

## Proverbs As Linguistic Units Preserving the Value of Words

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<https://doi.org/10.69760/aghel.026001013>

Keywords	Abstract
Proverb Word speech culture linguistic worldview communicative ethics	Proverbs represent condensed expressions of collective wisdom that embody the ethical, cultural, and communicative values of a society. Among their thematic classifications, proverbs concerning the value of words occupy a distinctive position within the moral philosophy of speech communities. These proverbs articulate cultural perceptions of language, silence, and verbal responsibility, reflecting an understanding of speech as both a cognitive instrument and a moral force. The present study examines the linguistic, semantic, stylistic, pragmatic, and cognitive features of proverbs that emphasize the value of words. Drawing on cross-linguistic examples, the research demonstrates that across cultures, words are perceived as indicators of intellectual capacity, reflections of moral integrity, and powerful agents capable of creation, healing, or destruction. Proverbs addressing speech behavior, communicative ethics, and the social consequences of language form a significant layer of intangible cultural heritage. The findings suggest that such proverbs reveal a universal awareness of language as a transformative social force and highlight the enduring relevance of verbal responsibility in human interaction.

### Introduction

Language constitutes one of the defining characteristics of human existence. Through words, individuals articulate thoughts, convey emotions, construct social relationships, and transmit cultural values. The responsible and skillful use of language has historically been regarded as an indicator of intellectual refinement and moral maturity. Within this framework, proverbs that emphasize the value of words function as ethical guides, transmitting communicative norms and cultural expectations across generations.

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Proverbs are concise, metaphorical expressions of collective experience and represent a significant component of both linguistic structure and cultural memory. As stable phraseological units, they encode social norms, moral principles, and philosophical reflections in compact and memorable forms. Among the wide range of thematic categories, proverbs concerning “the word” occupy a particularly meaningful position. These proverbs address speech etiquette, communicative behavior, silence, truthfulness, and the ethical consequences of verbal expression.

In proverbial discourse, the “word” is not merely a linguistic sign; it is conceptualized as an action with social and moral implications. The symbolic status of the word reflects the recognition of language as a force capable of shaping interpersonal relationships and social harmony. As Malikova (2016) notes, proverbs frequently portray words as instruments of influence, capable of both constructive and destructive impact.

For example, traditional sayings such as “A sword wound heals, but a word wound does not” (Proverbs about the word, n.d.) illustrate the enduring belief that verbal harm may surpass physical injury in its long-term consequences. Similarly, expressions like “Words are the adornment of life” emphasize the aesthetic and ethical dimension of speech, while “Words are the hand that strikes” (Malikova, 2016, p. 25) metaphorically equates language with action and responsibility.

These examples demonstrate that words function not only as tools of communication but also as carriers of emotional weight and moral accountability. The wise and measured use of language is thus presented as foundational to social cohesion and ethical conduct.

This study aims to analyze the cultural, ethical, cognitive, and communicative dimensions of proverbs that preserve and transmit the value of words. By examining their lexical, semantic, syntactic, stylistic, and pragmatic characteristics, the research seeks to demonstrate how the concept of the “word” operates simultaneously as a linguistic category and as an ethical construct within diverse cultural traditions.

## Materials and Methods

### Corpus and Data Sources

The primary materials of this study are drawn from the corpus of Azerbaijani proverbs and sayings, supplemented by comparative examples from other linguistic traditions. The collected paremiological units were selected based on their thematic relevance to the concept of “word,” including proverbs addressing speech, silence, truthfulness, communicative responsibility, and moral expression. Sources include published collections of proverbs, linguistic research, and scholarly works in phraseology and paremiology.



## Methodological Framework

The research applies a combination of descriptive-linguistic analysis, comparative analysis, and cognitive-functional approaches. The descriptive method enables the identification of structural and semantic characteristics of proverbs as stable linguistic units. Comparative analysis allows for the examination of similarities and differences across languages and cultures, highlighting the universality of the concept of the “word” as a moral and communicative phenomenon.

Formative, structural, and semantic-oriented analytical methods are employed to investigate the internal organization of proverbs. Particular attention is given to their lexical composition, syntactic structure, metaphorical mechanisms, pragmatic functions, and cognitive models. This methodological integration provides a comprehensive examination of proverbs as linguistic units that simultaneously function as cultural, ethical, and communicative constructs.

