



SEMANTIC SHIFTS OF TRADITIONAL SOMATIC IDIOMS IN POST-MILLENNIAL GERMAN NOVELS

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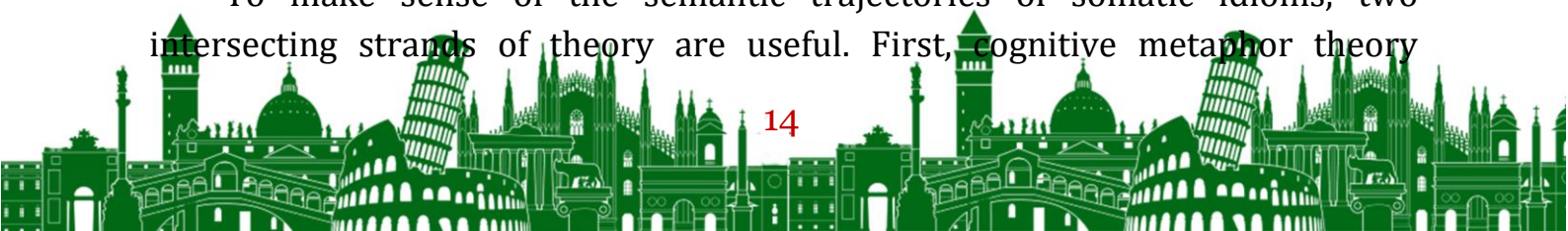
Abstract. This article examines how traditional somatic idioms — expressions that encode bodily experience such as *einen kühlen Kopf bewahren*, *Schmetterlinge im Bauch haben*, or *auf den Magen schlagen* — undergo semantic realignment in German novels published since ca. 2000. By combining insights from cognitive metaphor theory, historical semantics, and close literary reading, I trace several recurrent tendencies: semantic bleaching and conventionalization, ironic literalization, medicalization and biopolitical re-signification, and pragmatic redeployment as discourse markers. The analysis argues that these changes are not accidental but systematic responses to shifting cultural contexts (biomedicine, digital embodiment, migration, and the aesthetic strategies of contemporary narrators).

Keywords: somatic idioms, german literature, post-millennial novels, semantic shift, idiomatic bleaching, literalization, medicalization, irony and parody, pragmaticization.

Introduction. Somatic idioms are among the most persistent and most revealing resources in language. Because they map bodily states onto social, moral, and epistemic domains, idioms such as *das Herz brechen* (to break the heart) or *aus dem Bauch heraus entscheiden* (decide from the gut) simultaneously encode cultural models of emotion and attributions of agency. Consequently, when these idioms shift semantically, they disclose changes not only in lexis but also in cultural models of the body and subjectivity [4].

In the novels written by German-language authors since the turn of the millennium, we frequently encounter subtle but systematic transformations in how somatic idioms function. On the one hand, many idioms become lighter, more conventional — that is, semantically bleached — and thereby serve as pragmatic markers rather than vivid embodiments. On the other hand, novelists often stage the body explicitly so that the idiom oscillates between metaphor and literal description, producing irony, estrangement, or intensified pathos. This article develops an integrated account of these shifts through theoretical framing, close reading patterns, and suggestions for empirical follow-up.

To make sense of the semantic trajectories of somatic idioms, two intersecting strands of theory are useful. First, cognitive metaphor theory



frames idioms as conventionalized mappings: EMOTIONS ARE CONTAINERS or MIND IS A CONTAINER/HEAD undergird many somatic expressions. Thus, changes in idiom usage can be read as shifts in the salience of particular conceptual metaphors.

Second, historical/functional semantic models — including notions of semantic bleaching, grammaticalization, and pragmaticization — explain how figurative expressions lose imagistic force and become discourse devices. In addition, sociolinguistic and cultural-historical perspectives remind us that language change is embedded in shifting institutions: the rise of biomedical discourse, changes in media and digital communication, and the increased circulation of multilingual speakers all provide pressures that alter idiomatic meaning [1].

Bringing these frameworks together allows us to see idioms both as cognitive artifacts and as responsive cultural signs: they can be re-used by narrators for stylistic effects, recalibrated by speakers who draw on biomedical vocabularies, or reshaped by contact with other languages and modalities.

One dominant tendency is semantic bleaching: idioms lose their vivid bodily imagery and function increasingly as general evaluative or discourse markers. For example, *einen kühlen Kopf bewahren* in many recent novels functions less as a prompt to imagine physical cooling and more as a conventional idiom for measured comportment. Consequently, the phrase can be used even in absurd contexts where literal cooling would be impossible, and readers therefore process it almost automatically.

Moreover, as idioms become more frequent in rapid dialogue or telegraphic narration, their imagistic load diminishes. Thus, the idiom performs a pragmatic job — marking an attitude, smoothing conversational transitions, or signaling narrator judgment — rather than inviting a sensory simulation. This process mirrors well-known pathways of semantic change whereby metaphors lexicalize and then bleach, but it matters aesthetically because anemic idioms can function ironically when juxtaposed with intense bodily description. The next section shows precisely how writers exploit that contrast.

Contrasting with bleaching, novelists often deliberately literalize somatic idioms to produce estrangement or to foreground embodied trauma. That is, a phrase that has become conventional in everyday speech is re-embodied in fiction: *Schmetterlinge im Bauch* can be staged not as a metonym for nervous love but as a palpable, almost clinical sensation that the narrator scrutinizes. By doing so, authors force readers to re-imagine the idiom's referent: the



"butterflies" become symptoms, signs, or even objects of medical attention within the storyline.

