

Somatic Phraseologisms As Markers Of Emotional Expression In Modern German Novels

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Received: 15 June 2025; **Accepted:** 21 July 2025; **Published:** 31 August 2025

Abstract: This article explores the role of somatic phraseologisms as markers of emotional expression in modern German novels. Since idioms involving body parts and bodily functions condense cultural knowledge into conventionalized forms, they provide authors with a powerful tool for depicting affective states. Building on the works of Burger, Fleischer, Dobrovol'skij, Piirainen, and Kövecses, the paper analyzes how somatic idioms function as narrative shortcuts for conveying emotions such as fear, anger, disgust, shame, and relief. At the same time, the discussion demonstrates that these idioms are not static clichés but dynamic devices that authors refresh through contextual adaptation, syntactic variation, and prosodic positioning. Drawing on illustrative examples, the article highlights how somatic idioms contribute to characterization, focalization, and cultural representation in contemporary German literature. Ultimately, it argues that somatic phraseologisms are central to the stylistic economy of modern novels because they embody emotions in a linguistically efficient, culturally meaningful, and aesthetically versatile way.

Keywords: Somatic phraseologisms; emotional expression; German literature; idioms; conceptual metaphor; narrative style; figurative language.

Introduction: Modern German prose is characterized by a strong interest in the psychology of characters and the subtle representation of inner states. Consequently, authors frequently draw on linguistic resources that not only describe emotions but also embody them in vivid and culturally familiar ways. Among these resources, somatic phraseologisms occupy a particularly significant position. These are idiomatic expressions that make reference to the human body or bodily processes—such as *das Herz rutscht in die Hose* (“the heart slips into the trousers”), *die Nerven verlieren* (“to lose one’s nerves”), or *ein Stein fällt vom Herzen* (“a stone falls from the heart”).

As Harald Burger observes, phraseologisms serve as ready-made building blocks of language that carry evaluative force, cultural resonance, and pragmatic function [1]. They are instantly recognizable, easy to process, and therefore ideal for signaling emotions quickly. Wolfgang Fleischer further stresses that body-related idioms have particular salience because the human body is a universal experiential domain, which allows idioms to connect subjective feelings with collective knowledge [3]. Moreover, Dobrovol'skij and

Piirainen argue that idioms, although conventionalized, retain openness to contextual modulation and literary creativity [2, 73-96]. Their view is supported by Kövecses, who emphasizes that idioms often embody conceptual metaphors that map emotions onto bodily experiences, such as anger as heat, sadness as heaviness, or fear as downward movement [6].

Consequently, in modern German novels, somatic phraseologisms function as linguistic markers of emotion that are at once economical, embodied, and culturally coded. They enable authors to condense complex feelings into compact expressions, to embed emotional cues in dialogue and narration, and to guide readers' affective alignment with characters.

Because somatic idioms are fixed yet semantically rich, they provide a shorthand for emotional states without requiring lengthy descriptive exposition. For example, the expression *Ihm rutschte das Herz in die Hose* (“his heart slipped into his trousers”) conveys fear or shock in a single stroke, whereas a literal description of the character's bodily reaction would require several sentences. Thus, idioms accelerate narrative pacing and ensure that readers immediately grasp the

character's emotional shift. Conversely, *Ihr fiel ein Stein vom Herzen* ("a stone fell from her heart") signals relief and slows down the rhythm, marking a resolution in the emotional trajectory.

Moreover, idioms not only denote emotions but also shape focalization. When a narrator writes *Mir schnürt es die Kehle zu* ("it tightens my throat"), the expression shifts the perspective inside the character's body, thereby producing a more intimate and immersive viewpoint. In this way, somatic phraseologisms are not merely decorative but instrumental in anchoring narrative perspective.

Somatic idioms also operate as markers of register and social identity. For instance, colloquial expressions such as *Du gehst mir auf die Nerven* ("you get on my nerves") often appear in dialogue, where they index informality, youth, or working-class speech. In contrast, more neutral or literary idioms like *Ihr stockte der Atem* ("her breath stopped") frequently appear in narrative passages, contributing to stylistic elegance and heightened affect. Through such choices, authors not only depict emotions but also delineate characters' social positioning, group belonging, and personal voice.