## Relevance

Proverbs and sayings represent some of the oldest and most effective linguistic means reflecting the moral, ethical, and aesthetic values of a community. Their study remains highly relevant in contemporary linguistics, cultural studies, and education, as proverbs serve not only as repositories of linguistic structure but also as vehicles of collective cultural memory.

In modern scholarship, increasing attention is devoted to the semantic and functional properties of words as linguistic units. Within this context, proverbs provide invaluable material for understanding how societies conceptualize language, speech, and communicative responsibility. The investigation of proverbs about words is therefore significant for the preservation of linguistic heritage and the strengthening of national and cultural identity. Moreover, such research contributes to intercultural communication studies by demonstrating the shared moral foundations embedded in language traditions worldwide.

## Scientific Significance

The present study contributes several novel perspectives to the field of linguistics and paremiology:

- It identifies and analyzes the functional characteristics of proverbs as structured linguistic units.
- It reveals both the denotative and connotative layers of meaning encoded within the concept of the “word.”
- It demonstrates how proverbs serve as instruments for preserving folk culture and reinforcing national identity.



- It establishes a theoretical basis for integrating paremiological material into educational and pedagogical practice.

Accordingly, the study holds scientific value both in theoretical linguistic research and in the practical application of proverbs within moral and educational contexts.

## Discussion

### Historical and Theoretical Foundations of Proverbs

The precise historical origin of proverbs remains unknown. The earliest recorded proverbs are believed to have appeared around 2000 BCE in ancient Sumer, Mesopotamia. Remarkably, proverbs with nearly identical structures and meanings occur across diverse regions of the world. Proverbs widespread among Turkic peoples also appear in English, Italian, Japanese, Korean, and numerous other languages. As noted by Qurbanova (2024), Francis Bacon once observed that the genius and spirit of a people are reflected in their proverbs (p. 782).

Although the exact origin, authorship, and date of specific proverbs are uncertain, each proverb emerges from a concrete historical and social context. As Jafarov (2007) emphasizes, proverbs arise from lived experiences and, over time, become increasingly abstract and generalized, sometimes losing their original contextual associations (p. 117). Their initial place of emergence may be unclear; however, their connection to particular linguistic and ethnic communities remains evident.

Bayramov (1978) distinguishes proverbs from other wise expressions by noting that, despite the anonymity of their authorship and origin, they continue to function actively in modern language, enriching it with vividness and expressiveness. He characterizes proverbs as predicative word combinations whose origin is unknown (p. 35).

In English-language scholarship, proverbs are frequently examined within phraseology. Amosova (1963) classifies them as “predicative structured phraseological units” (p. 135), while Kunin (1970) refers to them as “predicative phraseologisms” and includes them under the broader category of “communicative phraseological units” (pp. 29). Despite terminological differences, scholars consistently emphasize the semantic density and cultural depth of proverbs.

According to Pashayev (2016), various cultures have attributed distinctive metaphorical names to proverbs: Russians call them “instructive words” or “golden words,” Greeks and Romans describe them as “maxims of wisdom,” Italians refer to them as “the school of the people,” Spaniards as “the nature of the soul,” and the English and French as “the fruit of experience.” These characterizations underscore the universal recognition of proverbs as condensed repositories of collective experience.



Rzasoy (2013) argues that proverbs constitute an indispensable component of any ethnocosmic thinking system, and it is impossible to imagine a society's cultural landscape without them (p. 3). Similarly, Ibrahimova (2024) notes that paremiological units reflect the stereotypes of national consciousness and characterize national culture (p. 29).

Adilov and Yusifov (2019) maintain that the inclusion of proverbs within phraseology is justified by their metaphorical and figurative nature (p. 40). Qadirova and Pirmammadova (2023) further describe proverbs as mirrors of the life of a people, encapsulating the formation and development of a nation's identity (p. 156).

### **Proverbs About Words as Ethical and Communicative Codes**

Across cultures, proverbs concerning words, speech, language, silence, truth, and oratory occupy a distinctive position. They function as linguistic mirrors of ethical conduct and social responsibility, guiding individuals on how to speak, when to remain silent, and how to consider the consequences of speech.

