



# English Idioms and their Cultural Origin

李玉平 编著

## 英语习语及其文化源流

南开大学出版社



*English Idioms and their Cultural Origin*

# 英语习语及其文化源流

李玉平 编著

南开大学出版社  
天 津



**图书在版编目(CIP)数据**

英语习语及其文化源流 / 李玉平编者. —天津: 南开大学出版社, 2008. 3

ISBN 978-7-310-02872-6

I. 英… II. 李… III. 英语—社会习惯语—研究  
IV. H313. 3

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(2008)第 021656 号

**版权所有 侵权必究**

**南开大学出版社出版发行**

**出版人: 肖占鹏**

地址 天津市南开区卫津路 94 号 邮政编码: 300071

营销部电话 (022)23508339 23500755

营销部传真: (022)23508542 邮购部电话: (022)23502200

\*

河北昌黎太阳红彩色印刷有限责任公司印刷

全国各地新华书店经销

\*

2008 年 3 月第 1 版 2008 年 3 月第 1 次印刷

880×1230 毫米 32 开本 6.875 印张 194 千字

**定价: 15.00 元**

如遇图书印装质量问题, 请与本社营销部联系调换, 电话: (022)23507125



## Preface

Every language is laden with idioms. An idiom is a word or group of words that cannot be literally translated from the source's language into the receptor's because an idiomatic meaning cannot be understood by literally defining its component parts. English, as the most active and widely used language, enjoys a vast idiomatic basis, which makes its learning very exciting and interesting, with about 4,000 idioms used in the daily communication.

Being very flexible, English language constantly enriches its vocabulary with the words invented by the language speakers, making it more colorful with new idiomatic expressions, and at times refills its stocks with the borrowings and neologisms. English just amazes by its extraordinary linguistic diversity. Idioms, as the cream of the English language, are very typical in this sense.

English idioms derived from the culture of the English-speaking nations and from day-to-day life. In real context idioms explain themselves: nine times out of ten, idioms carry their own explanation. If we are unaware of their presence we will find ourselves in a state of confusion because we will assign literal meanings to them — or just ignore them.

The main function of idioms is to paraphrase what is going on, and what is being said. Idiomatic expressions pervade English with a peculiar flavor and give it great variety, bright character and color. They help language learners understand English culture, penetrate into customs and



lifestyle of English people, and make a deeper insight into English history and culture.

With the development of cultural communication, more and more idioms will widely show up in English movies, books, newspapers, and real life communication. Consequently, learners will undoubtedly encounter more and more idioms in their learning not only in written form such as novels and magazines, but also in spoken form like movies and plays. Take a close view of English learning in China; it is easy to find that learners are not fully aware of the importance of English idiom study. And the outcome of idiom learning is far from satisfactory.

Furthermore, English idioms it should also be noted that are different from Chinese idioms, especially the four-character idioms in both cultural and pragmatic terms. For example, the users and the implication of idioms are different. In Chinese, a speaker being able to use four-character idioms is in most cases a cultured one, whereas it is not necessarily the case in English. Different cultural implications in Chinese and English idioms can be said to be the contributor to the difference in their pragmatic use.

In view of the difficulty in and the significance of idiom learning, as language learners, who are supposed to build a bridge for the Eastern and Western cultures, we should become aware of the increasing significance of idiom learning. Due attention and efforts should be given to the study of English idioms and more work needs to be done into this special field. English learners should learn about the meaning and usages of idioms as well as the origins of these idioms for the sake of adequate communication.

This book has been serving as teaching materials of an optional course for 50 students, and afterwards revised after being used for a whole semester. In this book you can find the knowledge about idioms in terms of their meaning, usages and cultural origins. The interesting pictures and cartoon stories appropriately illustrate the meaning and pragmatic usages of the corresponding idioms.



It is hoped that this book will be of help to you in finding the wonder of idioms and their cultural denotation in the English language. Through effort-taking study, you will learn to speak and write idiomatic English in the future. Good luck to you, my dear readers!

