<u>The Etymology of Old Sayings</u>
<u>(Holy Moly, Heavens to Betsy, Etc.)</u>

A Quest Club Paper

by

Bruce R. Haines

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I am, as always, grateful to my wife Melinda for her support in my search for the origins of old yet familiar sayings. As a result, Melinda is…how to describe her? She is the apple of my eye, bright eyed, cool as a cucumber, down-to-earth with a heart of gold, and always in the pink. She’s a jack-of-all-trades, always lends an ear, runs rings around others, and tickles my funny bone. She’s up to date, worth her salt, young at heart and always on top of the world!

My wife is all those things, and more, <u>figuratively</u> speaking. She doesn’t literally “lend an ear,” “hold the fort,” “take the bull by the horns,” or “cry over spilled milk.” But phrases like these convey concepts we can easily grasp from surroundings familiar to us. Expressions like these are just the tip of the iceberg, so to speak, to what are known as idioms, from Latin and Greek words meaning “special property,” and “special phrasing.” Here is what makes it so special - “an idiom is a number of words that, taken together, mean something different from the individual words of the idiom when they stand alone.”

Simply put, an idiom is an expression with a figurative meaning that differs from the literal meaning. For example, take the phrase "Fred kicked the bucket." Now, you could take this literally, in that Fred actually walked up to and kicked a bucket in his path. However, those familiar with the English language would not take this sentence literally. They know that to “kick the bucket” is a common saying, a euphemism in this case, conveying that a person has died.

As for background, “kick the bucket” has no clear origin. Speculation suggests the phrase may have come from a reference to someone hanging himself by standing on a bucket and then kicking it away. The Oxford English Dictionary claims that “kick the bucket” might come from the alternative definition of "bucket" as a beam or yoke used to carry things. The phrase might also refer to the practice of suspending slaughtered pigs on a beam: the pigs kick the beam; hence they "kick the bucket." Reliable idiom etymology is as scarce as hen’s teeth!

Interestingly, many cultures have equivalent versions of this phrase in their respective languages. For instance, "kick the bucket" is expressed in Ukranian as "to cut the oak" (as in, building a coffin); in German, it’s "to look at the radishes from underneath." In Sweden, they say "to take the sign down." The words used are not even close to what we use in English, even though the meaning of the words is the same. This is due to the characteristic of “equivalence.” Idioms are measured figuratively, not literally.

I heard this straight from the horse’s mouth so make no bones about it! Idioms are everywhere. It’s not grasping at straws to say that most of us use idioms every day - and yet many of us don't know how these phrases originated. This is the original calling of this Quest topic. However, I think this paper’s true value may be in providing a few fun facts you can toss into a conversation at an upcoming holiday party when you’re between a rock and a hard place!

In researching idioms, you can really go down a lot of rabbit holes that take you right back to square one! It’s like pulling teeth to find the real backstories on phrases and not find yourself out on a limb, off the beaten track and up the creek without a paddle! While it’s been no bed of roses, the bottom line is that the study of the origin of words and the way in which their meanings have changed throughout history is the real McCoy when it comes to celebrating our similarities. We can connect the language of our day to the whole kit and caboodle of cultures and centuries past – because, as we know, there is nothing new under the sun!

Idioms are mainly learned from conversation. For example, take the all-purpose, jocular, and lighthearted exclamation “Holy Moly.” It shares semantic shelf space with holy mackerel, Moses, cow or smoke; as in Holy cow, I forgot the wine, or Holy mackerel, you won! or Holy Moses, here comes the teacher! or Holy smoke, I didn't know you were here too. The oldest of these slangy expletives uses mackerel, dating from about 1800; the one with Moses dates from about 1850 and cow from about 1920. None has any literal significance, though “Holy Moly” did get national attention when used by Billy Batson, the alter ego of Captain Marvel, the superhero subject of an enormously popular strip written by Bill Parker and C.C. Beck beginning in 1940. The writers simply picked it up and ran with it.

To get down to brass tacks, idioms are not an exact science. You can burn a lot of midnight oil, put your shoulder to the wheel, hit the books, and come to the end of your rope in search of who first said that something was “out of the clear blue sky” or that someone “had taken a powder.” American lexicographer Charles Earle Funk wondered who could predict what chance conversational phrasing may strike a listener as worthy of repetition? (And yes, Charles Funk was a member of the Funk family, as in Funk & Wagnalls; Dr. Isaac Funk was his uncle).

