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The changing face of English idioms

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From kicking buckets to jumping sharks: The changing face of English idioms

The origins of many everyday phrases are unknown to most, but this doesn't prevent us from using them freely in our everyday language. Idioms tell us much about how language interacts with culture and how it evolves. ***Gareth Carrol*** *explains why idioms are such a fruitful area of study.*

We all use idioms all the time, even if we don't really realise it. On a regular basis, someone 'spills the beans' or 'drops the ball'; as a result we 'hit the roof' or there is 'Hell to pay', then sooner or later (hopefully) we 'bury the hatchet' or 'wipe the slate clean'. Often, and especially in context, idioms may seem more or less self-explanatory ('drop the ball' rather speaks for itself, since dropping something is rarely good), but plenty of phrases like these are much less obvious. For example, why do we 'bite the bullet' when we steel ourselves to do something, or 'pull someone's leg' when we tease them? Most people go through their lives without ever really considering this, but occasionally we may have cause to think about a phrase we've used many times before and try to work out what it actually refers to. Often, we will be wrong, and the process of folk etymology describes just that: making what seems like a logical guess about the origin of a phrase, but being incorrect because we don't have all of the information required to interpret it fully.

The example used most often in linguistic research into idioms is 'kick the bucket', which most people will recognise as a tongue in cheek way of saying that someone has died. It is described as being non-decomposable, which means that it cannot be worked out by breaking it down into the component words. Most people have no idea why it means 'die', but this doesn't stop them from understanding or using it. But idioms aren't all the same, and examples like 'at the end of the day' are in general easier to interpret, because it is fairly easy to work out the meaning once you realise that it is not being used literally. Here, 'the day' is being used metaphorically to refer to the situation or discussion at hand. Other examples fall in-between the two categories, so a phrase like 'spill the beans' is straightforward because we recognise the 'spill' means 'reveal', even if we don't automatically assume that 'beans' means 'secret'.

The use of metaphors is an important part of how we interpret many idioms. When linguists talk about metaphors we simply mean ‘describing one thing in terms of another’, so ‘John is a monster’ would be an example of a metaphor just as much as something more literary like ‘Juliet is the Sun’. Some linguists talk about conceptual metaphors, which are universal ideas that are used to shape the way we think and talk. So, for example, LIFE IS A JOURNEY is a conceptual metaphor that underpins how we talk about many of our own experiences (note that conceptual metaphors tend to be presented in capitals). We might talk about ‘reaching a crossroads’ or ‘having no direction’ in our lives, or even ‘moving on’ after a negative experience or ‘crossing that bridge when we come to it’. Some of these examples might be seen as idioms in their own right, but they certainly all share the same underlying idea. Some idioms might be easier to interpret than others for this reason, such as ‘he hit the roof’ or ‘he blew his top’, both of which have a metaphor like ANGER IS PRESSURE THAT BUILDS UP underneath them. The same underlying metaphor leads us to ‘let off steam’ or ‘cool down’. Such phrases are easy to interpret, since the imagery is clear even if you’ve not heard the phrase before.

So which idioms might be more difficult? Some idioms point to specific domains of knowledge that are difficult to see if you don’t understand the reference. Examples in English are ‘throw in the towel’ or ‘on the ropes’. Most people will know that these mean, respectively, ‘to give up’ and ‘to be in a disadvantageous position’, and they may know that they come from the world of boxing, but not having this knowledge doesn’t prevent us from understanding or using them. Boxing-related idioms are numerous (‘saved by the bell’, ‘pull your punches’, ‘out for the count’, ‘below the belt’), and other common domains in English idioms include horse racing (which gives us examples like ‘on the home straight’, ‘a dark horse’, ‘champ at the bit’, ‘across the board’), cricket (‘hit for six’, ‘on a sticky wicket’, ‘on the back foot’, ‘break your duck’) and sea-faring (‘all hands on deck’, ‘a loose cannon’, ‘learn the ropes’, ‘by and large’). All of these domains have played an important part in English culture and history, hence the terminology is widely known and used. For similar reasons, German has several idioms relating to sausages, since pig-farming has been important to German life through the ages.