Furthermore, idioms can reveal tension between inner and outer states. In a narrative where a character outwardly maintains composure but inwardly struggles, an expression such as *der Magen drehte sich um* ("the stomach turned") undermines the façade of control, producing irony or double-voicing. Consequently, idioms serve both as windows into interiority and as markers of narrative stance.

A further strength of somatic phraseologisms lies in their adaptability to intensification and layering. Anger, for example, can be expressed in baseline form (*Das Blut kochte ihr*—"her blood boiled"), intensified through causal specification (*vor Wut*—"with rage"), or heightened with boosters (*förmlich, geradezu*). Similarly, authors can layer idioms to portray complex emotions, as when *Kloß im Hals* ("a lump in the throat") is combined with *Atem stockte* ("breath stopped"), thereby depicting anxiety intertwined with speechlessness.

At the same time, authors refresh idioms to avoid cliché. Slight modifications—such as *ein Fels vom Herzen* ("a rock fell from the heart")—amplify intensity, while syntactic rearrangements (*Das Herz, es rutschte*) draw attention to rhythm and emphasis. Some writers even exploit the sound patterns of idioms, placing them at the end of sentences or paragraphs to produce a prosodic climax. Thus, idioms contribute not only semantically but also stylistically to narrative dynamics.

Although idioms are widespread in everyday German, their literary use acquires special weight. For instance,

in Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser* (1995), the protagonist's emotional turmoil is often captured through bodily metaphors that resonate with idiomatic structures, as when fear and guilt manifest through heavy-heartedness (*schwer ums Herz*). Similarly, in Daniel Kehlmann's *Die Vermessung der Welt* (2005), idioms such as *kalte Füße bekommen* ("to get cold feet") are playfully juxtaposed with scientific rationality, creating irony between bodily affect and intellectual aspiration. In Juli Zeh's *Unterleuten* (2016), characters frequently resort to expressions like *auf die Nerven gehen* in conflict situations, reflecting both emotional irritation and social tension in rural communities. These examples demonstrate how idioms are not merely inherited linguistic relics but vital resources that contemporary authors weave into narrative texture.

Because somatic phraseologisms encode evaluation as well as description, they significantly shape interpersonal dynamics within novels. In direct speech, idioms function as speech acts—complaints, insults, or reassurances—that structure relationships. At the narratorial level, they orient readers toward sympathy or antipathy, as in *Ihm wurde schwer ums Herz*, which elicits empathy. Moreover, cultural models of emotion embedded in idioms become visible in literature. German idioms of anger (*das Blut kocht, die Galle läuft über*) conceptualize emotion as heat and pressure, reflecting a broader cultural metaphor of the body as a container of feelings. Similarly, idioms of fear (*das Herz rutscht in die Hose, die Knie werden weich*) map emotion onto downward movement and bodily weakness, highlighting vulnerability as loss of strength. In multilingual novels, idioms from other languages are sometimes juxtaposed with German equivalents, underscoring contrasts in cultural emotionality and highlighting issues of identity.

The literary significance of somatic idioms also raises questions for translation and pedagogy. Translators must decide whether to render an idiom literally or replace it with a functionally equivalent expression in the target language. For example, *das Herz rutscht in die Hose* is often best translated as "his heart sank," since literal translation would sound awkward in English. Similarly, in language teaching, somatic idioms should not be presented as isolated lexical items but in contexts that show their emotional and cultural resonance. Literature thus becomes a valuable resource for teaching phraseological competence.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, somatic phraseologisms in modern German novels function as powerful markers of emotional expression because they condense cultural

models, bodily metaphors, and narrative strategies into compact forms. They allow authors to render fear, anger, disgust, shame, or relief with immediacy, while simultaneously shaping characterization, focalization, and social identity. Their adaptability to intensification, variation, and renewal ensures that they remain aesthetically productive, rather than mere clichés. Furthermore, their presence in dialogue and narration underscores their pragmatic force, while their cultural metaphoric basis reveals underlying models of emotional experience. For these reasons, the study of somatic idioms offers valuable insights into both the linguistic fabric and the emotional poetics of modern German literature.

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