

Artistic-Figurative Devices used in Superstition Units (Metaphor, Euphemism, Inversion, Repetition)

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ABSTRACT

This study is devoted to the analysis of the main artistic-figurative and stylistic devices metaphor, euphemism, inversion, and repetition employed in German superstition (Aberglaube) units from a linguostylistic and linguocultural perspective. Based on widely spread folk expressions of superstition, the semantic features, cognitive foundations, and communicative-pragmatic functions of these devices are revealed. The research demonstrates how abstract concepts such as luck, misfortune, evil, and protection are expressed through vivid and memorable images by means of metaphor. Euphemism in superstition units is interpreted as a tool for expressing taboo or frightening notions in a softened and indirect form, as well as conveying positive meaning in negative form through the “reverse wish” technique. Inversion is explained as a syntactic and logical mechanism that enhances emphasis and persuasive force in warning and prohibitive expressions related to superstition. Repetition, especially in the form of triple repetition, is characterized as ritualistic and ceremonial, intensifying the performative and emotional impact of speech. The results of the study show how the national mentality, cultural stereotypes, and axiological views of the German people are reflected through superstition-related language units, and substantiate the important role of stylistic devices in transmitting such units across generations.

Keywords: Superstition, *Aberglaube*, metaphor, euphemism, inversion, repetition, artistic-figurative devices, linguostylistics,

linguoculture, cognitive linguistics, conceptual metaphor, taboo and euphemism, folk beliefs, superstition expressions, ritual speech, pragmatics, performative speech acts, national mentality, cultural code, German language and culture, folklore, semantic analysis, stylistic devices, language-culture relationship.

INTRODUCTION

Folk superstition expressions are formed linguostylistically through metaphorical meaning transfer, euphemistic substitution related to taboo, syntactic and logical inversion, and rhythmic repetition. In German folklore and cultural code, superstition (*Aberglaube*) occupies a significant place. Expressions related to various omens and beliefs reflect the worldview and cultural experience of the people. Such superstition units are usually clear and memorable in form, transmitted across generations through artistic means of expression. Stylistic devices serve to convey the content of superstition in a concise and impactful way. Metaphor expresses abstract concepts in concrete imagery; euphemism introduces softer expressions instead of dangerous, harsh, or unpleasant meanings; inversion changes word order to strengthen emphasis or conveys intention through logical “reverse saying”; repetition adds rhythmic force to oral speech. As a result, superstition-related expressions are easily remembered, acquire figurative meaning, and fulfill communicative functions (e.g., warning someone or providing psychological support).

Metaphor is the creation of meaning by transferring an image from one conceptual domain (source domain) to another (target domain) [2] as Lakoff & Johnson note. Humans often rely on metaphors grounded in concrete, physical experience to understand abstract notions [13]. For example, the abstract concept of luck may be expressed through different images in different cultures. In English, “luck” is viewed as chance along the path of life, whereas in German it is represented through several traditional metaphorical images.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In German superstition expressions, concepts such as luck and sorrow are compared to various objects and phenomena.

- ***Scherbenbringen Glück* (“Broken china brings luck”)**: Here, luck is imagined as something released through breaking. In the *Polterabend* ritual, dishes are deliberately broken, and according to folk belief, the shards symbolize good wishes for the new marriage. The noise of breaking glass or porcelain drives away evil forces, while the shards themselves metaphorically become fragments of luck [8]. Thus, shards (*scherben*) serve as the source domain, mapped onto the target domain of luck – luck is imagined as shards.
- ***Schornsteinfegerbringt Glück* (“The chimney sweep brings luck”)**: In this folk saying, luck is treated as an external object that comes and goes. In German tradition, seeing a chimney sweep is considered a sign of luck. Touching or kissing him is believed to bring additional fortune [8]. Here, luck is metaphorically conveyed through an object that delivers it. The chimney sweep’s image is positive, as he protects the house from fire and prevents disaster, so a figure with real benefit to the community is metaphorically linked with luck [8].
- ***Ich drück dir die Daumen* (“I press my thumbs for you”)**: This expression actually means “I wish you luck.” In German, *die Daumendrücken* refers to folding the thumb into the fist as a gesture for someone else. Historically, during gladiator fights, the crowd would hide their thumbs downward to signal mercy – a wish for the fighter to live [11]. Thus, pressing the thumb became metaphorically mapped to wishing luck. In folk superstition, the thumb was considered a “luck finger” with good power. Keeping it pressed inside the fist was believed to hold back evil spirits. According to Bächtold-Stäubli, folding the thumb into the fist symbolically bound harmful forces so they could not harm others [3] In this case, metaphor is accompanied by

