

# Idiomatic expressions in Feigned, Jargon-like Colloquial Orality

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the use of idiomatic expressions—defined as multi-word combinations with fully or partially non-compositional meanings—in colloquial, jargon-like language within *Emil und die Detektive* (Kästner, 1929). Idiomatic expressions are shown to support key functions of feigned orality and sociolectal features, contributing to dynamic and realistic text passages, clearly characterizing the characters, and rendering the style more creative, ironic, and colloquial. Additionally, idiomatic expressions help to establish in-group identity and are often pragmatically significant. The protagonists exhibit varying degrees of language variation and formal modifications of their idiomatic expressions. As hypothesized, the main features of the analyzed idiomatic expressions overlap with strategies employed for the acquisition of phrasemes.

**Keywords:** idiomatic expressions; feigned orality; children’s literature; *Emil und die Detektive*.

## 1. Topic, Research Questions, Assumptions

This study examines idiomatic expressions—a subset of phrasemes—within the context of feigned orality (*fingierte Mündlichkeit*, Goetsch, 1985), specifically focusing on their use in colloquial language that approximates jargon as exemplified in Kästner’s *Emil und die Detektive* (1929).

The following sections introduce the three core components of the topic: (i) the novel itself, (ii) feigned orality, and (iii) phrasemes. Subsequently, I will address the three primary aspects of the research question (1–3).

(i) *Emil und die Detektive* narrates the story of Emil Tischbein, a secondary school student from Neustadt who travels to Berlin to visit relatives. During his journey, his money is stolen; however, he manages to apprehend the thief with assistance from a group of Berlin children and hand him over to the police. The novel is part of a broader modernization movement in children’s

literature during the Weimar Republic—characterized by adopting motifs and narrative techniques from adult literature and reflecting aspects of modern society such as technological advancements, urbanization, and increased traffic (cf. Schellheimer, 2010). Kästner is often regarded as a representative of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (“New Objectivity”) in children’s literature (Schellheimer, 2010). Despite this modernist stance, Kästner’s characters embody values like work ethic, integrity, reason, and discipline—values resonant with young readers but arguably not reflective of Berlin’s social reality at that time (cf. Springman, 1991). His moralistic approach encourages critical reflection among readers (cf. Boarini, 2015). The language employed is described as “eine sehr interessante und originelle, milieu- und lebensechte Sprache, die den Kindern abgelauscht wirkt, sehr natürlich und lebendig und von unnachahmlicher Prägnanz und Klarheit ist” (Sahr, 1994, 34–35).<sup>1</sup> Kästner aims to depict stylized everyday speech typical of street children from a metropolis—modern and cheeky rather than regional dialectal (cf. Schellheimer, 2010, 83). Consequently, colloquial expressions—including teenage slang and idiomatic expressions—are prevalent throughout the novel (cf. Boarini, 2015, 274; Richter-Vapaatalo, 2006, 260–262). These characteristics underscore the importance of idiomaticity alongside diaphasic and diastratic variation. Children’s literature by Kästner exemplifies how employing idiomatic expressions becomes a stylistic principle (Burger, 1998, 165–166), making *Emil und die Detektive* an ideal textual basis for this investigation.

(ii) Feigned orality refers to language in literary texts that mimics conceptual orality—at the proximity pole or near it—as defined by Koch and Oesterreicher (1985). It involves stylized proximity language characterized by an author-specific selection of features (cf. Nicklaus and Rocco, 2018, 425; Reinhardt, 2017, 464–465; Schwitalla and Tiittula, 2009). Elements typical of authentic spoken language are exaggerated or used ironically; certain features such as overlaps or co-construction are omitted when deemed unsuitable.<sup>2</sup> Feigned orality serves functions including suggesting immediacy or closeness between characters or narrator and audience, modulating dramatic effects, creating irony, situating characters geographically or socially, and characterizing behavior and relationships (cf. Czennia, 2004, 508–509). When analyzing dialogues among children specifically—and colloquial language more broadly—additional linguistic features must be considered, such as jargon or low diastratic markers that mark them as sociolects or diaphasic varieties.

1 ‘A very interesting and original milieu- and life-like language that seems overheard by children—natural, lively—and characterized by unparalleled conciseness and clarity’ (my translation).

2 In empirical works, the characteristics of spoken language are used as a standard for comparison, particularly the linguistic features that encode the highest proximity (cf. Fiehler, 2009; Schwitalla, 2012).

(iii) By *phrasemes*, I mean linguistic units functioning as single semantic entities that typically possess three main characteristics—even if to different degrees (cf. Burger <sup>5</sup>2015, 17–20, 26):

(a) Multi-part structure: They consist of at least two free morphemes.<sup>3</sup> I therefore exclude single-lexeme words with non-literal meanings.<sup>4</sup>

(b) Fixity: They are stable expressions—retrieved holistically (as evidenced by psycholinguistic studies), structurally fixed regarding component order and potential modifications, semantically constant in meaning or speech act function—and frequently used.

(c) Idiosyncrasy: The combinations of the components are unpredictable (cf. Schafroth, 2023, 234),<sup>5</sup> yet often conventionalized or idiomatic to varying degrees.<sup>6</sup> In the case of idiomaticity, the meaning of one or more morpheme(s) of the phraseme is not the literal one. Since idiomatic expressions—in their traditional definition—contain two or more morphemes, the phraseological meaning is not compositional (i.e., it cannot be derived from the literal meaning of the morphemes), if at least the meaning of one morpheme is idiomatic.<sup>7</sup>

This paper focuses exclusively on idiomatic phrasemes—that is, those whose meaning cannot be derived solely from that of their constituent parts, as just mentioned; I will call them *idiomatic expressions*, since this term is common in English studies on phraseology. Idiomatic expressions are particularly relevant to the present research question (see Section (2)). Moreover, as Fleischer (<sup>2</sup>1997) emphasizes in his typology based on the prototype approach, idiomaticity is central to phraseology.

