

Book Reviews

Humble pie and cold turkey: English expressions and their origins (a review)

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Reviewed by Victoria A. Borisenko

Victoria A. Borisenko Southern Federal University, Russia v-bor@yandex.ru

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Idioms can be a curse for foreign language learners. First, it's not obvious what they mean. Secondly, we don't know where the expression comes from and thirdly, even if we have a similar concept expressed by an idiom in our own language it uses completely different language to do so. A common example in German is *dienst is dienst und schnaps ist schnaps*, which translates literally as *work is work and schnapps is schnapps* (an alcoholic drink). However, the comparable expression in English is *Don't mix business and pleasure*. Not obvious to a speaker of German learning English and definitely not to an English speaker learning German.

This is why appreciating the etymology of words and phrases to understand how they came to mean what they mean today is an important linguistic skill, as illustrated in Caroline Taggart's book about the origins of many common expressions used in everyday English. This makes them easier to understand. Let's take the two expressions in the title as an example. To eat *Humble Pie* means to make an apology when you make a bad mistake. But what is a humble pie? According to Caroline Taggart, in rich households the members of the family would eat the meat of an animal, and the servants would eat what remains – the heart or the liver

entrails – which were known at the time as *umbles*, often cooked in a pie with flour. So, eating *umble pie* is what the servants did while the landowners and their families feasted on the meat. The servants were humble in relation to the landowners, showing humility in their presence. So, *to eat humble pie* gradually came to mean to make a humiliating apology when something goes wrong or someone makes a bad mistake, as in *The journalist was forced to eat humble pie when analysis of the statistics exposed a number of inaccuracies in her report*'.

No one seems to know where the other expression in the title *Cold Turkey* comes from. In English to *talk cold turkey* meant to talk frankly. That later became simply *talk turkey*, to get to the point. The phrase to *go cold turkey* means to withdraw completely from doing something potentially harmful, such as drugtaking or drinking alcohol. The evidence suggests that the original expressions came from America and possibly the eating of turkey to commemorate the Thanksgiving ceremony for the safe arrival of the pilgrims from Britain in America in 1621.

Some 400 colloquial words and idiomatic expressions are explained in the book and listed in a very useful index at the back. After a brief introduction the book

is divided into 8 chapters. Chapter 1 – *Big Wigs and Festive Boards* – focuses on words and expressions using homes, furnishings, and fashion. Chapter 2 – *Scapegoats and White Elephants* – focuses on expressions featuring food, animals, and birds. Chapter 3 – *Olive Branches and Apple Pies* – deals with nature and food, while Chapters 4 – *Thumbs up for the Grass Roots* – and 5 – *Running Amok with the Devil to Pay* – explore the origin of expressions deriving from legal practices and government and the military. Don't worry if the titles leave you lost. The expressions they contain are explained in the book. Chapter 6 – *Currying Favour with No Holds Barred* – explores expressions based on sports and Chapter 7 – *Assassins, Thugs and Morticians* – examines colour, the body and medicine and expressions dealing with death. Chapter 8 – *The Tower of Babel and Seventh Heaven* – is devoted to names, gardens, to the skies above us, and to conclude, theatrical expressions.

The book also contains references, one exceptionally useful example of which is The Phrase Finder which the author herself highly recommends. The organisation of the book will be helpful to researchers looking for examples of expressions relating to a particular area, for example food.

So, what does it all mean? The chapter headings themselves are full of idiomatic expressions. A *Bigwig* in Chapter 1 is an important person, the name being derived from the long hairpieces called wigs worn by important men in the 17th and early 18th centuries. *Festive Board* refers to the food on the table at a festival of some kind. *Scapegoat*, in Chapter 2, is the person who takes the blame when something goes wrong even if they are not responsible and refers back to the Book of Leviticus in the Old Testament of the Bible, while a *White Elephant* comes from a tradition in ancient Siam (Thailand) and refers to something which is considered useless and expensive. When you offer an *Olive Branch* in Chapter 3, again a reference to the Bible, you do something to restore or maintain peaceful relations, and an *Apple Pie* refers to arranging things in *apple pie order*, i.e., perfectly organised. The French are credited with the origin of this concept, but the precise reference is not clear.

In Chapter 4, A *Thumbs Up* sign, with the thumb of one hand signifies encouragement and the *Grass Roots* represent the general population, the people you must convince to support you if you are to be successful. Appealing to the grass roots is an important tool in politics to encourage voters in elections. However, in Chapter 5, if things aren't handled carefully people may *Run Amok*, i.e., go wild and behave very badly. As a result, there'll be *The Devil to Pay*, a very bad outcome. The Devil in this case was the seams of the wooden planks that formed the keel of a ship before the 1830s which would cause the ship to sink if you didn't paint them with hot pitch to stop sea water entering.

In Chapter 6 you *Curry Favour*, do and say nice things to get the support of influential people, an expression derived from *currying Fauvel*, a medieval French story about an important horse and if there is a disagreement you may attack with *No Holds Barred*, doing whatever you have to do to win no matter how violent. No holds barred is derived from the British Queensbury rules in the 19th century which set regulations for the sports of boxing and wrestling.

An *Assassin* in Chapter 7 is a killer of a prominent figure, while a *Thug* is a violent robber. Both terms have their origin in medieval times. A *Mortician* is term coined in American English to mean a person responsible for looking after the dead, just as a physician, a doctor, is responsible keeping people alive. The British English equivalent would be *undertaker* or *funeral director*. Finally, in Chapter 7, the *Tower of Babel* is the tower mentioned in the Bible where everyone spoke different languages and could not understand each other (incidentally, this is not included in the index.) and *Seventh Heaven* describes a state of total happiness. Being in the seventh heaven is similar to being on *cloud nine*, an expression denoting extreme delight.

Humble Pie and Cold Turkey is a very enjoyable read. I would recommend it for reference when you come across a colloquial expression you don't know the meaning of. At higher levels it could also be the basis of a language quiz-guessing the meaning of a colloquial phrase. Above all, it's a resource for researchers and for teachers who want not just to explain meaning but also the origin of colloquial words and phrases.

VICTORIA A. BORISENKO

Southern Federal University | 105 Bolshaya Sadovaya Str., 344006 Rostov-on-Don, Russia
v-bor@yandex.ru