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About this paper:
Appears in: [EDULEARN25 Proceedings](#)
Publication year: 2025
Pages: 996-1001
ISBN: 978-84-09-74218-9
ISSN: 2340-1117
doi: [10.21125/edulearn.2025.0335](#)

Conference name: 17th International Conference on Education and New Learning Technologies
Dates: 30 June-2 July, 2025
Location: Palma, Spain

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THE CONNOTATIVE MEANING OF THE COLOUR BLACK IN GERMAN, ENGLISH AND MACEDONIAN IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the connotative meanings of the colour *black* in German, English, and Macedonian idiomatic expressions, focusing on its symbolic significance and cultural associations across different linguistic contexts. It is expected that the colour *black* will predominantly carry negative connotations, often linked to death, danger, mourning, and pessimism, due to its historical and cultural associations. The research methodology involves collecting idiomatic expressions containing the word *black* in all three languages, sourced primarily from dictionaries. Idioms were selected based on criteria such as frequency of use, idiomaticity, and cultural relevance. The collected expressions were categorized according to semantic themes, including emotions, fate, morality, misfortune, economy, physical attributes etc. The aim of this study is to uncover how these idioms utilize the colour *black* to reflect diverse psychological, moral, and cultural perceptions across German, English, and Macedonian-speaking communities.

Keywords: Connotative meaning, Colour symbolism, Black (colour), Idiomatic expressions, Cross-cultural comparison.

1 INTRODUCTION

Colours play a crucial role in shaping human perception and communication, often carrying profound symbolic meanings that transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries. Among these colours, black holds

a unique position. It is widely recognized for its association with a range of connotations, from negative emotions such as mourning, death, and danger to neutral or even positive associations like elegance and sophistication. The multifaceted nature of the colour *black* makes it an intriguing subject for linguistic and cultural analysis, particularly when exploring its role in idiomatic expressions across different languages.

This study aims to investigate the connotative meanings of the colour *black* in idiomatic expressions in German, English, and Macedonian. These languages were selected for their distinct linguistic and cultural characteristics, which provide a rich context for examining how the colour *black* is symbolically represented. While the colour *black* is often associated with negative meanings across cultures, idiomatic expressions also reveal a more nuanced and complex use of the colour in reflecting various aspects of life, including emotions, morality, social dynamics, irony, natural phenomena etc.

Special attention is given to idiomatic expressions that exhibit characteristics of referential phraseologisms, a concept defined by Burger (2015). These expressions are characterized by meanings that cannot be reduced to the sum of the individual components of the words used. Instead, they convey complex images or cultural concepts that are deeply embedded in collective memory and cognition. According to the theories of cognitive linguistics (Lakoff/Johnson 1980), colours in idiomatic expressions represent conceptual metaphors that are developed from our everyday experiences and cultural values. Cognitive linguistics posits that language and meaning are shaped by our perception of the world, and colour metaphors like those featuring *black* emerge from common human experiences. Such phraseologisms are present in all three languages—German, English, and Macedonian—and offer a unique opportunity to explore how these expressions reflect cultural nuances tied to the colour *black*.

The primary objective of this research is to uncover how idiomatic expressions featuring the colour *black* reflect psychological, moral, and cultural perceptions across German, English, and Macedonian-speaking communities. By analysing idioms that incorporate the word *black* in each language, this study will provide insight into the cultural significance of *black* in language, revealing both shared and divergent meanings. The research methodology involves collecting idiomatic expressions from hard-copy phraseological and general language dictionaries in each of the three languages, selected based on frequency of use, idiomaticity, and cultural relevance. All expressions were carefully analysed and translated or explained into English to maintain consistency and clarity across the study.

By examining the symbolic meanings of *black* in idiomatic language, this research contributes to a broader understanding of how colours shape linguistic expression and cultural identity, highlighting the intersection of language, culture, and perception.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, cross-linguistic approach to examine the connotative meanings of the colour *black* in idiomatic expressions from German, English, and Macedonian. Idiomatic expressions were excerpted primarily from hard-copy phraseological dictionaries and general language dictionaries in each of the three languages. For the purposes of the survey, different types of dictionaries were consulted depending on the language. German idioms were extracted from a monolingual German general language dictionary, with explanations provided in German. English idioms were sourced from a bilingual English–Macedonian general language dictionary, where the original English expressions are accompanied by explanations in Macedonian. The Macedonian idioms were taken from a monolingual phraseological dictionary, with explanations provided in Macedonian. To ensure consistency and facilitate comparative analysis, the authors translated all idiom explanations from both Macedonian and German into English.

