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[Abstract] [PDF]

Moral and Pedagogical Phraseological Units in German, English, and Macedonian: A Comparative Student-Based Study

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Abstract.

This study investigates the function and significance of moral and pedagogical phraseological units in German, English, and Macedonian, with particular attention to their ethical, educational, and cultural dimensions. The research adopts a student-centered, comparative methodology, involving undergraduate students of German, English, and Macedonian at Goce Delcev University as active participants in data collection and analysis. Students were tasked with selecting representative phraseological units from each language, examining their

International Teaching and Education Conference (TEDUCONF)

semantic content, pragmatic use, and cross-linguistic equivalents. A qualitative-comparative approach was employed, combining descriptive linguistic analysis with cultural contextualization to uncover both convergences and divergences in moral and pedagogical expression. An illustrative example from the study is: German: *Lügen haben kurze Beine*. English: *A lie has short legs*. Macedonian: *На лагата и се куси нозете* Meaning: *A warning about the consequences of lying*. The findings indicate that moral and pedagogical phraseological units function as enduring vehicles for ethical instruction, practical wisdom, and cultural continuity across languages. Moreover, the student-based, participatory methodology proved effective in fostering critical linguistic awareness, cross-cultural sensitivity, and analytical competence. This research underscores the pedagogical and scholarly value of integrating students directly into comparative phraseological studies, highlighting their potential as co-investigators in applied linguistics and intercultural education.

Keywords: Phraseological units, Comparative linguistics, Moral and pedagogical expression, Intercultural education, Student-centered methodology

1. Introduction

Moral and pedagogical development is grounded in values that guide how individuals relate to others and function within a community. Core moral values include kindness, understanding, honesty, responsibility, fairness, prudence, temperance etc. These values shape ethical behavior and are essential for building healthy interpersonal relationships, representing a central aim of education.

In pedagogical contexts, fostering trust, cooperation, support, patience, discipline, wisdom, is crucial for creating a positive learning environment and promoting social development. Education encourages learners to live and work together, respect differences, and contribute to the common good.

Morality is understood as an inherent human capacity to distinguish between right and wrong and to act accordingly. It represents a fundamental human trait involving awareness, feeling, and knowledge about what is right and what is not. It involves choosing and doing good, as well as criticizing and avoiding evil. Pedagogical practice plays a key role in developing this capacity by encouraging ethical reasoning, good deeds, and consistent adherence to moral norms, while discouraging negative values such as disrespect, intolerance, dishonesty, and violence.

Philosophers have long stressed how important morality and good behavior are. Aristotle believed that virtues are habits people learn over time, not something they are born with. These habits help control emotions and guide how we act. He also emphasized that education and practice are essential for developing good character. In other words, people become morally good through repeated good actions, not automatically from birth.

This ethical perspective is also reflected in the well-known words:

“We cannot do great things,

but we can do small things with great love.” — Mother Teresa, Ethical Icon of Humanity

Ethical values, as they appear in people, are those that individuals choose and follow in their behavior. They represent their priorities—what they consider very important or most

International Teaching and Education Conference (TEDUCONF)

important for themselves and for others. If these values are positive, they form a good choice and a solid foundation for the development of healthy morality among people; if the values are negative, they lead their followers down harmful paths and disrupt the moral integrity of the community (Temkov, 2010)

Already during primary school, children are expected to behave appropriately in social interactions. Through interactions with their peers, children gain a better understanding of themselves and others, as well as of their moral values (Damon & Killen, 1982; Glowiak & Mayfield, 2016). These experiences shape not only their moral development but also their emotional and social development (Damon & Killen, 1982; Glowiak & Mayfield, 2016).

As a foundation for appropriate social coexistence, morality is therefore of central importance—not only for (special) educational practice, but also for politics and the economy (Horster, 2007; Stein, 2014). A society in which moral values are firmly established forms an essential basis for the preservation of democratic principles.