The following issues (research questions) will be addressed:

(1) The role of idiomatic expressions in realizing feigned orality and jargon-like colloquial language—for example: their relationship with text effects such as humor or emphasis (cf. Heringer, 2020, 50; Richter-Vapaatalo, 2007, 229; Section (2) of this paper).

3 According to this wording, no clarification is needed as to whether these should be lexical words or grammatical words. Phrasemes therefore also include word combinations consisting only of grammatical words such as *an sich* ('as such'; 'by itself'; cf. Burger <sup>5</sup>2015, 15–16; Fleischer, <sup>2</sup>1997, on the other hand, takes the opposite view).

4 For a discussion of this issue, cf. Burger (<sup>2</sup>2015, 36–37); Fleischer (<sup>2</sup>1997, 170, 249).

5 Burger (<sup>2</sup>2015, 26), conversely, refers to this as 'anomalies' at various levels.

6 Thus, phraseology is always idiosyncratic. Moreover, idiomaticity is supposed to play an extremely important role in the language in general (cf. Fillmore, Kay and O'Connor, 1988; Taylor, 2012, 71–72).

7 Of course, idiomaticity is not limited to phraseology, but also concerns other linguistic elements (e.g., metaphors), figurative language use (including one-word lexemes), allusions, culturally given and pragmatic connotations and reinterpretations, etc. (cf. Carobbio, 2023; Schafroth, 2023).

It is assumed that idiomatic expressions closely related to the children's world (featuring anchor words from their everyday life, and belonging to groups like somatisms, kinegrams, animalisms, but also comparative idiomatic expressions) will play a particularly important role. Therefore, these subgroups will be examined in greater detail (see the investigation categories in Section (3)).

(2) A comprehensive characterization of all idiomatic expressions within dialogues is the objective, encompassing situation-specific, group-specific, and function-specific features (cf. Ehrhardt, 2011, 162; Fleischer, <sup>2</sup>1997, 125–130; Sabban, 2007; Schafroth, 2023). This analysis also aims to determine whether idiomatic expressions are used more frequently by children versus adults, and predominantly in in-group conversations among children (or adults).

(3) The potential relationship between specific features of the idiomatic expressions within dialogues and strategies aimed at facilitating their acquisition by young readers.

In the specialist literature, strategies are postulated that serve to promote and accelerate the acquisition of phraseology by children reading children's literature (so-called procedures for enhancing comprehensibility—*Verfahren der Verständlichmachung*). These include the introduction, embedding, and explanation of idiomatic expressions, possibly also a metalinguistic characterization, the clustering of idiomatic expressions, modifications, and paraphrases (cf. also Finkbeiner, 2011, 63–64; Richter-Vapaatalo, 2007, 103, 134). Additionally, consideration of the children's conceptual framework plays a role in selecting suitable idiomatic expressions.

Specifically, I assume that there are interplays and interactions between the features of the idiomatic expressions found in the dialogues and these methods.

In the following sections, I first discuss theoretical frameworks concerning phrasemes' roles in literary texts alongside feigned orality and language variation (2). In (3), I comment on the procedures and the categories for the empirical analysis. Section (4) presents results. Section (5) offers conclusions addressing the research questions (RQs).

## 2. Theoretical Background

Numerous studies have demonstrated that phrasemes—across their various forms, usages, and functions—possess significant potential to characterize texts and text types in a profound manner. Černyševa (1980, 93 ff.) first introduced the concept of the *text-creating potential* (*textbildendes Potenzial*) of phrasemes, which was subsequently elaborated by Dobrovol'skij (1980, 1987), Fleischer (<sup>2</sup>1997), and Sabban (2004). In this context, Sabban examines the frequency

of specific groups of phrasemes within particular text genres, as well as their distinctive features—such as their characteristics, functions, and effects—in different texts (cf. Sabban, 2007, 237).

In literary texts, phrasemes are often characterized by pronounced conspicuousness: They tend to exhibit varying degrees of idiomaticity and are frequently employed creatively (cf. Eismann, 2007). They contribute significantly to the text's style (cf. Sandig, 2007, 159).<sup>8</sup> The stylistic features associated with phrasemes include their degree of idiomaticity just mentioned, connotative markers, as well as their potential for chaining and modification (cf. Sandig, 2007). Marked phraseological usages also play a role; these include phenomena such as the cumulative use of phrasemes, networks and contamination (i.e., fusion of different phrasemes), and decompositions (where individual constituents are reactivated within the textual context with their denotative meanings).<sup>9</sup> Given these considerations, this study focuses on idiomatic expressions and also takes modifications and marked usages into account.

One fundamental contribution of idiomatic expressions to literary texts is their role in dialogue: They help make dialogues more reflective of spoken language. Idiomatic expressions convey succinct messages, evoke associations, and facilitate playful language use (cf. Heringer 2020, 50). Consequently, they enhance the entertainment value and create a humorous, witty, relaxed, and direct effect that characterizes individual protagonists while improving perceived authenticity (cf. Richter-Vapaatalo, 2007, 229). Frequent modifications—such as allusions, wordplay, or irony—further reinforce these effects (cf. Heller and Zinesi, 2023). Moreover, idiomatic expressions function as indicators of situation-, domain-, group-, or function-specific characteristics (cf. Donalis, 2009, 99; Ehrhardt, 2011, 162) fulfilling pragmatic tasks associated with feigned orality. This focus on pragmatics stems from the understanding that idiomatic expressions are not only used to refer to objects or situations but also serve performative functions—such as speech acts (cf. Ehrhardt, 2011, 158).