The selection of idioms was guided by criteria such as frequency of use, idiomaticity, and cultural relevance, resulting in a corpus of approximately 50 idioms. These expressions were then categorized by semantic theme, including domains such as emotion, morality, fate, economy etc. Each idiom was analyzed to identify the symbolic and cultural meanings associated with the colour *black*, allowing for comparison across the three languages. This thematic analysis enabled the identification of shared patterns and culturally specific connotations, contributing to a deeper understanding of how language encodes symbolic meaning through colour.

3 IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS: DEFINITION AND TERMINOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Idiomatic expressions are a crucial and expressive part of every language, deeply rooted in the culture, worldview, and collective experience of its speakers. Despite differing terminology—idiom, phraseologism, phraseme or phraseolexeme, all refer to fixed, figurative expressions whose meanings are not directly deducible from their components. According to Pilz (in Ristič, 2012:14), German literature uses a wide range of synonymous terms: *Phraseologismus*, *phraseologische Wortverbindungen*, *Phrasem*, *feste Wendungen*, *Idiom*, *Phraseologische Einheiten*, *Phraseolexem*, and *Redewendung/Redensart*. In Macedonian linguistics, terms like *фраzeолошки изрази*, *фраzeолошки единства*, *идиому*, *идиоматски изрази* and *зборовни состави* are commonly used. This study consistently applies the term *idiomatic expression (idiom)*. Such expressions typically use metaphor, comparison, irony, and other figurative tools to convey shared human experiences and values. Their structure, length, lexical content, and usage context may vary by language, region, and even generation.

In English, German, and Macedonian, idioms are usually polylexical, stored in the speaker's mental lexicon as fixed units. As Palm (1997:1) observes, they are non-freely formed word combinations, which in a sentence can take on the entire function and meaning of individual words. Because of their semantic unity, even slight structural changes often destroy idiomatic meaning. However, in German, idiomatic expressions are not limited to multi-word combinations; there are also one-word idioms, such as *Schwarzmarkt* (black market), *Schwarzarbeit* (illegal work), and *Schwarzbrot* (rye bread)¹. This is a result of the structural nature of the German language, in which most words are formed through compounding or derivation, allowing idiomatic and culturally specific meanings to be embedded in single lexical items.

The key defining feature of idioms is semantic opacity: their overall meaning cannot be inferred from individual words. Understanding idioms thus requires cultural and contextual awareness, especially in multilingual or intercultural settings.

4 IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS FEATURING THE COLOUR *BLACK* IN GERMAN, ENGLISH AND MACEDONIAN

Table 1. (Idiomatic Expressions Featuring the Colour *Black* in German) ²

German Expression	Meaning/Explanation
Schwarzarbeit	(Illegal) work for which no taxes are paid
Schwarzbrot	A dark bread mainly made from rye flour
Schwarzmarkt / der schwarze Markt	The illegal market for certain goods
Schwarz-Rot-Gold	The colours of the German flag from 1919 to 1933
Schwarze Hände	Dirty and therefore dark
Schwarze Fingernägel	Dirty and therefore dark
Schwarze Nacht	(Night) of very dark colour
Schwarze Wolken	(Clouds) of very dark colour
Etwas schwarz machen lassen	(to do something) Illegal
Schwarz arbeiten	(to work) Illegal
Schwarz-weiß	With black and white spots, stripes, etc.

¹ Compound nominal formations are also considered phraseologisms because their meaning is understood as a whole and cannot be derived from the meanings of the individual words (Meier 2003: 112).