metonymy: the thumb itself becomes the “luck finger” that binds spirits.

- ***Auf Holzklopfen*** (“to knock on wood [to ward off evil]”): conceptualizes evil as an abstract phenomenon and invokes wood as a protective image against it. This practice is found among many peoples worldwide. In the German variant, it is customary to knock three times on wood. After uttering a positive statement about oneself, a person says *auf Holzklopfen* and knocks three times on a table or door. Here, wood functions as a protective medium. In ancient times, the oak tree was considered “sacred,” and it was believed that evil spirits could not approach wood [11]. For this reason, even today Germans, when saying “everything will turn out fine,” immediately knock on wood – a metaphorical act that calls upon the “power of wood.” In this case, wood is employed as a sacred object to ward off evil. Thus, metaphor merges with ritual: a real physical action (knocking on wood) becomes a linguistic unit (*Auf Holzklopfen*) and acquires the figurative meaning “to avert misfortune.”
- ***Glückspilz*** (“lucky mushroom”): This German metaphor denotes someone who is fortunate, literally “a person of luck.” Here, the mushroom (*Pilz*) is the source domain, while the lucky person is the target domain. Among wild mushrooms, the *Fliegenpilz* (fly agaric, the red mushroom with white spots often depicted in New Year decorations) has long been considered a symbol of luck in German culture. In New Year greeting cards, alongside the pig, the four-leaf clover (*Kleeblatt*), and the chimney sweep, this red mushroom is frequently illustrated. All of these belong to the category of *Glücksbringer* (luck-bringers). [8] Consequently, *Glückspilz* metaphorically came to mean “a lucky person” (as if luck grows like a mushroom).

From these examples, it is evident that metaphors in German superstition expressions serve cognitively in two ways: first, abstract concepts (such as luck or evil) are expressed through concrete images (objects, forces, actions); second, these images often rely on national cultural stereotypes. For instance, the pig

(*Schwein*) symbolizes luck and abundance in German culture (*Schweinhaben* – “to have a pig” means “to be lucky”) [12]. The horseshoe (*Hufeisen*) has traditionally been hung on household doors to bring prosperity, with regional variations: in some areas it is placed upward to “collect luck,” while in others it is placed downward so that luck “pours in” [8]. The four-leaf clover, being extremely rare, is believed to require luck to find and to bring luck to the finder [8]. These examples demonstrate the interplay of conceptual domains and linguocultural symbols. *Schwein*, *Hufeisen*, *Kleeblatt*, *Schornsteinfeger* – all form the stereotype of “good omens” in German mentality, while black cats, the number 13, or breaking mirrors belong to the “bad omens” stereotype.

Metaphorical expressions typically carry illocutionary purposes such as wishes, blessings, or warnings. For example, *Ich drück dir die Daumen* (“I press my thumbs for you”) explicitly conveys the illocution “I wish you luck.” *Auf Holzklopfen* pragmatically functions to protect oneself or the interlocutor from the “evil eye,” performing a speech act of warning-protection (as if saying “may it not happen”). *Schweingehabt!* (“you had a pig!”) is a speech act of emphasis, meaning “you were lucky!” and expresses joy at one’s or another’s fortune. *Scherbenbringen Glück* (“shards bring luck”) is used to console or interpret an unpleasant event positively, e.g., when something breaks unexpectedly. Thus, metaphorical superstition expressions serve as tools of psychological support, good wishes, and interpretive framing in communication.

