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**Idioms and culture**

It is widely acknowledged that idioms should not be translated word-for-word, but nobody knows exactly why their overall meaning is so different from the meanings of their constituents. The thing is idioms are formed in specific circumstances in a specific period of time under specific conditions and they describe specific realities. These very specific times go by, vanish for good, a new reality comes to take the place of the old one, the circumstances which formed particular idioms sink into oblivion, but the idiomatic expression stays all the same in the minds of speakers.

Idioms are a cultural phenomenon rather than a linguistic one. Their origins may be hidden in:

1. The Bible
2. Mythology
3. Literature
4. History
5. Culture
6. Customs, traditions and beliefs
7. Sports and games
8. Film-making and cartoons

**1.**As a matter of fact, the Bible is a treasure trove of wisdom which is crystallized in idioms and sayings. All in all, there are more than 1000 idioms coming from the Bible. For example,

**To wear sackcloth and ashes** denotes ‘to be contrite, penitent or chagrined over something one has done’.

The quotation: ‘And I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes’

It was an ancient Hebrew custom to wear sackcloth dusted with ashes as a sign of humbleness in religious ceremonies.

**2.** It is no exaggeration to say that Greek and Roman mythology has exerted no small influence upon Western culture, literature and the English language.

**Pandora's box** is linked to [Greek mythology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_mythology). The ‘box’ was actually a large jar given to [Pandora](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pandora), which contained all the [evils](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evil) of the world. When Pandora opened the jar, the entire contents of the jar were released, but for one – hope. Today, opening Pandora's box means ‘creating evil that cannot be undone’.

**3.** A number of outstanding authors, like George Orwell, Geoffrey Chaucer and countless others contributed to the development of the English language and invented a wealth of fixed phrases which have lived through ages to our days. **Some (people) are more equal than others** denotes that although the members of a society appear to be equal, some get better treatment than others.

This phrase is used by one of the pigs in the book ‘Animal Farm’ by George Orwell.

**4.** Some idioms perform the function of historical milestones marking important memorable events.

**To cut the Gordian knot** signifies ‘to quickly solve a difficult problem by determined action’.

According to a legend, an intricate knot was tied by King Gordius of Phrygia and cut by Alexander the Great with his sword after hearing an oracle promise that whoever could undo it would be the next ruler of Asia.

**5.** In fact, language is a nation’s cultural memory.Language and culture are inseparable, and idioms represent the depositary of cultural phenomena, which are accumulated and logically stored with the current language means.

**Break a leg** stands for ‘I wish you luck’.

This phrase comes from the theater community. Theatrical slang calls the devices that raise and lower the side curtains on the stage 'legs'. So when an actor is told to 'break a leg' it means to get so much applause and curtain calls that the stage legs break.

**6.** Idioms inevitably reflect the unique mindset of people on different stages of their evolution, their language habits, customs and practices of different epochs.

**To bury the hatchet** stands for ‘making peace’.

This idiom comes from an old Native American custom in which the chiefs from warring tribes would bury their tomahawks signifying the end of hostilities between the tribes.

**7.** Sports and games idioms generally originate from a specific sport such as baseball or sailing and various games, especially from card games.

**To toe the line** means ‘to conform to a preset standard or norm’. This idiom comes from boxing. Prior to the adoption of the Queensberry rules for boxing in 1867, boxers would fight from a stationary position, placing their toes on a line drawn by the referee and remaining there until the end of the match.

**8.**Strangely enough, a lot of idioms are created by cartoon characters and film actors. Their catchy, vivid, and easy-to-remember phrases become popular with mass audiences and are thus introduced into the language.

**Cut to the chase** means ‘stop wasting time and do or say the important things that need to be done or said’

This expression comes from the device used in films of changing from a slower scene to a more exciting one, such as a car chase, to keep the audience interested.

In conclusion, idiomatic expressions provide English with a peculiar flavor and give it astounding variety, bright character and color. They help language learners understand English culture, penetrate into the customs and lifestyle of English people, and gain a deeper insight into English history.

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