Since the novel under analysis features children as the main characters and includes dialogues rich in language variation, it is essential to consider three additional aspects:

(1) Domains of language variation: Certain sociolectal elements and proximity to jargon contribute to geographical and social localization. These features help to typify characters while conveying a sense of realism and immediacy—thereby creating an illusion of orality (cf. Czennia, 2004, 508–509).

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8 Here, *style* is understood as a set of characteristics that influence the overall meaning or tone of a text or conversation (cf. Sandig, 2007, 158).

9 For empirical studies on these phenomena, cf. Heller and Zinesi (2023).

(2) Multiple dimensions of variation: Feigned orality encompasses more than diastratic, diaphasic and diamesic features mentioned previously; it can also be marked diatopically or diachronically—for example: differentiating between older versus younger speakers.

(3) Types of colloquial language:

- i) A diatopically and diastratically neutral variety, close to standard colloquial speech or spoken standard language (for German, cf. Schneider, Butterworth and Hahn, 2018).
- ii) A diastratically marked variety with substandard elements or slang indicators—near-jargon colloquial language.
- iii) A diatopically marked variety resembling dialectal speech—near-dialect colloquial language (cf. Cinato and Amico di Meane, 2019, 22).

All these dimensions are interconnected and contribute to the intricate landscape of language variation associated with feigned orality, particularly in the idiomatic expressions employed within dialogues in literary texts.

### 3. Procedure and Categories for Analysis

Methodologically, I first identified all idiomatic expressions within the dialogues, compiled them into an Excel spreadsheet, and applied filters to facilitate analysis. The following categories—derived from established typologies—were considered:<sup>10</sup>

- Partial idioms/partially idiomatic expressions (*Teilidiome*, see examples (1) and (2)) and full idioms/fully idiomatic expressions (*Vollidiome*, see examples (3) and (4)): These are partially or fully idiomatic expressions; in some cases, they are metaphorical partial idioms or full idioms,<sup>11</sup> as illustrated by all these four examples.

(1) Jemandem die Taschen volllügen [‘to feed someone a pack of lies’; ‘to lie through one’s teeth’]<sup>12</sup>

10 This article deals with German idiomatic expressions and is therefore grounded in fundamental typologies within the German scholarly community specialized in phraseology, primarily as proposed by Harald Burger and Wolfgang Fleischer (among others).

11 These adhere to the following criteria: (A) They possess at least two readings. (B) One reading must be literal, and the other figurative (i.e., concretely imaginable). (C) The readings are mutually exclusive (disjunctive). (D) They are motivated (transparent), meaning that the metaphorical connection—the shift in meaning from a concrete to an abstract domain—can be established (cf. Burger, 2015, 64–65, 83, 92–93).

12 Examples (1) to (7) are taken from Hornáček Banášová *et al.* (2025). The English translations are my own; when available, an idiomatic translation is provided. Examples (8) to (10), as well as those pertaining to the classes of the cross-classification, are my own.

- (2) Einen Streit vom Zaun brechen [‘to make a mountain out of a molehill’]
- (3) Jemandem einen Korb geben [‘to give someone the brush-off’]
- (4) Jemandem etwas in die Schuhe schieben [‘to pass the buck’]

As demonstrated by these examples, partially idiomatic expressions contain only one component—or more than one, but not all—with a metaphorical meaning. Conversely, fully idiomatic expressions have all components understood in a metaphorical sense. Both types fall under the category of nominative idiomatic expressions (which refer to objects or processes and are embedded within sentences) and are part of the referential idiomatic expressions (cf. Burger, <sup>5</sup>2015, 32).

- Propositional phrasemes (*propositionale Phraseme*): These form a subset of referential idiomatic expressions but differ from the nominative ones in that they make statements about objects or processes—thus functioning as complete sentences (cf. Burger, <sup>5</sup>2015, 32). Examples include fixed phrases explicitly linked to specific contexts (*feste Phrasen*) such as

- (5) Jemandem geht ein Licht auf [‘the light bulb goes on for someone’]
- (6) Das Eis ist gebrochen [‘the ice has been broken’]

and general statements (topical formulas—*topische Formeln*) such as proverbs (*Sprichwörter*, example (7)), or commonplaces (*Gemeinplätze*, example (8)).

- (7) Morgenstunde hat Gold im Munde [‘the early bird catches the worm’]
- (8) Der Mensch ist, was er isst [‘you are what you eat’]

- Communicative phrasemes (*kommunikative Phraseme*): These are formulas—thus characterized by their formulaic nature—and express speech acts. They can be equated with pragmatic idiomatic expressions that manage recurring communicative situations (cf. Filatkina, 2007, 142).<sup>13</sup> Function is considered the best practical criterion for a clear classification (cf. Filatkina, 2007, 144). The pragmatic functions of these idiomatic expressions are postulated by Fleischer (<sup>2</sup>1997, 218), and a detailed typology of functions is proposed by Lüger (2007, 450–451). Functions are understood here as specific ways in which idiomatic expressions influence the communication process to support the speaker’s intentions in both the illocutionary sense (the intended effect) and the perlocutionary sense (the

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13 Cf. also the concept of communicative formulas in Stein (2004, 263). This term was already employed in the first German handbook of phraseology (Burger, Buhofer and Sialm, 1982, 105).

actual effect produced).<sup>14</sup> They can be situation-dependent (*Routineformeln*, example (9)) or situation-independent (*Gesprächsformeln*, example (10)); in the latter case, they primarily consist of reactions and comments made during conversations:

(9) Hals und Beinbruch! ['break a leg!']

