

Integration of Culture and History of English into Language Learning via Phraseology

Ivana Cimermanová

Department of English Language and Literature
Institute of American and British Studies
Faculty of Arts, University of Presov
ivana.cimermanova@unipo.sk

Abstract:

Idioms and phraseological language are typical and natural for native speakers. They are not so common on non-natives utterances as they many times do not belong to the “automatized language chunks” of users.

As idiomatic language enriches the language it should become a subject of teaching-learning process. Whatmore, many times students can learn a lot about culture, history and philosophy of the target language native users. The article suggests several idioms that might be used in language teaching to teach not only language but also to present some historical facts and cultural aspects.

Key words: *idiom, phraseological language, opaque,*

1 Introduction

Phrases used in different languages are not seldom influenced by their culture and history. It is also truth that there is a group of idioms that are similar (or same) in different language. Idioms are frequently used by natives however non-natives might have problems to understand, remember and use them automatically.

One of the very common idiom is *The silence is golden* that sounds same in the Slovak language *Mlčať je zlato*. The translation of Japanese *Iwanu ga hana* means *Not-speaking is flower*. Chinese say *The silence is the sun*. Nobody would argue that it is related to the philosophy and culture of the nation.

One of the first idioms that used to be presented to Slovak learners of English was *It's raining cats and dogs*. Children usually remember it well as they many times visualise it even tough

in Slovak language we use *Leje ako z krhly* what is close to e.g Russian *луть как из ведра*. Both idioms are close to American *It's bucketing*.

2 Idioms generally

Searching through different types of dictionaries, looking mainly for the English and American idioms that are connected with their history and culture we have made a few conclusions:

- 1) *Most idioms are used also in the Slovak language in the same meaning using the words with the same meaning. (A house of cards, black as midnight, like a lamb, etc.)*
- 2) *Many idioms could be categorized according to what do they refer to into one of the following categories: Bible, Aesop fables, Sport and Animals.*

AESOP FABLES

❖ *KILL THE GOOSE THAT LAYS THE GOLDEN EGGS* - to destroy the chief cause of one's profit or success

Longman Dictionary of English Idioms

From a story by Aesop. The owner of the bird kills it when he tries to get all the golden eggs which he thinks are inside it

❖ *SOUR GRAPES* - telling of bitterness caused by failure to get what one wants (used to describe the behaviour of a person who, because he cannot get what he wants, pretends that the object is of no use or value

Longman Dictionary of English Idioms

Referring to a story by Aesop in which a fox cannot reach the fruit that it wants to eat and therefore decides that the fruit is not ripe

❖ *THE LION'S SHARE* - the larger or largest part

Longman Dictionary of English Idioms

In one of the stories of Aesop several animals were hunting for food. The lion claimed three quarters of the food for himself, and the other animals, afraid of his anger, yielded the fourth quarter to him also

SPORT

❖ *HANDS DOWN* - without difficulty, very easily

Longman Dictionary of English Idioms

Referring to a horse that wins a race without making a special effort. The rider does not have to use his hands to whip or encourage the horse

❖ *WITH NO HOLDS BARRED* - without rules or restrictions on fairness, what may be done, etc.

Longman Dictionary of English Idioms

Referring to the sport of wrestling and meaning that the two opponents may use any holds they like in order to throw or keep each other on the ground.

❖ *HAVE A GOOD INNINGS* - to have a long life (often used of a person who has died)

Longman Dictionary of English Idioms

In the game of cricket, an innings is the time during which a player or team is batting. A good innings is one that lasts for a long time or one in which many runs are made

❖ *KNOCK/HIT FOR SIX* - to defeat (an opponent) thoroughly or destroy completely the effectiveness of (a plan, idea, etc.)

Longman Dictionary of English Idioms

From cricket. If the ball is struck very hard by the batsmen so that it goes over the line around the cricket field without touching the ground first, then six points or runs are won.

BIBLE

- ❖ *WASH ONE'S HANDS OFF* - to refuse to accept any responsibility for (something or someone)

Longman Dictionary of English Idioms

Referring to the action of Pontius Pilate in the Bible: '...he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just man...'

- ❖ *CROSS ONE'S HEART AND HOPE TO DIE* - to swear that one is telling the truth or that one will not reveal a secret

Longman Dictionary of English Idioms

The phrase refers to the Christian practice of crossing oneself

- ❖ *MANNA FROM HEAVEN* - something that comes out unexpectedly and that gives great comfort or encouragement, often at a time of trouble

Longman Dictionary of English Idioms

From the Bible (Exodus 16:15), referring to the food which the Israelites found on their journey out of Egypt.

