42 Idiom Origins - mental_floss on YouTube (Ep. 29)

List Show
https://youtube.com/watch?v=WW5FDhsHkUg
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Hi, I'm John Green. Welcome to my salon. An idiom is a figure of speech that is used to mean something other than its literal meaning.

1. Like, for example, if you say that someone is "flying off the handle" you're no longer referring to the lose axe heads of the 1800's that would literally fly off the handle if not wielded properly. At least I hope that's not what you're referring to.

And that's the first of many idiom origins that you're going to learn about with me today.

(Intro)

2. "Jump the shark" became an idiom meaning when a TV show takes an irreversible turn for the worse due to a 1977 episode of *Happy Days* in which Fonzie went water-skiing and literally jumped over a shark. *Arrested Development* later parodied this by having Henry Winkler's character jump over a shark on a dock. By the way, Henry Winkler: nicest guy I've ever met.

3. In 1867, John Bright was speaking before the British Parliament about a topic they didn't particularly care about. He said that trying to get them interested was like "flogging the dead horse" which is the first recorded use of "to beat (or flog) a dead horse".

4. "Speak of the devil" has been used since at least 1666 - mark of the beast - when Giovanni Torriano wrote, "The English say, Talk of the Devil and he's presently at your elbow." Back then, people believed that it was bad luck to mention the devil. Over time, the phrase evolved to mean anyone rather than just, you know, the actual Devil.

5. "Cup of tea" had positive associations starting in the 1800s, but the idiom was used to describe a person, as in "she's my cup of tea", beginning in the 1920s. This one came from - wait for it - Britain.

6. Why do we "ride shotgun"? This one isn't hard to figure out. In the wild west, which was totally wild, - watch the Crash Course U.S History episode about it - the person who sat in the coach next to the driver would often carry a shotgun to, you know, like, kill robbers. The practice had been common for much longer, of course, but the expression emerged in America in the early 1900s. Regardless, those people riding shotgun seem much more interesting than my typical road trip partners, who mostly just fall asleep with a bag of Doritos in their laps.

7. As you might be able to tell from my rippling, Adonis-like physique, I eat vegetables "once in a blue moon". A blue moon means two full moons happening in the same month, which is rare. It also means a delicious beer which you drink with an orange - that one is less rare. Anyway, the Maine Farmers Almanac started counting blue moons in 1819 when the book noted that there are sometimes thirteen full moons in a twelve-month year.

8. "Cold shoulder" is usually attributed to Sir Walter Scott's 1816 novel *The Antiquary*. Here (2:27) we see creepy-armless-lady giving the cold shoulder to Samwise Gamgee, although to be fair Sam is armed.

9. By the way, Sir Walter Scott is also probably responsible for "caught red-handed",

10. as well as the "apple of my eye". And arguably more importantly, he named an entire breed of terrier, the Dandie Dinmonts, which look like this (2:44). Oh my god, that is adorable.

11. Surprising, "skeleton in the closet" doesn't have dark, murderous origins. In 1816 William Henry Stole wrote, "The dread of being the cause of misery to posterity has prevailed over men to conceal the skeleton in the closet." The skeleton here is a metaphor for disease.

12. In 1649, King Charles II wrote a list of everyone who he thought was responsible for getting his father executed. After he was restored to the throne, 38 of 58 of those people were either killed or imprisoned. This was Charles II's blacklist.

13. And speaking of super-fun, not-at-all-boring historical figures from England's Restoration, John Milton coined the term "silver lining" in his play *Comus*. Milton's silver lining, as it turned out, would be that we're all still forced to study his work despite his blatant sexism.

14. "Bite the bullet" is likely a reference to surgeries in the 1800's when patients would literally bite a bullet to cope with the pain of having surgery without anesthesia. Alternatively, it might have evolved from the Indian Revolution when "bite the cartridge" meant the act of biting a cartridge full of gun powder in order to load rifles. Either way, boy am I glad I don't live in the past.

15. The expression "to win hands down" came from horse racing in the nineteenth century, when a jockey who was really far ahead could still win even if he took his hands off the reins a little bit. Now we just call that "showing off".

16. Back in the early 1800s, hunters started complaining about their dogs "barking up the wrong tree". This was common when a dog would spot prey but the prey would jump to another tree, leaving the dog confused and literally barking up the wrong tree. One of the earliest uses in print comes from none other than Davy Crockett.

17. Davy Crockett was also one of the first people who published the expression "head over heels" in reference to love. The expression itself had been used before but typically in reference to an actual motion, like a cartwheel, or a flip.

18. Speaking of hunting, "beat around the bush" has been around since at least the 1400s when hunters would literally beat bushes to scare birds or boars out of hiding. Wait, did someone say "boars"?! It's time to put another quarter in the staff pork chop party fund.