(10) Das ist der Hammer! ['That's a real shocker!']

Additionally, certain classes of the cross-classification intersect with children's language use and are relevant for analysis:

- Animalisms: Idiomatic expressions involving animals conveying qualities or behaviors. Traditionally, they do not belong to the usual typologies of phrasemes, but are classified as a category by Heringer (2020). Examples are *jemandem einen Bären aufbinden* ('to pull someone's leg'; 'to feed someone a line') and *den Löwenanteil bekommen* ('to get the lion's share').
- Somatisms: Expressions referring to body parts or physical states used metaphorically—e.g., *jemandem das Herz brechen* ('to break someone's heart') or *etwas auf Herz und Nieren prüfen* ('to scrutinize something thoroughly').
- Kinegrams: Expressions involving physical actions or images—e.g., *mit strahlender Miene* ('with a beaming face').
- Pair formulas: Fixed word pairs with specific meanings—e.g., *Schwarz und Weiß sehen* ('to see black and white') or *hoch und heilig versprechen* ('sworn on high').
- Comparative idiomatic expressions: Phrasemes drawing comparisons to highlight traits—e.g., *stark wie ein Löwe* ('strong as a lion') or *schnell wie der Blitz* ('fast as lightning').

I initially annotated the following categories (Analysis 1—relevant to RQ 2):

- Speaker: The person speaking in the turn containing the idiomatic expression.
- Addressee: The person addressed by the speaker.
- Interlocutors: The speaker-addressee constellation—who is speaking to whom.<sup>15</sup>

14 For instance, there are various types of formulas, including polite formulas (e.g., greeting formulas), scolding and swearing formulas, commentary formulas (expressions that indicate doubt, rejection, criticism, or astonishment), and stimulus formulas (such as requests, threats, and warnings).

15 The chapter of the novel in which the idiomatic expression occurs, along with its cotext and broader context, was also annotated. However, these annotations are not included in the analyses presented here.

These indicators facilitate the reconstruction of the communicative context in which the idiomatic expressions are utilized; they enable an examination of whether children use these expressions more frequently than adults and whether they appear more often in peer-to-peer interactions. Furthermore, annotating which character employs specific idiomatic expressions highlights usages that characterize the characters in the novel and reflect their individuality.

In a second step (Analysis 2—relevant to RQs 1, 2 and 3), I annotated:

- Degree of idiomaticity.
- Markedness at the level of language variation.
- Category based on typologies outlined above.

In subsequent steps, I further annotated:

- Possible communicative functions and pragmatic uses (Analysis 3—relevant to RQ 2).
- Formal and semantic modifications (Analysis 4—relevant to RQ 1 and 2).
- Anchor words<sup>16</sup> and strategies aimed at facilitating reader comprehension (Analysis 5—relevant to RQ 3).

To ensure objectivity, only idiomatic expressions listed in the Duden 11 Dictionary (<sup>2</sup>2002) were included for detailed analysis. Recognition and annotation were performed manually.

## 4. Main Findings

This section presents the results of the analysis, including quantitative data and illustrative examples for qualitative insights. All idiomatic expressions identified in the dialogues of the novel (a total of 93) were included in Analysis 1. For Analyses 2, 3, 4, and 5, only those expressions listed in the Duden 11 Dictionary (<sup>2</sup>2002)—a total of 67 out of the 93—were considered.

### 4.1 Speakers, Addressees, and Interlocutors (Analysis 1)

The evaluation of speakers and addressees encompassed all 93 occurrences of idiomatic expressions within the dialogues and is summarized in Tables (1) to (3).

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<sup>16</sup> Heringer (2020) emphasizes the importance of anchor words and utilizes them to categorize idioms.

**Table 1.** Speaker<sup>17</sup>

Speaker		
Adult	24	26%
Child	69	74%
Total	93	100%

**Table 2.** Addressee

Addressee		
Adult	28	30%
Child	61	66%
Oneself	4	4%
Total	93	100%

**Table 3.** Interlocutors

Interlocutors		
Adult to adult(s)	16	17%
Adult to child(ren)	8	9%
Child to adult(s)	12	13%
Child to child(ren)	53	57%
Child to oneself	4	4%
Total	93	100%

Of the 93 idiomatic expressions identified throughout the dialogues, 69 (74%) are used by children, whereas only 24 (26%) are used by adults (see Table (1)). This provides clear evidence that idiomatic expressions predominantly serve to characterize children's feigned orality.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, since many idiomatic expressions are directed toward other children, they can be interpreted as sociolectal features associated with in-group interactions. Specifically, 57% of these expressions are addressed to children, while only 17% are used by adults addressing other adults (see Table (3)).

Qualitatively, it is noteworthy that nearly all idiomatic expressions within children's turns (64 out of 69) are uttered by four main characters: Emil, Pony, Gustav, and the so-called Professor. This supports Kästner's intention to

<sup>17</sup> The longer the shades of gray in the boxes representing the percentages in this (and subsequent) table(s), the higher the frequency.

<sup>18</sup> However, it should be noted that dialogues among children clearly predominate in the novel.

characterize these protagonists through a language marked by idiomatic expressions. As will be further discussed in Section (4.5), each character's idiomatic usage exhibits distinct features that contribute to their individual profiles.

#### 4.2 Idiomaticity, Markedness, and Categorization (Analysis 2)

This section presents the main findings of Analysis 2, which pertain to idiomaticity and markedness in relation to the dimensions of language variation, as well as the categorization within phraseme typologies.