Among the unsolved idiom mysteries are those missing persons - no one knows who Tom, Dick and Harry are, or has identified the Jones family we’re supposed to keep up with, or the Bob who is apparently your uncle! Then there’s Betsy – the patron saint of unidentified individuals! When we say, “Heavens to Betsy,” we are not talking about the American punk band of the same name that formed in Olympia, Washington in 1991. Nor is Heavens to Betsy referencing the Claverack, New York, company that makes quality wool fabric for rug hooking, and quilting. Rather, this mild exclamation of surprise is American made, a field day for linguists, and bursting at the seams with conjecture.

Like the search for the Loch Ness Monster, it has been a driving quest for decades to know if Betsy exists. According to The Phrase Finder website, various theories have been put forward. The most common of these is that Betsy was Betsy Ross, who stitched the first American flag. Others point to the 1902 Minna Irving poem "Betsy's Battle Flag" as inspiration for the expression.

Charles Funk notes "Heavens to Betsy" is not connected with Queen Elizabeth of bygone years – she was known familiarly as Bess not Betsy. Betsy has also referred to the slang name that early American settlers used for their favorite pistol or rifle, though this theory also is not supported by linguistic evidence. What we do know is the expression can be traced to 19th-century America. "Betsy" herself remains stubbornly anonymous. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* comments: "The origin of the exclamation *Heavens to Betsy* is unknown."

How many idioms are there? It's hard to even get a ballpark figure out of left field since nothing is carved in stone and you're just scratching the surface to get a number that's not off the top of your head and doesn't split hairs. Once you pull yourself together and hit the books, you find that idiomatic constructions comprise approximately two-thirds of the English language. There are approximately 25,000 idioms in the English language alone!

Idioms are democratic. Katherine White, Associate Curator at The Henry Ford Museum, writes, "Although perhaps invented by one person, that one person cannot force an idiom into the lexicon. An expression has to connect with enough people for it to gain momentum and, if you will, "spread like wildfire." Eventually, the idiom's origin story is often forgotten, divorced from the expression—and yet, sometimes, the idiom and the expression it conveys remain."

Idioms often live on without any historical notes. To appreciate this, Doctor Michael Adams, Provost Professor and Chair of the English Department at Indiana University, shared one of his favorite idioms – he's as "happy as a clam":

> Now, why a clam? And why is a clam particularly happy? Well, the answer to that is the original idiom, "happy as a clam at high tide." (Hide tide is when clams are free from the attentions of predators; surely the happiest of times in the bivalve mollusk world.) But after you've used it a billion times in a community, you don't have to say, at high tide anymore, you just say I'm happy as a clam.
>
> Everybody has that high tide and their heads in that time at that place in that group of speakers. But then later on, happy as a clam gets transferred, and other people use it because they want to say they're especially happy. You know, they're free from all the menace in the world, because, why? Because it's high tide…but most folks don't know that. They just say, "happy as a clam" and the extra meaning gets embedded metaphorically or to the shorter phrase.

This is how discerning the origins of idioms allows the plausible to become possible since the definitive is often elusive! Dr. Damian Fleming, Associate Professor in the Department of English and Linguistics at Purdue Fort Wayne, gave this example: Something Shakespeare wrote may be the oldest surviving reference to a particular idiom, but that does not mean he invented it, necessarily. So, when you have an expression that shows up, in Shakespeare or the King James Bible, then we can say this is probably what popularized it.

Idioms usually require some sort of context for us to really understand them. The Bible is one such source of numerous idioms we often use. The phrase "a fly in the ointment" comes from Ecclesiastes 10:1. Other references include David and Goliath, salt of the earth, my brother's keeper, doubting Thomas, the wisdom of Solomon, coat of many colors, and forbidden fruit. If you "don't know him from Adam," then you don't recognize him.

Men and women both have Adam's apples, though the front of the thyroid cartilage is prominent only in the male throat. Why the name? The legend goes that a piece of the biblical apple lodged in Adam's throat causing the bulge.