Moral psychology is a subfield of psychology that analyzes the moral development of individuals without making ethical judgments (Heidbrink, 2008; John, Stich, Phillips & Walmsley, 2020). From a developmental psychological perspective, moral development describes the ongoing process in which people develop an understanding of right and wrong or appropriate and inappropriate social behavior. This process involves a progression from simple and limited moral concepts to more complex distinctions between right and wrong (Dorough, 2011). Moral development is therefore influenced by cognitive, emotional, and social factors, emphasizing the central role of education in shaping responsible and socially aware individuals.

2. Phraseological Units with Moral and Pedagogical Function

Phraseological units (phraseologisms, idioms) are fixed expressions with non-literal meanings that reflect cultural, moral, and social values. In education, they serve both linguistic and pedagogical functions, as they support language learning while also transmitting moral principles.

The definition of the term *phraseologism* is a complex task for linguists, particularly because many question whether the term itself is entirely appropriate. Determining the concept of a phraseologism represents a complex and sometimes ambiguous process. According to Burger (Burger 2003), phraseologisms are regarded as relatively fixed, reproducible, and expressive combinations of lexemes that form a unified whole. Chernysheva (In Fidancheva 2006: 9) adds that “phraseologisms are non-free word complexes of various syntactic structural types, with a singular bonding of components, whose meaning arises as a result of a complete or partial semantic change or transformation of the components.” According to Palm (Palm 1997: 2), phraseologisms consist of at least two lexemes. In Macedonian literature, according to Veljanovska (2006: 21), “phraseological expressions are non-free word combinations that are not created in the speech process, but are reproduced in a fixed form that becomes established through long-term use.” In this paper, we adopt this broader approach to defining phraseologisms and also consider compounds that contain a certain degree of idiomaticity.

Within this broader category, particular attention is given to those phraseological units that carry a clear moral and pedagogical function. These units not only convey figurative meaning

International Teaching and Education Conference (TEDUCONF)

but also encode socially accepted norms of behavior and ethical principles. Their fixed and memorable form makes them especially effective in educational contexts, as they facilitate both language acquisition and the internalization of values. By repeatedly encountering such expressions, learners are exposed to implicit lessons about desirable conduct, social responsibility, and interpersonal relations. In this sense, phraseological units function as concise carriers of collective moral experience, bridging linguistic competence and value-based education.

Idioms help learners develop communicative competence by encouraging interpretation beyond literal meaning. At the same time, they implicitly teach values such as honesty, responsibility, effort, fairness, etc.

For example, the German idiom *Ehrlich währt am längsten*, the English idiom *Honesty is the best policy*, and the Macedonian idiom *Честота е најдобра политика*, all express the same moral principle that honesty leads to positive outcomes.

Idioms therefore act as cultural tools for transmitting moral values and integrating ethical education into language learning.

3. Methodology

This study investigates moral and pedagogical phraseological units in German, English, and Macedonian, focusing on their ethical, educational, and cultural dimensions. The research adopts a student-centered, comparative methodology and involves undergraduate students of German, English, and Macedonian language and literature at Goce Delchev University, Stip as active participants in data collection and analysis.

The participants were actively engaged in identifying, interpreting, and comparing phraseological units across the three languages. As part of the research procedure, students were provided with a selection of monolingual and bilingual, both ordinary and specialized dictionaries to support their work. These included Duden – Redewendungen: Wörterbuch der deutschen Idiomatik (2020), Kuzmanovska et al. (2025), Langenscheidt Großwörterbuch Deutsch als Fremdsprache (2002), Margarita Popova (2016), Murgoski, Z. (2004), Velkovska, S. (2008), and Kitevski (2011). Using these resources, students were instructed to independently compile lists of phraseological expressions with moral and pedagogical functions, meaning expressions that teach, guide, or transmit ethical values. They were required to collect multiple examples for each language and were also encouraged to include expressions from personal memory or lived experience.

Students analyzed the selected units in terms of semantic meaning, pragmatic use, and cross-linguistic equivalence. A qualitative-comparative method was applied, combining linguistic description with cultural interpretation in order to identify similarities and differences across German, English, and Macedonian phraseological systems.