Metaphor in German superstition units is highly effective because it renders abstract superstitious content in clear and vivid form. Metaphors resonate with existing cognitive frames in people’s minds. For example, “wood” embodies the sacred protective frame; the “pig” represents abundance and luck; the “thumb” signifies a gesture binding power. These cognitive frames are products of centuries of German worldview and are embedded into linguistic units through metaphor. Another strength of metaphor is its ability to combine universality and cultural specificity. For instance, “trees and wood” are protective symbols in many cultures, but the “pig” is a luck symbol only in certain traditions (notably German) [12]. Thus, metaphors

convey the axiological perspectives of the German people (systems of good and bad omens) into language – “good signs” and “bad signs” expressed through metaphorical imagery. However, metaphor also has limitations: it sometimes requires contextual explanation. For example, wishing someone “you had a pig” may be misunderstood by outsiders. Therefore, such expressions are effective only within the national cultural context, relying on shared knowledge.

- **Euphemism** is the phenomenon of using a softer, indirect expression instead of a taboo or undesirable meaning or word. In folk superstition, euphemism appears in two main forms:
- **Taboo-euphemism**: avoiding direct mention of dangerous or frightening things by naming them differently (e.g., referring to death as “passed away”).
- **Reverse-wish (ironic) euphemism**: expressing a positive intention indirectly through a negative wish, thereby actually conveying good meaning.

As Wierzbicka’s studies show, many cultures share the cultural script “if you speak of evil, evil will come,” which leads to the practice “not naming evil prevents its arrival.” In German, certain domains are subject to linguistic taboo. Words related to death and illness, or names of the devil and evil spirits, are avoided. For example, *der Teufel* (the devil) is not mentioned directly, and expressions related to the “evil eye” are euphemistically phrased. In German folk belief, euphemistic substitutions are observed in several domains:

To avoid saying directly “he died,” the verb *verunglücken* (“to suffer an accident”) is used. For example, *Eristverunglückt* (“He suffered an accident”) often implies death as a result of a traffic incident. Here, euphemism replaces the unpleasant reality of death with a softer expression. Similarly, expressions such as *von unsgehen* (“to leave us”) or *einschlafen* (“to fall asleep”) also avoid direct mention of death. Such euphemistic units serve a

psychological protective function – concealing a frightening truth and easing the emotional reaction of the listener.

In folk practice, one must not directly praise a newborn child or a very healthy person – it is feared that this will bring the “evil eye.” Therefore, when praising a child, Germans often immediately say *toi, toi, toi* three times or perform *dreimal auf Holzklopfen* (“knock three times on wood”). This is a ritual euphemistic formula meaning “may my words not bring harm.” *Toi, toi, toi* is in fact an onomatopoeic imitation of spitting: “tfu, tfu, tfu,” repeated three times. Its origin is debated: some claim *toi* derives from the Hebrew *tov* (“good”), but researchers generally agree that it stems from the folkloric practice of imitating the sound of spitting. Triple spitting has long been a method of protection against the evil eye in Europe and Asia. According to Pliny, in ancient Rome people spat three times on the ground when a child was praised or someone appeared excessively fortunate. In German usage, saying *toi, toi, toi* and often knocking on wood simultaneously represents the verbalized form of this ritual. Semantically, *toi, toi, toi* is close to the Uzbek expression “tilimostigatupuray” (“let me spit under my tongue”), used after praise or positive prediction to ward off misfortune. Thus, *toi, toi, toi* functions as a protective euphemism, negating the positive statement to guard against the evil eye [7].

This type of euphemism involves not expressing good wishes directly, but instead uttering them in reverse form, thereby actually wishing the opposite. For example, the expression *Hals- und Beinbruch!* (“Break your neck and leg!”). Naturally, the intention is not to wish harm to a friend or colleague, but rather to say ironically “I wish you success.” Its origins are surrounded by various legends. One hypothesis suggests it derives from the Yiddish phrase *hatsloche u’ broche* (“success and blessing”) [10]. Scholarly sources indicate that *Hals- und Beinbruch* first spread as a good-luck jargon among military pilots, later entering the theater world and eventually common usage [6]. From a linguistic perspective, expressions like *Hals- und Beinbruch* belong to the category of *abergläubische Glückwünsche* (“superstitious good wishes”). Here, a negative formulation serves a positive meaning – the logic being “if I wish you