These examples all help us to see how and why some idioms might seem much less transparent than others, especially when the original cultural reference is

lost. Some idioms are iconic, in that they are used to represent a more general version of a specific action: ‘throw in the towel’ is a good example, since it has come to mean ‘give up’ generally, and not just in the context of boxing, where throwing a towel into the ring signals that a fighter’s support team wants to concede defeat on his or her behalf. When the link between the specific action and the general meaning is no longer apparent, a phrase will seem much less transparent, and ‘kick the bucket’ is a prime example of this. Although we can’t be sure, a likely explanation for the etymology of this phrase (as provided by phrases.org) dates back to the 16th century, when ‘bucket’ had an additional dialect meaning of ‘beam’ or ‘yoke’. When an animal was slaughtered, a common practice would be to string it up by its feet (therefore tied to the ‘bucket’ in a shed or slaughterhouse), and in its death throes it would spasm and kick against the ‘bucket’. Here, a very specific reference to dying became more generally applied. In this case, the dialect meaning of ‘bucket’ has largely died out, making the link between the phrase and the modern reading of the words entirely unclear. The term ‘dead metaphors’ has sometimes been applied to such idioms for this reason.

Other idioms seem to contain elements that are both iconic and metaphorical. ‘Bury the hatchet’ is a good example, since it relates to the practice of physically burying weapons as a symbolic act of peace amongst Native Americans. At the same time, the imagery of burying anything puts us in mind of forgetting or covering something up, hence to bury your weapons seems quite a logical representation of putting things behind you. As with the other examples here, knowing or not knowing the etymology doesn’t affect our ability to use the idiom, but it does help us to understand the cultural reference that underpins it.

The changing face of idioms

Just like words, idioms emerge and die out in language, and the examples above might give us some clues as to why. An English idiom that seems to be on the way out is ‘spend a penny’, and how old you are will probably determine whether you know what this means. Historically, public toilets in the UK had coin-operated locks and cost a penny to get in, hence to ‘spend a penny’ is, euphemistically, to visit the lavatory. The practice is no longer common (hence the reference itself doesn’t

resonate with most people), and this idiom is certainly not particularly frequent, but many people will still recognise it when used. There are probably hundreds if not thousands of examples of phrases that have disappeared like this, but equally interesting is to consider the reverse: idioms that have entered the language in recent decades, and where these have come from. One big advantage here is that in the information age, we have detailed records of almost everything, so the origin and development of a phrase can be accurately tracked in a way that historical idioms cannot.

Just as ‘kick the bucket’ is the classic example of idioms in general, my choice for the archetypical modern idiom is ‘jump the shark’. Some people will recognise the phrase, but many won’t. It means ‘to pass beyond the realms of credibility’, and is another example of a specific meaning becoming more generalised. It refers to an episode of Happy Days (the American sitcom of the 1970s and 80s) where one of the main characters (Fonzie) demonstrates his bravery by water-ski jumping over a caged shark. The incident is seen as so ludicrous and out of keeping with the show in general that critics declared it the point at which the writers ran out of good ideas and marked the beginning of the end. (Actually, this is a little unfair, as it ran very successfully for a further 150 episodes after this point!) Subsequently, the phrase has come to be used to mark the point at which a TV show or movie franchise begins to go downhill. It has also gone beyond this specific frame of use and has been used in recent years to describe a range of situations, such as in a Guardian article in 2017 where the comedian Frankie Boyle declared, “Now that Trump has been elected leader of the nominally free world, democracy has jumped the shark”. What is notable is that the writer felt no need to explain the meaning of this, suggesting that he fully expected that it would be understood as intended by his readers.

Other modern idioms fall into the same category of iconic action. ‘Groundhog Day’ can now be seen as an idiom, in that it is understood to mean something like ‘a sense of the same situation repeating over and over again’ in a variety of contexts, with no need to refer to the original movie of the same name. Importantly, people don’t have to speak of something being ‘like Groundhog Day’, but generally use it as a noun phrase in its own right (for example, ‘It’s Groundhog Day for England as they lose on penalties again’.) The derogatory term ‘bunny boiler’ would qualify as an

iconic idiom in the same way. A ‘bunny boiler’ is an unhinged individual (generally a romantic partner), referencing the movie Fatal Attraction, where a jilted woman stalks her former lover and, among other things, kills his daughter’s pet rabbit and leaves it boiling in a pot of water on the stove as an act of retribution. The term is absent from the movie itself and emerged only later, but is now applied (and understood) in a range of contexts, such as the fans of Italian football club AS Roma who were described by an Evening Standard journalist as “real bunny boilers” if their team does not perform as expected.

