

# PHRASEOLOGY AND PAREMIOLOGY ACROSS CULTURES AND LANGUAGES: CONCEPTUALISATIONS AND METAPHORICAL IMAGES OF LOYALTY PROVERBS

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## **Abstract**

The article is dedicated to discussion of phraseology as a field of study, highlighting key figures and landmark works in English, Latvian, Italian, and Spanish.

Initially introduced by Charles Bally, phraseology gained prominence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mainly through Viktor Vinogradov, who established classifications of phraseological units based on the degree of semantic cohesion. Today, phraseology is interdisciplinary, with contributions from various fields such as folklore, anthropology, cognitive linguistics, and cultural studies.

With this theoretical background, the analysis of LOYALTY proverbs is comparative, focusing on selected case studies from four languages – English, Latvian, Italian, and Spanish – to identify recurring themes.

Comparative case studies of specific proverbs reveal universal themes and cultural insights regarding loyalty, social and mutual protection, and recognition among peers. These findings demonstrate that the use of animal metaphors, along with references to social hierarchies and supernatural beings, conveys dominant cultural values and perceptions of the world.

Studying proverbs is crucial for cultural and linguistic research, as it provides a deeper insight into language aspects through cultural conceptualisations that organise the social reality of different cultures. Moreover, this study suggests

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*Culture Crossroads*

Volume 33, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.55877/cc.vol33.523>

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ISSN 2500-9974



that the concept of LOYALTY<sup>1</sup>, mutual protection, and social recognition are fundamental to human social behaviour, transcending cultural and language boundaries.

**Keywords:** *paremiology, classification of phraseological units, cultural conceptualisations, Latvian, English, Italian and Spanish proverbs.*

## Introduction

Phraseology is a branch of linguistics with a tradition dating back more than a hundred years. The Swiss linguist Charles Bally introduced the term “phraseology” (*phraséologie*) in his *Treatise on French Stylistics*. Bally’s ideas were not immediately developed further until the 1940s when Viktor Vinogradov (*Виноградов Виктор Владимирович*) took them up. This led to the creation of numerous works on Russian material. Phraseology became an internationally recognised discipline and expanding area of research in the 1970s [Bally 1909, Burger, Dobrovolskij, Kühn, Norrick 2007]. Phraseology studies different types of formulaic language, for instance, collocations, idioms, and other lexical multi-word units<sup>2</sup>, including extensive research on proverbs [EUROPHRAS 2024].

Idioms can also be explored within a cognitive-linguistic framework. Andreas Langlotz addresses the complexities of idioms, emphasising their dynamic nature and the cognitive processes involved in their understanding and usage. There are two key questions: one is about cognitive processes that influence and determine how idioms are represented; and the other one is about how these processes establish the boundaries and possibilities for systematic variation of idioms in real-life communication. Idioms are framed as products of cognitive processes and cultural contexts [Langlotz 2006].

It has to be stressed that paremiology, the study of proverbs, is interdisciplinary: folklorists, linguists, literary scholars, and anthropologists have contributed to the development of its research. Andreas Buerki highlights the rapid growth and diversification of phraseological research over the past 25 years from a relatively obscure field to a vibrant and multifaceted area of linguistic inquiry. From being

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<sup>1</sup> Mental concepts are represented by using all capital letters to distinguish them from verbal concepts and indicate that they are not just a matter of language but rather concepts that belong to the realm of human thought. This convention is commonly used in cognitive linguistics.

<sup>2</sup> See Alison Wray’s book *Formulaic Language and the Lexicon*, for numerous terms that designate phraseological units [Wray 2002: 9].

a niche interest, the field has become a diverse network, connecting many different areas with their own histories, philosophies and goals [Buerki 2020: xiii].

For centuries, scholars have explored paremiology as a subfield of phraseology, seeking to understand the nature, origins, and uses of proverbs. The history of paremiology dates back to the Sumerian cuneiform tablets, the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, the Renaissance scholars, e.g., Erasmus of Rotterdam ([1466?] 1469–1536), and leading to modern folklorists like Wolfgang Mieder, a leading scholar in paremiology, Archer Taylor (1890–1973), an American folklorist, with a special interest in cultural history, literature, proverbs, and riddles, Adélékè Adéèkó, an academic who has made significant contributions to the study of proverbs and their role in African literature and culture, and Shirley Arora (1930–2021), a scholar who advanced the academic study of proverbs and folklore, particularly in the context of the Spanish-speaking world [Mieder 2004; Hrisztova-Gotthardt, Varga 2015].

