

Grammar Guru 13

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How do you like this conversation?

Mani: How are you?

Mini: In the pink of health.

Mani: How's your father?

Mini: Well, he kicked the bucket.

Mani: I'm sorry to hear that. He was a very active man.

Mini: Quite, busy as a bee.

Every reply has an idiomatic expression in it, but such profuse use of idioms and clichés is rather amusing. The speaker seems to have lost control over what he is saying and the language has taken over, creating the response on its own. Idioms are effective in the right place at the right time; but we need to guard against their overuse.

What are *idioms*? An expression like *turn up* meaning 'arrive' or *break even* meaning 'make neither profit nor loss' is difficult to understand, because its meaning is different from the meaning of the separate words in the expression. Idioms are special to one language and cannot be translated word for word.

Short verbs like *bring, put, give* or *look*, used with prepositions or adverb particles like

up, out, in, and *after* are often idiomatic.

Examples:

She just doesn't know how to bring up children.

Can you look after my dog while I am away?

Conventional word combinations or collocations are also idiomatic. For example, we say *Thanks a lot* but not *Thank you a lot*; *A golden opportunity*, but not *A golden chance*. Mistakes arise when we forget these collocations:

The news of the bomb blast came as a bolt from the sky. (Wrong)

The news of the bomb blast came as a bolt from the blue. (Correct)

He fell from the fire into the frying pan. (Wrong)

He felt he had fallen from the frying pan into the fire. (Correct)

The origins of idioms are quite fascinating. In her book *The Real McCoy*, Georgia Hole traces the true stories behind idioms. When I talk of your *salad days*, I refer to the time when you were young and inexperienced. This expression is one of Shakespeare's inventions, occurring in 'Antony and Cleopatra'. Cleopatra says, "My salad days, when I was green in my judgement." Shakespeare uses the word *salad* as a clever pun on the word *green*, which symbolizes inexperience.

A white elephant, meaning 'a useless possession that is expensive to maintain', has an interesting story behind it. The rare albino elephant was regarded as holy in Asian countries. The kings of Siam (Indonesia) had

the custom of presenting a white elephant to a courtier whom they did not like. The unfortunate recipient could not refuse the gift; nor could he give it away for fear of displeasing the king. Finally, he was ruined financially by the cost of looking after the elephant.

Should we make a conscious effort to acquire idioms and use them in our speech and writing? This is neither feasible nor desirable. Even if we use non-idiomatic language, we will be understood. We generally learn the most common idioms with the rest of our English. In fact, if we consciously include idioms in our speech, the effect will be quite amusing! Here's an idioms-quiz for you. Answer each question with an idiom.

- a) Why didn't the abominable snowman ask the girl for a date?
- b) Why did the millionaire marry the cleaning lady?

- c) Why is a deep sea diver always sad?
- d) Why did the man in expensive clothes get the job?

Answers:

- a) Because he got cold feet!
- b) Because she swept him off his feet!
- c) Because his friends always let him down!
- d) Because he was well suited for the job!

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