Determining the degree of idiomaticity can be complex; sometimes it is preferable to distinguish simply between non-idiomatic phrasemes and those with varying degrees of idiomaticity. Following Burger (<sup>5</sup>2015, 33), I classified certain expressions as weakly idiomatic. For example:

(11) Sich aus der Affäre ziehen [‘to get out of a tight spot’]

(12) Tag und Nacht [‘night and day’]

In example (11), the metaphorical meaning hinges on spatial/movement concepts associated with *ziehen* (‘to pull’), which is pervasive in German but not exclusively phraseological;<sup>19</sup> thus, its idiomaticity is considered weak. In example (12), literal and figurative meanings can coincide depending on the context; in the novel's usage on page 95, ambiguity persists. Consequently, this expression was also classified as weakly idiomatic.

Quantitative data reveal that 83% of all examined expressions exhibit clear idiomaticity—divided evenly between total and partial idiomaticity:

**Table 4.** Degree of idiomaticity

Degree of idiomaticity		
Full	27	40%
Partial	29	43%
Weak	11	16%
Total	67	100%

Table (5) shows the results of checking the markedness as to the dimensions of language variation in Duden 11.

<sup>19</sup> For example, this is evident in studies on the so-called *Alltägliche Wissenschaftssprache* (‘daily scientific language’), cf. Ehlich (1999) and Heller (2012).

**Table 5.** Marked forms based on dimensions of language variation

Markings relating to linguistic variation		
Diachron: archaic	1	1%
Diaphasic: colloquial	48	67%
Diaphasic: colloquial after modification	5	7%
Diaphasic: colloquial and humorous	3	4%
Diaphasic: obscene	1	1%
Diastratic: military	1	1%
Diatopic: Berlin	1	1%
None	12	17%
Total	72	100%

The total refers to markings, not to idiomatic expressions.

In a few cases, one idiomatic expression is associated with more than one marking.

The analysis shows that 83% of these idiomatic expressions are marked for language variation dimensions. The most prominent dimension is the diaphasic one, with 67% of the idiomatic expressions classified as colloquial and an additional 5% as colloquial and humorous. For example:

(13) Aber mir hat doch wer, der einen großen Umhängebart trug und die Kinder *wie seine Westentasche kannte*, ausdrücklich erklärt, das gefiele ihnen nicht! (8) [**But** someone who wore a big beard and *knew* the children *like the back of his hand* expressly told me that they didn't like it!]<sup>20</sup>

This partially non-compositional comparative phraseme is marked as colloquial in Duden 11.

Furthermore, five idiomatic expressions are not inherently colloquial but become so after formal modifications—for instance example (14), which features a partially non-compositional communicative formula conveying encouragement:

(14) *Nur keine Bange*, junge Frau! (32) [**Have no fear**, young lady! (42)]

20 In this and all subsequent examples, the analyzed idiomatic expression is in bold. The translation of this example—unlike those of the subsequent ones—is my own, as the English version used to obtain the translations does not include the prologue from the original version from which this example is derived. The translations of the other examples are by W. Martin (official English translation of the novel, edition 2007). The page numbers in the original text and the translation are enclosed in brackets.

This expression abbreviates a longer phraseme (*jemandem wird/ist angst und bange*—‘someone becomes scared or frightened’). The shortening—a typical feature of spoken language—,<sup>21</sup> along with Emil playfully addressing his mother as *junge Frau*, emphasizes colloquial tone. His mother’s meta-linguistic reply further reinforces this effect: *und sei vor allem zu den anderen Leuten nicht so frech wie zu deiner Mutter* (‘And don’t be a smart-aleck with other people like you are with your mother!’, on the same pages).

The categorization results based on Burger’s classes are summarized in Table (6).

**Table 6.** Categorization of idiomatic expressions based on the classes proposed by Burger

Categorization of idiomatic expressions (classes by Burger)		
<i>Kommunikative Phraseme</i> (communicative phrasemes)	6	9%
<i>Modellbildungen</i> (schematic patterns)	6	9%
<i>Referentiell - nominativ - Teilidiome</i> (partial idioms)	32	48%
<i>Referentiell - nominativ - Vollidiome</i> (full idioms)	20	30%
<i>Referentiell - propositional - feste Phrasen</i> (fixed phrases)	3	4%
Total	67	100%

A striking observation concerns referential idiomatic expressions: There is a predominance of nominative types—particularly partial idioms—which account for 48% of all cases. Conversely, propositional idiomatic expressions are marginal—only about 4%, consisting solely of fixed phrases;<sup>22</sup> no topic formulas such as proverbs or commonplaces were identified. The remaining expressions are either communicative phrasemes or schematic patterns (*Phraseoschablonen*, following Schafroth’s terminology (2024)), both constituting about 9%.

Special classes such as somatisms, kinograms, and animalisms proved particularly relevant. Collectively, these three groups account for approximately 69% of all analyzed idiomatic expressions belonging to special classes (see Table (7)).

21 The Collins German Dictionary lists the idiomatic expression *nur keine Bange!* in its short form as being informally marked, meaning ‘don’t worry’ (<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/german-english/bange>, last accessed on July 19<sup>th</sup> 2025).