In Spain, paremiological research has developed in different trajectories. A landmark in Spanish research was the founding of the journal *Paremia* by the *Asociación Cultural Independiente* in 1993. As the first Spanish journal dedicated to proverbs and proverbial expressions, *Paremia* significantly enhanced scientific exchange and became a crucial meeting point for experts in paremiology. Sevilla Muñoz's contribution to the development of proverbial studies in Spanish deserves special mention. She, together with C.A. Crida Álvarez, developed a classification which is based on the consideration of proverbs as archilexemes of short phrases and on the application of a series of criteria: genetic (origin), pragmatic, morphological, and semantic. The first major division of the proverbs is determined by their origin (known or anonymous) and their use (cultural or popular). Thus, a parable can have a known origin, but be ignored by most speakers, and have a very frequent current use, i.e., be a very popular parable [Sevilla Muñoz, Crida Álvarez 2013].

Historically, the tradition of Italian proverbs dates back to a common European cultural background, with collections documented as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The Unification of Italy and the positivist school led to a scientific approach to the study of proverbs. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, paremiological studies produced rich and functional dictionaries in Italian [Lapucci 2007; Soletti 2011].

The first researchers of Latvian phraseology were German scholars who wrote about the Latvian language because of the historical and linguistic connections between the two cultures and languages. There are writings from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, for instance, Georg Mancelius (1593–1654) *Phraseologia Lettica* [Mancelius 1638; Kessler 2018; Vanags 2024].

Kārlis Mīlenbahs (1853–1916) and Jānis Endzelīns (1873–1961) created the *Dictionary of the Latvian Language*. It is considered a landmark work in Latvian linguistics and culture, comparable to Samuel Johnson's dictionary for the English

language [Endzelīns 1923–1932; Endzelīns, Vanags 1934–1946; Kļaviņa 2023; Druvieta 2024]. The dictionary also included a large stock of Latvian phraseology, including numerous proverbs, which was a significant contribution to the formation of the Latvian phraseological system [Endzelīns 1923–1932; Endzelīns, Hauzenberga 1934–1946; Kļaviņa 2011; MEV 2000–2024].

Latvian phraseology as an important field of academic study was developed by Alīse Laua (1914–1994) by her comprehensive study and analysis of Latvian idioms and phraseological units, aiming to identify the unique characteristics and origins of Latvian phraseology. Her work has been instrumental in preserving and promoting the understanding of Latvian phraseological heritage, which is an essential aspect of the country's linguistic and cultural identity [Laua 1992; Laua, Ezeriņa, Veinberga [2000] 2017; Urbanoviča 2014].

### Theoretical framework

In terms of proverbs research theoretical framework, not only linguistic and semantic aspects are considered but also cultural phenomena in figurative language, and cultural conceptualisations.

To investigate conceptual-cognitive and cross-cultural aspects, through the lens of proverbs, a complex approach is needed to provide a comprehensive analysis and give the insight of the proverbs' meaning.

Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen suggest that for the understanding of the figurative language, it is essential to uncover the types of knowledge that create links between the underlying mental image and the actual meaning of figurative units. Empirical data from various languages indicate that many significant properties of figurative language can only be explained through specific conceptual structures, referred to as cultural knowledge [Dobrovol'skij, Piirainen 2022].

The approach proposed by Dobrovol'skij and Piirainen, termed Conventional Figurative Language Theory, is cognitive, as it uses different types of knowledge to explain linguistic phenomena. The theory's main task is to explain the meanings and functions of expressions in relation to other conceptual and semiotic phenomena, rather than explaining specific expressions. The theory posits that the image component, a specific conceptual structure linking the lexical structure to the actual meaning of a figurative unit, is crucial to its content plane. The underlying mental image is stable and intersubjective to some extent, for instance, the proverbs: LV *putns*<sup>3</sup> *putnam aci ārā neknābs*, EN *birds of a feather flock (fly) together*, IT *gli uccelli si appaiano con loro pari*, and ES *todas las aves con sus pares*, the proverb idea

<sup>3</sup> The bold font is used to highlight the metaphorical image of the proverb.

is mapped on the metaphorical image of the bird. Despite the fact that these proverbs are semantically different, they are united by the same conceptual structure.

Considering cultural phenomena is crucial when describing figurative language from a cross-linguistic perspective. Different languages use different “literal” material to denote a concept figuratively, and sometimes reinterpret the same material in varied ways, leading to different meanings for similar figurative expressions. There are variations, stemming from cross-cultural differences; however, the cognitive principles are universal. Culture characterises groups of people who share a social, historical, and physical environment, enabling them to interpret experiences homogeneously. Culture is seen as a set of shared understandings within these groups, aligning with contemporary anthropological thought. Although this definition does not cover all cultural artefacts and practices, it emphasises the shared understandings that are essential to these cultures [Kövecses 2005].