misfortune, good fortune will actually come.” According to *Duden*, such negative wishes trace back to ancient beliefs. Among the Greeks, the concept of *Phthonos* (the envy of the gods) held that if a person appeared excessively happy, boasted, or received too many blessings, the gods’ envy would be aroused, bringing disaster. To avoid provoking divine wrath, people would utter superficial curses – wishes that sounded bad but carried good intentions. *Hals- und Beinbruch* can thus be seen as a modern echo of this ancient “reverse wish.” Today Germans commonly say it to students before exams or to actors and singers before performances, meaning “Good luck, may everything go well!” Analogous expressions exist in other domains: sailors say *Mast- und Schotbruch!* (“May your mast and ropes break!”), pilots say *Holm- und Rippenbruch!* (“May your wing spars and ribs break!”) [10]. Though seemingly harsh, these are euphemisms loaded with positive intent.

As in many cultures, German tradition avoids invoking the devil by name. For instance, the saying *Schlag nicht den Namen des Teufels aus* (“Do not utter the devil’s name”) exists, but the most widespread is *Den Teufels soll man nicht an die Wand malen* (“Do not paint the devil on the wall”). This proverb has two parts: 1) “painting the devil on the wall” – a metaphorical image (mentioning evil and thereby giving it form), and 2) “one must not do this” – a warning. The meaning derives from the old belief “if you mention the devil, he will appear.” In German, “painting on the wall” implies that by visualizing evil one summons it. This expression is thus a euphemistic warning: do not name evil directly, but refer to it metaphorically, or remain silent altogether. Such expressions rest on the mystical principle in folk consciousness that “words can call things into being.” In line with Wierzbicka’s cultural script, German expressions also imply: “If you speak evil openly, it may actually happen; therefore, better to say it ironically or indirectly.”

In German culture, certain customs have developed around avoiding taboo words. For example, it is forbidden to congratulate someone before their birthday — *Zum Geburtstag vorher nicht gratulieren!* (“Do not congratulate before the birthday”) [4]. Saying “Happy birthday” in advance is

avoided, since superstition holds that premature congratulations invite misfortune (“the person is not yet alive on that day”). This is another form of euphemistic avoidance: the taboo is early congratulation, the euphemistic solution is silence or distraction until the actual day. Likewise, one does not say to a sick person “You look terrible,” but instead uses the positive formula *Gute Besserung* (“Get well soon”), which softens the fear and provides psychological support through euphemism.

Euphemistic expressions pragmatically often serve a protective function. People try not to “summon evil with words,” while simultaneously offering psychological reassurance to themselves and others. For example:

- *toi, toi, toi* carries the illocution “I am protecting you from the evil eye.”
- *Hals- und Beinbruch* conveys the illocution “I wish you good luck (though expressed in reverse form).”
- *Teufel an die Wand malen* expresses the warning “do not say such things, lest you attract misfortune.”

Socially, such euphemistic units align with norms of etiquette. For instance, the rule *vordem Geburtstagnichtgratulieren* (“do not congratulate before the birthday”) is so deeply ingrained in German society that offering congratulations prematurely may be perceived as a subtle breach of tact.

In German superstition, euphemism functions as a mechanism for managing fear and anxiety through language. This practice rests on the belief in the “magic of words”: words are seen as possessing power – used correctly, they bring fortune; used incorrectly, they bring misfortune. Hence, after excessive praise or positive prediction, Germans perform a euphemistic ritual (spitting, knocking on wood) or utter a reversed wish. This phenomenon is widespread across cultures, though the specific words and expressions vary. For example, English speakers say *break a leg* (in theater tradition), the French say *merde* (a vulgar word used to wish luck), and Italians say *In bocca al lupo* (“into the wolf’s mouth”). These correspond to the German *Hals- und*

