

THE SYMBOLIC ROLE OF THE COLOURS “GOLD” AND “SILVER” IN ENGLISH PROVERBS

Sherdjanova Sevara Qahramanovna

English teacher at Ranch University of Technology

e-mail: seva.1988.03.10@gmail.com

Abstract: Proverbs serve as a vital component of language and culture, encapsulating collective wisdom, societal norms, and values in succinct and memorable expressions. Among the symbolic elements in proverbs, colors hold a unique place, often conveying profound meanings. This study focuses on the symbolic role of the colors “gold” and “silver” in English proverbs, analyzing their cultural significance and the messages they embody.

Keywords: English proverbs, gold symbolism, languages, silver symbolism, cultural significance, values, language, wealth, wisdom, moral virtues

Proverbs are an integral part of language and culture, encapsulating wisdom, values, and societal norms in concise, memorable phrases. Among the many symbolic elements in proverbs, colors play a significant role in conveying deeper meanings. Gold and silver, as colors and materials, are particularly prominent in English proverbs, often symbolizing wealth, value, purity, and wisdom. This study aims to explore the symbolic role of gold and silver in English proverbs, analyzing their cultural significance and the underlying messages they convey. By examining these symbols, we can better understand how language reflects societal values and beliefs.

The symbolic meanings of gold and silver have been extensively studied in linguistic, cultural contexts. Gold is often associated with divinity, wealth, and rarity, while silver symbolizes grace, refinement, and secondary value. In English literature, gold represents purity and divine authority, while silver is linked to redemption and monetary value. Proverbs such as “Speech is silver, silence is golden” highlight the comparative value of these metals, emphasizing the superiority of silence over speech in certain situations. Similarly, “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver” uses these colors to symbolize the beauty and value of timely and wise communication.

In English proverbs, gold often signifies the ultimate standard of excellence, as seen in phrases like “*Worth its weight in gold*,” while silver represents something valuable but less prestigious. The relative symbolism of these colors reflects societal hierarchies and the human tendency to rank values. Studies also suggest that the use of gold and silver in proverbs is influenced by their historical roles as precious metals, widely sought after for their beauty and utility.

Some great scholars have collectively enriched our understanding of how gold and silver function as symbols of value, wisdom, and morality in English proverbs and historical contexts. Florin Curta, Ph.D. Professor of Medieval History and Archaeology at the University of Florida, his research includes the historical significance of gold and silver in coinage and cultural symbolism. T. Kigel, conducted a contrastive analysis of English, Russian, and Hebrew idioms involving gold and silver metaphors. His work highlights the cultural and linguistic differences

in the use of these colors across languages. Shira Brisman, Historian of early modern art at the University of Pennsylvania, her research investigates the boundaries between societal patterns and symbolism, including the use of gold and silver in art and literature. Explored the dominance of gold as a cultural symbol for objects of great value, particularly in historical contexts. I. Kalita, studied comparative phraseology and the use of color metaphors in Russian, Belarusian, Ukrainian, and Czech linguistic traditions, including gold and silver idioms. K. Sokolova, focused on the structural and semantic features of phraseological units with color components in Western Romance languages, including gold and silver metaphors. Ben Ami, analyzed metaphors in the Torah, including the symbolic use of gold, silver, and copper, which influenced English biblical proverbs. Berlin B. and Kay P., co-authors of *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution*. Their work includes the cultural and linguistic implications of color naming, including gold and silver. David Allan, researched the connotations of English color terms, including gold and silver, and their metaphorical applications in language. Santob de Carrion (Shem Tob ben Isaac Arduziel), a 14th-century Spanish writer and translator of Arabic texts. His work contributed to the integration of gold and silver metaphors into Western culture.

Methodology. This study employs a qualitative approach, analyzing a corpus of English proverbs containing references to gold and silver. The proverbs were collected from linguistic databases and cultural studies. Each proverb was examined for its symbolic use of gold and silver, focusing on the context, cultural implications, and comparative meanings. The analysis was guided by Ricoeurian hermeneutics, which emphasizes the interpretive contribution of poetic and metaphorical texts.

The proverbs were categorized based on their thematic focus, such as wisdom, value, morality, and communication. Comparative analysis was conducted to identify patterns in the symbolic use of gold and silver, highlighting their cultural and linguistic significance.

Results. The analysis revealed several recurring themes in the symbolic use of gold and silver in English proverbs:

Value and Excellence: Gold is consistently used to denote the highest standard of value, as in “*Worth its weight in gold.*” Silver, while valuable, is often portrayed as secondary, as in “*Speech is silver, silence is golden.*”

Wisdom and Communication: Proverbs like “*A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver.*” emphasize the importance of thoughtful and timely speech, using gold and silver to symbolize beauty and harmony.

Morality and Refinement: Gold and silver are used metaphorically to represent moral purity and refinement, as seen in “*The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but the Lord tests the heart.*”

Cultural Hierarchies: “*Every silver lining has a cloud around it.*” the comparative symbolism of gold and silver reflects societal hierarchies, with gold representing ultimate prestige and silver denoting grace and utility.

Discussion. The findings highlight the deep cultural and linguistic significance of gold and silver in English proverbs. Gold's association with divinity, rarity, and ultimate value aligns with its historical role as a symbol of wealth and power. Silver, while also valuable, is often portrayed as graceful and functional, reflecting its widespread use in monetary systems and craftsmanship.

The comparative use of gold and silver in proverbs underscores societal values and priorities. For instance, the proverb *“Speech is silver, silence is golden”* suggests that silence, though less common, is more valuable than speech, reflecting cultural attitudes toward communication and restraint. Similarly, the metaphor of *“Apples of gold in settings of silver”* illustrates the harmony and intentionality required for effective communication.

These proverbs also reveal the interplay between material and moral values. Gold and silver are not only symbols of physical wealth but also metaphors for wisdom, purity, and refinement. This dual symbolism reflects the human tendency to equate material and moral excellence, using tangible objects to convey abstract concepts.

Gold and silver play a significant symbolic role in English proverbs, representing values such as excellence, wisdom, morality, and refinement. Their use reflects cultural hierarchies and societal priorities, with gold often symbolizing ultimate value and silver denoting grace and utility. By examining these symbols, we gain insight into the cultural and linguistic significance of proverbs and their ability to encapsulate complex ideas in simple, memorable phrases.

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