful tools that bring characters to life, shape dialogue, and reinforce the cultural resonance of German novels.

Somatic idioms have a long tradition in the German language. They are deeply rooted in embodied cognition: abstract states such as joy, fear, or determination are often conceptualized through bodily experience. For instance, the idiom *Schmetterlinge im Bauch haben* ("to have butterflies in one's stomach") vividly conveys the nervousness of falling in love. Thus, when characters in novels employ such expressions, they do more than describe a feeling; they activate a cultural metaphor that readers intuitively understand. In this way, idioms provide a shortcut between linguistic form and emotional resonance.

Moreover, idioms are particularly effective in dialogue, since they reveal not only what a character feels but also how that character speaks. The choice of idiom often reflects a speaker's education, social class, or emotional state. In Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, for example, characters frequently use expressions involving the heart — *etwas liegt mir am Herzen* ("something lies close to my heart") — to emphasize sincerity and deep concern for family honor. The idiom matches the bourgeois values of duty and respectability that dominate the family's worldview. Through such expressions, Mann achieves both psychological depth and social authenticity [7].

In contrast, in Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, the protagonist Franz Biberkopf and his working-class peers employ more visceral and raw idioms. An example is *die Faust in der Tasche machen* ("to make a fist in one's pocket"), an expression of suppressed rage or silent resistance. The bodily intensity of this idiom reflects both the violent environment of Weimar Berlin and the protagonist's inner struggle. Hence, idioms function as sociolectal markers, signaling the distance between bourgeois speech and working-class expression [3].

Somatic idioms also intensify emotional communication. When Erich Maria Remarque's characters in *Arc de Triomphe* experience relief after danger, they often use the phrase *ein Stein fällt mir vom Herzen* ("a stone falls from my heart"). The metaphor translates psychological tension into a physical image of weight being lifted, thus making the emotion more tangible for readers. Similarly, in romantic contexts, idioms such as *die Augen nicht von jemandem lassen können* ("to be unable to take one's eyes off someone") express attraction in a way that combines visual focus with emotional desire. Without such idioms, dialogue would appear flat and lack the vivid imagery that resonates with readers' own embodied experiences [9].

Furthermore, somatic idioms often serve ironic or humorous purposes. Günter Grass's *Die Blechtrommel* provides rich examples. The idiom *kein Haar krümmen* ("not to bend a hair") is used in an ironic tone, exposing the gap between promises of safety and the brutal reality of violence. Similarly, colloquial idioms like *die Nase voll haben* ("to have a full nose," meaning "to be fed up") inject humor and sarcasm into tense situations, highlighting the pragmatism or bitterness of the speaker. In these cases, idioms not only communicate meaning but also create stylistic layers, allowing authors to play with irony, satire, or understatement [5].

Another essential function of somatic idioms lies in their cultural embeddedness. They often carry connotations specific to German linguistic tradition, which makes them particularly effective in building a sense of authenticity. For instance, the idiom *Herz zeigen* ("to show heart") implies compassion, generosity, and moral integrity. When characters employ this phrase, they align themselves with cultural ideals of empathy and solidarity. Conversely, idioms



involving the head — such as *den Kopf verlieren* (“to lose one’s head”) or *einen kühlen Kopf bewahren* (“to keep a cool head”) — emphasize rationality and self-control. In narrative contexts, such idioms reveal not only individual personality traits but also broader cultural values that associate the heart with emotion and the head with reason.

In addition, idioms sometimes act as narrative shortcuts. Instead of lengthy description, a single phrase can condense complex emotional or moral states. When a character declares, *das geht mir nicht aus dem Kopf* (“I cannot get it out of my head”), the author avoids extended psychological exposition while still conveying obsession or persistent thought. Such compactness is valuable in dialogue-driven novels, where brevity and expressiveness must be balanced.

What makes somatic idioms particularly powerful in literature is their dual nature: they are both universal and culture-specific. On the one hand, bodily metaphors are rooted in shared human experience, making them accessible to a wide readership. On the other hand, the specific idiomatic forms are uniquely German, carrying connotations that may not exist in other languages. This duality enables German novelists to speak to both domestic and international audiences, offering universal themes through culturally distinct expressions.

Conclusion. To conclude, somatic idioms in German novels are far more than decorative language. They are instruments of characterization, markers of social class, intensifiers of emotion, and carriers of irony or humor. By grounding abstract experiences in physical imagery, they bridge the gap between inner life and outer expression. In dialogue, they render speech authentic and culturally resonant, thereby enhancing the realism and artistic quality of the narrative. Ultimately, somatic idioms allow readers to experience characters not only through rational description but also through the embodied metaphors that shape human thought and communication.

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