### Classification of phraseological units

According to Viktor Vinogradov’s classification, phraseological units can be divided into three main groups based on the degree of semantic cohesion between the components. There are three main groups: 1) **phraseological fusions**<sup>4</sup> are completely non-motivated word groups; the meaning of the whole cannot be deduced from the meanings of the individual components; they are highly idiomatic and have fixed structure, for instance, to die: LV *doties aizsaulē*, EN *to join the choir of angels*, IT *andare all’altro mondo*, ES *irse al otro mundo*, 2) **phraseological unities** are partially motivated word groups; their meaning can be guessed from the metaphorical meaning of the whole unit; they have a relatively high degree of stability in the lexical components, for instance, to become confused, leading to irrational behaviour: LV *zaudēt galvu*, EN *to lose one’s head*, IT *perdere la testa*, ES *perder la cabeza*, and 3) **phraseological combinations** are fully motivated word groups; their meanings are easily deduced from the meanings of the components; one component is used in its literal meaning, while the other one is used metaphorically, for instance: LV *nākt pie varas*, EN *to come to power*, IT *salire al potere*, ES *llegar al poder*. This classification remains one of the most influential and widely applied approaches to categorising phraseological units in linguistics [Vinogradov 1947; Laua 1992; Urbanoviča 2014; Lisciandro 2020; Sevilla Muñoz, Crida Álvarez 2013].

According to different studies, proverbs are part of research objects of phraseology research, and they correspond to Vinogradov’s classification of phraseological fusions as they are highly idiomatic and have fixed structure.

<sup>4</sup> There are also other terms in English that describe the same groups: **pure idioms**, **figurative idioms** and **restricted collocations** [Pawley 2007: 10].

## Case studies

The objective of this research is to systematically compare and analyse proverbs relating to loyalty across Latvian, English, Italian, and Spanish, to identify the main conceptual themes and cultural insights that underlie phraseological expressions in each language. The empirical steps undertaken include: selecting proverbs with specific elements from each language, classifying them according to established types of phraseological units, and examining their metaphorical images and cultural conceptualisations through a cross-cultural analysis. The methodology draws from conceptual metaphor theory and paremiology, employing cognitive-linguistic frameworks and classification schemes such as Vinogradov's, to ensure methodological transparency and reliability. This approach allows for both qualitative and comparative examination of the collected material, leading to a deeper understanding of how cultural and linguistic factors may shape the expression of loyalty in different languages and cultures.

We adopt a practical approach by starting our analysis of proverbs across different cultures and languages with our mother tongue. Elza Kokare's extensive research on Latvian proverbs has revealed the Latvian language being rich in proverbs that conceptualise the idea expressed by the English proverb "birds of a feather flock together," meaning that members of the same group or species will not harm one another, showing a sense of solidarity or mutual protection among peers [Kokare 1980; Kokare 1988].

The analysis of proverbs across Latvian, English, Italian, and Spanish reveals several key themes and cultural insights regarding LOYALTY and social dynamics<sup>5</sup>. There are three conceptual bases: 1) group identity and LOYALTY, 2) mutual protection, and 3) recognition among peers.

Many proverbs emphasise the idea that individuals of similar backgrounds or characteristics tend to associate and support one another. For example, the proverb LV *putns putnam aci ārā neknābs*, EN *birds of a feather flock (fly) together*, IT *gli uccelli si appaiano con loro pari*, and ES *todas las aves con sus pares*, is mirrored in all four languages, illustrating a universal recognition of the tendency for like-minded individuals to unite. The Latvian linguist Laua points out that the imaginative basis of phraseology is most often the so-called metaphorical picture, which concerns a virtually unlimited range of phenomena. It is important to note that it concerns a human being in all their actions and attitudes [Laua 1992: 29]. This means that these metaphorical paintings are based on human experience, including cultural

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<sup>5</sup> Full table of our collected empirical material on LOYALTY proverbs in Latvian, English, Italian, and Spanish can be found here: [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1S7bnXWfsiiFp-fny4aC02BNKRdUrArSa8N6gDZ\\_G89o/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1S7bnXWfsiiFp-fny4aC02BNKRdUrArSa8N6gDZ_G89o/edit?usp=sharing) (viewed 15.07.2024.)

conceptualisations. It is essential to stress that there is often what is known as synonymy, i.e., proverbs can be considered synonyms if they share a large degree of meaning but differ in their figurative basis and are used in different linguistic and non-verbal situations, acquiring both positive and negative connotations.

