

Analysis of Shifting Meaning of Expressions in German Cultural Contexts

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify the context that affects meaning, especially the meaning of idioms in German, which is expected to help improve understanding in cross-cultural communication skills between languages. Communication is an important part that is done by humans as social beings in order to fulfill their needs. It involves not only the transfer of words but also the exchange of cultural values, emotions, and intentions. Throughout the communication process, there are several errors in conveying information due to inaccurate interpretation of meaning. Misunderstandings often arise when idiomatic expressions are interpreted literally, rather than contextually, especially by language learners. Besides, this study answers three main research questions: how to understand the context of meaning in German idiom expressions; what is the function and role of idiom meaning (Redewendungen); and are there any relationships between idioms and cultural contexts. By using qualitative research methods such as media analysis, on the YouTube platform, this study aims to gather insights into idioms used in daily German communication. Analyzing idioms through authentic media content provides a more realistic and culturally grounded understanding of how they are actually used. It also helps highlight the connection between language use and cultural perception in real-life situations.

Keywords: *idioms, shifting meanings, cross cultural, interpretation*

Introduction

Communication is a fundamental aspect of human life as a social being that cannot be separated from daily interactions. Through communication, humans communicate ideas, emotions, needs, and harmonious social relationships and cooperation (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). By studying interpersonal communication, it will increase understanding and mastery of interpersonal communication in various communication contexts (interpersonal, group, public, intercultural and mass (DeVito, 2011)). More than just an exchange of information, communication also functions as a means to understand the values, norms, and culture adopted by individuals or groups, making it a vital element in building cross-cultural understanding. Through communication, humans convey thoughts, feelings, needs, and build relationships and cooperation. In this context, communication not only functions as a means of exchanging information, but also as a bridge to understanding the culture, values, and norms adopted by other individuals or groups. However, in practice, the communication process does not always run smoothly. However, the communication process does not always

proceed smoothly. Barriers or misunderstandings frequently arise in the delivery and reception of messages. A common source of such misunderstandings is the inaccurate interpretation of implied meanings in specific expressions or phrases. This becomes even more complex in intercultural communication, where differing social and linguistic backgrounds influence the way individuals interpret messages.

One form of language that often becomes a challenge in cross-cultural communication is idioms. Idioms are expressions or phrases, whose meaning cannot be deduced from the literal meaning. Understanding idioms requires knowledge of the cultural and social context in which the idiom is used (Fernando, 1996). Without understanding the context, someone runs the risk of misinterpreting the meaning of the idiom and ultimately failing to understand the message it is trying to convey. In learning a foreign language, including German, idioms are one of the important but difficult aspects to learn. This is due to the shift in idiomatic meaning that can occur depending on the context of use, media, and developments in the era. Modern media such as YouTube have become a new space where idioms are used in a more relaxed and contemporary form of communication. With the analytical media broadcast through the YouTube platform, it is interesting to study "Digman! Der unheilige Gral", an animated series. This show comes from the German-language media world which combines elements of comedy, satire, adventure, and modern life in the form of fictional narratives that tend to be humorous. In the conversations between the characters, the audience can find various forms of everyday language expressions, including the use of idioms and typical expressions that cannot always be understood literally. These idioms are used in situations that reflect urban life, professional interactions, and complex social relationships, thus creating opportunities for in-depth linguistic and cultural analysis.

Based on the background above, this study has 3 main focuses. First, "How to understand the context of meaning in a German idiom?". The second focus, "What is the function and role of idiom meaning (Redewendungen) in communication and narrative?", and the last focus is, "is there a relationship between idioms and cultural context?".

This study aims to identify contexts that influence the meaning of idioms in German and examine how cultural and historical factors shape these meanings, especially in the context of cross-cultural communication. The main focus of the study covers three aspects: how context changes the meaning of idioms, the role of culture and history in the formation of meaning, and factors that cause misunderstandings in interactions between speakers. Using a qualitative approach and hermeneutic method, this study analyzes dialogue transcripts from the animated series "Digman! Der unheilige Gral" on the YouTube platform.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach, according to Creswell is: "Qualitative approaches to data collection, analysis, interpretation, and report writing differ from traditional quantitative approaches. Purposeful sampling, open-ended data collection, text or image analysis, representation of information in figures and tables, and personal interpretation of findings all inform qualitative methods". (2018: 35). Bogdan & Biklen (1992): Qualitative research is a research step that produces descriptive data in the form of writing or speech, as well as the behavior of people observed. This study aims to gain a general understanding of social reality from the perspective of participants. The hermeneutic method was chosen because it allows researchers to interpret the meaning of idioms in depth through a contextual and interpretive approach, taking into account the socio-cultural dynamics and

digital media in which the idioms are used (Gadamer, 2004; Patton, 2002). Through this analysis, the study is expected to contribute to the development of intercultural competence, especially in learning German as a foreign language.



