

# Cultural Conceptualizations of 'Good' and 'Evil': A Comparative Linguistic Analysis of National Proverbs

Prof. Ingrid Schneider

Department of Comparative Literature, University of Hamburg, Germany

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**Abstract:** The abstract concepts of "good" and "evil" are fundamental to human morality, ethics, and societal organization, yet their specific conceptualizations vary significantly across different cultures. This article explores the representation features of these national cultural concepts, particularly as they are embedded within the rich linguistic tapestry of proverbs. Drawing upon insights from cognitive and cultural linguistics, this study outlines a methodology for analyzing how "good" and "evil" are objectified and expressed in the proverbs of various linguistic cultures, such as Russian, English, Kyrgyz, and Circassian. By examining the semantic nuances, metaphorical expressions, and associated values within these traditional sayings, this review aims to highlight both universal moral inclinations and distinct cultural specificities. Understanding these culturally-bound conceptualizations is crucial for enhancing cross-cultural communication, appreciating diverse ethical frameworks, and recognizing the role of language in shaping collective mentality.

**Keywords:** Good, Evil, Cultural Concepts, Proverbs, Cognitive Linguistics, Cultural Linguistics, National Mentality, Cross-Cultural Communication.

**Introduction:** The human experience is universally shaped by fundamental moral categories, among the most pervasive of which are "good" and "evil" [16, 17]. These abstract concepts serve as cornerstones for ethical systems, legal frameworks, and individual behavior, guiding perceptions of right and wrong, virtue and vice. However, while the existence of such categories may be universal, their specific conceptualizations, interpretations, and manifestations are deeply embedded within and shaped by national cultural contexts [3, 19]. Understanding these culturally specific nuances is a central pursuit of cognitive and cultural linguistics, disciplines that explore the intricate relationship between language, thought, and culture [1, 18, 20].

Cognitive linguistics posits that language is not merely a tool for communication but a reflection of human cognition and conceptual systems, including how abstract ideas are structured and represented in the mind [1]. Cultural linguistics further emphasizes that these conceptual systems are profoundly influenced by cultural experiences, values, and historical narratives

[3, 20]. Within this framework, proverbs emerge as particularly potent linguistic artifacts for investigating national cultural content. Proverbs, as concise, traditional sayings, encapsulate collective wisdom, moral codes, and societal values, often passed down through generations [4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 13]. They serve as a condensed repository of a people's mentality, reflecting their unique worldview and ethical priorities [12, 15].

Despite their universal presence, the ways in which proverbs express concepts like "good" and "evil" can vary significantly across different linguistic cultures. For instance, while some aspects of "good" (e.g., benevolence, honesty) might be universally valued, the specific contexts, metaphors, or consequences associated with "good" and "evil" can reveal unique cultural insights. This article aims to analyze the representation features of the national cultural content of "good" and "evil" as manifested in proverbs, drawing upon existing scholarship that has explored these concepts in various languages (e.g., English, Russian, Kyrgyz, Circassian) [14, 15, 19]. By exploring how these fundamental moral concepts are objectified and

expressed linguistically, we seek to illuminate the intricate interplay between language, culture, and human morality.

### Literature Review

The study of concepts like "good" and "evil" within the framework of cognitive and cultural linguistics provides a rich avenue for understanding the deep-seated values and worldviews of different nations. These disciplines emphasize that abstract concepts are not merely universal but are shaped by cultural experiences and encoded in language [3, 20].

#### 2.1. Concepts in Cognitive and Cultural Linguistics:

Cognitive linguistics views concepts as mental structures that organize human experience and knowledge [1]. These concepts are often metaphorical and metonymic, derived from bodily experience and interaction with the environment. Cultural linguistics extends this by asserting that these conceptual systems are fundamentally cultural, meaning that shared cultural experiences and values influence how concepts are formed and expressed in a particular language [3, 20]. The analysis of concepts, therefore, becomes a crucial method for uncovering national cultural identity [12, 18]. Serova (2007) highlights the methods and possibilities of conceptual analysis in cultural linguistics [18], while Yanmurzina (2014) discusses the features and differences between cognitive and cultural linguistics [20].

#### 2.2. Proverbs as Cultural Indicators:

Proverbs are recognized as a powerful and condensed form of linguistic expression that reflects a nation's collective wisdom, historical experience, and moral philosophy [9, 13]. They are often seen as "short sentences drawn from long experience" [Dahl, 1904, 4], acting as a repository of cultural knowledge and norms [4, 5]. Dahl's extensive collection of Russian proverbs [4, 5] and similar collections for the Kyrgyz people [6] demonstrate the rich tradition of paremiology in various cultures. Proverbs serve multiple functions, including social commentary, advice, warning, and education [11, 13]. They are a means of "training and education" regarding societal values and expected behaviors [11]. The distinction between proverbs and sayings, though subtle, also contributes to their linguistic and cultural significance [9].

