
Opening Extract from...

Idiomantics

The Weird and Wonderful World of Popular Phrases

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INTRODUCTION

This book is the fruition of our abiding fascination with language. As writers, words are the tools of our trade. But more importantly, words are the tools required for life – for everyone. We think we know what words mean, at least when they are in our own language. Yet, in the case of the idiom, this isn't always so. There are many expressions in both British and American English whose origins are curious or shadowy or contested. And as for idioms from other languages, well, they are a *terra incognita*. Or, as one might say, all Greek to me.

So what is the special lure of idioms? The etymology of the term – via Latin from the Greek adjective *idios*; 'personal' or 'private' – straightaway hints at what's so endlessly interesting about them: their peculiarity. 'Peculiar' both in being particular or unique to the culture whence they come, and in the sense of being downright odd. To cite three random examples – from American English, Dutch and Italian – what on earth are *Swift-boating*, a *monkey sandwich story*, and *Mr Punch's Secret*? All is revealed within.

Idioms tend to lay bare nations' enthusiasms, fixations, antipathies and idiosyncrasies. In keeping with this, we felt free to indulge personal whims when choosing our material for *Idiomantics.* There's no great organising principle at work here, nor do we make any claims to comprehensiveness or complete up-to-dateness. Sure, most phrases in the book are in current usage, but where there was a good yarn to be spun, we haven't let a whiff of obsolescence put us off. This book is less about the destination and more about the fun of getting there (or getting lost, as the case may be).

To nail our colours firmly to the mast: *Idiomantics* is a rag-bag of items beachcombed from the stranger shores of language. Some fascinating information about history, politics, art and literature came to light as we rummaged through our finds. This we now pass on to you, dear reader, with the hope that you'll find it as enthralling as we did. Like guides on some latter-day Grand Tour, we offer it in a spirit of unabashed dilettantism – for all its sometimes negative connotations, it's worth recalling that the root of this word is the Italian verb meaning 'to delight'.

Philip Gooden and Peter Lewis
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Chapter 1

CURIOUS COVES

The world of idioms is peopled by a large cast of characters, many of them familiar, some less so. Certain phrases in English involve well-known figures from the Bible: 'not to know someone from Adam', 'hard as Pharaoh's heart', 'a Job's comforter'. Even here, though, there's plenty of scope for obscurity. Who remembers who Methuselah was (as in as 'old as Methuselah')? Or knows what's being referred to in the 'law of the Medes and Persians' or 'bow down in the house of Rimmon'?

Beyond Biblical allusions, idiomatic language invokes a whole host of proper names whose origins are now lost forever. We trot out phrases like 'the life of Riley', 'the real McCoy' and 'all my eye and Betty Martin' with no idea who these individuals were, or if they even existed.

This chapter explores some of the factual and fictional characters who have lent their names to everyday phrases. Unashamedly, though, we have chosen to major here on foreign usages, some of which have a surprising provenance…

LAUGH LIKE BOLLE ON THE MILK FLOAT (German)

Sich wie die Bolles uffn Milchwagen amüsieren – **to laugh like a drain/be as happy as Larry**

Berlin grew like Topsy in the 19th century. Its population of just over 170,000 in 1800 had mushroomed to 826,000 by 1871, the year the Second German Empire was founded. And it kept on climbing steeply: it had risen to two million around the turn of the century and four million by the start of the First World War. A vastly increased supply of goods and services

was needed to keep pace with this massive expansion and the period witnessed the rise of some dynamic entrepreneurs. Carl Julius Andreas Bolle (1832–1910) was one such: starting out as a humble bricklayer's apprentice, by the 1860s he had moved on to selling ice for keeping perishable goods fresh, chipped from the winter floes on Berlin's rivers. He then diversified into selling sea fish, growing fruit and making preserves. But his most successful venture by far was the dairy he founded in 1881. By the following year, he had a fleet of 56 horse-drawn carts delivering fresh milk to the metropolis. These floats, with their characteristic bell to attract customers, were a familiar sight on the city's streets for decades.

Bolle is a common Berlin surname, and some time before the advent of Carl's dairy business, a popular song in the local dialect about a typically rumbustious, happy-go-lucky Berliner of this name had been doing the rounds. Its refrain ran: *Aber dennoch hat sich Bolle janz köstlich amüsiert* ('But Bolle just laughed it all off'). In time – and a testament to how ubiquitous Carl Bolle's product had become – this catchphrase was embellished with *uffn Milchwagen* ('on the milk float'). Nobody quite knows why: it could simply be that milkmen soon gained a reputation as cheery, chirpy fellows. But one commentator has suggested that Bolle's employees got a kick out of driving their carts fast through puddles, drenching passers-by. This would lend their amusement that quintessentially German edge of *Schadenfreude*.