Results

Character Overview



Figure 1. Comedy Central's Youtube Thumbnail

The media that we used is Rip Digman Series. The image above shows thumbnail from Der unheilige Gral | Digman! | Staffel 1 Folge 8, an animated series by Comedy Central. It features the two characters in this episode. This episode, titled "*Der unheilige Gral*", serves as the primary media analyzed in this study.

No.	Character	Description	Role
1.		Rip Digman	Main Character
2.		Bella	Rip's deceased wife
3.			



Zane Troy

Rip's Rival

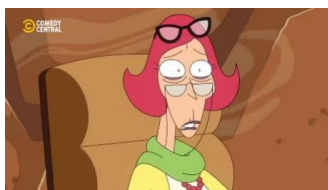
4.



Swooper

Rip's assistant

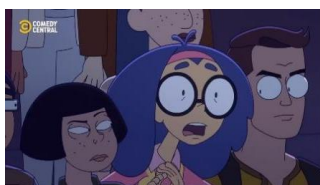
5.



Agatha

Rip's Secretary

6.



Saltine

Rip's new assistant

7.



Quail Eegan

Mr. Quail's Son

8.



Mr. Quail

Eegan's Father

The animated series "Digman! Der unheilige Gral" presents a character named Rip Digman. He is an archaeologist who is portrayed as a once-famous adventurer who is now in a difficult time, trying to make amends and restore his reputation in the world of archaeology. He is bold, charismatic, but often reckless. Some of the other characters in the series are Bella, Swooper, Agatha, Saltine, Zane Troy, and Quail Eegan. Bella is Rip's wife, who has since passed away. Bella has a great influence on Rip's decisions and motivations in every adventure. Swooper is Rip's loyal friend who always helps him in the process of his adventures. Agatha is Rip Digman's secretary. This character is a supporting character who helps Rip in various administrative and operational activities. Saltine is an enthusiastic and passionate student and assistant to archaeologist Rip Digman. She strives to help Rip Digman rise back to the top of his career after suffering a major setback. She often accompanies Rip on various adventures in search of historical artifacts and plays an important role in motivating and supporting Rip. Zane Troy is Rip's traitor character who becomes Rip's enemy or rival. Initially they were old friends and worked together, but because he only wanted to succeed himself and wanted to be famous, Zane finally betrayed Rip. Furthermore, there is Quail Eegan, who is someone who has a dark past. He was once a proud athlete, but despite his impressive achievements, he never received praise from his father, Mr. Quail.

Synopsis

In 200 BC, the supervolcano Mount Quickwarin erupted, wiping out an entire local tribe. In desperation, the tribe's elders sought help from a master artisan named Tillichtek Torkatin, who created a dazzling golden statue as an offering to the gods—hoping to end the disaster and protect the tribe. This ancient tale reflects how early civilizations responded to natural catastrophes through spiritual and artistic means.

Centuries later, Rip Digman and his team, Bella and Zane, visit the volcano. Bella warns that removing the statue may cause another eruption. Digman dismisses it, saying, "Legends are rarely true." But when they remove the statue, the volcano indeed erupts. As they flee with the artifact, they are confronted by a lawyer and locals from Mondonesia, who plead with Digman not to steal the sacred statue. During their escape through a deadly forest of man-eating flowers, Bella is poisoned. She insists she'll be fine—there's an antidote at a nearby hospital just 10 minutes away. Suddenly, Zane betrays them, steals the statue, and claims it for himself, tired of being treated as inferior by Digman. Digman fires Zane, but Zane escapes with the statue via speedboat. Swooper arrives with a helicopter, and they chase Zane—only to crash after a bird hits the rotor.

Later, Digman lies to Bella, saying he recovered the statue. In reality, Zane still has it. The news reports reveal that it's been 12 years since Digman let his sister Bella die. Zane Troy, his former assistant, is now the world's most celebrated archaeologist. Meanwhile, Rip Digman has been fired by the Smithsonian and is seen as a loser and unemployed failure. Now, he wants to start his new journey on reviving his wife, Bella.

