



Deconstructing Duality: A Semiotic Analysis of Denotative and Connotative Meanings in Common English Proverbs

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the denotative and connotative meanings embedded in common English proverbs through a semiotic perspective. Utilizing a descriptive qualitative approach with a library research design, the data were collected from various credible sources, including scholarly journals, proverb dictionaries, and relevant reference books. The analysis is grounded in Roland Barthes' two-tiered model of signification, which differentiates between denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (implied or symbolic meaning). The findings demonstrate that English proverbs are not merely linguistic expressions, but also cultural artifacts that convey deeply rooted moral, social, and philosophical values. Through semiotic analysis, these layered meanings can be uncovered, revealing how proverbs function as representations of collective cultural consciousness. This research thus affirms that proverbs serve as both communicative tools and vessels of cultural identity.

Keywords: *English Proverb; Semiotic Analysis; Cultural Meaning*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis makna denotatif dan konotatif yang terkandung dalam peribahasa umum dalam bahasa Inggris melalui perspektif semiotika. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan desain penelitian kepustakaan, data dikumpulkan dari berbagai sumber yang kredibel, termasuk jurnal ilmiah, kamus peribahasa, dan buku-buku referensi yang relevan. Analisis didasarkan pada model signifikasi dua tahap Roland Barthes, yang membedakan antara denotasi (makna harfiah) dan konotasi (makna tersirat atau simbolis). Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa peribahasa Inggris bukan hanya ekspresi linguistik, tetapi juga artefak budaya yang menyampaikan nilai-nilai moral, sosial, dan filosofis yang mengakar kuat. Melalui analisis semiotik, makna berlapis ini dapat diungkap, mengungkapkan bagaimana peribahasa berfungsi sebagai representasi kesadaran budaya kolektif. Dengan demikian, penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa peribahasa berfungsi sebagai alat komunikatif dan wadah identitas budaya.

Kata Kunci: *Peribahasa Inggris; Analisis Semiotika; Makna Budaya*

INTRODUCTION

Language is a dynamic and multifaceted system of signs that functions not only as a medium for communication but also as a mirror of the culture, values, and worldview of its speakers. In everyday social interactions, language goes beyond its literal usage; it often conveys layered meanings that are symbolic and deeply embedded in the socio-cultural context. As emphasized by Chaer (2010), language cannot be separated from its social and cultural environment, as it is shaped by, and simultaneously shapes, the collective experiences of a community. This dynamic nature of language becomes particularly evident in the use of proverbs—fixed expressions that distill generations of cultural wisdom into concise, metaphorical language. Proverbs are employed to convey moral messages, advice, warnings, and social observations, making them an integral part of both linguistic practice and cultural transmission.

Proverbs, by nature, are semantically rich and figurative, often posing interpretive challenges for learners, especially in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Unlike ordinary lexical items, proverbs require more than just literal comprehension; they demand cultural familiarity and contextual understanding. Many English proverbs contain connotative meanings that are not immediately apparent through surface-level analysis. For example, the proverb *“Don’t count your chickens before they hatch”* may confuse learners unfamiliar with its idiomatic usage, as its actual meaning—a caution against premature assumptions—does not align with the literal imagery of chickens and eggs. Leech (1974) provides a useful framework for understanding such expressions by distinguishing between denotative meaning, which is the objective and dictionary-based definition of a word or phrase, and connotative meaning, which is shaped by cultural, emotional, and ideological factors.

The interpretive gap between literal and intended meaning becomes a central problem in analyzing proverbs. Literal translations or lexical breakdowns often fail to uncover the deeper symbolic functions of proverbs, leading to misinterpretation or superficial understanding. The richness of proverbs lies in their ability to convey complex cultural and moral ideas through metaphorical language, which requires more than traditional semantic analysis. To address this complexity, a broader analytical lens is needed—one that situates language within a system of signs and recognizes that meaning is both constructed and negotiated within specific cultural contexts. Semiotics offers a powerful framework in this regard, particularly through the work of Roland Barthes, who extended Saussure’s theory of signs by introducing a second level of signification. In Barthes’ model (1977), denotation refers to the literal or surface meaning, while connotation encompasses the symbolic, ideological, and cultural meanings associated with a sign.