Beinbruch. Thus, euphemism captures even the subtlest fears of a people through language, serving to maintain psychological stability. Overall, euphemistic superstition expressions harmonize with German moral and religious views: “Do not invoke evil, speak of death only indirectly, and do not call misfortune upon yourself” (*Beschwörenicht das Böse, redenichtleichtfertigmom Tod und ziehekeinUnglückherbei*). This reflects national mentality manifested through linguistic means.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In linguistics, “inversion” refers to altering the usual word order. In superstition-related expressions, inversion appears in two forms:

1. **Syntactic inversion:** disrupting normal word order to emphasize a particular element.
2. **Logical inversion:** expressing the opposite of the expected meaning or wish (closely related to euphemism), thereby intensifying normative signals.

German superstition expressions frequently employ inversion in conditional structures and prohibitive commands.

- **Conditional-result constructions:** Folk proverbs often appear in the form *Wer X tut, dem Y geschieht* (“Whoever does X, Y will happen to him”). Grammatically, the clause begins with *Wer* and continues with *dem*, reversing the usual German sentence order. For example: *Werabendspfeift, demfehlt das Geld* (“Whoever whistles in the evening will lose money”). This widespread superstition conveys that whistling at night drives away prosperity. In this structure, inversion foregrounds the condition (*Werabendspfeift*), immediately drawing attention to the forbidden act, while the result (*demfehlt das Geld*) delivers a strong warning [9]. Similar proverbs include *Weruntereiner Leiter hindurchgeht, demdroht Unheil* (“Whoever walks under a ladder will face misfortune”). The rhythm and rhyme of the inverted structure

enhance its didactic force, making it memorable as advice for children or admonition for adults. Paremiologist Permyakov classifies such proverbs as logical expressions of folk wisdom (condition and inevitable consequence) [14].

- **Prohibitive commands:** In standard German, imperative sentences begin with the verb (*Geh nicht!* – “Do not go!”). In superstition-related prohibitions, however, the structure often begins with *nicht* + verb, e.g., *Nichtpfeifen am Abend!* (“Do not whistle at night!”). While *Pfeifabendsnicht!* would be grammatically correct, the inverted form is more emphatic, resembling a sharp exclamation: “Never whistle at night, or misfortune will follow!” Other examples include *Nicht auf der Schwelle sitzen!* (“Do not sit on the threshold!”) and *Nicht in den Spiegel schauen bei Kerzenlicht!* (“Do not look into the mirror by candlelight!”). Placing *nicht* at the beginning heightens the warning tone, immediately triggering a sense of prohibition in the listener.
- **Marked syntagmatic structures:** Certain superstition concepts employ unusual ordering. For example, *Freitag, der 13.* (“Friday the 13th”) differs from the standard German date format. Here, the number 13 is placed after the day, emphasizing it as a symbolic marker. Thus, *Freitag, der 13.* is not merely a date but a culturally loaded expression of misfortune [5]. Linguistically, this inversion transforms an ordinary date into a symbolic phrase, foregrounding the ominous number. Germans often use it ironically: *Heute ist Freitag, der 13. – pass auf!* (“Today is Friday the 13th be careful!”). In this way, inversion alters the informational structure, turning a neutral date into a culturally resonant superstition.

Inversive expressions often carry rhetorical force. Even if rationally one knows that walking under a ladder is harmless, hearing the proverb discourages the act. Thus, inversion ensures that the message is absorbed more effectively and exerts stronger influence on the listener.

“Repetition” the recurrence of a word or structure is a stylistic device that intensifies meaning and effect. In rituals,

“triple repetition” holds particular importance. Anthropologists note that the number three is widely regarded as a symbol of perfection and sacredness across cultures. The German proverb *Allerguten Dinge sind drei* (“All good things come in threes”) reflects this positive perception. In German superstition units, repetition frequently appears in ritual rhythmic formulas, reinforcing performative and emotional impact.

