

Idiomaticity Of Goodness-Related Proverbs In English

Yuldashev Azim Abdurakhmonovich

PhD, Uzbekistan State World Languages University

Rahmonova Jasmina Matyokubovna

Master's student, Uzbekistan State World Languages University

Abstract

This article investigates the semantic motivation and degree of idiomaticity of English proverbs expressing the concept of goodness. Proverbs are examined as culturally marked phraseological units that encode moral values through figurative language and stable semantic structures. Drawing on A. V. Kunin's theory of phraseological units, the study differentiates goodness-related proverbs according to degrees of idiomaticity, including phraseomatic, ideophraseomatic, and fully idiomatic types. The analysis also incorporates conceptual metaphor theory to identify cognitive mechanisms underlying semantic motivation. The data are taken from authoritative English proverb dictionaries and verified lexicographic sources. The findings demonstrate that English proverbs expressing goodness are predominantly metaphorically motivated and exhibit varying degrees of semantic transparency, reflecting ethical norms such as reciprocity, altruism, and moral causality. The study contributes to phraseological semantics by clarifying the applicability of idiomaticity and motivation frameworks to proverbial material.

Keywords: proverb semantics, goodness, idiomaticity, semantic motivation, phraseology, English proverbs

Introduction. Proverbs are concise, culturally embedded expressions that transmit moral, ethical, and social wisdom through conventionalized linguistic forms.¹ They function not only as lexical units but also as cognitive and cultural tools, reflecting shared values, guiding behavior, and encoding moral reasoning.² Among the abstract concepts encoded in proverbs, goodness occupies a central position, serving as a moral benchmark and a guide for human conduct. English proverbs expressing goodness offer insight into how moral concepts are linguistically structured and socially transmitted.³

Semantic motivation—the internal rationale connecting a proverb's form to its meaning—is essential for understanding how ethical ideas are communicated. It

explains why specific lexical choices, metaphorical constructions, or figurative patterns are used to convey abstract concepts such as goodness and why some expressions are transparent while others are idiomatically opaque.⁴ In English, proverbs frequently employ metaphors of reciprocity, moral causation, social value, and virtue to encode ethical meaning.⁵

Idiomaticity, or the degree to which the meaning of a proverb can be inferred from its constituent parts, is closely linked to semantic motivation. Proverbs range from fully transparent expressions to highly idiomatic or fixed units. Using Kunin's (1996) phraseological typology, proverbs can be classified as **fusions, unities, combinations,** or **expressions,** allowing systematic

¹ Apperson, G. L. (1993). *The Wordsworth dictionary of proverbs*. Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions.

² Kunin, A. V. (1996). *Phraseology and lexical semantics*. Moscow: Russian Academy of Sciences.

³ Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

⁴ Mieder, W. (1993). *A dictionary of American proverbs*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

⁵ Mieder, W. (2004). *Proverbs: A handbook*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

analysis of idiomaticity and figurative depth.⁶

This study investigates the **semantic motivation and idiomaticity of English proverbs expressing goodness**. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

1. How is goodness semantically motivated in English proverbs?
2. What degrees of idiomaticity can be observed in these proverbs?
3. How do figurative and phraseological features interact to shape the expression of moral values?

Methods. The corpus consisted of **120 English proverbs** explicitly expressing goodness, drawn from authoritative sources: *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Proverbs* (Apperson, 1993), *A Dictionary of American Proverbs* (Mieder, 1993), and *Modern Proverbs and Proverbial Sayings* (Whiting, 1989).⁷ Only proverbs conveying moral virtue, benevolence, or ethical behavior were included, and all entries were cross-verified to ensure authenticity.

Analysis combined semantic motivation theory with Kunin's (1996) phraseological typology.⁸ Semantic motivation identifies the internal logic connecting a proverb's form and meaning, including metaphorical or evaluative structures. Kunin's classification distinguishes phraseological fusions, unities, combinations, and expressions, facilitating systematic analysis of idiomaticity and figurative transparency. The analytical procedure consisted of three stages. First, proverbs containing lexical markers of goodness

(e.g., good, goodness, kind, virtuous) or metaphorically representing moral virtue were extracted. Second, each proverb was classified according to Kunin's typology to determine the degree of idiomaticity. Third, semantic and figurative content was analyzed, identifying recurrent conceptual metaphors, ethical frames, and cross-cutting cultural patterns. This method ensured a systematic and nuanced understanding of moral expression in English proverbs.