Li Yuping (李玉平)

At Angelic Source, Nankai University, Tianjin

June 13, 2007



# Contents

<b>Preface</b> .....	1
<b>Section One</b> General Introduction to English Idioms .....	1
<b>Section Two</b> The Common Features of English Idioms .....	13
<b>Section Three</b> English Idioms and Daily Life .....	22
<b>Section Four</b> English Idioms and Historical Development .....	38
<b>Section Five</b> English Idioms and Natural Conditions .....	66
<b>Section Six</b> English Idioms and Customs .....	87
<b>Section Seven</b> English Idioms and Religion .....	113
<b>Section Eight</b> English Idioms, Greek and Roman Mythology, and Fables .....	127
<b>Section Nine</b> English Idioms and Literary Works .....	160
<b>Section Ten</b> English Idioms and Sports Games .....	179
<b>Keys to Exercises</b> .....	204
<b>References</b> .....	209



## *Section One*

# General Introduction to English Idioms

Idioms (习语) are the expressions in a language gradually developed in the populace's physical life and widely accepted and used among a community of people. They are, in essence, the outcome of cultural growth and ethnical evolution. Idioms are, often colloquial metaphors — terms which require of users some foundational knowledge, information, or experience, to use only within a culture where parties must have common reference. As a specialized form of language, idiom will naturally reflect its culture even more profoundly and intensely than all other kinds of words. As idioms are typically localized in a culture, learning idioms well in a language will undoubtedly involve knowledge of its culture.

Using an idiom is a manner of speaking that is natural to native speakers of the language. Only those who are very good at speaking that language can adequately and to the point use idiomatic expressions in their speech. Accordingly, it should be noted that learning idioms presents a host of difficulties to English learners, primarily because they don't know the culture and history behind the idioms. That's why they often fail to use idioms incongruous (适合的) with the situation.

Idioms are used in both spoken and written English, and often appear in newspaper articles and everyday speech. They are frequently used by native speakers. Indeed, English learners use idiomatic expressions very



carefully, being afraid of using them incorrectly and being misunderstood. They find idioms very problematic to both understand and memorize. Whereas the majority of native language speakers can utilize them in every day communication, they know their meaning and feel where it is appropriate to use this or that idiom. Undoubtedly, the correct usage of English idioms is finesse (高超的技巧), which makes the language of the speaker more vivid and exciting.

## Idioms in the English Language

First look at the following passage, and let's see if you can fully understand the whole passage.

The next day, our 20-year-old daughter, Ophelia, who was majoring in wallpaper hanging at State University, *floated in on cloud nine*. *With bated breath*, she *laid her cards on the table* and said, "Mother! Dad! Guess what! I've *fallen head over heels in love with Cornelius, a man after my own heart*. He's a yo-yo expert, second to none." Gabrielle, her mother, *became as mad as a wet hen*, while I just stood there, *all ears*. "A career and love don't mix," admonished Gabrielle. "If you try to *burn the candle at both ends*, you'll *fall flat on your face*."\*

Most probably your answer would be negative. But as a matter of fact, the previous excerpt was taken from an article entitled "Talking Turkey about Clichés." (Russotto) Although the aforementioned passage is a gross exaggeration of idiom use, the wide use of idioms can be seen from it. Idioms are often used in conversational as well as literary language. The English language is full of idioms (over 15,000). And native speakers



---

\* The meaning of all the italicized idioms can be found in the book.



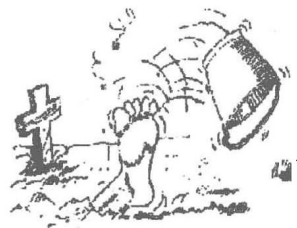
English use idioms all the time, often without realizing that they are doing so. This means that communication with native speakers of English can be quite a confusing experience if a learner doesn't know much about idioms.

## What is idiom?

The word "idiom" itself is of Greek origin (*idioma*), meaning "peculiarity" or "speciality."