ANIMAL BEHAVIOUR

- ❖ *A MARE'S NEST* - something that does not exist; something, e.g. a discovery, which is found to be worthless or very different from what one had expected

Longman Dictionary of English Idioms

From the fact that mares do not build nests

3 Idioms Etymology And Explanation Ambiguity

Not all the explanations in the dictionaries are same. It is really interesting to read the dictionaries.

We can learn a lot. For example the idiom

❖ AS MAD AS A HATTER is explained in

NTC's Super Mini American Idioms Dictionary

- from the character called the Mad Hatter in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

BUT - in *Longman Dictionary of English Idioms*

Perhaps referring to an old belief that hatters (people who made hats) often went mad. It is now thought that they may have developed a disease caused by working with mercury (a metal formerly used in hat-making)

Another idiom is

❖ AS MAD AS A MARCH HARE

NTC's Super Mini American Idioms Dictionary

From the name of a character in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

Longman Dictionary of English Idioms

These animals can be seen leaping about wildly during march, when they breed

Another interesting example I found is the following one:

NTC's Super Mini American Idioms Dictionary

HAVE AN AX TO GRIND - to have something to complain about

Bill and Bob went into other room to argue. They have an ax to grind.

Longman Dictionary of English Idioms

HAVE AN AXE TO GRIND - to be trying to gain professional profit or advantage

From a story told by Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), the American politician. When Franklin was a boy, a man told him how much he admired GRINDSTONE (wheel used for sharpening knives, etc.) that belonged to Franklin's father. The man asked to see how the grindstone worked, and as the boy turned the wheel, the man sharpened his own axe on it.

Two idioms that are lexically merely same (differing just in one word). We could not find the first one in any other dictionary but we found the second one. And so we decided to use Internet corpus to check the use of these idioms.

Corpus

all of them seem to have an axe to grind one way or another. There's no

And we found just one example in the CobuildDirect Corpus Sampler containing 26 million of the words from British books, ephemera, radio, newspapers, magazines, 9 million words of words from American books, ephemera and radio and 10 million of words from British transcribed speech. The result draw my attention to the question - Which idioms are used most?

We checked some of the idioms on my list and this is the result

	<i>Brit. books etc. (26 m words)</i>	<i>American books etc. (9 m words)</i>	<i>Br. Transcr. speech (10 m words)</i>
AS MAD AS A HATTER	1	0	0
AS DEAD AS A DODO	0	0	0
AS EASY AS DUCK SOUP	0	0	0
AS MAD AS A MARCH HARE	0	0	0
BACK TO THE SALT MINES	0	0	0
ABOVE/BELOW THE SALT	0	0	0
WORTH ONE'S SALT	12	2	0
RUN THE GAUNTLET	14	0	0
BE FROM MISSOURI			
BURN WITH A LOW BLUE FLAME	0	0	0

BUY A PIG IN A POKE	0	2	0
CARRY COALS TO NEWCASTLE	0	0	0
KEEP UP WITH THE JONESESS	0	0	0
HAVE AN AX TO GRIND	0	0	0
HAVE AN AXE TO GRIND	1	0	0
ACHILLES HEEL	0	0	0
ALICE-IN-WONDERLAND			
ON THE SIDE OF ANGELS	1	0	0
THE APPLE OF SOMEONE'S EYE	6	0	1
JUMP/CLIMB/GET ON/ABOUARD THE BANDWAGON			
DRAW A BEAD ON	0	0	0
BELOW THE BELT	0	0	0
IN THE BLACK/IN THE RED			
HAVE KISSED THE 'BLARNEY STONE			
A COLONEL BLIMP	0	0	0
THE/A WHIPPING BOY			
BIG BROTHER			
PASS THE BUCK	4	0	2
A CASSANDRA			
BELL THE CAT	0	1	0
CATCH-22 SITUATION	0	0	0
IN/INTO CHANCERY			
GRIN LIKE CHESHIRE CAT	0	0	0
PULL SOMEONE'S CHESTNUTS OUT OF THE FIRE	0	0	0
JOIN THE CHOIR INVISIBLE	0	0	0
SEND TO COVENTRY	0	0	0
CROCODILE TEARS	4	1	1
CUPBOARD LOVE	0	0	0
LOAD THE DICE AGAINST	0	0	0
AN UGLY DUCKLING	8	3	0
DOUBLE DUTCH	0	0	0
HOLD THE DYKE AGAINST	0	0	0
A WHITE ELEPHANT			
A FEATHER IN SOMEONE'S CAP	3	1	2
HAVE A FIELD DAY	23	8	2
FIGHT LIKE KILKENNY CATS	0	0	0
GUINEA PIG	27	2	20
HALCYON DAYS	18	1	2
KING CHARLE'S HEAD			
HOBSON'S CHOICE			
LIKE THE BLACK HOLE IN A CALCUTTA	0	0	0
THE HOLY OF HOLLIES	0	0	0
DRAW/PULL IN ONE'S HORNS	0	0	0