THE REAL McCOY (US)

The real thing, the genuine article

There are various explanations as to who or what the original McCoy (or MacKay) was. The most plausible ultimate derivation

is from the Scottish distillers Mackay & Co who, if not the creators of the phrase 'the real Mackay', certainly used it in their advertising from the 1870s. Within a few years, and after crossing the Atlantic, the Mackay part of the expression mutated into the Irish form of McCoy. Once in the US, it attached itself to at least three figures. One was a cattle baron, Joseph McCoy, who was shipping up to half a million head of cattle every year from Kansas to Chicago during the 1870s. Another was Elijah McCoy, the Canadian-born son of fugitive slaves who invented a lubricating cup for oiling a locomotive while it was in motion and so eliminated the need for frequent stops. A third was the boxer 'Kid' McCoy (real name Norman Selby), who supposedly had to face down imitators and who, when he won a match in San Francisco, was headlined as the 'real McCoy'.

Since the expression is designed to distinguish the fake or the inferior from the genuine article, the association with the boxer is the one most likely responsible for the continued currency of the 'real McCoy'. The cattle baron was not competing against anyone using the same name, and although there have been some attempts to link Elijah to the phrase – on the grounds that railway engineers looking for the best lubricant would ask for the 'real McCoy' – these seem to belong more to a revisionary version of African-American historical achievement than to any usage which emerged at the time. It is ironically apt, however, that there should be several competing claimants to the title of the 'real McCoy'.

KNOW MORE THAN LEPE (Spanish)

*Saber más (*or *Más listo) que Lepe* – **to be very smart/a fount of knowledge/a walking encyclopedia**

Nowadays, our models of egg-headedness are scientists or

witty cultural commentators – think Stephen Hawking or Stephen Fry. A sign of these secular times; but in 18th-century Spain, when this phrase was coined, the epitome of a person with a brain the size of a planet was a man of the cloth. Pedro de Lepe y Dorantes was born in 1641 at Sanlúcar de Barrameda in the Cádiz region of Andalucia, taught humanities at the universities of Seville and Salamanca, was ordained a priest in 1667 and appointed Bishop of Calahorra and la Calzada (in the Rioja region) in 1686, a post he remained in until his death in 1700.

Lepe earned his reputation for sagacity from his authorship of the catchily titled *Catecismo católico, en el cual se contiene la explicación de los principales misterios de nuestra santa católica fe y las demás cosas que debe el cristiano saber para su salvación* ('Catholic Catechism, in which is contained an explanation of all the principal mysteries of our Sacred Catholic faith and of other matters that any Christian needs to know for his salvation'). This handbook of religious observance became a bestseller among the God-fearing people of Spain in the 17th and 18th centuries, providing comprehensive answers to all questions regarding the Seven Sacraments (Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Communion, Confession, Marriage, Holy Orders and the Anointing of the Sick).

As uncritical reverence for the Church declined, so the idiom was tweaked for comic effect: later variants include *saber más que Lepe, su hija y su hijo* ('to know more than Lepe, his daughter and his son' – a scurrilous, but by no means implausible, suggestion in the case of a Catholic priest) and the neatly rhyming *saber más que Lepe, Lepijo y el que lo dijo* ('to know more than Lepe, Lepijo [a diminutive form] and the person who coined the phrase').

The Spanish historian Pedro Voltes (1926–2009) claims that the idiom derives not from Pedro de Lepe but Juan de Lepe, an earlier Spanish adventurer. According to Voltes' 1994 book *El reverso de la historia* (vol. 4), after roaming far and wide, Lepe fetched up in England in the late 1400s, where he became friends with King Henry VII. When they were engaged on one occasion in their favourite pastime of playing cards, the king staked control over his realm for one day on a hand, and lost. From his 24-hour reign over Tudor England, the Spaniard reputedly acquired enough wealth to return to his native country and live in comfort for the rest of his life.

FURPHY (Australian)

A rumour

John Furphy was a manufacturer of farm equipment in the state of Victoria at the close of the 19th century. His most notable product was an item which he never patented, a water cart consisting of a 180-gallon iron cylinder on a horse-drawn wooden frame. The name of the manufacturer was painted in large capitals on each side of the tank and, Furphy being a devout man, moralising slogans were inscribed on the rear of the cylinder. The carts were created for transporting water on farms and were used in large numbers by the Australian army in the First World War. Once towed into camp, the water carts were usually parked close to the latrines, the one area where the men were able to gossip and exchange stories away from the watchful eye of the officers. In addition, the drivers of the 'furphies' were themselves notorious for spreading rumours from place to place. In this way, the name of the manufacturer/truck swiftly became a slang term for a rumour or even a lie.