22 Qualitatively, only two instances involve non-idiomatic usage.

**Table 7.** Categorization of idiomatic expressions based on the special classes proposed by Burger and Fleischer

Categorization of idiomatic expressions (special classes by Burger and Fleischer)		
Animalisms	4	11%
Comparative phrasemes	6	17%
Form-meaning pairs	4	11%
Kinegrams	10	29%
Somatisms	10	29%
Twin formulas	1	3%
Total	35	100%

Examples include a colloquial idiom that is used as a communicative formula conveying fear and negative associations that also functions as a somatism (15), a colloquial partial idiom that also qualifies as a kinegram (16), an animalism being an idiom and serving as a communicative formula expressing surprise (17), and a colloquial, modified idiom functioning as a communicative formula conveying criticism that is also a kinegram (18).

(15) *Mir stehen die Haare zu Berge*, obwohl ja alles längst vorüber ist (127) [*It makes my hair stand on end*, even though it's all over now' (152)]

(16) Mein Enkel Emil *ist erst auf 'nen Sprung* beim Reichspräsidenten! (82) [*My grandson Emil went to pay a visit to the president!*' (100)]

(17) »[...] Das meiste Geld hat man, in seinem Anzugfutter eingenäht, wiedergefunden. Lauter Tausendmarkscheine.« »*Du kriegst die Motten*«, sagte Pony Hütchen (123). [«[...] Most of the money was subsequently found hidden in the lining of his jacket. All in thousand-mark bills.» “*Get outta here!*” said Pony the Hat (146)]

(18) »Na Mensch, *fall nur nicht gleich vom Stühlchen*«, sagte der Junge (63) [“*Hey man, settle down!*” said the boy (78)]

### 4.3 Communicative Functions (Analysis 3)

The examples above ((15), (17) and (18)) illustrate how special classes serve pragmatic functions within dialogue. Overall, 26 out of the 67 analyzed idiomatic expressions (39%) fulfill specific communicative purposes and are classified as communicative formulas in terms of their use in context, irrespective of their formal phraseological category. This high percentage underscores the vital role played by idiomatic expressions with pragmatic intent. The functions include criticism, warnings, requests/pleas/encouragements (e.g., example (14)), positive excitement or surprise. In (19), Petzold, one of the children, warns his friends not to be cheeky or loud before leaving the group. To express this, he uses a fully non-compositional communicative formula conveying warning:

(19) *Macht euch ja nicht mausig*, ihr Saukerle! Ich gehe sowieso (90). [*Don't be so arrogant*, you idiots. I'm going anyway' (110)].

Most cases involve stimulus formulas directed at the addressee (15 instances), followed by commentary formulas focused on the speaker (11 instances). Almost all of these expressions convey positive feelings; neither polite nor scolding formulas were observed.

#### 4.4 Modifications (Analysis 4)

Formal modifications occurred frequently—about 34% of cases—while semantic modifications were less common (18%). The percentages of the types of formal modifications are summarized in Table (8).

**Table 8.** Formal modifications of idiomatic expressions

Formally modified component		
Predicate	1	4%
Preposition	1	4%
Structure (reduction)	9	39%
Substantive	5	22%
Verb	7	30%
Total	23	100%

Typically, either nouns or verbs within the idiomatic expressions are modified. Example (20) features a partial idiom with noun modification:

(20) Aber wozu soll der Junge *die Ferien* hier *totschlagen*? (24) [But why should the boy *spend his vacation* here, boring himself to death? (32)]<sup>23</sup>

In its canonical form recorded in the Duden 11 Dictionary, the noun is *Zeit*: *die Zeit totschiagen* ('to kill time'). Here, *totschiagen* ('to kill') is used metaphorically with reference not to time in general, but to holiday time (*Ferien*—'holidays'). As observed in the word profile in DWDS (*Digitales Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache*) of *totschiagen* ('to strike dead'), this idiomatic expression allows for some variation, but the semantic field of time is predominant (*Zeit* and related compounds, but also, for example, *Langeweile*—'boredom'). The nouns (direct objects) in the collocation with the highest *logDice*<sup>24</sup> (>2) are, in order of frequen-

23 Choosing a collocation (that is, a non-idiomatic but rather an idiosyncratic phraseme, namely *to spend his vacations*) results in the English version losing the idiomaticity, creativity, and emotional intensity of the original German idiomatic expression. However, this loss is compensated by the subsequent explanatory addition *boring himself to death*, which reintroduces the concept of death.

24 *LogDice* is the natural logarithm of the *Dice* coefficient, a statistical measure used to evaluate and compare word associations or collocations within corpora. Higher *logDice* scores indicate stronger associations and are useful for identifying significant collocations.

cy: *Mücke* ('mosquito'), *Fliege* ('fly'), *Gendarm* ('gendarme')—these three admit a literal interpretation—*Langeweile* ('boredom'), *Rezensent* ('reviewer'), *Zeit* ('time'), *Lebenszeit* ('lifetime'), *Ratte* ('rat'), *Freizeit* ('free time'), *Wartezeit* ('waiting time'). When considering the absolute frequency, the value of *Zeit* is significantly higher than the others, as it confirms the importance of *Zeit* for the unmodified form of the idiomatic expression.

Example (21) involves modification of the verb in a partially idiomatic, colloquial and humorous expression conveying warning:

(21) Wenn wir den Bruder entwischen lassen, *nennen wir uns alle* von morgen ab *nur noch Moritz* (66) [If we let our friend over there get away, *we'll all be wearing permanent dunce caps* after tomorrow (83)]

*Jemandem Moritz lehren* ('to give/to teach someone a lesson') undergoes modification and the verb becomes *nennen* (*sich Moritz nennen*—'to call someone Moritz').<sup>25</sup> This change shifts both meaning and role constellation, by modifying the denoting and denoted entities (someone—another person à we—ourselves).