This literalization is frequently linked to themes of trauma, migration, or biopolitical monitoring. When a character's Herz (heart) is described in physiological detail immediately after a conventional idiom, the text collapses the metaphorical and literal registers, producing an aesthetic effect of hyper-embodiment. Hence, literalization functions rhetorically: it recharges worn-out idioms and redirects attention toward material vulnerability.

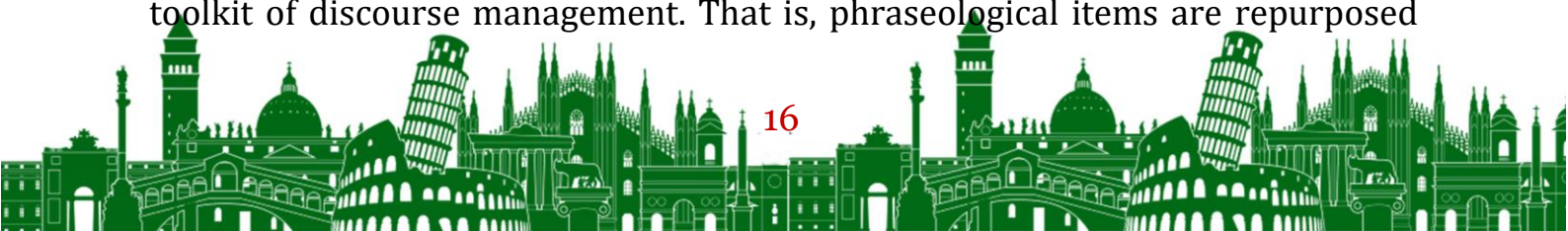
A third pattern is the medicalization of idiomatic language. As biomedical vocabularies become more pervasive in everyday discourse, somatic idioms are increasingly reinterpreted against diagnostic categories and technologies (e.g., heart rate monitors, psychosomatic diagnosis, psychopharmacology). Consequently, expressions that once indexed folk-psychological states — *etwas sitzt einem im Magen* (something sits in one's stomach) — are now sometimes framed in terms of psychosomatic illness or stress physiology [3].

Furthermore, novels that engage with institutions (hospitals, clinics, forensic settings) often show characters translating idiomatic language into clinical registers, thereby exposing the tension between lay metaphors and expert discourse. This shift has ideological consequences: bodily idioms become nodes where power and knowledge meet, revealing how subjectivity is shaped by medical categories. In short, what used to be colloquial emotional talk can be subsumed into diagnostic narratives, which both destabilizes older metaphorical meanings and creates new, often ambiguous readings.

Closely connected to the previous tendencies is the strategic use of irony and parody. Contemporary narrators frequently use somatic idioms self-consciously, invoking them only to undercut them immediately. For instance, a character who says *Hand aufs Herz* (hand on heart; truthfully) might be shown acting deceitfully seconds later; consequently the idiom itself becomes suspect.

This reflexive stance has two effects. First, it makes the idiom index not sincerity but performative mask-wearing; second, it invites meta-linguistic awareness: readers are asked to notice idiom use as a cultural script rather than to accept its pretence of transparent interiority. Thus, irony often operates through the gap between idiom-as-convention and idiom-as-felt, and in doing so contemporary novels stage a skeptical modernity toward ready-made somatic metaphors.

In many novels, somatic idioms migrate from the lexicon of affect to the toolkit of discourse management. That is, phraseological items are repurposed



to organize speech, signal stance, or cue narrative transitions. Examples include using *aus dem Bauch heraus* not to denote instinctual decision-making per se, but to preface a digression or to mark a character's claim to authenticity.

This redeployment is consequential because it changes how idioms are processed: they become procedural rather than imagistic. Consequently, listeners/readers use them to orient themselves conversationally. In turn, authors exploit this function to manipulate reader expectations — for instance, by placing a supposedly authenticity-signifying idiom before a patently contrived exposition, thereby producing dramatic irony.

Two broader cultural currents condition these semantic shifts. First, the digitalization of social life transforms how bodies are imagined: online avatars, quantified self-technologies, and the disembodiment affordances of screens complicate traditional somatic metaphors. In digital contexts, Herz may be reduced to an icon (a heart emoji) whose pragmatic load differs radically from embodied heart metaphors.

Second, increased migration and multilingualism lead to calquing, borrowing, and hybrid idiomatic formations. Authors who depict multilingual protagonists often place German somatic idioms alongside translated or transferred idioms from other languages, thereby showing how bodily metaphors migrate across cultural frames. The result is frequently a layered semantics in which the same somatic phrase oscillates between local, translingual, and globalized meanings.

Finally, the fate of idioms depends on narratorial stance and stylistic design. Realist narrators may embed idioms as markers of colloquial speech, producing verisimilitude; experimental or post-realist narrators, by contrast, will play with idioms' opacity, sometimes fracturing them syntactically or distributing their parts across clauses to produce defamiliarization.

Moreover, first-person confessional voices often rely on somatic idioms to create intimacy, but contemporary authors complicate this intimacy by making the idioms unreliable narrators of feeling. Thus, the same idiom can produce warmth in one novel and estrangement in another, depending on the voice's reliability and the surrounding contextual cues.

Conclusion. To summarize, somatic idioms in post-millennial German novels exhibit several intersecting tendencies: bleaching and functionalization, deliberate literalization, medicalization, ironic redeployment, and pragmatic redistribution in discourse. These tendencies are driven by broader sociocultural shifts — the rising authority of biomedical narratives, digital





modes of embodiment, and increased linguistic contact — and by aesthetic choices that reflect contemporary narrators' skepticism toward ready-made models of interiority.

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