Proverbs such as LV *vārna vārņai acīs neknābs*, EN *one crow will not pick out another's eye*, IT *corvo con corvo non si cava gli occhi*, ES *cuervo con cuervo no se quitan los ojos*, reflect a cultural understanding of loyalty and protection within groups. This suggests that members of a group often refrain from harming each other, reinforcing social bonds.

The concept that individuals can recognise their own kind is prevalent, for instance, LV *pašu mājās zaglis nezog*, EN *one thief knows another*, IT *in casa di ladri non si ruba*, ES *en casa de ladrones no se hurta*, highlight an awareness of shared traits or behaviours within specific groups, whether they be thieves, devils, or other entities.

Cultural insights are connected with animal symbolism as animals frequently feature in these proverbs, serving as metaphors for human behaviour, for instance, crows, dogs, and wolves are commonly used to illustrate loyalty and social dynamics, suggesting that these animals hold significant cultural symbolism in the respective societies.

Social hierarchies are reflected in the presence of proverbs related to social classes, such as LV *bagāts bagātu aizstāv* and EN *nobility helps nobility*, indicating an awareness of social hierarchies and the tendency for individuals to support those within their own class or status.

References to supernatural beings, such as gods and devils, in proverbs also indicate a cultural dimension where moral and ethical considerations are intertwined with social loyalty. This suggests that beliefs in the supernatural may influence social behaviours and group dynamics: LV *velns velnam ragus nelauž*, EN *one devil knows another*, IT *dio li fa e poi li accoppia*, ES *dios los cría y ellos se juntan*.

The study of proverbs in these four languages highlights a shared understanding of LOYALTY, mutual protection, and social recognition. Through the use of animal metaphors and references to social hierarchies, these proverbs incorporate cultural values and social norms that emphasise the importance of community and belonging. The similarities across languages suggest that these themes are fundamental to human social behaviour, transcending cultural boundaries.

Cultural conceptualisations reveal a cohesive cognitive system within cultural groups, known as cultural cognition. This system comprises shared beliefs and values and is characterised by several unique features, for example, the so called emergent system in which cultural cognition evolves from interactions among group members over time and space, highlighting its diachronic nature [Sharifian 2008].

## Conclusion

Exploring proverbs across different cultures and languages reveals shared human experiences and unique cultural conceptualisations that shape our understanding of the world. The study of proverbs related to LOYALTY has highlighted the intricate relationship between phraseology and paremiology, emphasising how proverbs serve as cultural artefacts that epitomise collective values, norms, and beliefs.

Through a comparative analysis of Latvian, English, Italian, and Spanish proverbs, for instance: LV *putns putnam aci ārā neknābs*, EN *birds of a feather flock (fly) together*, IT *gli uccelli si appaiano con loro pari*, and ES *todas las aves con sus pares*, and the like<sup>6</sup>, we identified three primary themes: group identity and loyalty, mutual protection, and recognition among peers. These themes demonstrate the universal tendency for individuals to seek solidarity within their own communities, reflecting cultural conceptualisations that go beyond linguistic boundaries. The use of animal metaphors and references to social hierarchies in these proverbs further illustrates the cultural significance of loyalty and social bonds.

The findings suggest that studying proverbs is not merely a linguistic endeavour but an interdisciplinary approach combining insights from cultural studies and cognitive linguistics. By examining proverbs through the lens of cultural conceptualisations, a deeper understanding of how language shapes and is shaped by the social reality of different cultures can be gained.

By demonstrating the relevance of proverbs in understanding cultural identity and social behaviour, future studies could expand this analysis to include additional languages and cultural contexts, further enriching our understanding of the complex interplay between language, culture, and human cognition.

Limitations of this research should also be noted. Although the comparative analysis of Latvian, English, Italian, and Spanish proverbs highlights significant thematic similarities, suggesting similar cultural patterns, it remains impossible to precisely trace the historical processes or quantify the degree to which these cultures and languages have influenced one another. The complicated interplay between language and culture is shaped by a wide range of factors, including historical language contacts and parallel social developments, which often leave limited linguistic evidence. Consequently, while the findings reveal shared conceptualisations of loyalty, definitive conclusions about specific influence or the directionality of cross-cultural impact cannot be established within the scope of this study; the parallels of historical processes and linguistic correlation could be a subject of our future studies.

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<sup>6</sup> See table: [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1S7bnXWfsiiFp-fny4aC02BNKRdUrArSa8N6gDZ\\_G89o/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1S7bnXWfsiiFp-fny4aC02BNKRdUrArSa8N6gDZ_G89o/edit?usp=sharing).

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