Structural reduction was common—39%—reflecting spoken language features, exemplified by (22):

(22) Mensch, das reinste Theater. *Zum Quietschen*. Also, hört zu! (91) [It's like in the movies, bud. *Totally wild*. Listen to this (111)]

This rapid incipit emphasizes the emotional involvement of Gustav, who is about to tell his peers about his hotel raid in search of the thief, through shortened forms typical in colloquial speech. The colloquial, partially idiomatic and schematic pattern, which is used as a communicative formula conveying positive excitement, is a shortened form of the usual phraseological construction [*es ist zum X*], i.e.: *zum Quietschen* ('it is squeaky').<sup>26</sup>

#### 4.5 Characterization of the Protagonists Through Idiomatic Expressions

A qualitative analysis focusing on four main characters—Emil, Pony, Gustav, and the so-called Professor, those who primarily employ idiomatic expressions—revealed differences in their use of modifications and markedness levels within their language profiles (Table (9)). These variations contribute to their individual characterization through distinctive linguistic patterns.

25 To fully understand the meaning of this idiomatic expression, it is important to note that, within the German-speaking cultural context, the proper name *Moritz* is associated with a childlike, naïve soul—likely referencing a character created by the German caricaturist and painter Oberländer (1845–1923). Cf. the entry in the DWDS (<https://www.dwds.de/wb/Moritz?o=moritz>) and in the Duden online Dictionary ([https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/Moritz\\_Naivling](https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/Moritz_Naivling)) (both last accessed on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2025).

26 Here, X represents a nominalized verb or verbal noun.

**Table 9.** Use of idiomatic expressions by the four main characters

	Emil	Pony	Gustav	Professor
Idiomatic expressions (total)	17	14	20	13
Marked in relation to the levels of linguistic variation	6	12	14	6
Modified	6	7	3	1

As shown in the table, all four characters frequently use idiomatic expressions; however, their usage patterns differ. Pony (the only girl in the novel) and Gustav employ significantly more colloquial or Berlin-marked idiomatic expressions, whereas Emil predominantly uses neutral expressions. The idiomatic expressions used by the Professor, the son of a judge, are also more neutral in terms of language variation than those of his friends. Emil enjoys playing with language and modifies about one-third of the idiomatic expressions he employs. Similarly, half of Pony's idiomatic expressions are modified; notably, Pony—the only girl in the novel—uniquely exhibits both high levels of language variation and modification simultaneously.

#### 4.6 Anchor Words and Strategies to Facilitate Comprehension (Analysis 5)

Seventy-five percent of the idiomatic expressions feature anchor words related to children's everyday experiences, serving as aids in phraseme acquisition for young readers. This deliberate use of anchor words is evidenced not only by the high percentage, but also by their diversity: 44 different anchor words were identified. Many refer to body parts—such as *Auge* ('eye'), *Buckel* ('hunchback'), *Haare* ('hair'), *Kopf* ('head'), *Mund* ('mouth'), *Nase* ('nose'), and *Schädel* ('skull'). Children are familiar with other words through their daily routines: *Berge* ('mountain'), *Geld* ('money'), *Hose* ('trousers'), *Jacke* ('jacket'), *Ohrfeige* ('slap'), *Sprung* ('jump'), *Stuhl* ('chair'), and *Tinte* ('ink').

Nearly half of the idiomatic expressions (40%) contain linguistic elements within their co-text that support decoding. As shown in Table (10), these strategies vary.

**Table 10.** Strategies for explicitly supporting phraseme acquisition

Strategy to support phraseme acquisition		
Accumulation	19	70%
Implicit explication	1	4%
Metalinguistic comment	2	7%
Vocabulary	5	19%
Total	27	100%

The primary strategy involves accumulating multiple idiomatic expressions within a single context—used in 70% of cases. In example (23), the colloquial partial idiom *etwas ausfressen* ('to do something wrong') appears alongside two other idiomatic expressions: *jemanden hoppnehmen* ('to catch someone') and *scharf auf jemanden sein* ('to be keen on someone'; 'to be hot for someone'). This clustering provides idiomatic support through contextual reinforcement.

(23) »Sag's doch dem Schupo dort. Der nimmt ihn hopp.« »Ich mag nicht. Ich habe bei uns in Neustadt was ausgefressen. Da sind sie nun vielleicht scharf auf mich [...]« (64) [“Tell the patrolman over there. He’ll bust him for sure.” “I’d rather not. I pulled some stuff back in New Town. They may have it in for me [...]” (79–80)]<sup>27</sup>

The interpretation is supported not only by the two idiomatic expressions mentioned, but also by a lexical choice—*Schupo* ('patrolman').<sup>28</sup> Idiomatic expressions with lexical cues that aid interpretation in the co-text accounted for 19% of the 67 idiomatic expressions analyzed, as illustrated in example (24), too. This passage features a partial idiom that is diatopically marked (regional: Berlin) and used as a communicative formula conveying an order:

(24) »Also, ich finde die Sache mit dem Dieb knorke. Ganz große Klasse, Ehrenwort! Und, Mensch, wenn du nischt dagegen hast, helfe ich dir.« »Da wär ich dir kolossal dankbar!« »Quatsch nicht, Krause! Das ist doch klar, daß ich hier mitmache. Ich heiße Gustav.« »Und ich Emil.« (64) [“Listen, this thing with the robber is cool. It’s awesome, actually! So unless you have a problem with it, I’d like to help out.” “Wow, that would be great of you!” “It’s no big deal. Of course I’m game. By the way, my name is Gus.” “And I’m Emil.” (80)]

The underlined words and expressions in example (24) possess characteristics that clearly facilitate correct interpretation: They are lexical exaggerations typical of teenage slang (e.g., *ganz große Klasse*—‘awesome,’ *Ehrenwort*—omitted in the official English translation, *kolossal*—‘great’), terms used by teenagers at that time (e.g., *knorke*—‘smashing’/‘swell,’ marked as dated slang in the Collins German Dictionary), colloquial synonyms (*mitmachen* for *teilnehmen*—‘to take part in’), or forms with regional connotations (<nischt> for <nicht>, which encodes Berlin pronunciation [nɪʃt] instead of the standard [nɪçt]). These linguistic devices create an appropriate setting for the scenes described—the first meeting and the beginning of a friendly alliance between the protagonist Emil and Gustav from Berlin.