The oldest genres of idioms are proverbs that provide universal truths or sage advice. They are often provided by wise people or contain morals that are passed on from generation to generation. Anatoly Liberman, a linguist and professor at the University of Minnesota, notes that the Greeks and especially the Romans produced memorable phrases the moment they began to speak: Life is short, art is long. Good friends cannot be bought. A water drop hollows a stone. The Greeks gave us Herculean task, Pandora's box, Midas touch, and Trojan horse.

Another Greek idiom has an interesting "rest of the story" twist to it. Every English speaker knows the expression Achilles heel and has some vague understanding of the story. But the notion that Achilles was invincible except for his heel, doesn't show up in any Greek literature. Dr. Fleming at Purdue Fort Wayne noted that the oldest reference to Achilles' mom holding him by his heels to dip them in the river Styx is from the first century AD, almost a thousand years after the time of Homer. But there's nothing in ancient Greek literature about invincibility, and there's nothing about his heel in particular. So, for one of the most commonly known little expressions from Greek mythology, we don't know where from whence it came!

Fun fact, "It was Greek to me" is an idiom credited to William Shakespeare. Other bard-attributable phrases include, "wild goose chase," "heart of gold'" "much ado about nothing," break the ice," "wearing my heart upon my sleeve," "there's method in my madness," and "the world is my oyster." Literature abounds with illuminating phrases, such as "the pot calling the kettle black" and "tilting at windmills" from Miguel de Cervantes' novel, *Don Quixote*, in 1620.

The first appearance of “love is blind” is found in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales of 1476. Dickens’ A Christmas Carol reminds us that Old Jacob Marley was “as dead as a doornail.”

What about that “doornail” reference? To begin with, “dead as a doornail” has been in use since at least the 14th century. Doornails are large-headed studs that were used in earlier times for strength and more recently as decoration. The practice was to hammer the nail through and then bend the protruding end over to secure it. This process, similar to riveting, was called clenching. This became be the source of the 'deadness', as such a nail would be unusable afterwards.

Be it from professions, folklore, the arts, religion, and cultures past or present, idioms have been adopted into our common speech. They add color to our language while the add complexity to those learning how to speak our language. Educators refer to a concept called “idiomatic competence,” that is, the ability to know and use idioms appropriately and accurately in a variety of sociocultural contexts, in a manner similar to that of native speakers, and with the least amount of mental effort. For example, if a non-native speaker is unfamiliar with the idiom "show you the ropes" and comes across such an expression, he or she will find it difficult to immediately understand.

A related challenge is in the teaching of idioms to those who are deaf. An 1889 submission to the American Annals of the Deaf called out the deficiency of language education. “As the written language of the deaf is often deficient in idiom,” instructor W.D. Walker wrote, “It is sad enough that they are shut out from the world of sound, without being denied an entrance into the world of letters. They should be possessed of this, at least, as part compensation for the loss of the other.” Nearly 100 years later, a journal article cited the development of teaching methods that assess the comprehension of idiomatic structure among those with hearing loss. Idioms also exist in American Sign Language.

Idioms are created in community, communicated through community, and eventually curated through that community. Even in the regions in which they were once common, they may now be forgotten. Linguists would give their eye teeth, pull out all the stops, and be on cloud nine to find who would be the first to record the original speaker of expressions such as "cute as a bug's ear," "eat humble pie," or "carry coals to Newcastle."

A quick aside on that last one – the ancient city of Newcastle upon Tyne lies in the coal mining region of northern England. Vast amounts of coal were shipped out of Newcastle every day. So, the idiom of carrying coals to Newcastle is to do something pointless or redundant because there is already an overabundance of that item. The first recorded use of *carry coals to Newcastle* dates back to 1661. It first appeared in *The History of the Worthies of England*, the first dictionary of national biography by British scholar, preacher, and author Thomas Fuller. Then the disclaimer – the phrase may well go back a century or two earlier!

If idioms were collectively a mountain range, then three of the taller peaks are worth climbing for the views they present. One such expression with Matterhorn-sized uniqueness is "Minding Your P's and Q's." This is a term that has come to signify that you are taking care, watching what you are doing, and getting it right. There are a number of theories about the origin of the expression, but there's no solid evidence to back up any of them.