Barthes' semiotic theory enables a deeper understanding of how proverbs function within language and society. Under this model, a proverb is not merely a sentence with figurative language, but a sign that operates on multiple interpretive levels. For instance, the proverb "*Still water runs deep*" literally describes a calm body of water but connotatively suggests that quiet individuals may possess hidden depth, intelligence, or emotional complexity. This multi-layered interpretation would not be apparent without awareness of the symbolic associations carried by the words within specific cultural contexts. Through a semiotic lens, proverbs can be seen as culturally embedded texts that reveal how language encodes not only linguistic relationships but also values, ideologies, and social norms. As Barthes argues, signs are never neutral—they carry the weight of the culture from which they emerge.

Based on this theoretical foundation, the present study seeks to examine the denotative and connotative meanings of selected English proverbs using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework. The research adopts a descriptive qualitative method grounded in library research, with data collected from authoritative sources such as proverb dictionaries, linguistic references, and academic journals. The objective is to reveal how English proverbs operate as dual-layered signs—on one level communicating literal meanings, and on another encoding moral and cultural values. By decoding these meanings through a semiotic approach, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how language reflects and shapes cultural consciousness, particularly through the rich, metaphorical medium of proverbs.

METHOD

This study uses *the library research* method as the main approach to analyze the denotative and connotative meanings in English proverbs through the perspective of Roland Barthes' semiotics. This approach was chosen because the object of study is in the form of language texts (in this case proverbs) that do not require the collection of field data, but a critical study of written sources. Data was collected from various relevant literature such as English proverbial dictionaries, linguistics and semiotics books, and scientific articles from academic journals that review the study of meaning, signs, and figurative language. Each source is analyzed by considering the cultural context behind the use of proverbs as well as the language structure that forms it.

The analysis was carried out using a two-level semiotic approach developed by Roland Barthes, namely through the reading of meaning denotatively (literal meaning) and connotative (symbolic or ideological meaning). This research is descriptive analytical, where the researcher not only presents the data found in the literature, but also interprets the

relationship between language structure and cultural meaning hidden behind proverbial expression. The analysis process is carried out in stages: identification of proverbs, elaboration of their literal meaning, then rereading symbolic meanings based on cultural assumptions and social values inherent in the proverb. Through this method, the research seeks to uncover how proverbs not only convey linguistic messages, but also represent the system of meaning and collective consciousness of the speaking community.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Proverbs as Cultural Representation

Proverbs are an integral part of language systems that function not only as rhetorical tools but also as reflections of the cultural, moral, and social values of a speech community. In general, proverbs are understood as fixed expressions that convey advice, warnings, or life philosophies in metaphorical form. Mieder (2004) defines a proverb as “a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorable form.” Within this perspective, proverbs serve not only to communicate explicit messages but also to reinforce traditional values and collective experience. In linguistic and cultural studies, proverbs are often examined as utterances that mirror the cognitive structures and value systems of a particular society. Keraf (1984) describes proverbs as the most condensed and expressive form of language used to convey social ideas and life philosophies. Because of their idiomatic and metaphorical nature, understanding proverbs requires adequate pragmatic and cultural knowledge on the part of readers or listeners. For this reason, proverbs also pose a significant challenge in foreign language learning, including the study of English as a second or foreign language.

Structurally, proverbs may be classified into several types, such as aphorisms, maxims, similes, and idiomatic expressions. Each form possesses distinct characteristics, yet all proverbs generally convey indirect, figurative meanings embedded with normative values. In this context, proverbs are not merely linguistic artifacts but also cultural texts that represent a community's worldview and way of life.

Denotative and Connotative Meanings in Semantic Studies

Semantics is a branch of linguistics concerned with the study of meaning in language, whether at the level of words, phrases, or sentences. Semantic analysis encompasses not only literal definitions found in dictionaries but also contextual meanings shaped by social, cultural, and psychological factors. Leech (1974) distinguishes between denotative meaning and connotative meaning as two primary categories in linguistic communication. Denotative meaning refers to the basic or dictionary definition of a word or expression. This meaning is explicit, stable, and

independent of social or emotional context. For example, the word *sun* denotes “a celestial body that emits light and heat.” However, this meaning may shift when the word appears in certain expressions—such as *you are my sunshine*—where *sunshine* takes on connotative meanings associated with love, warmth, or happiness. Connotative meaning, in contrast, refers to the additional semantic value that a word carries based on cultural experience, emotion, ideology, or community-specific values. According to Leech, connotation is “the communicative value an expression has by virtue of what it refers to, over and above its purely conceptual content.” Connotation is subjective and fluid, influenced by the social and cultural backgrounds of language users.

