

THE EXPRESSION OF ETHICAL VALUES IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE: ANALYSIS AND EXAMPLES

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Abstract: This article explores the representation of ethical values in the English language through semantic, pragmatic, and cultural lenses. Drawing on examples from authentic texts, idioms, and corpora, it identifies key lexical and phraseological patterns used to express concepts like honesty, justice, responsibility, and respect. Using qualitative discourse analysis and semantic field theory, the study reveals the interplay between language and culture in shaping moral understanding.

Keywords: ethical values, English language, semantics, pragmatics, discourse analysis, moral language.

Introduction

Ethical values are fundamental to human communication, influencing not only behavior but also the language we use. In the English language, ethical values are embedded in vocabulary, idioms, proverbs, and even speech acts. As language both reflects and shapes societal norms, the way moral concepts are expressed offers insights into the cultural values of English-speaking communities. Previous research has highlighted that values such as honesty, justice, loyalty, and tolerance are central to ethical communication (Lakoff, 1990; Wierzbicka, 2006). However, there is a need for a more systematic examination of how these abstract values are linguistically encoded. This study aims to analyze the lexical-semantic and pragmatic mechanisms used to express ethical values in English and provide illustrative examples from various discourse types.

The analysis draws upon three main data sources: English corpora (British National Corpus, Corpus of Contemporary American English) Contemporary English fiction and media (BBC, The Guardian, New York Times) Phraseological dictionaries and idiom banks.

Ethical values in English are often grouped under key semantic domains:

Honesty: truth, integrity, sincerity, transparency (e.g., “To be honest,” “He’s a man of his word.”)

Justice: fairness, equality, law, retribution (e.g., “Justice must be served,” “Equal rights for all.”)

Responsibility: duty, accountability, obligation (e.g., “Take responsibility,” “It’s your duty as a citizen.”)

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Respect: tolerance, consideration, empathy (e.g., “Respect others’ opinions,” “Live and let live.”)

Many ethical principles are reflected in common idioms: “What goes around comes around” (karma, justice)

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Golden Rule)
“The truth will out” (value of honesty) “Walk a mile in someone’s shoes” (empathy, respect)

News discourse frequently appeals to justice and fairness: “The public demands transparency and accountability from government officials.”
Fictional narratives often explore moral dilemmas using dialogue: “I couldn’t lie to her — it wouldn’t be right.” (from *To Kill a Mockingbird*)

The analysis demonstrates that the English language is rich in ethical terminology and expressions, shaped by Judeo-Christian values, Enlightenment rationalism, and democratic ideals. The linguistic encoding of ethical values often depends on cultural context, with different registers used in formal (legal, political) vs informal (everyday) discourse. For instance, the word integrity is often used in political discourse, while being real or straightforward appears more in colloquial speech. The pragmatic function of moral expressions also serves to signal trust, reinforce social norms, or persuade others (Brown&Levinson,1987). Wierzbicka (2006) argues that universal values like justice and honesty exist across languages, but the way they are verbalized reflects cultural specificity. In English, ethics is often expressed through directness, individual accountability, and fairness, which aligns with Western cultural models.

In conclusion, the English language reflects and reinforces ethical values through a rich array of lexical, idiomatic, and pragmatic tools. Understanding how moral values are linguistically conveyed enhances our grasp of intercultural communication, translation studies, and language teaching. Further research could explore comparative analysis across languages or investigate shifts in ethical language in digital communication.

Literature references:

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