Analysis of Literal vs. Contextual Meaning

At the beginning of the episode, the simple life of Mr. Quail and his son, Eegan, is depicted. When Eegan comes enthusiastically telling about his achievements, his father's response is very cold and unsupportive, even while he is drinking beer. At minute 00.42, Mr. Quail utters the sentence "Dir wird niemals ein Museum gehören", which literally means "You will never have a museum." Although this phrase seems literal, in the context of German culture and society in general, a museum is not just a private property, but a symbol of great responsibility in preserving cultural heritage, education, and historical values. Therefore, this expression can be interpreted symbolically as a rejection of the possibility of someone to achieve a high social status, or to be trusted to hold important cultural responsibilities. This idiom is appropriate to use in situations where someone wants to express doubt or rejection of someone's great ambitions that are considered unrealistic or socially inappropriate, such as in the context of family, education, or social criticism of the inequality of achievement and expectations.

In one scene in the video "Digman! The Unheilige Gral", the character Rip utters the phrase "Eigentlich bin ich froh, dass sie weg ist. Your war sowas von nervtötend. Standing hing die Kleine mir am Sack." which idiomatically implies a feeling of relief mixed with irritation with a sarcastic expression over the departure of the character Saltine. In this context, the phrase "sie ging mir am Sack" literally means "he's hanging in my pocket," but idiomatically contains the meaning that someone is constantly bothering or annoying. This idiom is an informal expression typical of German used in everyday conversational situations that are familiar or rude, especially in the context of complaining about someone's behavior that is considered too clingy, fussy, or annoying. This statement is then responded to by Agatha's character at 03:39 with the sarcastic corrective sentence, "Ich glaube, sie meinen, sie ging ihm auf den Sack," which means "I think you mean he's annoying." The phrase "jemandem auf den Sack gehen" is also a common idiom to express that someone is really annoying someone else. Both of these phrases show how idiomatic meanings in German cannot be understood through literal translation, but must be analyzed based on the context of the conversation, the relationships between the characters, and the underlying emotional tone.

Another idiom is also found in the dialogue "Nein, halt! Das heißt, ich sitze in der Tinte und brauch dich!" (07.05), the idiomatic phrase "ich sitze in der Tinte" literally means "I sit in the ink", but in the context of German language culture, this idiom refers to a condition where someone is experiencing great difficulty or is trapped in a serious problem. According to Cruse (1986), idioms like this are non-literal and require contextual understanding and cultural background to be interpreted correctly. The use of this expression in the dialogue reflects Rip's character shift from a sarcastic and indifferent attitude to someone who admits his downfall and explicitly asks for help, showing significant character development. This idiom is commonly used in real situations when someone wants to emphasize that they are in a difficult situation and need immediate help, for example when facing a failed project, a financial crisis, or a critical personal situation.

Then the last one, this idiom is "Aber ich habe die Hölle auf Erden entfesselt und alles ruiniert!" (19.48). This idiom if interpreted literally, it would mean "But I have unleashed hell on earth and destroyed everything!". However, in the context of the video series, the sentence has an idiomatic meaning, namely, "a bad/torturous situation". In the clip, Eegan initially intended to restore his father, Mr. Quail, who had died long ago and also helped Rip revive his wife, Bella. However, his actions actually made the situation worse, where Bella

and Mr. Quail became evil figures who destroyed everything. This is where Eegan uses the phrase "Hölle auf Erden" because in the worst situation that could not have been imagined before. Eegan wants to restore the past, but instead destroys the present. This shows that he has regret and despair over the actions he has made.

Function and Role of Idiom Meaning (Redewendungen) in German

The function and role of the meaning of idioms (Redewendungen) in German have very important dimensions, especially in the aspects of communication, cultural expression, and narrative development. Idioms function as powerful expressive tools because they are able to convey the feelings, attitudes, and emotions of characters more vividly and deeply than literal expressions. Idioms not only strengthen social conflicts and relationships between characters, but also create humorous effects, irony, or emotional tension that are rich in meaning. According to Cruse's theory (1986), idioms are lexical units whose meanings cannot be derived directly from the literal meanings of the words that make them up. Therefore, idioms require an understanding of the context as well as pragmatic and cultural competence from speakers and listeners. When idioms are used in dialogue or narrative, they become tools to enrich interpersonal communication, build characterization of characters, and strengthen themes in literary works or audiovisual media. Idioms also have unique cognitive and cultural roles. Because they cannot be translated literally (non-compositional), their understanding depends on the mastery of the cultural conventions of native speakers. For example, the German idiom "Hölle auf Erden" (hell on earth) does not refer to the literal meaning of a place of torment in the afterlife, but is used idiomatically to describe a life situation that is extremely torturous, full of suffering, or full of chaos in a real-world context. This idiom reflects extreme feelings such as deep regret, despair, or a condition that is no longer under control. In the video narration of *Digman! Der unheilige Gral*, this expression is used by the character Eegan when he realizes that his actions to bring his loved ones back to life have actually brought great destruction. Through this idiom, the audience can feel the emotional burden that the character experiences, and understand how terrible and unimaginable the consequences of this decision are. This emphasizes that idioms such as "Hölle auf Erden" not only enrich the expression in language, but also help convey the psychological depth of the character and the intensity of the conflict in the story. This shows that learning idioms means learning ways of thinking and cultural values, such as the tendency of German to use bold and dramatic metaphors to describe feelings. In practical communication, mastering idioms makes language more lively, fluent, and varied. Its proper use can create a natural, expressive, and contextual conversational nuance, both in casual and formal situations. In this study, the analysis of the function of idioms also answers the problem of how Redewendungen play a role as: Being able to capture the meaning of an idiom well. Idioms usually cannot be translated word for word. Therefore, we know the meaning well so that we can capture the intent of the sentence well. If we learn idioms, we automatically learn the way of thinking and habits of life from that culture. Communicating sounds more fluent, capable, more alive, and more varied. In many languages, idioms can make conversations sound more relaxed, natural and expressive.