27 In this and the following example, accompanying phenomena that support the acquisition of phrasemes—such as other idiomatic expressions or words with appropriate connotations—are underlined.

28 According to the Collins German Dictionary, *Schupo* (an abbreviation of *Schutzpolizist*) is a (archaic) colloquial term meaning ‘cop’ in English.

## 5. Conclusions

The primary aim of this study was to examine the use of idiomatic expressions within the feigned colloquial and, to some extent, jargon-like orality in *Emil und die Detektive* (Kästner, 1929/1935). Given Kästner's prominence as an author of children's and youth literature where idiomatic expressions, irony, colloquialisms, and teenage slang are particularly frequent, the analysis focused on all fully or partially idiomatic expressions present in the dialogues. The overarching goal was to address three research questions (RQs) and test related hypotheses:

- RQ1. What role do idiomatic expressions play in creating feigned, jargon-like colloquiality?

I hypothesized that idiomatic expressions closely related to the children's world—featuring anchor words from their everyday life, somatisms, kinesthetics, and animalisms—as well as metaphorical and other idiomatic expressions, including comparative idioms, would be particularly significant. To address this question, I analyzed all dialogues in the novel both quantitatively and qualitatively. The idiomatic expressions were classified according to the main and special classes of the usual typologies. Additionally, I annotated the degree of idiomaticity, any modifications, and marked features related to language variation dimensions.

- RQ2. How are these expressions characterized in terms of situation-, group-, or function-specific features?

This question aimed to determine whether idiomatic expressions were used more frequently by children and within in-group conversations. To achieve this, I annotated contextual information for each idiomatic expression, including the speaker, the addressee, and the correspondence between them. The analysis also incorporated data collected for RQ1 to provide a comprehensive characterization. Furthermore, examining the communicative functions of the idiomatic expressions offered insights into their situational and social roles.

- RQ3. How do the features of the idiomatic expressions identified in relation to RQ1 and RQ2 relate to strategies for facilitating phraseme acquisition among young readers?

For this purpose, I took into account the children's conceptual framework. I hypothesized that interactions exist between the features of these expressions and the strategies for aiding comprehension and acquisition (introduction, embedding or explanation of phrasemes, clustering patterns, modifications, and paraphrases). To explore this relationship, I annotated the strategies in the co-text.

The quantitative and qualitative analyses of all 93 idiomatic expressions within the dialogues (or the 67 listed in the Duden 11 Dictionary, depending on the analysis) yielded the following results:

- RQ1. The analysis revealed that idiomatic expressions significantly support the depiction of feigned orality and sociolectal elements within the novel. Their use imbues the text with dynamism and authenticity, closely mirroring everyday speech. While many expressions were modified—often playfully or ironically—they rarely approached jargon or teenage slang levels. Instead, they contributed to a colloquial tone that enhanced character depth without resorting to overt slang.
- RQ2. The quantitative data demonstrated that idiomatic expressions predominantly occur in peer-to-peer interactions, reinforcing group affiliation. They also serve as markers of sociolectal identity, especially among children. Notably, individual characters exhibited different degrees of language variation and modification (cf. also Richter-Vapaatalo, 2006, 262): Pony, the only girl in the novel, displays frequent use of marked and modified idioms—a possible sign of emancipation and linguistic independence that were not so self-evident at that time. Gustav’s idiomatic expressions also show high levels of markedness and modification. Emil, by contrast, mainly uses neutral forms but enjoys playful modifications—reflecting his lively personality. The Professor, being a judge’s son, employs more neutral idioms with fewer modifications. A common denominator was the pragmatic relevance of the analysed idiomatic expressions, indicated by the high percentage of communicative formulas.
- RQ3. Phraseme acquisition was eased by features of the idiomatic expressions. A significant percentage (75%) of the idiomatic expressions featured anchor words rooted in children’s daily experiences—such as body parts (*Auge, Nase*), common objects (*Stuhl, Jacke*), or familiar concepts (*Geld, Berge*). These anchor words serve as cognitive cues facilitating comprehension and acquisition. Furthermore, many expressions included lexical elements from colloquial or regional varieties (e.g., Berlin dialect), which provide contextual clues for interpretation. For example, regional slang (*kenorke, nischt*) and colloquial intensifiers help young readers understand the intended meaning. Additionally, co-textual accumulations and repetitions of idiomatic expressions eased understanding.

Such strategies align with Burger’s (1997, 237) concept of *schonend-vermittelter Gebrauch* (“gently mediating use”). However, as the use of idiomatic expressions in the dialogues is particularly playful and tongue-in-cheek (*spielerisch-“augenzwinkernd”*, Burger 1997, 240), even adult readers enjoy the formulations. Of course, these are merely initial insights that warrant further investigation.

Addressing this research question in detail would require a more comprehensive theoretical framework and a dedicated article.

This study represents an initial exploration. Future investigations could examine cross-cultural and linguistic variations, longitudinal development of phraseme comprehension in children, or experimental approaches to assess how such texts influence language acquisition.

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