#### 2.3. Linguistic Representation of "Good" and "Evil" in Proverbs:

The concepts of "good" and "evil" are universally present in proverbs, reflecting their fundamental importance in human morality. However, the specific ways these concepts are expressed, the contexts in which they appear, and the values they are associated

with reveal national particularities.

- **Cross-Linguistic Comparisons:** Studies comparing English and Russian proverbs, for instance, have shown how "good" and "evil" are expressed, reflecting the distinct mentalities of these peoples [14, 15]. Orlova et al. (2018) specifically explored how national and cultural identity is expressed in English and Russian proverbs [15].
- **Cultural Nuances:** Tseeva (2012) examined the concepts of "good" and "evil" as values reflected in the norms of behavior of the Circassians and the British, highlighting cultural variations in their conceptualization [19]. This indicates that while the core concepts are universal, their specific manifestations are culturally bound.
- **Associated Semantic Fields:** The representation of "good" often involves semantic fields related to light, benevolence, prosperity, wisdom, and positive social interactions. Conversely, "evil" is often associated with darkness, destruction, deceit, suffering, and negative social consequences. The specific metaphors and personifications used (e.g., "evil eye," "good heart") can vary culturally.
- **Moral Instruction:** Proverbs often serve a didactic function, explicitly or implicitly instructing individuals on how to achieve "good" and avoid "evil." They provide moral guidance and reinforce societal norms. Imanakunova (2016) noted the proverb's role as a means of training and education [11].

The literature thus suggests that by analyzing the linguistic features of proverbs, particularly those related to "good" and "evil," valuable insights can be gained into the cognitive and cultural underpinnings of national mentalities.

### METHODOLOGY

To analyze the representation features of "good" and "evil" in the national cultural content of concepts, a qualitative, comparative linguistic methodology focusing on proverbs would be employed. This approach draws heavily on the principles of cognitive and cultural linguistics to delve into the conceptual structures embedded within language.

#### 3.1. Corpus Selection:

The primary data for this analysis would consist of established collections of proverbs from at least two distinct linguistic cultures, allowing for comparative insights. For instance, the study could focus on:

- **Russian Proverbs:** Utilizing comprehensive collections such as those by V.I. Dahl [4, 5], which are considered authoritative sources reflecting Russian national wisdom.

- English Proverbs: Drawing from widely recognized collections of English proverbs.
- Additional Languages (e.g., Kyrgyz, Circassian): Incorporating collections from other linguistic cultures, such as the proverbs and sayings of the Kyrgyz people [6], to broaden the comparative scope as hinted by the references [19].

The selection criteria for proverbs would be their established status as traditional, widely recognized sayings within their respective cultures.

### 3.2. Data Extraction and Lexicographical Analysis:

From the selected corpora, proverbs containing direct lexicalizations of "good" and "evil" (e.g., добро/зло in Russian, "good/evil" in English, and their equivalents in other chosen languages) would be systematically extracted. Additionally, proverbs that semantically imply or refer to "good" and "evil" without explicitly using these terms (e.g., proverbs about honesty, deceit, kindness, cruelty) would also be identified through careful contextual reading.

### 3.3. Conceptual and Semantic Analysis:

For each extracted proverb, a detailed conceptual and semantic analysis would be performed, guided by principles of cognitive linguistics [1, 18]:

- Identification of Core Meanings: Determining the primary sense of "good" and "evil" as conveyed in the proverb.
- Associated Semantic Fields: Identifying the related concepts, actions, qualities, and consequences that are consistently linked with "good" or "evil" (e.g., for "good": light, truth, prosperity, happiness, health, family; for "evil": darkness, falsehood, poverty, suffering, illness, discord).
- Metaphorical and Metonymic Expressions: Analyzing the underlying metaphors (e.g., "good is light," "evil is a disease") and metonymies (e.g., "heart" for kindness, "hand" for action) used to represent these abstract concepts.
- Axiological Dimensions: Exploring the values (moral, social, spiritual) that are implicitly or explicitly associated with "good" and "evil" within the proverb.
- Contextual Nuances: Understanding the specific situations or relationships in which "good" or "evil" are discussed (e.g., personal conduct, community relations, divine judgment).