Factors Causing Misunderstandings in Interactions Between Speakers:

-Cultural Context Differences (High-Context vs. Low-Context) In intercultural communication, differences in communication styles between high-context and low-context cultures can lead to misunderstandings. For example, in high cultures, much information is

conveyed implicitly through context, whereas in low cultures, information is conveyed explicitly through words. These differences can affect the understanding of the message being conveyed.

-Ethnocentrism and Prejudice Ethnocentrism, the tendency to judge other cultures by one's own cultural standards, can hinder objective understanding of messages from other cultures. This can lead to misinterpretations of the behavior or speech of individuals from different cultures.

Discussion

The animated series "Digman! Der unheilige Gral" presents a character named Rip Digman. He is an archaeologist who is depicted as a once-famous adventurer but is now in trouble, trying to atone for his mistakes and restore his reputation in the world of archaeology. He is brave, charismatic, but often reckless. Some other characters in this series are Bella, Swooper, Agatha, Saltine, Zane Troy, and Quail Eegan. Bella is Rip's wife, who has died. Bella has a big influence on Rip's decisions and motivations in every adventure. Swooper is Rip's loyal friend who always helps him in his adventure process. Agatha is Rip Digman's secretary. This character is a supporting character who helps Rip in various administrative and operational activities. Saltine is Rip Digman's enthusiastic and passionate student and assistant archaeologist. She tries to help Rip Digman rise again to the peak of his career after experiencing a major setback. She often accompanies Rip on various adventures looking for historical artifacts and plays an important role in motivating and supporting Rip. Zane Troy is a traitor to Rip who is Rip's enemy or rival. Initially they were friends for a long time and worked together, but because he only wanted to succeed on his own and wanted to be famous, Zane finally betrayed Rip. Next there is Quail Eegan, who is someone who has a dark past. He was once a proud athlete, but even with his impressive achievements, he never received praise from his father, Mr. Quail.

Conclusion

In the episode "Digman! Der unheilige Gral", German idioms are used to convey the emotions, conflicts, and social dynamics of the characters in a powerful and expressive way. The idiom "*sie ging ihm auf den Sack*" expresses emotional and spontaneous irritation, reflecting the informal and frank communication style in German culture. The use of this expression shows how understanding idioms plays an important role in revealing hidden meanings and character development in the narrative. It also shows the level of familiarity or closeness between the speaker and the listener, because this idiom is considered rude and is not used in a formal context. Second, the idioms "*Ich sitze in der Tinte*" and "*Hölle auf Erden*" reflect the use of language in conveying hardship or suffering. This shows that German culture values visual and dramatic communication styles to convey personal experiences. The choice of words such as "Tinte" and "Hölle" illustrates how serious the situation is, while also giving an emotional color to the narrative. This expression is common in everyday conversation and indicates that communication in German culture often involves elements of language play or subtle humor that is contextual in nature.

In the context of foreign language learning, idioms are also a challenge because the cultural content does not always have a direct equivalent in the language of the foreign language learner. Therefore, a cross-cultural approach is very important in teaching idioms. Idioms are not only literal and idiomatic, but also include cultural information, the origin of the idiom, and its relevance in social interaction. In this way, learning idioms not only

improves students' linguistic competence, but also hones their cultural sensitivity and critical thinking skills towards differences between cultures. Understanding idioms is not enough just literally, but requires an understanding of the norms, values, and communication styles of the speaking community. This is very important in foreign language teaching and cross-cultural studies, because misunderstanding the meaning of idioms can affect the effectiveness of intercultural communication.

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