Idioms–Their Meaning and Origin

It is often not possible to understand an idiom by looking at the individual words. Idioms have developed over time and often seem random to us. They heavily rely on analogies and metaphors. The key to understanding English idioms is **never to look at them or read them in a literal sense**—the words just won't make sense together. Instead, we need to understand them in context so you can understand their true meaning.

Give a cold shoulder

Meaning: to disregard someone or be indifferent towards someone

Image Source: Creativecommons

Origin:

The idiom can be traced back to the early 1800s to the work *The Antiquary*, written by Sir Walter Scott

In medieval England, it was customary to give a guest a cold piece of meat from the shoulder of mutton, pork or beef when the host felt it was time for the guest to leave.

Bite the bullet

Meaning: To decide to do something unpleasant

Origin:

The phrase was first recorded by Rudyard Kipling in his 1891 novel The Light that Failed.

In the olden days, when doctors were short on anaesthesia or time during a battle, they would ask the patient to bite down on a bullet to cope with the pain during surgery or amputation.

Break the ice

Meaning: To break off a conflict or to get the conversation going when strangers meet.

Origin:

The first recorded use of the phrases can be traced back to the 17th century (1678) when Samuel Butler used it in his poem Hudibras "The Oratour"

When ships were the most important means of transportation and means of trade, at they would

get stuck during the winter because of ice formation. The receiving country would send small ships to "break the ice" to clear a way for the trade ships. This gesture showed affiliation and understanding between two territories.

Image Source: Ginger software

Barking up the wrong tree

Meaning: To be pursuing a mistaken or misguided line of thought or course of action, a false lead

Origin:

The origin of the idiom dates back to early 1800s America, when hunting with packs of dogs was very popular. The term was used when the clever prey animals such as raccoons would trick the dogs into believing they were up a certain tree. The dogs would continue to bark, assuming that the prey is still in the tree.

Caught red-handed

Meaning: To be caught in the act of doing something wrong

Origin:

The use of the phrase can be traced back to

15th-century Scotland and Scottish law.

The law ordered any person to be punished for butchering an animal that wasn't his own. The only way the person could be convicted is if he was caught with the animal's blood still on his hands.

Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater

Meaning: Don't discard something valuable things along with something undesirable.

Origin:

This idiom is derived from a German proverb.

This phrase originated from a practice in the medieval times when there was scarcity of water. The entire family bathed in the same water without changing it! The adult

males would bathe first, then the females, leaving the children and babies to go last. By the time the babies got in, the water was clouded with filth. The poor mothers had to take extra care that their babies were not thrown out with the bathwater.