



THE ROLE OF SOMATIC IDIOMS IN CHARACTER SPEECH FOR SOCIAL STATUS AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN GERMAN NOVELS

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Abstract. This article examines the role of somatic idioms in German novels as a means of shaping character speech to reflect both social status and personal identity. Drawing on examples from authors such as Thomas Mann and Juli Zeh, it highlights how body-related expressions convey not only vivid imagery but also culturally embedded meanings. These idioms act as markers of class distinction, emotional disposition, and interpersonal relationships, allowing readers to infer subtle social and psychological nuances. By analysing the cultural resonance and narrative function of such idioms, the study demonstrates that they are integral to authentic characterisation and the depiction of complex social worlds in German literature.

Keywords: somatic idioms, German literature, character speech, social status, identity construction, cultural metaphor, literary stylistics

Language in literature is never neutral; it is a deliberate tool through which authors construct identities, convey relationships, and portray the complexities of social life. Among the various linguistic devices available to writers, somatic idioms—expressions involving references to the human body—stand out for their ability to combine vivid imagery with cultural depth [3]. In German novels, such idioms not only enrich the narrative style but also serve as subtle markers of a character's social status and personal identity.

Somatic idioms in German are deeply embedded in the cultural consciousness. Phrases like *die Nase hochtragen* ("to carry one's nose high") or *kalte Füße bekommen* ("to get cold feet") convey far more than their literal meaning. They evoke social attitudes, emotional states, and personal traits in ways that are immediately recognisable to native speakers. When placed in the mouths of fictional characters, these idioms function as social signifiers. A character who habitually uses expressions implying pride or self-assurance signals an awareness of their elevated position in the social hierarchy, whereas one who uses idioms of defeat or hesitation may be associated with lower status or personal insecurity.

Authors have long recognised that idiomatic language is a key element of authentic dialogue. In *Buddenbrooks*, for example, Thomas Mann differentiates



between upper-class and working-class characters through the idioms they use. High-status figures often choose expressions that emphasise dignity and resilience, such as *den Kopf hochhalten* (“to keep one’s head high”), while less privileged characters favour idioms suggesting submission or resignation, like *den Kopf hängen lassen* (“to let one’s head hang”). This contrast reinforces the class distinctions at the heart of the novel’s social world, making the language itself a reflection of the broader societal order [1].

Beyond social status, somatic idioms are a powerful means of identity construction. They reveal psychological tendencies, emotional priorities, and cultural affiliations. In Juli Zeh’s *Unterleuten*, a character who frequently uses *Hände* (“hands”) idioms—such as *etwas in der Hand haben* (“to have something in hand”)—projects a sense of agency and control, shaping the reader’s perception of them as competent and influential [5]. By contrast, another character’s repeated resort to *Hals* (“neck”) idioms, like *jemandem die Kehle zuschnüren* (“to strangle someone”), paints a more confrontational, even aggressive persona. Through such patterns, authors weave linguistic habits into the fabric of characterisation, allowing idioms to become recurring motifs that echo the thematic concerns of the novel.

The cultural implications of somatic idioms cannot be overlooked. Since idioms are grounded in shared knowledge and cultural metaphors, their successful use in literature depends on a mutual understanding between writer, character, and reader. Expressions like *die Stirn bieten* (“to offer one’s forehead”) not only convey bravery but also tap into historically embedded values in German-speaking societies, thereby reinforcing a sense of cultural continuity. At the interpersonal level, idiomatic choice becomes a marker of group belonging. When two characters share similar idiomatic repertoires, they signal solidarity and mutual recognition; when their idiomatic usage diverges, the distance between them—whether social, ideological, or emotional—becomes more apparent.

Ultimately, somatic idioms in German novels are more than stylistic decoration. They are loaded with narrative potential, capable of revealing a character’s social position, emotional inclinations, and cultural grounding in just a few words. They function as micro-signals that, when accumulated throughout a text, build a coherent image of a fictional personality and their place in the story’s social order. Through their careful deployment, authors can make language serve as a mirror of life, reflecting the subtleties of human interaction and the enduring power of culturally rooted expression.



Conclusion. Somatic idioms in German novels operate as far more than decorative linguistic devices; they are potent tools for conveying social positioning and constructing identity within fictional worlds. Through their culturally resonant imagery, these expressions give depth to character speech, enabling authors to reveal class distinctions, personal dispositions, and relational dynamics with remarkable economy. The consistent use of certain idioms can form linguistic patterns that echo a character's values, emotional tendencies, and place in the social hierarchy, while contrasts in idiomatic choice can expose tensions, inequalities, or solidarity between characters. Because idioms draw on shared cultural knowledge, they bridge the gap between fictional dialogue and real-world language use, making character portrayals more believable and socially grounded. Ultimately, the strategic deployment of somatic idioms underscores the intricate interplay between language, culture, and identity, demonstrating that even the smallest linguistic details can shape how readers perceive and connect with a literary character.

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