AT THE ELEVENTH HOUR	37	4	5
HAVE MANY IRONS IN THE FIRE	1	0	0
TICKLE THE IVORIES	0	0	0
THE NIGHT OF THE LONG KNIVES	0	0	0
THE THIN RED LINE			
A MECCA	0	0	0
BEYOND THE PALE			
SPEND A PENNY	2	0	0
SIGN/TAKE/KEEP THE PLEDGE			
PLAY POSSUM	1	0	0
RICH AS CROESUS	0	0	0
READ THE RIOT ACT	10	0	0
WEARING SACK CLOTH AND ASHES	0	0	0
BETWEEN SCYLLA AND CHARIBDYS			
(ON/BY) SHANK'S 'PONY 'MARE			
A SHOT IN THE ARM	18	4	1
SPICK AND SPAN	0	0	0
THE WOODEN SPOON			
GO TO THE STAKE			
ONE SWALLOW DOESN'T MAKE A SUMMER			
ON/FROM THE WRONG SIDE OF THE TRACKS	7	3	1
A/THE YOUNG TURK			
KILL THE GOOSE THAT LAYS THE GOLDEN EGGS	0	0	0
SOUR GRAPES	30	2	3
THE LION'S SHARE			
HANDS DOWN			
WITH NO HOLDS BARRED			
HAVE A GOOD INNINGS	0	0	0
KNOCK/HIT FOR SIX			
WASH ONE'S HANDS OFF	0	0	0
CROSS ONE'S HEART AND HOPE TO DIE			
MANNA FROM HEAVEN	2	1	1
A MARE'S NEST			

The result was surprising. Does it mean that the English native speakers do not use the idioms, or is their use limited?

Curry Dean claims that: "Most Americans use idioms, especially when they talk to one another, and, consequently, idioms form a very important part of American English. They are used

to give life and richness to the language by enabling it to absorb new concepts which need to be expressed linguistically in a new way. Idioms take existing words, combine them in a new sense and bring forth new expressions."

But according to our "research and statistics" idioms are not frequently used in the spoken language. And so naturally, the question was - Why are the results of my search so different when comparing with reality?

The language develops constantly. Adam Makkai, professor of linguistics, in the Introduction of A Dictionary of American Idioms says: "We develop new concepts, we need new expressions for them, but instead of creating a brand new word from the sounds of the language we use some already existent words and put them together in a new sense. This, however, appears to be true of all known languages." (1987)

The idioms we studied were those that reflected the culture or history (it was not a random sampling). It means they all have something in common - historical, cultural or literal background, it means most of them were not transparent.

Let me quote Hatch and Brown (1995:204). One would think that all idioms and proverbs would be transparent in meaning but they are not. An ESL or EFL student will not be able to recognize immediately the intended meaning of many idioms (that's why there are so many idiom books for language learners). Fernando and Flavell (1981) use a four-point scale for transparency of meanings in phrases:

1. opaque (kick the bucket - *to die*)
2. semi-opaque (tarred with the same brush - *having the same characteristics, esp. the same faults*)
3. semitransparent (skate on thin ice)
4. transparent - non-idiomatic; meaning derived from the words in combination (walk by the building)

The meaning of opaque idioms cannot be worked out from the meanings of the separate words, whereas it might be possible to do so in the case of semi-opaque idioms.

Although idioms (especially proverbs) are culturally bound, many idioms have equivalents across different languages. (Hatch and Brown, *ibid*)

These idioms are not the problematic, questionable for the language learners. The problem is with understanding and learning opaque idioms. Hatch and Brown (1995:204) claim that: "Although idioms and proverbs are not always transparent, learners are fascinated by them, just as language learners we are always intrigued with expressive, colourful language. We enjoy identifying and even using quotable or proverbial phrases in the new language."