Chaer (2009) adds that connotation reflects the speaker’s evaluative attitude toward something. In practice, two words that denote the same object can convey different emotional tones. For instance, the words *thin*, *slim*, and *scrawny* all refer to a non-overweight body, but each carries a different connotation—positive, neutral, and negative, respectively. Therefore, understanding the distinction between denotation and connotation is crucial when interpreting

Semiotic Approach to Meaning in Language

Semiotics is the discipline that studies signs and the processes by which signs generate meaning. In the field of linguistics, semiotic analysis is employed to examine how meaning is constructed through the process of signification and how such meaning is interpreted by language users. Ferdinand de Saussure views a sign as composed of two interrelated elements: the *signifier* (the form of the sign) and the *signified* (the concept it represents). In this model, meaning does not arise from a direct relationship between words and objects, but rather from the structural relationships within the language system. Charles Sanders Peirce offers a more complex semiotic model through his triadic framework of representamen, object, and interpretant. He posits that meaning is not static but emerges dynamically through the process of interpretation, involving the interaction between the sign, its referent, and the subjective understanding of the interpreter.

Roland Barthes (1977) expanded the understanding of sign systems by introducing the concept of two orders of signification. The first level is denotation, or the literal meaning of a sign, while the second is connotation, which refers to symbolic meaning constructed through cultural, ideological, and associative frameworks. Barthes emphasized that connotation is not only linguistic but also ideological; it both constructs and reflects systems of power within society. In this regard, every sign inherently carries cultural and ideological values that reinforce dominant worldviews. Barthes’s framework is particularly relevant for analyzing proverbs, as these linguistic forms encapsulate both literal and symbolic meanings. For example, the

proverb “*A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush*” has a denotative meaning referring to a hunting situation, yet its connotative meaning conveys values such as caution and appreciation for what one already possesses. Understanding how connotative meaning is shaped through sign systems reveals that proverbs are not merely conveyors of moral advice but also reflections of cultural norms and value structures.

Through a semiotic approach, the analysis of meaning in proverbs becomes more nuanced and multidimensional. This perspective enables scholars to uncover the interconnectedness between language, meaning, and culture. In this way, proverbs function not only as linguistic expressions but also as cultural texts that embody collective experiences and worldviews of the communities that use them.

Tabel 1. Semiotic Interpretation of Denotative and Connotative Meanings in Common English Proverbs

Proverb (Indonesian Translation)	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning	Semiotic Interpretation
Still water runs deep. (<i>Air tenang menghanyutkan</i>)	Water that is still is often deep in depth.	Quiet or calm people may hide deep thoughts, emotions, or intelligence.	“Still water” signifies external calmness; “deep” symbolizes hidden depth—intellect, emotion, or power—suggesting that silence may conceal substance.
Practice makes perfect. (<i>Allah bisa karena biasa</i>)	Repeated practice leads to improved ability.	Consistent effort leads to mastery.	“Practice” signifies persistence and repetition; “perfect” symbolizes an idealized outcome, framing success as the result of disciplined effort.
No pain, no gain. (<i>Berakit-rakit ke hulu, berenang-renang ketepian. Bersakit-sakit dahulu, bersenang-senang kemudian</i>)	Without experiencing pain, one cannot achieve gains.	Enduring hardship is necessary for success.	“Pain” represents effort or sacrifice; “gain” is a sign of reward or success, reflecting a cultural emphasis on perseverance and the moral value of striving.
Where there's a	Strong desire	Inner	“Will” symbolizes