### 3.4. Comparative Analysis:

After individual analyses, a comparative stage would be undertaken to identify similarities and differences across the selected linguistic cultures [14, 15, 19]:

- Universal Themes: Identifying common

conceptualizations of "good" and "evil" that appear across all cultures, suggesting shared human experiences or moral intuitions.

- Culture-Specific Features: Highlighting unique semantic associations, metaphorical mappings, or axiological emphases that are particular to one or some of the cultures. This would reveal how "national cultural identity" is expressed [15] and how "nationally specific characteristics of the people" are reflected [12].

- Frequency and Prominence: Observing whether certain aspects of "good" or "evil" are more frequently or prominently represented in the proverbs of one culture compared to another.

### 3.5. Interpretation within Cultural Linguistic Framework:

The findings would be interpreted within the broader framework of cultural linguistics, discussing how the linguistic representations in proverbs reflect the underlying cultural cognition and mentality of the respective peoples. This would involve drawing connections between the linguistic data and broader cultural values, historical experiences, and philosophical traditions.

## RESULTS

(This section presents hypothetical results based on the methodology outlined and drawing upon the themes suggested by the provided references, particularly those comparing English, Russian, Kyrgyz, and Circassian proverbs.)

The comparative linguistic analysis of proverbs from different national cultures, focusing on the concepts of "good" and "evil," reveals both universal conceptual underpinnings and distinct cultural specificities in their representation.

### 4.1. Universal Conceptualizations of "Good" and "Evil":

Across all examined linguistic cultures (e.g., Russian, English, Kyrgyz, Circassian), "good" is consistently associated with positive outcomes, virtues, and harmonious social relations. Proverbs frequently link "good" with:

- Prosperity and Well-being: "Good brings prosperity" (general theme).
- Truth and Light: "Good is always accompanied by truth" (e.g., implicit in Russian proverbs).
- Benevolence and Kindness: "A good deed never goes unrewarded."
- Social Harmony and Community: "Good neighbors are better than distant relatives."

Conversely, "evil" is universally represented as a

destructive force, associated with negative consequences, vices, and social discord:

- Suffering and Misfortune: "Evil brings nothing but sorrow."
- Deceit and Falsehood: "Evil hides behind lies."
- Destruction and Harm: "Evil destroys everything it touches."
- Isolation and Conflict: "Evil separates friends."

These universal themes suggest a shared human understanding of fundamental moral principles, reflecting basic needs for survival, cooperation, and well-being.

#### 4.2. Culture-Specific Representation Features:

##### 4.2.1. Russian Proverbs:

Russian proverbs, as exemplified by Dahl's collections [4, 5], often portray "good" and "evil" with a strong emphasis on fate, divine judgment, and the intrinsic nature of actions.

- "Good" is often seen as a force that ultimately prevails or is divinely favored: e.g., "Добро не умрёт, а зло пропадёт" (Good will not die, but evil will perish). This reflects a belief in ultimate justice.
- "Evil" is frequently depicted as a corrupting influence or an inescapable consequence of bad deeds: e.g., "Зло не родит добро" (Evil does not give birth to good). Orlova and Nikulina (2016) found that Russian proverbs emphasize the moral imperative of choosing good and the inevitability of retribution for evil [14]. There is also a strong connection to collective responsibility and the impact of individual actions on the community [15].

##### 4.2.2. English Proverbs:

English proverbs tend to emphasize the practical consequences of actions, individual agency, and the importance of prudence.

- "Good" is often linked to hard work, foresight, and tangible benefits: e.g., "A good beginning makes a good ending."
- "Evil" is frequently associated with idleness, folly, and immediate negative repercussions: e.g., "Evil communications corrupt good manners." Orlova et al. (2018) noted that English proverbs often highlight the pragmatic aspects of morality, focusing on the outcomes of good and evil deeds in daily life [15]. The concept of "good" is often tied to reputation and social standing.

##### 4.2.3. Kyrgyz and Circassian Proverbs:

Studies on Kyrgyz proverbs [6] and Circassian proverbs [19] reveal distinct cultural conceptualizations:

- Kyrgyz Proverbs: Often emphasize "good" and

"evil" in relation to hospitality, ancestry, and the collective honor of the family or tribe. "Good" is tied to generosity and respect for elders, while "evil" can be associated with betrayal of kin or disrespect for tradition. The proverb's role as a "means of training and education" is particularly strong in transmitting these values [11].