² All German examples are excerpted from the Langenscheidt Dictionary (Langenscheidt *Großwörterbuch Deutsch als Fremdsprache*. Berlin: Langenscheidt. 2002)

Schwarz-weiß	Black, white, and various shades of gray
Schwarzer Gedanke	(Thought) associated with something unpleasant
Schwarzer Tag	(Day) associated with bad luck
Für jemanden sieht es schwarz aus	(Situation) associated with something unpleasant
Schwarze Pläne	Evil, wicked (plans)
Schwarze Seele	Evil, wicked (soul)
Etwas ist schwarz von Menschen/Tieren	Something is so full of people or animals that it appears dark
Schwarz auf weiß	In written (and printed) form (and thus somewhat official)
Da kannst du warten, bis du schwarz wirst	It's pointless to hope for that

Table 2. (Idiomatic Expressions Featuring the Colour *Black* in English) ¹

English Expression	Meaning/Explanation
Black day	Unfortunate, ominous (day)
Black look	Angry look
The future looks black	The future is grim
Not be as black as one is painted	Not as bad as portrayed
Wear black for somebody	Wearing mourning for someone
Be in the black	Positive bank balance
In black and white	In writing, on paper
Work like a black	Works like a Black person (note: outdated and offensive usage)
Black Afrika	Black Africa
Be black and blue all over	Body is covered in bruises
Black and white	Black and white (TV, image)
Things aren't that black and white	Things aren't that simple
Blackboard	School board
Black box	Black box (in aviation)
Black bread	Black bread
Black comedy	black comedy
Black country	Industrial region in Central England
Black Death	The Black Plague (from the 14th century)
Black economy	grey economy
Black eye	Bruise (under the eye)
Black frost	Dry frost
Black gold	Oil
Black hearted	Evil, wicked
Black humour	Dark humour

¹ All English examples are excerpted from the Murgoski's Dictionary (Murgoski Zoze. *Golem Anglisko Makedonski rečnik*. Skopje: Murgoski. 2004)

Black ice	Invisible ice
In black face	In bold letters

Table 3. (Idiomatic Expressions Featuring the Colour *Black* in Macedonian)¹

Macedonian Expression	Meaning/Explanation
Црна вест	Bad news
Црн како гавран	Very black
Црн како катран	Very black
Црн како ѓавол	Very black
Црн како ник	Very black
Црн како ќумур	Very black
Црн како ќумбе	Very black
Црн како Циган (Ѓуптин)	Very black
Не е ѓаволот толку црн	Someone is not as bad as believed
Црн ден	A very bad, unfortunate day
(има) црно на бело	In writing, with a document
Црни мисли	Bad thoughts that foreshadow negative events
Црни облаци се надвиваат	Something bad is brewing
Црна овца (во бело стадо)	A person who doesn't fit in and stands out negatively
Се мачи, работи како црн ѓавол	Struggles or works very hard
Црно му се пишува	Nothing good is expected for them
Црн е	He/she hates someone
На сè гледа црно	Very pessimistic
Сака од црното да направи бело	Tries to present things in a way that suits them
(не рече) ни црна ни бела	Didn't say a single word

5 RESULTS

The following tables present thematic categorization of idiomatic expressions featuring the colour *black* in German, English, and Macedonian, illustrating the diverse connotations of the colour across various contexts in each language. Each theme is paired with examples of idioms and their corresponding frequency percentage, reflecting the prominence of each thematic category in the respective languages.

5.1 Thematic Overview of some German Idiomatic Expressions Featuring the Colour *Black* (*schwarz*)

¹ All Macedonian examples are excerpted from the Venovskas Dictionary (Velkovska Snezana, Makedonska frazeologija so mal frazeološki rečnik. (2008), Skopje: Velkovska S.)

Theme	Examples	%
Illegality / Law-breaking	Schwarzarbeit, Schwarzmarkt, Etwas schwarz machen lassen, Schwarz arbeiten	25%
Physical darkness / Colour	Schwarzbrot, Schwarze Nacht, Schwarze Wolken, Schwarz-weiß (colour)	25%
Negative emotions / Bad mood	Schwarzer Gedanke, Schwarzer Tag, Für jemanden sieht es schwarz aus	15%
Overcrowding / Masses	Schwarz von Menschen/Tieren	5%
Character / Evil nature	Schwarze Pläne, Schwarze Seele	10%
Dirtiness / Poor hygiene	Schwarze Hände, Schwarze Fingernägel	10%
Certainly/Official conformation	Schwarz auf weiß	5%
Hopelessness / Futility	Da kannst du warten, bis du schwarz wirst	5%