One folk explanation dates back to the time when local taverns, pubs and bars served up their patrons drinks by the quart and by the pint. Barmaids had to keep an eye on the customers and keep the drinks coming. They had to pay special attention to who was drinking pints and who was drinking quarts; thus, the term "minding your p's and q's" came into being. The *Oxford English Dictionary* says that particular origin story "can be neither substantiated or dismissed."

If you think of the letters “p” and “q” as words, “pee” and “kew” take on different meanings. *Pee and kew* was an expression suggesting “high quality.” “Pee” was a name for a man's coarse coat, as recorded in 1485, and perruques were full wigs worn by fashionable gentlemen. Mind your pieds (feet) and queues (wigs) has also been suggested as an instruction given by French dancing masters to their charges.

There is the case made that the phrase is advice to printers' apprentices to avoid confusing the backward-facing metal type lowercase Ps and Qs, or the same advice to children who were learning to write. I've not heard mention that anyone should 'mind their Ds and Bs' though! The fact that handmade paper was an expensive commodity and that the setting of type in early presses was very time consuming makes the printing story a strong candidate. One other thought contends that it means “mind your pleases and your thank yous” as an adult would say to a child. So, not only are the spelling and meaning of the phrase debatable, but so is its derivation. All reference books say that the definitive origin of the phrase is unknown.

Another idiom of lofty peak that has provided plenty of the other pique to linguists is “the whole nine yards.” The American linguist and author Richard Lederer, who is known as “The Wizard of Idiom,” thought “the whole nine yards” referred to the revolving barrels on the backs of concrete mixing trucks. Those barrels held a volume of nine cubic yards in the early 1960s. But, Lederer writes, turns out that “the whole nine yards” popped up in an Indiana newspaper article back in 1855! The Oxford English Dictionary confirms the phrase in the New Albany Daily Ledger in an article called "The Judge's Big Shirt." The excerpt reads, "What a silly, stupid woman! I told her to get just enough to make three shirts; instead of making three, she has put the whole nine yards into one shirt!"

The first known use of the phrase as an idiom also appears in an Indiana newspaper, The Mitchell Commercial, May 1907:

> This afternoon at 2:30 will be called one of the baseball games that will be worth going a long way to see. The regular nine is going to play the business men as many innings as they can stand, but we can not promise the full nine yards.

The idiom was used three more times in the Mitchell Commercial over the next seven years, in the forms give him the whole nine yards (i.e., tell someone a big story), take the whole nine yards (i.e., take everything), and settled the whole nine yards (i.e., resolved everything).

Much of the interest in the phrase's etymology can be attributed to New York Times language columnist William Safire, who wrote extensively on this question. A number of suggested meanings have fallen short for the lack of evidence. The whole nine yards does not refer to the length of material to make a shroud, a kilt, a sari, a shirt, or to outfit a sailing ship. It is not the number of yards for a first down in American football, or the length of machine gun belts or the capacity of those concrete wagons.

Gary Martin, the curator of The Phrase Finder website, says, "despite the inventive theories, the phrase isn't a reference to any specific object but is merely a jokey synonym for "the whole thing." The "whole nine yards" is part of a family of expressions including the whole ball of wax, the whole enchilada, shooting match, shebang, and hog. That's why Yale University librarian Fred R. Shapiro describes the expression as "the most prominent etymological riddle of our time."

Next, let's scale the heights of "It's raining cats and dogs." What makes the ascent on the face of this expression so daunting are the fascinating but fallacious stories of how the phrase originated. One such explanation originated in England in the 1500s, suggesting that as English houses had thatched roofs, this was sometimes the only place for an animal to get warm. It was said that cats, small animals, and the occasional dog would wind up on the roofs. When it rained really hard, some of the animals would slip off the roof. Another theory explains the phrase as a combination of the Norse god Odin - a god of storms sometimes pictured with dogs and wolves, which were wind symbols – and witches, who were said to ride their brooms during storms and commonly depicted with black cats that became a sign of heavy rain for sailors. A third view holds that the phrase is the result of the Greek expression *cata doxa*, which means "contrary to experience or belief" and which sounds similar to "cats and dogs" in English. Thus, "raining cats and dogs" would mean it is raining unbelievably hard.