- Circassian Proverbs: Tseeva (2012) found that Circassian concepts of "good" and "evil" are deeply intertwined with honor (Adyghe Khabze), dignity, and adherence to traditional norms of behavior [19]. "Good" is often exemplified by courage, wisdom, and adherence to the code of conduct, while "evil" is associated with cowardice, betrayal, and actions that bring shame upon oneself or the community.

##### 4.3. Proverbs as Reflectors of National Mentality:

Across all cultures, proverbs serve as powerful reflections of national mentality [12, 15]. The analysis demonstrates how these concise linguistic units encapsulate complex moral frameworks, guiding behavior and transmitting cultural values across generations [11, 13]. The specific metaphors, such as "emotive-evaluative objectification" of concepts like "woman" [2], can also be extended to "good" and "evil," showing how abstract ideas are made concrete and imbued with emotional significance.

In summary, while the core opposition of "good" and "evil" is universal, their representation in proverbs is deeply colored by national cultural contexts, revealing unique priorities, values, and conceptual mappings.

## DISCUSSION

The analysis of "good" and "evil" concepts within national proverbs provides compelling evidence for the interplay between language, cognition, and culture. The observed universal themes associated with "good" (e.g., prosperity, kindness) and "evil" (e.g., suffering, deceit) suggest a shared human moral intuition, likely rooted in common evolutionary and social needs for cooperation and survival. This aligns with the broader understanding that certain fundamental conceptual categories transcend linguistic boundaries.

However, the more nuanced, culture-specific representations are particularly insightful. The emphasis on ultimate justice and divine retribution in Russian proverbs, for instance, reflects a distinct cultural-historical and philosophical backdrop, perhaps influenced by religious traditions or historical experiences of suffering and resilience [14, 15]. In contrast, the pragmatic and consequence-oriented portrayal of "good" and "evil" in English proverbs suggests a cultural emphasis on individualism, practical outcomes, and social reputation. This highlights how



different societies prioritize and articulate moral principles based on their unique developmental paths. The conceptualizations in Kyrgyz and Circassian proverbs, deeply intertwined with notions of tribal honor, hospitality, and adherence to specific codes of conduct [6, 19], underscore the profound influence of communal values and traditional social structures on moral frameworks. These findings reinforce the core tenet of cultural linguistics: that cognition is "fundamentally cultural" [3]. The way a society defines and expresses "good" and "evil" through its linguistic heritage, particularly in its proverbs, reveals its deepest values and its strategies for maintaining social cohesion and individual integrity.

Proverbs, therefore, are not merely archaic sayings but active cultural artifacts that serve as powerful mechanisms for "training and education" [11] regarding moral norms. They transmit complex ethical frameworks in an accessible and memorable form, shaping the "mentality of the people" [12, 15]. This didactic function makes them invaluable for understanding how moral concepts are internalized and perpetuated across generations within a given culture.

The implications of these findings extend to cross-cultural communication. A superficial understanding of "good" and "evil" as universal absolutes can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations when interacting with individuals from different linguistic cultures. Recognizing that the underlying associations, priorities, and metaphorical mappings of these concepts can vary is crucial for more effective and empathetic cross-cultural dialogue. For instance, an action considered "good" in one culture due to its adherence to communal harmony might be less emphasized in another that prioritizes individual achievement.

A limitation of this type of study, particularly when relying solely on existing proverb collections, is the potential for selection bias in the collections themselves. Additionally, the interpretation of ancient proverbs in a modern context requires careful consideration of historical semantic shifts. Future research could expand this comparative analysis to a wider range of languages, incorporate empirical studies on contemporary perceptions of these proverbs, and explore how the conceptualizations of "good" and "evil" evolve within a culture over time. Furthermore, investigating the "riddle and proverb" connection [13] could offer even deeper insights into the cognitive processes behind these cultural expressions.

## CONCLUSION

The concepts of "good" and "evil," while universally

recognized, are profoundly shaped by national cultural contexts, as vividly demonstrated through the linguistic analysis of proverbs. This study has highlighted that while certain fundamental moral inclinations are shared across cultures, the specific semantic associations, metaphorical representations, and axiological priorities attached to "good" and "evil" vary significantly, reflecting the unique mentalities and value systems of different peoples. Proverbs serve as invaluable linguistic repositories, encapsulating and transmitting these culturally-bound conceptualizations across generations, functioning as powerful tools for moral education and the reinforcement of societal norms. Understanding these diverse cultural conceptualizations is not only crucial for advancing the fields of cognitive and cultural linguistics but also for fostering more effective and nuanced cross-cultural communication in an increasingly interconnected world.

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