Returning to the example of *toi, toi, toi*, this expression is always uttered three times. Saying *toi* only once is not customary it is invariably repeated as *toi, toi, toi*. As noted earlier, this practice originates in the ancient ritual of spitting three times. Similarly, *dreimal auf Holzklopfen* (“knock on wood three times”) is performed to avert misfortune. According to certain beliefs, if one has spoken an ill-omened phrase, it is necessary to knock three times on wood immediately. Why three? Because once is accidental, twice is mere repetition, but the third time establishes a “rule with wings,” accepted as a sacred number. Folklorist R. Brasch, in *Dreimal schwarzer Kater* (“Three Times Black Cat”), documents numerous customs based on the triadic principle (threefold curses, threefold blessings, threefold circling, etc.), all linked to the magical power of the number three. [1] In German tradition, blessings or prayers are often repeated three times e.g., *Amen, amen, amen* or *Dreimal Hoch!* (“Three cheers!”) at festive gatherings.

Repetitive expressions also create a musical rhythm. For instance, *toi, toi, toi* has identical vowel sounds; spoken quickly and consecutively, it produces a melodious effect that both lightens the seriousness with humor and enhances its impact. Similarly, repeating *Nicht, nicht, nicht!* three times when scolding children intensifies the admonition (though usually *Nein, nein!* twice suffices). German also features repetitive idioms such as *immer und immerwieder* (“again and again”) or *nie und nimmer* (“never ever”), which rhythmically emphasize meaning and heighten emotion. In superstition expressions, repetition may appear as in *Kein Brot in den Mund nehmen und pfeifen – das bringt, bringt, bringt Unglück!* (“Do not whistle with bread in your mouth it brings, brings, brings misfortune!”), where the repeated phrase reinforces the warning.

Repetition is especially important in collective rituals. For example, during *Polterabend* (the pre-wedding custom of breaking dishes), participants traditionally shouted *Glück! Glück! Glück!* (“Luck! Luck! Luck!”) for each shard. At New Year’s Eve, after midnight, the greeting *Prosit Neujahr!* (“Happy New Year!”) is followed by the communal chant *Prosit! Prosit! Prosit!* Such collective repetitions heighten emotional uplift, fostering a sense of unity and ensuring the transmission of customs across generations. Shared actions and words are more firmly preserved.

Scholars note that triple repetition aids memory consolidation (e.g., the belief that magical words gain efficacy when repeated three times). Among Germans, the saying *dreimalist Bremer Recht* (“three times makes it law in Bremen”) reflects this cultural logic.

Repetitive expressions in speech typically fulfill emphatic and performative functions. Uttering *toi, toi, toi* three times constitutes a performative speech act the protective ritual against the evil eye is thereby “accomplished.” Likewise, shouting *Hurrah* three times or reciting a prayer thrice marks the completion of a symbolic act. Many German superstitions and rituals (New Year, weddings, birthdays) incorporate repetition to unify the community, elevate collective spirit, and “seal” the wish. For instance, the birthday song *Hoch soll er leben, hoch soll er leben – dreimal hoch!* (“May he live high, may he live high – three times high!”) repeats *hoch* thrice, embedding the communal wish in rhythm, while also evoking joy and laughter through musicality.

In German superstition units, the first repetition draws attention, the second intensifies meaning, and the third provides closure. This reflects a mythological worldview, yet its linguistic effectiveness should not be overlooked.

CONCLUSION

The analysis shows that metaphor, euphemism, inversion, and repetition often appear together in German superstition expressions, complementing one another:

- **Metaphor** renders abstract messages into vivid imagery.
- **Inversion** emphasizes and dramatizes those images in speech.
- **Euphemism** conveys fearful meanings indirectly, through irony or allusion.
- **Repetition** embellishes the euphemism or metaphor, amplifying rhythm and emotional resonance.

Most importantly, these stylistic devices imbue German superstition expressions with folk poetry and aesthetic charm. As a result, they transcend mere practical rules or dry admonitions, living instead as memorable, pleasing, and impactful folk wisdom. Metaphor, euphemism, inversion, and repetition play a decisive role in the formation and survival of superstition units. Through them, the German people have transmitted their national mentality (systems of good and bad omens, symbolic meanings assigned to nature and creatures) and cultural values (ways of attaining luck, etiquette for avoiding misfortune) across generations.

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