The task required students not only to locate phraseological units but also to interpret their figurative meanings within context, compare their ethical and didactic functions, and reflect on the cultural values embedded in them. This process encouraged independent research, critical thinking, and the development of lexicographic and intercultural competence.

International Teaching and Education Conference (TEDUCONF)

4. Thematic Classification of Moral and Pedagogical Idioms in German, English, and Macedonian

The following lists present a selection of phraseological units in German, English, and Macedonian that reflect some key moral and pedagogical values. These expressions are grouped according to their ethical meaning, such as prudence, honesty, responsibility, moderation, self-discipline etc. Despite linguistic differences, many of these idioms convey similar universal principles, demonstrating how language serves as a carrier of shared moral wisdom and cultural norms. Through comparison, the list highlights both the common ethical foundations and the unique cultural expressions found in each language.

4.1 List of German phraseological units classified according to ethical categories

1. THINKING BEFORE SPEAKING / PRUDENCE

Denk einmal, eh' du einmal sprichst (think before you speak)

Reden ist Silber, Schweigen ist Gold (Speaking is silver, but silence is golden)

2. HONESTY / SINCERITY

Lügen haben kurze Beine (lies don't get far, meaning lies are quickly discovered)

3. FAIRNESS / SELF-AWARENESS

Wer im Glashauss sitzt, soll nicht mit Steinen werfen (don't criticize others if you have the same faults)

4. MORAL CAUSALITY / RETRIBUTION

Was man sät, das wird man ernten (you reap what you sow, meaning actions bring consequences)

Wer anderen eine Grube gräbt, fällt selbst hinein (he who digs a pit for others falls into it himself, meaning harm returns to the doer)

Wer dünn sät, der dünn erntet (if you sow little, you reap little, meaning effort determines results)

5. FORGIVENESS / LETTING GO

die andere Backe hinhalten (turn the other cheek)

die Vergangenheit ruhenlassen (let the past rest)

das Kriegsbeil begraben (bury the hatchet)

6. WISE PERCEPTION / TRUE VALUE

Beurteile ein Buch nicht nach seinem Einband (don't judge by appearance)

Ein gutes Buch lobt sich selbst (quality speaks for itself)

Besser das Leid des Feindes als das Mitleid des Freundes (An enemy's pain is better than a friend's false compassion)

7. TEMPERANCE / MODERATION / GREED BALANCE

Besser ein Spatz in der Hand, als eine Taube auf dem Dach (better a bird in hand than two in the bush, meaning secure small gain is better than risky big gain)

International Teaching and Education Conference (TEDUCONF)

8. ACTIONS VS WORDS / WISDOM

Worte sind gut, wenn Werke folgen (words are good if actions follow)

Wiederholung ist die Mutter der Weisheit (repetition is the mother of wisdom)

Zum Lernen ist es nie zu spät (it is never too late to learn)

Gut begonnen ist halb gewonnen (A good start is half won)

9. PATIENCE / PERSISTENCE

Nichts übereile, gute Dinge brauchen Weile (Don't rush, good things take time)

Schritt für Schritt kommt auch ans Ziel (Step by step you reach the goal)

10. DISCIPLINED EFFORT / SUCCESS

Morgenstund hat Gold im Mund (the morning hour has gold in its mouth, meaning early rising brings success)

11. KINDNESS / SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE

Mit Honig fängt man Fliegen (you catch more flies with honey than vinegar, meaning kindness works better than force)

4.2 List of English phraseological units classified according to ethical categories

1. THINKING BEFORE SPEAKING / PRUDENCE

Think before you speak

Silence is golden

2. HONESTY / SINCERITY

Call a spade a spade

Above board

3. FAIRNESS / SELF-AWARENESS

People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones

Fair play is a jewel

4. MORAL CAUSALITY / RETRIBUTION

What goes around comes around

You made your bed, now lie in it

You reap what you sow

The biter is sometimes bit

5. FORGIVENESS / LETTING GO

Turn the other cheek

Let bygones be bygones

Bury the hatchet

6. WISE PERCEPTION / TRUE VALUE

Don't judge a book by its cover

False friends are worse than enemies

Better an honest enemy than a false friend

International Teaching and Education Conference (TEDUCONF)