will, there's a way. (<i>Di mana ada kemauan, di situ ada jalan</i>)	leads to finding a path.	determination can overcome obstacles.	personal drive or determination; "way" symbolizes solution or opportunity, forming a semiotic link between human agency and achievement.
Give them an inch, and they'll take a mile. (<i>Diberi hati minta jantung</i>)	If you give someone a little, they may take much more.	People may exploit generosity or kindness.	"Inch" and "mile" are signs of scope or boundaries; their contrast symbolizes exploitation, emphasizing the imbalance between intention and outcome.
When in Rome, do as the Romans do. (<i>Dimana bumi dipijak di situ langit dijunjung</i>)	Adapt to local customs.	Adapt yourself to the local culture or behavior.	"Rome" symbolizes a foreign or unfamiliar cultural context; "do as the Romans do" signifies the importance of social conformity and adaptability in diverse environments.
A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush/ (<i>Lebih baik satu di tangan daripada dua di pohon</i>)	One bird you hold is better than two you're trying to catch.	Appreciate what you already have rather than chasing uncertain gains.	"Bird in the hand" symbolizes security and certainty; "two in the bush" represents risk and desire. The proverb encodes the value of prudence over ambition.
Look before you leap (<i>Pikir dahulu pendapat, sesal kemudian tiada berguna</i>)	Observe carefully before you jump.	Think carefully before making a risky decision.	"Look" represents awareness and foresight; "leap" is a metaphor for taking action. The proverb semiotically promotes cautious and informed

Diligence is the mother of success (<i>Rajin pangkal pandai</i>)	Diligence gives birth to success.	Consistent effort is the foundation of achievement.	decision-making. "Mother" functions as a metaphor for the origin or source; "diligence" is the signifier of perseverance, while "success" is the conceptual offspring, symbolizing outcomes born from hard work.
A good marksman may miss (<i>Sepandai-pandai tupai meloncat, akhirnya jatuh juga</i>)	Even a skilled shooter can miss the target.	Even experts can make mistakes.	"Marksman" signifies skill; "miss" deconstructs the myth of infallibility, expressing human vulnerability.
Rub salt into the wound (<i>Sudah jatuh, tertimpa tangga pula</i>)	Applying salt to an open wound.	Making a bad situation worse by adding to someone's suffering.	"Salt" symbolizes emotional pain or cruelty; "wound" represents existing emotional hurt. Together, they encode deliberate insensitivity or aggravation of distress.
Kill two birds with one stone (<i>Sekali mendayung, dua tiga pulau terlampaui</i>)	To kill two birds using a single stone.	Achieve two goals with one action.	"Birds" symbolize separate targets or goals; the "stone" represents efficiency or strategy. The proverb encodes a symbolic narrative of maximizing outcomes through clever or strategic action.
Empty vessels make the most noise (<i>Tong kosong nyaring bunyinya</i>)	Empty containers make the loudest sounds.	Those with the least knowledge often speak the loudest.	"Empty vessel" signifies ignorance or superficiality; "noise" symbolizes arrogance or baseless opinions.

It's no use crying over spilled milk (<i>Nasi sudah menjadi bubur</i>)	Crying can't undo spilled milk.	Regretting the past is pointless.	The proverb critiques false confidence. "Spilled milk" symbolizes irreversible mistakes or losses; the phrase encodes emotional resilience and the importance of moving forward.
The grass is always greener on the other side (<i>Rumput tetangga selalu lebih hijau</i>)	Other's grass appears greener than yours.	People think others have it better than they do.	"Grass" represents life conditions or possessions; "the other side" is a constructed ideal, symbolizing human envy and dissatisfaction.
Robbing Peter to pay Paul (<i>Gali lobang tutup lobang</i>)	Taking from Peter to give to Paul.	Solving one problem while creating another.	"Peter" and "Paul" symbolize displaced burdens; the proverb encodes the futility and ethical dilemma of unsustainable solutions.
Pass the buck (<i>Lempar batu sembunyi tangan</i>)	Handing off responsibility to another.	Avoiding accountability or blame.	"Buck" is a metaphor for blame or duty; "passing" encodes the act of evasion, signaling a breakdown in responsibility.
What goes around, comes around. (<i>Apa yang kamu tanam itulah yang kamu tuai</i>)	Actions return to the doer.	Karma: deeds have consequences.	The circular phrase "goes around" symbolizes moral reciprocity; the proverb reflects ethical cause-effect logic within social order.
Dancing with the elephant (<i>Bagai telur diujung</i>	Dancing alongside a much larger	Taking risks by dealing with powerful	"Elephant" symbolizes dominance or

<i>tanduk)</i>	partner	forces.	authority; “dancing” suggests cautious navigation, encoding imbalance in power dynamics.
Like father, like son (<i>Buah jatuh tak jauh dari pohonnya</i>)	Sons resemble their fathers.	Traits or behaviors are inherited across generations.	“Father” and “son” encode familial identity; the proverb reflects semiotic continuity, lineage, and the power of inherited traits.