19. "Bury the hatchet" is also literal. Certain Native American tribes would bury a hatchet as a sign of peace after warring periods with other tribes. The earliest record of this tradition goes all the way back to the 1600s.

20. "Always a bridesmaid but never a bride" originated in a song by Fred W. Leigh in 1917 but it wasn't popular until it was featured in a print ad for Listerine. This was an incredibly successful ad campaign back in 1924 because, as we all know, once you buy mouthwash you're just one step away from true love.

21. In the screenplay for a 1935 film about Annie Oakley she says, "Close, Colonel, but no cigar." It's believed that fairs at the time often gave out cigars as prizes but the screenplay is given credit for making the phrase common. By the way, I wish fairs still gave out cigars as prizes as prizes because nowadays you just win goldfish and they are a gigantic time investment. I mean, I guess it's only a two day time investment because they die, but still!

22. "Pardon my French" probably evolved from a literal meaning. In the eighteenth century when the French language would seep into English conversations and writings, "pardon my French" was a way of acknowledging the language shift in case the listener didn't know French. And also, you know, bragging a little.

23. Originally, "cold turkey" meant to speak bluntly. It's believed that the phrase evolved to refer to abstaining from drugs either because it takes no time to prepare cold turkey, or because symptoms of withdrawal can make an addict look like and/or feel like a cold turkey. That phrase was popularized after Time Magazine used it in an article in the 1950s.

24. Chaucer invented the phrase "as busy as a bee" in *The Canterbury Tales*, and grandmas everywhere continue to be grateful for it.

25. "Peeping Tom" was a possibly fictional man who, according to folklore, watched noblewoman Lady Godiva ride naked through the streets of Coventry. So he wasn't really "peeping", he was just "watching". She was allegedly protesting unfair taxation. You know, as you do when you ride naked through the streets. But this story is probably fictional anyway, you'll be surprised to learn. Lady Godiva was alive in the eleventh century, but the legend can only be traced back to the thirteenth century. Regardless, George McFly of *Back to the Future* will forever be known as Peeping Tom.

26. Many claim that "spill the beans" dates back to the system of voting in ancient Greece, which was apparently done via beans so spilling them made the process inefficient, but in reality the first time it appeared in print was in the twentieth century in American literature.

27. However, if you're looking for idioms that really did originate in ancient times, look no further than "broken heart" which is attributed to the Bible.

28. The Bible also gave us "rise and shine",

29. "wolf in sheep's clothing",

30. "seeing eye to eye" and

31. "a leopard cannot change its spots". This thing is actually astonishingly hard to break. Most of those came from the King James Bible incidentally. Just think about that the next time you're singing 'Eye to Eye' along with the soundtrack to *A Goofy Movie*. Unless you don't own the soundtrack to *A Goofy Movie*, in which case, what are you doing with your life?

32. "Halcyon days" as in "the halcyon days of yore" can be traced all the way back to at least Ovid's *Metamorphoses* from 8 CE. The husband of the character Alcyone drowns so she also throws herself into the ocean, but the wind reunites them and they are turned into kingfishers, or halcyon birds, for some reason. Anyway, their reunion results in a peaceful time, hence the "halcyon days".

33. "Loophole" actually comes from castles in the Middle Ages. Little circular windows were built into castles so that it could be protected by a person standing inside the window with a bow and arrow. They were safe to shoot out of because it was practically impossible for an intruder to hit. The only way to attack a loophole would be to, like, climb the castle walls and then grab the person with the bow and arrow. At which point, guards would just shout, "He's climbing in your loopholes; he's snatching your people up. Hide your kids. Hide your wife." People who don't know get that reference are very confused right now.

34. Next time someone makes fun of your hashtags, remind them that teenagers are responsible for the oh-so-eloquent "get a life". That expression caught on in the early 1980s and it now has a place in our language and a lot of our YouTube comments, actually.

35. Okay, we return to the salon to finish up with some expressions we have Shakespeare to thank for, like "foaming at the mouth",

36. "dish fit for the gods",

37. "hot blooded",

38. "in stitches",

39. "green-eyed monster",

40. "wear your heart on your sleeve",

41. "one fell swoop", and of course everyone's favorite expression:

42. "how sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child". Not that I have a tiny baby at home or anything.

Thank you for watching Mental Floss here on YouTube, which is made with the help of all of these nice people.

Every week we endeavour to answer one of your mind-blowing questions. This week's question comes from drivingonwires, who asks, "Why does metal turn orange or red when heated?"

That's due to thermal radiation, my friend. My brother would give you like a four minute speech about it, but yeah, it all boils down to thermal radiation. Get it? Boils down.

By the way, Mental Floss isn't just a web series - it's also a real-life physical magazine, and there's lots of cool Mental Floss stuff you can get at the store. And if you use the code "YoutubeFlossers" you get 15% off, so check that out. Link in the doobly-doo. Thank you for watching, and best wishes.