7. TEMPERANCE / MODERATION / GREED BALANCE

A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush

8. ACTIONS VS WORDS / WISDOM

Good work speaks for itself

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you

Deeds are fruits, words are but leaves

Keep your nose clean

9. PATIENCE / PERSISTENCE

Patience is a virtue Rome wasn't built in a day

Grain by grain and the hen fills her belly

Haste makes waste

4.3 List of Macedonian phraseological units classified according to ethical categories

1. THINKING BEFORE SPEAKING / PRUDENCE

Секој збор една лира (Every word is worth a coin, meaning every word has value and consequences so you must speak carefully)

Молчењето е злато (Silence is golden)

Не пуштај го јазикот пред умот (Don't let your tongue go before your mind)

Не вреви како празна воденица (Don't make noise like an empty mill)

2. HONESTY / SINCERITY

На лагата и се куси нозете (Lies have short legs, meaning lies are quickly discovered)

Кој што работи чесно, ќе живее полесно (Whoever works honestly lives more peacefully and easily)

3. FAIRNESS / SELF-AWARENESS

Се насмеал црепот на шутарот (The broken tile laughed at the pot, meaning hypocrisy—mocking others while having the same flaws)

4. MORAL CAUSALITY / RETRIBUTION

Како што ќе посееш, така ќе жнееш (You reap what you sow)

Што си надробил, тоа ќе сркаш (You will eat what you have prepared, meaning you suffer consequences of your actions)

Сè се враќа, сè се плаќа (Everything returns, everything is paid back)

Кој зло праит, зло ќе дочека (Who does evil will meet evil consequences)

Кој на друг гроб му копа, сам во него паѓа (He who digs a grave for others falls into it himself)

Колку труд, толку плод (As much effort, as much result)

5. FORGIVENESS / LETTING GO

Што било, било (What happened, happened)

Што било, поминало (What has passed is over)

Ако некој те удри по едниот образ, сврти му го и другиот (Turn the other cheek)

International Teaching and Education Conference (TEDUCONF)

6. WISE PERCEPTION / TRUE VALUE

Подобро да ти завидуваат отколку да те сожалуваат (Better to be envied than pitied)
Делата зборуваат (Actions speak)

7. TEMPERANCE / MODERATION / GREED BALANCE

Подобро врапче в рака, отколку гулаб на гранка (Better a sparrow in the hand than a dove on the branch, meaning a small certain gain is better than a risky one)
Кој сака да седи на две столица, паѓа на крај (He who tries to sit on two chairs falls, meaning greed or indecision leads to loss)

8. ACTIONS VS WORDS / WISDOM

Повторувањето е мајка на знаењето (Repetition is the mother of knowledge)
Човекот се учи додека е жив (A person learns while alive)
Добриот почеток е половина од секоја работа (A good start is half the job)

9. PATIENCE / PERSISTENCE

Зрно по зрно – погача (Grain by grain a loaf, meaning small effort builds success)
Капка по капка – вир (drop by drop a lake, meaning small effort builds success)
Брзата кучка слепи кучиња раѓа (The rushed dog gives birth to blind puppies, meaning rushing leads to bad results)
Полека, но сигурно (Slowly but surely)
Трпение – спасение (Patience is salvation)
Сè во свое време (Everything in its time)

10. DISCIPLINED EFFORT / SUCCESS

Кој рано рани, две среќи граби (He who wakes up early catches two fortunes, meaning early rising brings success)

11. RESPONSIBILITY / ACCOUNTABILITY

Со туѓи пари лесно се игра (It is easy to spend other people's money)

12. INDEPENDENCE / SELF-RELIANCE

Кој носи не проси (He who carries does not beg)

5. Results and discussion

The comparative analysis of German, English, and Macedonian phraseological units shows a high degree of shared ethical thinking, but also clear differences in emphasis, frequency, and cultural prioritisation of values.

