



Adult Learning Within Reach

Member Lecture – 8 February 2024

English: a figure of speech?
Janet Wilson, WEA tutor

Questions answered post-lecture

Q1 Why do we cry ‘blue murder’ and not red or bloody murder?

This is a really interesting example of one of those idioms that we may use on an everyday basis, and only wonder about when we reflect on the relationship between the colour and the action. According to the [English Stack Exchange](#) there are several possible explanations for using the idiom ‘blue murder’. One is that ‘blue murder’ is a euphemism for the more literal ‘bloody murder’ which is used in US English, but which may be considered offensive in British English. Another explanation is that ‘blue murder’ is a translation of the French idiom ‘morbleu’ which itself is a euphemism for ‘mort de Dieu’ which is a blasphemy meaning ‘death of God’.

Q2 Is another origin of ‘to let the cat out of the bag’ from cat ‘o’ nine tails from the navy (bosun disciplining a sailor)?

Yes, very possibly indeed. A lot of idioms may have more than one possible origin, and sometimes it is not possible to determine which source is the original. For example, it is possible that the saying ‘Has the cat got your tongue?’ stated when someone is not speaking, originates from the practice of sailors being punished (with the cat o’ nine tails) if they spoke out of turn.

Q3 I lived in French-speaking Belgium for many years and was amused by the expression ‘filer a l’anglais’ – to slip away like an Englishman. Similar but different to our ‘to take French leave’. Might this originate in the British historical warring with France?

This is a really interesting saying. Indeed, I remember a friend from Eastern Europe telling me that there was a saying in their country which when translated meant ‘Don’t leave like an Englishman’ e.g. ‘Don’t leave without saying goodbye’. Yet, a casual search on the Internet, shows that the idioms about which nation leaves without saying goodbye, are highly variable and, I would say, related to historical contact and stereotypes about different nations. I think in English we may say ‘taking French Leave’ or we may experience an ‘Irish Goodbye’ which have similar meanings.

Countries referenced in idioms for ‘Leaving without saying goodbye’ – reddit.com

Useful links and resources for further reading

Books

Idioms – Origins and Meanings: A Dictionary of Popular Sayings, Phrases and Expressions – J Hartwell (2023)

Humble Pie and Cold Turkey: English Expressions and Their Origins – C Taggart (2021)

Why Do We Say That? 101 Idioms, Phrases, Sayings and Facts!: A Brief History on Where They Come From – S Matthews (2021)

Links

[20 English Idioms with their Meanings and Origins - Oxford Royale - oxford-royale.com](https://www.oxford-royale.com)

[Learn The History Behind These 66 Commonly Used Old Sayings - Bored Panda](https://www.boredpanda.com/idioms/)

[idiomdictionary.com](https://www.idiomdictionary.com)

Forthcoming WEA courses by Janet Wilson

History: Why do we say that? Idioms, Expressions and sayings in English - date to be confirmed, keep an eye out on the website.