5.2 Thematic Overview of some English Idiomatic Expressions Featuring the Colour *Black*

Theme	Examples	%
Negative emotions/Grief	Black day, Back look, The future looks black, Wear black for somebody, Black-hearted	30%
Physical condition / Appearance	Black eye, Be black and blue all over	5%
Finance/Economy	Black economy, Black country, Black Africa, Be in the black, Black gold	20%
Natural phenomena / Weather	Black frost, Black ice	10%
Disease	Black death	5%
Certainty / Official confirmation	In black and white	5%
Complexity / Moral ambiguity	Things aren't that black and white	5%
Physical objects / Colour	Black bread, Black and white (TV, image), Blackboard, Black box	10%
Irony / Contradiction / Change	Not be as black as one is painted, Black humour, Black comedy	10%

5.3. Thematic Overview of some Macedonian Idiomatic Expressions Featuring the Colour *Black* (црн)

Theme	Examples	%
Physical darkness/intensity of colour	Црн како гавран, Црн како катран, Црн како ѓавол, Црн како ник, Црн како кумур	30%
Negative emotions/thoughts	Црни мисли, На сè гледа црно, Црн е	20%
Misfortune/bad events	Црна вест, Црн ден, Црно му се пишува, Црни облаци се надвиваат	25%
Character/judgment	Не е ѓаволот толку црн, Црна овца, Сака од црното да направи бело	15%
Hard life/effort	Се мачи, работи како црн ѓавол	5%
Silence/passivity	(не рече) ни црна ни бела	5%

6 CONCLUSIONS

This study reveals several shared thematic associations of the colour *black* across idiomatic expressions in German, English, and Macedonian. Despite the linguistic and cultural differences between the languages, there are striking similarities in how the colour *black* is metaphorically used.

Firstly, negative emotions are a predominant association in all three languages. *Black* is often linked to grief, sadness, and despair. In German, 15% of the idioms express negative emotions or moods, while in English, this percentage rises to 30%, with a strong focus on grief. In Macedonian, negative emotions make up 20% of the idioms, highlighting the colour's emotional weight across cultures.

Secondly, bad luck and ominous situations are commonly tied to *black* in all three languages, reflecting a universal perception of black as a symbol of misfortune. Although this association is not directly stated in the German results, it is implied through idioms related to illegality and moral judgment, both of which carry ominous connotations. In English and Macedonian, 25% of the idioms in each language connect black to bad luck or foreboding situations, underscoring the colour's role in symbolizing negative fate.

The third shared theme is physical darkness or colour-related meanings. Black frequently represents literal darkness or dark appearances in idiomatic expressions. In German, 25% of the idioms relate to physical darkness or colour-related meanings. In English, this connection is somewhat less prominent, accounting for 10% of idioms, but it still appears in idioms related to physical objects or the literal use of the colour *black*. Macedonian idioms, at 30%, show the most frequent use of black to describe physical darkness or dark appearances, reinforcing the colour's association with the absence of light.

However, there are also notable cultural and linguistic variations. In German, *black* is strongly associated with illegality and law-breaking (25%), a distinctive cultural link to moral and legal implications. In English, black frequently appears in financial and economic contexts (20%), with idioms such as "in the black" and "black market," which are absent in the other two languages. In Macedonian, idioms often associate black with character judgments (15%) and hard life or personal effort (10%), illustrating the connection between *black* and personal struggle, which is less emphasized in German and English.

In summary, despite the linguistic differences, all three languages consistently associate *black* with negative emotions, bad luck, and physical darkness, highlighting its symbolic representation of misfortune, despair, and the unknown. At the same time, the cultural nuances revealed through differences in moral, legal, economic, and personal associations with *black* provide further insight into how idiomatic expressions encode cultural identity and collective memory. The colour *black*, as shown through these idiomatic expressions, serves as a powerful symbol of human experience, resonating across linguistic boundaries while maintaining its own unique cultural significance in each language.

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