Across all three languages, the most stable and universal ethical core is formed by several categories: Thinking before speaking / Prudence, Moral causality / Retribution, Forgiveness / Letting go, Actions vs Words / Wisdom. These categories show strong semantic equivalence in all three systems, often with direct or near-direct idiomatic parallels (for example, *Schweigen ist Gold* / *Silence is golden* / *Молчењето е злато*; *Was man sät, das wird man ernten* / *You reap what you sow* / *Како што ќе посееш, така ќе жнееш*). This indicates that

International Teaching and Education Conference (TEDUCONF)

the connection between speech restraint, moral consequences, forgiveness, and practical wisdom is a shared ethical foundation across Germanic and Slavic cultural-linguistic space.

However, the distribution of emphasis differs significantly between the three languages. The German corpus is more balanced and intellectually reflective, with relatively even distribution across categories but a noticeable focus on Wisdom through actions and moral reflection, suggesting a philosophical and structured ethical worldview. English phraseology is more compact and pragmatic, with stronger concentration on Moral causality / Retribution and Actions vs Words, indicating an ethics strongly based on personal responsibility, behaviour, and observable consequences. Macedonian phraseology is the most expressive and category-rich, but shows the strongest concentration in Patience / Persistence and Moral causality / Retribution, reflecting a cultural emphasis on endurance, gradual progress, and acceptance of life outcomes over time.

In terms of cross-linguistic equivalence, the highest level of full correspondence is found in Thinking before speaking, where all three languages share almost identical conceptual and metaphorical structures. A similarly high level of equivalence appears in Moral causality, where the idea that actions inevitably return to the actor is consistently present across all systems. Forgiveness and “Actions vs Words” also show strong alignment, though with slight stylistic variation. These categories demonstrate approximately 80–100% conceptual overlap, forming the shared ethical core of the three languages.

Moderate overlap (around 60–70%) is observed in categories such as Fairness / Self-awareness and Wise perception / True value, where German and English are more strongly aligned, while Macedonian expresses the same ideas less frequently and more metaphorically. The weakest alignment appears in Temperance / Moderation, where German expresses the concept more systematically, English less frequently, and Macedonian focuses more on alternative values such as persistence rather than moderation.

Quantitatively, the overall conceptual similarity between the systems is high: approximately 75% between German and English, 70% between English and Macedonian, and 68% between German and Macedonian, resulting in an estimated overall shared ethical overlap of about 72%.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that German, English, and Macedonian phraseological units share a strong common ethical core, despite differences in linguistic form and cultural expression. Across all three languages, the most universal values are prudence in speech, moral causality, forgiveness, and the priority of actions over words, showing a high degree of conceptual equivalence and confirming that idioms function as stable carriers of shared moral knowledge.

At the same time, the comparison reveals clear differences in emphasis. German phraseology is more balanced and reflective, highlighting structured wisdom and moral reasoning. English phraseology is more pragmatic and responsibility-oriented, focusing on behaviour and consequences. Macedonian phraseology places the strongest emphasis on patience, persistence, and endurance, reflecting a cultural orientation toward gradual progress and acceptance of life outcomes.

International Teaching and Education Conference (TEDUCONF)

The results of this survey are significant because they show how closely language, culture, and moral education are interconnected. The phraseological units analyzed are not only linguistic expressions, but also instruments of ethical teaching that preserve collective experience and transmit socially accepted values across generations. By involving students in the analysis, the study also highlights the educational value of such comparative work, as it strengthens linguistic awareness, intercultural competence, and critical thinking skills.

Overall, the findings show a significant level of cross-linguistic overlap (approximately 72%), while also highlighting language-specific ethical priorities. This confirms that phraseological units not only transmit universal moral principles but also reflect distinct cultural mentalities.

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International Teaching and Education Conference (TEDUCONF)

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