We can also find modern idioms that are more metaphorical. To ‘throw someone under the bus’ is a phrase now used quite widely to refer to sacrificing someone as an act of self-preservation, and it is easy to see where the sacrifice part comes from at least, since presumably throwing people under buses isn’t likely to end well for them. It appears in two domains in particular: politics (especially US politics) and sport (especially US sport). The linguist Geoffrey Nunberg looked into the coverage of the 2008 US Primaries and found over 400 press stories that used the phrase over a six-month period, which may testify to the increasingly cut-throat nature of American politics in the 21st century. Often it is used when a candidate is forced to distance him or herself from a former ally because of some scandal, with the intention of deflecting blame. The phrase actually originated in UK politics when, in 1982, Margaret Thatcher was said to have been ‘pushed under the bus’ by Argentine leader General Galtieri, implying that his precipitation of the Falklands crisis had deeply imperilled her position as Prime Minister. The additional meaning of this being a deliberate act to save one’s own skin seems to have emerged only later, but is now firmly part of how the phrase is used. Another example of a metaphorical modern idiom would be ‘not rocket science’, to describe anything that is not particularly challenging. The imagery is easy to see, since most people understand rocket science to be a particularly difficult field, but by definition this idiom cannot have existed prior to the emergence of ‘rocket science’ as a discipline.

We also find modern idioms that seem to be both iconic and metaphorical. An example here is to ‘turn something up to eleven’, which references the cult movie This is Spinal Tap, a spoof mockumentary about a fictional English heavy metal band. The band’s lead guitarist at one point shows off his custom amplifier, which has dials that go up to eleven, rather than the traditional ten, in order to allow the

volume to be louder. The phrase was originally intended to highlight the absurdity of not realising that even when things are labelled differently, they are still the same (full volume is full volume, regardless of the numbers!), but is now more commonly used at more or less face value: things that are ‘turned up to eleven’ are things that have gone beyond normal limits. Even those who haven’t seen the film can presumably appreciate the meaning, since we are so used to a scale where ten is the highest that the imagery of surpassing this is easy enough to see.

The list of modern idioms goes on, and many phrases that we might use can be traced back to film (‘we’re not in Kansas anymore’), TV (‘like something from the Twilight Zone’), books (‘down the rabbit hole’), pop culture (‘break the internet’), adverts (‘does exactly what is says on the tin’) and sport (‘the hairdryer treatment’). In some cases, catchphrases have entered the language, and could arguably qualify as idioms. An example would be ‘computer says no’ (from the TV show Little Britain), which is used to generally refer to any bureaucratic obstacle to something that seems like it should be straightforwardly achievable.

The common thread – and what I consider to qualify all of these as idioms – is that the phrase is now used beyond its original context, and can be understood without the need to highlight the original reference. They are also fixed in terms of the specific words that make them up, and here we see another important aspect of what constitutes an idiom. Any substitution, even if the new phrase would mean more or less the same thing, makes it more difficult to understand. For example, if we were to describe something difficult as ‘not astrophysics’, the meaning would not be as apparent even though astrophysics is just as challenging a field as rocket science. Here, we return to one of the key uses of idioms as neatly packaged carriers of information: we understand the intended meaning very easily and with minimal effort, which would not be true if we had to interpret novel or even modified phrases. Alison Wray, a linguist who developed the field of ‘formulaic language’, suggests that we speak in such highly recurrent, predictable phrases for three main reasons: to identify us as members of a particular speech community, and therefore to socially align ourselves with others in that community; to minimise the risk of being misunderstood, since someone may not interpret a novel phrase in the way we intend; and to save resources, since our brains have to work harder to work out the meaning of a new phrase compared to one that we have heard many times before.

Modern idioms, no less than phrases that have been around for centuries, help us to achieve these aims – it's not rocket science!

Find out more

Books

Raymond W. Gibbs Jr. and Herbert L. Colston (2012) *Interpreting Figurative Meaning*, Cambridge University Press.

Philip Gooden and Peter Lewis (2012) *Idiomantics: The Weird World of Popular Phrases*, Bloomsbury.

Articles

Gareth Carrol, Jeannette Littlemore and Margaret Gillon Dowens (2018) 'Of false friends and familiar foes: comparing native and non-native understanding of figurative phrases', in *Lingua*, 204.

Online

www.phrases.org

Gareth Carrol is a lecturer in Psycholinguistics at the University of Birmingham. He is the author of several research papers on the topic of how figurative language is processed, and co-author of Eye-Tracking: A Guide for Applied Linguistics Research (2018, with Kathy Conklin and Ana Pellicer-Sánchez).