4 History and idioms

I believe that what has been mentioned above is true. Students do not have problems with the e.g. the opaque and semi-opaque idioms, but when they see the logical reason, the reason why these words that have their own meaning have different - metaphorical meaning when put together. Learning and understanding such idioms helps us also with learning culture and history. They could be subject of British and American Study, Cultural Studies as well as Language development courses.

For example

❖ **ABOVE/BELOW THE SALT** - position of honour

Longman Dictionary of English Idioms

In the houses of rich and important people, salt was formerly kept in a large container placed in the middle of the long dining table. Guests of honour at dinner sat between this container and the head of the table

- ❖ **BELOW THE BELT** - not in accordance with rules; unfair or unfairly

Longman Dictionary of English Idioms

Referring to boxing. It is against the rules to hit an opponent lower than the belt worn round the waist

- ❖ **IN THE BLACK/IN THE RED** - having some money in the bank / in debt

Longman Dictionary of English Idioms

When one has money in the bank it is indicated by figures printed in black / When one takes out more money from a bank than one has in one's account, this is sometimes by figures printed in red on one's bank statement

- ❖ **HAVE KISSED THE 'BLARNEY STONE** - to have the ability to persuade, praise or deceive by charming talk

Longman Dictionary of English Idioms

Referring to a stone at Blarney Castle, near Cork, Ireland, which is supposed to give this ability to anyone who kisses it

- ❖ **KING CHARLE'S HEAD** - a subject that keeps on appearing in a person's conversation

Longman Dictionary of English Idioms

King Charles I (1600-49) was executed by having his head cut off. In Charles Dicken's novel *David Copperfield* (1849-50), Mr. Dick, a slightly mad character keeps returning to this subject in his conversation

- ❖ **HOBSON'S CHOICE** - no choice at all, esp. Because one has to choose between what one is offered or nothing at all

Longman Dictionary of English Idioms

Referring to Thobias Hobson, who kept a large number of horses for hire. When anyone asked to hire a horse, Hobson would also offer only the horse nearest the door of the stable.

- ❖ **LIKE THE BLACK HOLE IN A CALCUTTA** - very hot and uncomfortable, and with no fresh air coming in

Longman Dictionary of English Idioms

Referring to an event in Calcutta, India, in 1756, when a large number of Europeans were put into one very small prison for a night. In the morning only a few were still alive.

- ❖ **THE NIGHT OF THE LONG KNIVES** - a time when an act of great disloyalty is done, esp. When when several people meet together to arrange the dismissal of a friend from high office

Longman Dictionary of English Idioms

Referring to 29 June 1934 in Nazi Germany, when Hitler had a number of people connected with the Nazi party killed or put in prison

- ❖ **THE THIN RED LINE** - a small group of courageous people; accept the ideas, principles and refuse to yield to any attack

Longman Dictionary of English Idioms

First used (1877) by W.H. Russell to refer to the British troops (who wore red uniforms) in the Crimean War

❖ **SPEND A PENNY** - to urinate

Longman Dictionary of English Idioms

It formerly cost a penny to use a public toilet. This phrase is usually used to or by children or by their mothers.

Dean (1988) states that "...the more idioms that a non-native speaker of English can use in the right context in conversation with native Americans, the more easily will he be able to establish a communicative relationship thus opening the door to friendly feelings on the part of both native and non-native speakers."

It was already mentioned that there are many idioms in the textbooks for EFL and ESL. It would be good to do a small research and to check which idioms are in the textbooks and whether they are still used. We also mentioned that language is developing, there are new words, new phrases, new idioms, but there are also some words, some phrases and some idioms that are not used anymore and we still learn them and teach them. It is up to the teacher to update the idioms that are in the textbooks because many of the idioms that are frequently used in real language are connected with the political and cultural situation.

3 Literature

Cowie, Mackin, McCaig. (1994). *Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms*, OUP: Oxford.

Curry, Dean. (1988). *Illustrated American Idioms*, USIA Washington.

Hatch Evelyn and Cheryl Brown. (1995). *Semantics, and Language Education*, CUP: Cambridge.

Jarancev (1981). *Slovar spravocnok po ruskoj frazeologii*, Ruskij jazyk, 1981

Kvetko Pavol (1996). *Slovensko-anglický frazeologický slovník*, IRIS: Bratislava

Logman Dictionary of English Idioms (1991). Longman Group Limited, 3rd impression, 1991

Makkai Adam. (1987). *A Dictionary of American Idioms*, Barron's Educational series, 2nd edition,
USA

Spears Richard (1996). *NTC's Super-Mini American Idioms Dictionary*, NTC Publishing Group:
Illinois, USA.