Generally speaking, idioms cover set phrases and short sentences, which are peculiar to the language in question and loaded with the native cultures and ideas. In most cases, the meaning of idiomatic expressions cannot be deduced from the literal definitions and the arrangement of its parts, but refers instead to a figurative meaning that is known only through conventional use. Strictly speaking, idioms are expressions that are not readily understandable from their literal meanings of individual elements. In a broad sense, idioms may include colloquialisms, catchphrases, slang expressions, proverbs, etc.

By definition, an idiom has no meaning on a literal level. Idioms are phrases or sentences that do not mean exactly what they say. Even if you know the meaning of every word in the see or hear, you may not understand the idiom because you don't understand the culture behind it.



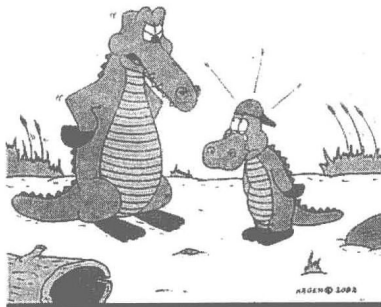
For example, in the English expression "*to kick the bucket*," a listener knowing only the meaning of "kick" and "bucket" would be unable to deduce the expression's actual meaning, which is "to die." Although kicking the bucket can refer literally to the act of striking a bucket with a foot, native speakers rarely use it that way. Another example:

A: How was the driving test yesterday? Did you pass?



B: Of course! It was *a piece of cake*.

Here the meaning of this idiom has nothing to do with the food—cake. If something is a piece of cake, it means that it is very easy to do. And the phrase “*crocodile tears*” does not refer to anything zoological. To weep crocodile tears is to pretend a sorrow that one doesn’t in fact feel; it is just to create a hypocritical show of emotion. The idea comes from the ancient belief that crocodiles weep while luring or devouring their prey.



Idioms, hence, tend to confuse those unfamiliar with them; students of a new language must learn its idiomatic expressions the way they learn its other vocabulary. In fact many natural language words have idiomatic origins, but have been sufficiently assimilated so that their figurative senses have been lost.

## Idiom, Slang and Proverb

Some linguists hold that idioms are not slang but expressions and figurative phrases that work like proverbs. But it can be said that idiom is yesterday’s slang and slang is tomorrow’s idiom. In other words, idiom is slang that has, through use and over time, become acceptable to use in informal language. Thus they are not to be taken literally as their meaning cannot be understood from the individual meanings of their elements.

Idioms often, but not always, in contrast to proverbs, allude to other (usually older) literature, e.g. Greek mythology, or the Bible. Some English idioms are almost exactly like their Danish equivalents (but not all are listed here); others are quite different or have no Danish counterpart. This reflects the fact that idioms express a specific grammatical, syntactic,



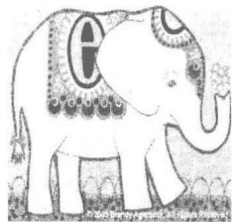
or structural character of a given language. Idiom gives a language color, character and variety. It can also make a language very difficult to understand, especially for new speakers.

Meanwhile, some linguists maintain that idioms cover more than that. They hold that idioms refer to not only the metaphorical phrases and expressions mentioned above, but also slang, colloquialism, proverbs and so on. Hereby idioms are given wider coverage. This book will adopt the broad definition which can help us learn more in-depth about the culture implied in the idioms.

## Classification of Idioms

The difficulty in using idiom lies first in the difficulty of grasping the elusive and figurative meaning, of determining the syntactic functions of idioms. So it's necessary for the learners to learn about the different types of idiom and their syntactic functions. Idioms can be classified into five kinds according to their grammatical functions.

1. Idioms nominal in nature: they have a noun as the key word and function as nouns in a sentence. For example, "*White elephant*" refers to something useless and unwanted but big and costly; "*Brain trust*" is a group of people with special knowledge who answer questions or give advice; "*An apple of discord*" is cause of disagreement or argument; "*Jack of all trades*" is a person who can do so many different kinds of work but may not be good at any of them; "*Fly in the ointment*" (油膏里的苍蝇) is something that spoils the perfection of something.



e.g. The two most influential members of the *brain trust* are likely to be Dr. Peterson and Dr. Teo.