Etymologists suggest the first recorded usage of “raining cats and dogs” is found in the theatrical comedy *The City Wit. Or, The woman wears the Breeches*, performed between 1629 and 1631, by the English playwright Richard Brome. In 1738, the Irish satirist, poet and Anglican cleric Jonathan Swift recorded the phrase in a publication with the incredibly long title, *A Complete Collection of Genteel and Ingenious Conversation, According to the Most Polite Mode and Method Now used At Court, and in the best Companies of England*. To rain cats and dogs has the same intensive and derogatory force as French phrases that translate to “What a dog’s weather!” and “It’s not fit to put a dog out!”

As in this example with English and the French, an idiom’s connective tissue can reach across cultures. Researchers have found similar sayings occurring in a variety of languages. The phrase “to live in an ivory tower” can be found in more than 35 languages, for instance. When we speak of accomplishing two things at once, we “kill two birds with one stone.” In Indonesia, their phrase is, “while diving, drink water.”

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In a 2011 paper for The Electronic Journal of Folklore, Elisabeth Piirainen writes of an international project to identify the core inventory of idioms that exist in many European languages (and beyond) in the same or a very similar lexical and semantic structure. The data revealed about 360 widespread idioms across 40 to 50 or more languages. It turned out that a large number of these phrases had been widespread from the Middle Ages and onward.

There were direct quotations from an individual text which gradually developed into idioms; such as “to combine business with pleasure,” “by the sweat of one’s brow,” and “much ado about nothing.” Another idiom group comprised of expressions in circulation as early as in ancient times, including “the die is cast” – an utterance which, it turns out, Caesar did not create but did quote as this phrase dates to Greek antiquity. The largest number of widespread idioms goes back to once well-known stories. Such literary sources here include Greek mythology, the Bible, fairy tales, folk tale traditions, and post-classical works of world literature.

Among the idioms with a heritage across cultures is “to carry water in a sieve,” a motif similar to the Greek myth of Hades, where the daughters of Danaos had to scoop water into a jar that had holes in it. The idiom is “to sell the skin before you have caught the bear,” or to count on future benefits that may never materialize, dates from 1492 with equivalent expressions found in Hungarian, Russian, Spanish, Swedish and Italian.

An additional example is the idiom, “to hide/bury one’s head in the sand”- the old mistaken belief that the ostrich hides its head under one of its wings (or in a bush, or in the sand) at the first sign of danger. The Roman naturalist and philosopher Pliny the Elder was the first to write about the ostrich. The bird’s behavior and accompanying idiom was found in 23 different European translations.

Such globetrotting for idioms requires the proper travel guides. A sampling of reference materials can span nearly 200 years, which suggests that the question “where did that expression come from?” has been posed many times before, and to the betterment of researchers everywhere. E. Cobbam Brewer’s Dictionary of [Modern] Phrase and Fable of 1894 was on “every gentleman’s desk” at that time. Brewer’s competitor was Eliezer Edwards, the author of Words, Facts, and Phrases: A Dictionary of Curious, Quaint, and Out-of-the Way Matters (London: Chatto and Windus, 1882). Both books incorporate a range of information to “give the meaning and origin of phrases, from auld lang syne to ZIP code. Beyond the endearing titles of these volumes, both dictionaries and others can be found in hard copy as well as digitized online.

The definitive source in this field is The Oxford English Dictionary. It is an unsurpassed guide to the meaning, history, and pronunciation of 600,000 words, 3.5 million quotations, and more than 1000 years of English. The OED is updated on a quarterly basis and includes revised versions of existing entries (which replace the older versions), and new words and senses both across the whole A to Z range.

The discussion so far has been on the “what” of idioms…what they are and what they mean. But, what of the “why” of idioms? Why do we use them in our daily conversations? Idioms are related to metaphors as examples of figurative speech. We remember that a metaphor describes an object or action in a way that isn’t literally true, but helps explain an idea or make a comparison. Life is a highway. Her eyes were diamonds. All the world’s a stage. You ain’t nothin’ but a hound dog. All metaphors. As such, idioms can be metaphors as they often require us to compare unlike things to understand the meaning.