Current use equates a furphy with a falsehood ('Being both fat and fit may not be a furphy'[1]; 'Furphies a'plenty in long ANZUS alliance'[2]). This expression, which has never travelled outside Australia, is the equivalent of the US 'scuttlebutt'.

There are a couple of curious sanitary equivalents to 'furphy', also drawn from service slang even if not in current use. One is 'Elsan gen', referring to information which can't be relied on and deriving from the trade name of the portable lavatories that use chemicals to neutralise the waste. Elsans – the word is an amalgamation of the first two initials of the inventor Ephraim Louis Jackson and 'sanitation' – were installed on bombers at the same time as 'gen' emerged as RAF slang for 'information'. The other word from the Second World War is 'latrinogram', a technically advanced version of the 'latrine rumour' which first saw the light of day in 1918. (see also **Scuttlebutt**)

GET YOURSELF FRANZED (German)

Sich verfranzen – **to get hopelessly lost**

This verb is still in current German usage, but derives from a long-since obsolete bit of pilots' argot. During the First World War, when everything about flying was still very much on a wing and a prayer, navigation was rudimentary in the extreme. In two-seater aircraft – the very first military machines, used initially for battlefield spotting, plus the occasional crude bomb drop, by hand – this involved the observer consulting a map, a watch and a compass in order to work out the plane's speed and

1 'Being both fat and fit may not be a furphy' *Sydney Morning Herald,* 25 March 2010.

2 'Furphies a'plenty in long ANZUS alliance' *Canberra Times,* 18 November 2011.

course and so determine its position. The generic term for a navigator/observer in the Imperial German flying corps was 'Franz', while that for a pilot was 'Emil' (a practice echoed in RAF slang for a bomber's rear gunner in the Second World War – 'tail-end Charlie'). From this there arose the verb *franzen* (now defunct), meaning 'to navigate by dead reckoning'. By extension, to go astray was conveyed by the reflexive *sich verfranzen*; in German the prefix *ver-* frequently negates a verb, as in *lernen* (to learn) and *verlernen* (to forget something you've learnt).

But why 'Franz' and 'Emil'? This may have something to do with standard voice procedure in radio communication. The German equivalent of 'Echo', which in the NATO spelling alphabet represents the letter E in an aircraft's call sign, is 'Emil'. And although F is now 'Friedrich' and not 'Franz', it may well be that the latter was the original designation. The alphabet has certainly changed several times. The Nazis, for example, were so thoroughgoing in their racism that they expunged all Jewish-sounding names such as David, Nathan, Samuel and Zacharias from the alphabet, replacing them with Dora, Nordpol, Siegfried and Zeppelin. Most, though not all, of the former names have since been reinstated.

THE FULL MONTY (UK)

Everything, the lot

Just as the Americans have their 'whole nine yards', the British have 'the full Monty', two expressions which are identical in meaning ('the works', 'the whole lot') and equally obscure in origin. Of the two, 'the full Monty' is the more recent, with the earliest dictionary citation being dated to 1985 although the term appears to have provided the name

of a Manchester chip shop before that according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*.[3] The expression is sometimes laid at the door of Field Marshal Montgomery, victor of the battle of El Alamein and famously nicknamed 'Monty'. Suggestions that the 'full' relates to his long-winded briefings or the large number of medals he wore seem more the product of desperation than common sense, while the connection with the full English breakfasts which Monty apparently enjoyed each morning during the North African campaign ignore the relatively recent emergence of the phrase 'full English' to describe breakfast (like the ploughman's lunch, the meal is not really a tradition at all). No, the Field Marshal can be safely dismissed.

The 'full Monty' is often connected to the chain of tailors founded by Montague Burton. Customers in search of a three-piece suit would supposedly ask for 'the full Monty'. The northern links for the earliest citations of the term together with the Yorkshire roots of the company make this at least a possible origin. The expression was really given a boost by the eponymous 1997 film which featured a group of unemployed Sheffield steel workers who regain some control over their lives by forming a Chippendales-style group, stripping down before crowds of local lasses and going the 'full Monty'. (see also **the whole nine yards**)

3 'Earlier currency is app. implied by the following names of fish and chip shops: 1982 Yellow pages: Manchester North 264/3 Fully Monty Chippy The, 30 Townley St, Middleton; Fullmonty Chippy, 61 Radclyffe St, Chadderton. Oxford English Dictionary. Oxford: Oxford University Press.