

IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS IN ENGLISH

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Abstract:

This paper throws the light on a few idiomatic expressions in English. Idioms can be rooted in ancient Greek classics and from the Bible. Idioms may be defined as expressions peculiar to a language, because idioms don't always make sense and literally need to be familiarized with the meaning and usage of each idiom. The Bible has provided many idioms to the English language. Classical literature emerging from the myths and legends of Greece and Rome has given idiomatic and picturesque phrases to the English language. Some expressions coined by eminent writers are used as idiomatic expressions. Like she child is the father of the man: The character of a fully grown person is the product of childhood experiences (from the poem 'Rainbow' by William Wordsworth). As idioms are expressions which cannot be understood from their meanings, the best way of learning idioms is through comprehending the meaning and usage. They can also be learnt by practising through exercises in listening, speaking and writing. Acquiring fluency in English is undoubtedly one of the primary objectives of learning language.

Keywords: Idioms, Greek classics, the Bible, English etc

Introduction:

Idioms are often difficult to trace, but their roots may be in the ancient Greek classics or traceable to the Bible and more recently to the wealth of literature produced by the British and the American and other English –speaking nations of the world. Idioms enhance communication skills as they add richness to the language by enabling it to absorb new concepts in new ways. Idioms are an important part of everyday English as they are used both in written and spoken form. Idioms may be defined as expressions peculiar to a language, because idioms don't always make sense and literally need to be familiarized with the meaning and usage of each idiom. Learning idioms is fun, especially when compared to the idioms in our own language. English language wouldn't have been as colorful and vivid without idioms. Idiomatic expressions play a vital role in the English language and in fact the use of idioms is so widespread that an understanding of these expressions is integral to successful communication, be it listening, speaking, reading, or writing.

Idioms and their source

1. Biblical sources

The Bible has provided many idioms to the English language.

Examples:

- a. To turn the other cheek: to take no action against the person who has hurt or harmed one, especially to allow him to do it again (from Mathew).
- b. Forbidden fruit: anything that is more attractive because it is forbidden (from the Book of Genesis).

2. Classical sources

Classical literature emerging from the myths and legends of Greece and Rome have given idiomatic and picturesque phrases to the English language

Examples:

- a. Pyrrhic victory : ruinous victory (Pyrrhus, after his victory over the Romans, said : ‘one more such victory and we are ruined’).
- b. Fabian tactics: weakening the enemy by a series of minor skirmishes, avoiding full battle
(tactics similar to those used by Quintus Fabius, the Roman general, against Hannibal).

3. Literary sources

Some expressions coined by eminent writers are used as idiomatic expressions.

Examples:

- a. The child is the father of the man: The character of a fully grown person is the product of childhood experiences (from the poem ‘Rainbow’ by William Wordsworth)

- b. Hope springs eternal in the human breast: Human beings never lose hope in the face of difficulties (from Alexander Pope's poem, 'An Essay on Criticism').

4. Animal idioms from animal imagery

Many idioms are related to animal imagery as human life is inextricably linked with animals.

Examples:

- a. straight from the horse's mouth: information from a reliable source
- b. to smell a rat: to detect something suspicious
- c. black sheep: a bad character in the family
- d. snake in the grass: a person who cannot be trusted

5. Idioms based on parts of the body

Many idioms are related to parts of the body.

Examples:

- a. an itching palm: greed for money
- b. at arm's length: keep one at a distance
- c. to have a sweet tooth: a liking for sweets
- d. hit the nail on the head: judge correctly; say something exactly right

6. Idioms commonly used in newspapers, magazines and books

Examples:

- a. beat about the bush: evade or avoid the issue
- b. bolt from the blue: unexpected calamity/ danger
- c. between the devil and the deep sea: between two equal evils
- d. move heaven and earth: to use all available means to achieve an end
- e. storm in the teacup: a great fuss about nothing
- f. to cry over spilt milk: to cry over what cannot be altered or restored

Learning English idioms

As idioms are expressions which cannot be understood from their meanings, the best way of learning idioms is through comprehending the meaning and usage. They can also be learnt by practising through exercises in listening, speaking and writing. The most comprehensive method of learning is through dictionaries of idioms. Participation in workplace conversations and discussions also help in mastering idioms.

- In 16th century houses in England had thatched roofs and it was the only place for pets like dogs and cats. Whenever it rained heavily, the animals living on the roofs skipped and fell off the roof.

Thus the idiom referring to heavy rain is used to this day by all English speakers : 'it is raining cats and dogs'.

- Similarly the idiom 'to be on cloud nine' has been originated from the American weather bureau which identifies different types of clouds – the highest is found at over 10,000 metres is called 'cloud nine' which means high in the clouds – very happy and excited.

Conclusion

Acquiring fluency in English is undoubtedly one of the primary objectives of learning language. Idiomatic expressions not only add colour to English vocabulary but also help language learners understand English culture, penetrate into customs and lifestyle of English people and gain a deeper insight into the History.

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