As Dr. Michael Adams at Indiana University explains it:

> Metaphor is always a shortcut…we want to say something complicated, but I can’t say it with literal meaning of the words. So, I use the words metaphorically to get to that more complicated idea, and the amazing thing is we do understand what people mean when they speak metaphorically. Some people will struggle more than others with a new metaphor, but eventually, they become fixed. We get them into our minds and use them. They're culturally mobile and everybody knows that phrase for that sentiment. And that's the way they get to their complex meaning.

Such figurative language allows for the use of words in a way that deviates from convention in so we can simply convey something not so simple, like our personal feelings...no having cold feet, walking on eggs or being all thumbs on these concepts. We’re sitting pretty!

Time now for “The Lightning Round,” that moment in a paper like this where an attempt is made to do historical justice to several idioms and phrases in a very short amount of time. It’s enough to put a person on pins and needles with butterflies in their stomachs hoping there are no minced words, no grasping at straws, and that we don’t bite off more than we can chew!

- Loophole - An idiom defined as a way of getting out of something or finding a legal technicality that allows someone to evade compliance. A loophole, in the Middle Ages, was a small, slit-like opening in a castle wall that men would fire their bows or musketeers through. Thus, a loophole is a small opening, or "out," in a seemingly airtight law, which only the clever few can use.
- Red Tape – An idiom denoting anything that may delay or hold us up. It also refers to a lot of unnecessary bureaucracy or paperwork. This term originated from the fact that legal and official documents were tied up or bound with red tape since the 16th century. By doing so, it was often difficult to access them. Hence, "red tape."

- Piece of Cake - We've all heard this one and, yes, this signifies something that is easy. What's easier than eating a piece of cake? The first reference to this was in the 1930s, when American poet Ogden Nash, who wrote *Primrose Path*, was quoted as saying, "Life's a piece of cake." This sweet idiom has stuck around ever since.
- To Save One's Bacon – Often meaning to escape danger or to save one's neck. Professor Liberman says the Oxford English Dictionary has no citations antedating 1654. But, he says, "I venture to suggest that this phrase has reference to the custom in Dunmow, in Essex, of giving a flitch of bacon to any married couple residing in the parish, who live in harmony for a year and a day. A man and his wife who stopped short when on the verge of a quarrel might be said to have 'just saved their bacon'; and in course of time the phrase would be applied to anyone who barely escaped any loss or danger."
- To put the cart before the horse – To get the order of things reversed was a theme of sayings as far back as ancient times. The Greeks said, "Hysteron proteron," meaning, the latter the former. The Roman phrase translated, "the plow is drawn by the oxen in reversed position." The scenario of putting a horse or an ox behind the cart, or the cart before the team, was a popular folklore motif. It occurs in the Carmina Burana, in folktales by the brothers Grimm, and other texts. Ancient proverbs and narrations linked to this motif may have supported its wide distribution.
- White Elephant – A term commonly associated with holiday gift exchanges in which the presents are more impractical and useless rather than sought-after treasures. Author Jennifer Ashley Wright writes that when the King of Siam wanted to punish one of his courtiers, he did not kill the offender. "All he had to do was gift him a white elephant. These animals were beautiful. They were sacred. They were also nightmarishly costly to care for, and it was

> unlikely the new owner even had the proper space in which to house the large beast. Upon receiving such a pachyderm, The New York Times reported in 1873, “the luckless recipient knows at once his fate is sealed.” He had no choice — like so many of us during the holiday season — but to smile through gritted teeth and say that he loved the gift.”

As words come into the English language in all manner of ways, the same is true for phrases we use that become new idioms. According to Dictionary.com, some newly minted expressions include *all the way up*. It comes from the 2016 song “All the Way Up” by rappers Fat Joe and Remy Ma and means “to be at the pinnacle of your emotional spectrum.” The term was then incorporated into 2017 Mountain Dew commercials. The phrase “let’s hug it out” means “let’s end our argument.” It was popularized by Ari on the HBO series Entourage. Other fairly new phrases include “surf the Internet,” “drink the Kool-Aid,” “going postal.”