2. Idioms adjectival in nature: they function as adjectives in a sentence but the constituents are not necessarily adjectives.

e.g. “*Sick as a dog*” means seriously ill; “*Cut and dried*” means already settled and unlikely to be changed;

“*As poor as a church mouse*” (一贫如洗) means having, or earning, barely enough money for one’s needs.

e.g. He is now *as poor as a church mouse* after his firm went bankrupt.



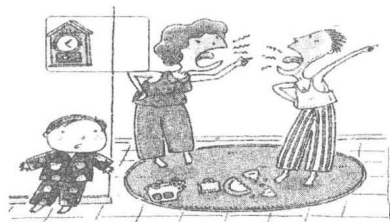
3. Idioms verbal in nature: they function as verbs in a sentence. And they are the largest group, including:

(i) The phrasal verbs that are idioms composed of a verb plus a preposition and/or a particle.

e.g. “*To look into*”: investigate.

“*To get away with*”: do something wrong without being punished.

(ii) Verb phrases – the phrases that serve as verb. e.g. “*To make it*” means “to arrive in time or succeed”; “*To follow one’s nose*” means go straight ahead; “*To fall flat*” means to fail completely; “*To give sb. the bag or sack*” is to fire sb. “*To sing a different tune*” is to change one’s opinion; “*To call it a day*” is to decide to stop temporarily or for good. “*To come back to earth*” means to stop dreaming; “*To make ends meet*” is to earn what it costs to live; “*To keep the pot boiling*” is to earn enough to maintain an adequate standard of living or to keep a situation active. “*To let the dog see the rabbit*” (also let cat see the rat, or cat see the rabbit) means not to get the way of another who wishes to see; “*To bite the hand that feeds one*” (忘恩负义) is to repay



Daddy retorted, “I am doing the best I could to make ends meet.”

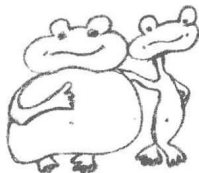




kindness with wrong. It is used when talking about someone who does not appreciate those who have helped him / her, and instead does harm to his or her patron.

e.g. "Hey, man, get out of the way! Let the dog see the rabbit!"

4. Idioms adverbial in nature: they function as adverbials in a sentence. e.g. "*With flying colors*" (出色地完成) means to fulfill something successfully. "*Tooth and nail*" means with great violence and determination; "*In clover*" or "*in the clover*" means in rich comfort or having a pleasant or easy life; "*Through thick and thin*" means through all difficulties.



e.g. Over the past 60 years, the old couple went *through thick and thin* and brought up their six children.

5. Sentence idioms: such idioms are mainly in complete sentential form. They are usually proverbs or sayings including colloquialisms and catchphrases. Each functions as a sentence. Sometimes this kind of idioms is referred to as proverbs. The forms and functions of idioms are not necessarily identical.



e.g. Every dog has his day.

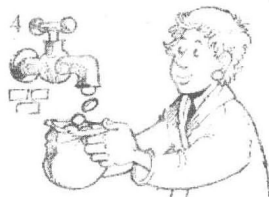
## Learning Idioms: the Good News

Sometimes idioms are very easy for learners to understand because there are similar expressions in the speakers' mother tongue. For example, in ancient times, Chinese people and British people, due to lack of scientific knowledge, both viewed heart as the core of human thoughts, emotion, and soul. Hence in both languages there are quite a few idioms about heart. For example, in Chinese there are expressions like "心情沉



重”，“全心全意”，“心心相印”，while in English they have counterpart “with a heavy heart/,” “heart and soul,” “heart to heart.”

Similarly, labor, the universal human experience, gave birth to many similar idioms in both languages, such as “花钱如流水(*spend money like water*),” “趁热打铁(*strike while the iron is hot*),” “欲速不达(*more haste, less speed*),” “鱼目混珠(*to pass fish eyes for pearls*).”