Examples from different linguistic traditions demonstrate the universality of this awareness:

- English: *A word is enough to the wise.*
- Azerbaijani: *Söz var yaralar, söz var sağaldar.*
- Russian: *Слово не воробей, вылетит — не поймаешь.*

These examples confirm that, regardless of linguistic or geographic differences, societies recognize the moral weight of speech. Proverbs about words therefore represent not merely linguistic expressions but philosophical reflections on human responsibility.

The concept of the word holds sacred and ethical value in many cultures. Azerbaijani proverbs vividly illustrate the constructive and destructive potential of speech:

- *Söz var xəstəni sağaldar, söz var adamı yaralar.*
- *Söz var iş bitirər, söz var baş itirər.*
- *Söz var ki, kəsdirir başı, söz var ki, kəsər savaşı* (Proverbs, 2013, p. 366).

These expressions emphasize that words may heal, resolve conflict, or bring destruction. Similarly, proverbs such as:

- *Söz qılınçdan kəsərlidir*
- *Söz həyatın bəzəyidir*
- *Söz insanın vuran əlidir* (Malikova, 2016, p. 25)



highlight the metaphorical power attributed to speech.

Moral education is strongly connected with linguistic behavior. Proverbs instruct individuals to think before speaking:

- *Sözü ağzında bişir, sonra çıxart.*
- *Sözün yaxşısı baldan şirin olar* (Malikova, 2016, p. 25).

Such expressions link ethical maturity with communicative responsibility. In educational contexts, they serve as tools for developing intercultural competence and moral awareness.

Other proverbs emphasize the broad social impact of words:

- *Güllə bir nəfəri, söz on nəfəri öldürər* (Malikova, 2016, p. 39).
- *Söz sözü çəkər* (Malikova, 2016, p. 158).

These illustrate the chain reaction and far-reaching consequences of speech.

Truthfulness occupies a particularly significant place in paremiological discourse:

- *Doğru söz acı olar* (Malikova, 2016, p. 158).
- *Doğru söz kin duruldar.*
- *Düz söz daşdan keçər* (Proverbs, 2004, pp. 92–97).

In these examples, the “truthful word” becomes synonymous with conscience, justice, and ethical integrity.

## Conclusion

Proverbs that emphasize the value of words constitute a profound moral, linguistic, and cultural heritage shared across civilizations. As stable paremiological units, they encapsulate centuries of collective experience and preserve the ethical principles governing human communication. The analysis conducted in this study demonstrates that proverbs about words function not merely as figurative linguistic expressions but as moral frameworks that regulate social interaction and communicative behavior.

The findings confirm that proverbs consistently affirm several fundamental principles:

- Words possess moral, emotional, and social power.
- Honest, kind, and measured speech enhances human dignity and reinforces social harmony.



- Thoughtful silence may, in certain contexts, be as meaningful and valuable as verbal expression.
- Words hold transformative capacity—they can unite or divide, heal or wound, construct or destroy—depending on intention and usage.

Across linguistic traditions, the concept of the “word” is not treated as a neutral linguistic sign but as an ethical instrument deeply embedded in cultural consciousness. Proverbs encode the understanding that speech reflects not only intellect but also character. The responsible use of language is therefore presented as a defining attribute of moral maturity.

From a linguistic perspective, proverbs about words reveal the interaction between lexical meaning and cultural symbolism, demonstrating how denotative structures acquire rich connotative and pragmatic dimensions. From a cognitive standpoint, they reflect universal conceptual metaphors that equate words with physical force, healing, weaponry, or creative energy. From a pedagogical perspective, they serve as effective tools for moral education and communicative training.

Ultimately, proverbs remind us that language is not merely a system of signs but a living ethical force. To value words is to value human dignity, cultural continuity, and social responsibility. Respect for language thus becomes synonymous with respect for humanity itself.

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Received: 01.20.2025

Revised: 02.02.2025

Accepted: 02.12.2026

Published: 02.17.2026



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**Acta Globalis Humanitatis et Linguarum**  
ISSN 3030-1718