Results. Analysis revealed three prominent patterns of semantic motivation: **reciprocity**, **social value/reputation**, and **moral guidance/virtue**. Proverbs exemplifying reciprocity, such as "*One good turn deserves another*" and "*Kindness begets kindness*", were mostly **phraseological expressions**, with high transparency and direct cause-effect semantics.⁹ Proverbs framing goodness in terms of social value, including "*A good name is better than riches*" and "*Good words are worth much and cost little*", were typically **phraseological unities**, demonstrating metaphorical motivation with moderate interpretability.¹⁰ Proverbs offering moral guidance, such as "*Virtue is its own reward*" and "*Do good and you will be remembered*", were primarily **phraseological combinations**, combining conventional moral wisdom with partially transparent lexical elements.¹¹

Distribution of phraseological types:

⁶ Whiting, B. (1989). *Modern proverbs and proverbial sayings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁷ Fernando, C. (1996). *Idioms and idiomaticity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁸ Moon, R. (1998). *Fixed expressions and idioms in English: A corpus-based approach*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

⁹ Nunberg, G., Sag, I. A., & Wasow, T. (1994). Idioms. *Language*, 70(3), 491–538.

¹⁰ Wray, A. (2002). *Formulaic language and the lexicon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹¹ Pawley, A., & Syder, F. H. (1983). Two puzzles for linguistic theory: Nativelike selection and nativelike fluency. In J. C. Richards & R. W. Schmidt (Eds.), *Language and communication* (pp. 191–226). London: Longman.

Phraseological Type	Number of Proverbs	Percentage
Phraseological Expressions	52	43%
Phraseological Unities	46	38%
Phraseological Combinations	18	15%
Phraseological Fusions	4	4%

Conceptual metaphor analysis revealed recurrent schemas: GOODNESS IS RECIPROCITY, GOODNESS IS SOCIAL VALUE, and GOODNESS IS INHERENT VIRTUE, reflecting relational, evaluative, and normative frameworks in English-speaking cultures.¹² These metaphors show that English proverbs encode moral knowledge by mapping abstract ethical principles onto social and relational experiences.

Discussion. The findings indicate that English proverbs expressing goodness are **systematically motivated** and vary in idiomaticity according to function and conceptual content. Proverbs emphasizing reciprocity, such as “*One good turn deserves another*”, are highly transparent, aligning with their didactic and socially prescriptive role. Proverbs linking goodness to social reputation, such as “*A good name is better than riches*”, demonstrate metaphorical motivation, combining social evaluation with moral guidance.¹³ Proverbs offering moral exhortation, like “*Virtue is its own reward*”, occupy a middle ground, with partially idiomatic structures that balance figurative richness and interpretive clarity.

Kunin’s phraseological framework provides insight into how idiomaticity correlates with semantic motivation. Transparent expressions dominate the corpus, reflecting the need for clarity in moral communication. Phraseological unities enrich meaning through metaphorical structures, while combinations provide partially idiomatic constructions for more reflective ethical commentary. Fully idiomatic fusions are rare, likely because opacity would hinder comprehension in moral instruction.¹⁴ The recurrent conceptual metaphors identified suggest that English proverbs encode ethical values through **relational, evaluative, and normative schemas**. GOODNESS AS RECIPROCITY aligns moral behavior with cause-effect logic; GOODNESS AS SOCIAL VALUE situates virtue in social evaluation; GOODNESS AS INHERENT VIRTUE reflects intrinsic moral worth.¹⁵ This interplay of semantic motivation and idiomaticity ensures proverbs function efficiently as instruments of ethical socialization, balancing clarity with cognitive and cultural depth. These results align with previous research on idiomaticity, phraseology, and moral proverbs (Mieder, 2004; Wray, 2002; Fernando, 1996), confirming that English proverbs combine semantic transparency and figurative richness to convey ethical norms effectively. The findings also have implications for translation, language teaching, and corpus-based analyses of figurative language, highlighting the importance of integrating semantic motivation, idiomaticity, and metaphorical structures.¹⁶

¹² Cappelle, B. (2014). *Phraseology: An interdisciplinary perspective*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

¹³ Cowie, A. P. (1998). *Phraseology: Theory, analysis, and applications*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁴ Schmitt, N., & Carter, R. (2004). Formulaic sequences in action: An introduction. *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, 9(3), 243–247.

¹⁵ Siyanova-Chanturia, A., Conklin, K., & Schmitt, N. (2011). Adding more fuel to the fire: A corpus-driven response to “The idiom principle and the open choice principle.” *Text & Talk*, 31(6), 761–791.

¹⁶ Yuldashev, A. A. (2021). Metaphorical studies and its types. *Academic Research in Educational Sciences*, 2(1), 1–15.

Conclusion. English proverbs expressing goodness demonstrate a systematic relationship between **semantic motivation** and **idiomaticity**. Proverbs emphasizing reciprocity are highly transparent, unities offer metaphorical richness, and combinations balance figurative depth with interpretive clarity. Fully idiomatic fusions are rare due to the didactic purpose of moral instruction. Conceptual metaphors (GOODNESS AS RECIPROCITY, GOODNESS AS SOCIAL VALUE, GOODNESS AS INHERENT VIRTUE) reveal how English-speaking cultures encode ethical values linguistically. Future research could explore cross-linguistic comparisons, investigating how different cultures encode moral concepts in proverbs and how idiomaticity and semantic motivation vary across languages. Integrating phraseological analysis with metaphor theory provides a robust framework for understanding ethical expression and cultural cognition in proverb studies.

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