Sometimes you can guess the meaning of new idioms from context. For example, what do you think these idioms mean?

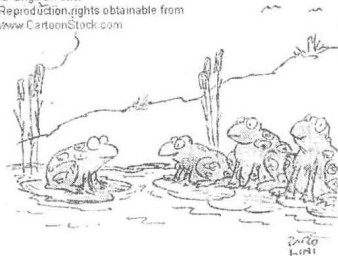
1. I'm afraid we'll have to *tighten our belts* now there's another mouth to feed.

2. More people in Britain are *on the breadline* now than thirty years ago.

3. I am very tired and we have covered the main points of the meeting I think. *Let's call it a day*.

4. I believe we should talk openly and frankly about the project — *warts and all*.

© Original Artist  
Reproduction rights obtainable from  
www.CartoonStock.com



I LOVE THEM BOTH — WARTS AND ALL. ?

## Learning Idioms: the Bad News

However, idioms can often be very difficult to understand. You may be able to guess the meaning from context but if not, it is not easy to know the meaning. Many idioms, for instance, come from favorite traditional British activities such as fighting, sailing, hunting and playing games. As well as being quite specialist in meaning, some of the words in idioms were used two or three hundred years ago, or longer, and can be a little obscure. Here are some examples:



1. Now that the Prime Minister has been elected there will be *a lot of jockeying* for position to get the key posts in his administration.

2. I finally *ran the book to earth* in a second-hand bookshop in Wales. I had been searching for it for three years.

3. They *took her ideas on board* and decided to increase the budget.

4. You should *fall in* with our arrangements; we can't make alternative plans for you.

5. We saw the boss at the bar but we *gave him a wide berth*. We did not want to talk to him then.

## The Status Quo of Idioms Today

The following conversation is about the questions of using idioms by native English speakers. Nyggus, an English learner from Poland asked online the editor, tdol, which I quote from UsingEnglish.com ESL Forum to show to the readers the status quo of English idioms among the native speakers.

N: Do you, native English speakers, often use idioms in (a) spoken, and (b) written English?

E: Idioms are widely used in all forms and styles of English. However, proverbs are much less used than in the past.

N: Do you think that it's permissible to use idioms in official writing, for instance in scientific literature? Nowadays clarity and readability of texts is very important in science, especially because very many readers (and authors) are not native English speakers. Actually, I do not meet too many proverbs in scientific literature and am figuring out whether it is permissible at all.

E: I'd avoid proverbs in scientific writing and be careful about idioms. Science is perhaps the most international in readership, so excessive or unnecessary use of idioms may well make the text more difficult for



foreign readers. One problem many native speakers have is not taking foreign readers into account, which is one reason why many non-native speakers understand each other better even though from very different cultures and language backgrounds. A scientific text for, say, the general press will often use idioms, etc., especially in headlines, but more specialist publications should, I think, go easy. An article in a journal may be read by people from dozens of countries — would an idiomatic usage help them? In many cases, probably not. Idiomatic usage may make it easier for native speakers, but for the wider community, many of whom have studied English because they have to rather than because they want to, trips to the dictionary are unwelcome intrusions on trying to master the often complex contents of a text.

N: Actually, I see in your posts that you use idioms, so my question was needless. This is the best opportunity to learn them: to talk with someone who uses them. Actually, I don't like learning English at school or courses: I don't have to now, fortunately. But I work with English, I also have many English speaking friends, and I use it a lot: this kind of learning is great!

N: And how do native speakers look at those who do not use idiomatic language and proverbs in both spoken and written language? Do you find their language poor? And what about phrasal verbs: if they are not used at all, do you find it as a symptom of a poor language, too?

E: Idioms can add color and life to language, but not using them doesn't equate with poor English IMO (in my opinion), when dealing with a non-native speaker — I don't think I've ever come across a native speaker who was an idiom-free zone. Many learners seem to avoid using many phrasal verbs — the only result of this is that they don't sound as natural to use. 😊

N: Thanks for all your replies and the discussion! It clarifies my view on English using and shows me a way of my future learning.