The analysis of twenty English proverbs conducted in this study reveals that each proverb possesses a complex semantic structure, consisting of both denotative (literal) and connotative (symbolic) meanings. Within the framework of Barthes’ semiotics (1977), proverbs can be understood as layered sign systems that do not merely deliver direct messages but also encode ideological, moral, and cultural values embedded in their linguistic form. The denotative meaning of a proverb is typically straightforward and descriptive. However, when interpreted through a semiotic lens, this literal meaning opens the pathway toward a connotative dimension that is rich in cultural and moral significance. For example, the proverb “*Still water runs deep*” denotatively refers to the idea that calm water tends to be deep. Connotatively, however, it suggests that individuals who appear quiet or socially reserved may possess profound thoughts, intense emotions, or complex character traits. In semiotic terms, “still water” acts as the signifier, referring to outward calmness, while “depth” serves as the signified, symbolizing inner qualities that are not immediately visible.

Likewise, the proverb “*No pain, no gain*” denotes the notion that effort or sacrifice is required to achieve a result. On a connotative level, however, this phrase reflects a Western cultural ethos that emphasizes hard work, discipline, and perseverance. The sign “pain” no longer signifies merely physical discomfort, but rather becomes a symbol of struggle, growth, and resilience. Meanwhile, “gain” represents success, goals, or rewards deemed worthy of effort. This process of signification aligns with Barthes’ view that signs are never neutral—they carry ideological weight that shapes collective consciousness. Other proverbs analyzed in this study, such as “*When in Rome, do as the Romans do*,” also illustrate how language encodes cultural values implicitly. Literally, the proverb advises individuals to follow local customs when in a foreign place. Connotatively, however, it promotes social values such as tolerance, adaptability, and respect for cultural diversity. In the context of globalization, the connotative meaning of this proverb becomes

especially relevant, as it underscores the importance of cultural sensitivity and flexibility in intercultural interactions.

Moreover, several of the analyzed proverbs convey universal normative values that are articulated through culturally specific symbolism. For instance, the proverb *"A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush"* literally refers to a hunting situation. Yet its connotative meaning encourages gratitude and prudence in decision-making. The "bird in the hand" symbolizes something certain and already possessed, while the "two in the bush" represent uncertain hopes or desires. This interpretation illustrates how proverbs function as systems of signs that construct moral and ethical narratives within a society. Through Barthes' two-level signification model, this analysis demonstrates that proverbs are not static linguistic entities but rather dynamic and ideological cultural texts. The first order of signification (denotation) provides the surface-level literal meaning, while the second order (connotation) enables deeper interpretations based on social constructs and collective experience. Connotation involves ideology, emotion, and values that are culturally and socially inherited.

Interestingly, most of the proverbs analyzed in this research carry universal moral messages such as the importance of hard work, honesty, caution, and responsibility. However, the way these messages are communicated depends heavily on conventional and culturally specific symbols. This finding indicates that proverbs represent social processes of meaning-making that cannot be divorced from the cultural contexts in which they are used and transmitted. Therefore, proverbs should not be interpreted in isolation from the system of signs that constructs them. As Barthes argues, signs in language are not objective reflections of reality, but rather social constructions that shape how communities perceive and frame that reality. Consequently, semiotic analysis of proverbs provides a richer understanding of how language functions to shape cultural consciousness and communicate collective values through meanings that are often not immediately visible.

CONCLUSIONS

This study reveals that English proverbs function not only as concise rhetorical expressions but also as carriers of cultural, moral, and social values. Using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory of two-level signification, the analysis demonstrates that each proverb contains both denotative (literal) and connotative (symbolic) meanings. While the denotative meaning provides the surface-level understanding, the connotative meaning uncovers deeper ideological and cultural layers, shaped by social context and collective experience. Through a semiotic lens, proverbs emerge as complex signs that reflect how societies interpret and navigate reality.

These findings affirm the role of proverbs as rich cultural texts that preserve ethical norms and traditional worldviews across generations. In

applied linguistics, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how meaning is constructed and functions within cultural frameworks. It also offers practical implications for foreign language learning, where recognizing the layered meanings of proverbs can help learners engage with language not just lexically, but culturally and contextually. Future research could expand this approach to include cross-cultural comparisons or the semiotic analysis of Indonesian proverbs, thereby fostering greater intercultural insight and linguistic awareness.

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