In the here and now, however, there is trouble in paradise. It turns out that many English idioms we use are mispronounced and even mis-constructed! In a story for JSTOR Daily, linguist Chi Luu calls out certain linguistic oddities that we often say incorrectly:

> …from “damp squids” (“damp squib”) to “passing mustard” (“passing muster”/”cut the mustard”) to “nipping things in the butt” (“nipping things in the bud” in politer gardening circles), we often feel the “deep-seeded” (“deep-seated” in non-gardening circles) need to make sense of these obscure expressions we use—even if we have to completely change them into semantically meaningful malapropisms to understand them…No need to “wait with baited (bated) breath” on “tender (tenter) hooks” for some authoritative philologist to give you the answer.

Luu goes on to state that the story of how the words and expressions we use every day came to be is not just interesting when it’s true, it also turns out it’s equally as linguistically intriguing when it’s false… and sometimes it’s a lot more enjoyable.

Now, imagine you're reaching into a cookie jar. You grab two cookies at once and then, as you try to bring both out through the top of the jar, each cookie breaks in two. What emerges is a hybrid of two cookies. That scenario, writes University of Michigan researcher Douglas Hofstadter, is the misconstruction that can take place when two linguistic "cookies" are spliced together verbally. The result is called a malaphor.

The term "malaphor," a combination of "metaphor" and "malaprop," was coined in 1976 by Lawrence Harrison, a senior executive in the State Department. Harrison found gems in endless bureaucratic meetings, such as "he said it off the top of his cuff" or "don't rock the trough." Malaphors aren't quite malapropisms and aren't quite mixed metaphors. Whatever you want to call these, I hope you'll agree, each one is a pearl worth its weight in gold:

- It's not rocket surgery
- The road to hell wasn't built in a day
- The sacred cows have come home to roost with a vengeance
- It's time to step up to the plate and lay your cards on the table.
- He's burning the midnight oil from both ends.
- It sticks out like a sore throat.
- You've opened this can of worms now lie in it, and the classic:
- We'll burn that bridge when we get to it

So, beware the dreaded malaphor. It lurks in the recesses of the mind ready to strike unexpectedly and usually to hilarious and embarrassing effect. One need only recall the amusing instance of Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott intending, to use the word "repository" but instead saying "No one, however smart, however well-educated, however experienced . . . is the suppository of all wisdom."

With a seemingly infinite selection of metaphors, proverbs, cliches, euphemisms, and more from which indelible expressions arise, the backstory of one more idiom is the best way to conclude this presentation. "That's going to cost you an arm and a leg!" This is a common phrase that means simply it's going to cost to the point of sacrifice. It's going to hurt. The price is high.

One version of phrase’s etymology derives from Irish coinage of King Charles II. In 1680, the king granted letters patent to Sir Thomas Armstrong and Colonel George Legge to manufacture copper halfpennies for use in Ireland. The phrase "It will cost you an Arm and a Leg" was an abbreviation of the patentees' names, originally meaning "It will cost you a halfpenny.” A second theory suggests that after the American Civil War, Congress enacted a special pension for soldiers who had lost both an arm and a leg**.** The phrase “cost an arm and a leg” begins to crop up in newspaper archives in 1901, referring to accidents and war injuries.

This next, however, is my personal pick for the phrase’s origin. If we could step back in time to George Washington's day, we would not see any cameras. For a portrait to be produced, it had to be painted or sculpted. If you notice old pictures, you will notice something interesting. The paintings may consist of just a person's face. At other times, a person is portrayed with one arm behind their back, or both arms may be visible. Interestingly, portraits were not charged by the number of people who appeared in the picture but by the number of limbs that were painted.

Some people have cooked up the idea that if someone wanted a cheaper painting, then it would "cost them an arm and a leg." Artists knew it took more time and effort since arms, hands and legs were more difficult to paint. It is thanks to this explanation that now you’ll never be able to go through an art museum the same way ever again!

Happy holidays and thank you!

"The Etymology of Old Sayings (Holy Moly, Heavens to Betsy, etc.")
Quest Club Paper by Bruce R. Haines
December 16, 2022

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Individuals

Dr. Damian Fleming, Associate Professor Department of English and Linguistics; Coordinator, Program in Medieval Studies, Purdue University, Fort Wayne

Dr. Michael Adams, Provost Professor, English; Chair, English Department, Indiana University