

Idioms

By the skin of my teeth

Meaning

The expression is a Hebrew one that first appeared in this form in the Geneva Bible (1560). In Job 19:20, it reads:

My bone cleaveth to my skin and to my flesh, and I am escaped with the skin of my teeth.

That expression has evolved in meaning and has come to **mean**:

narrowly escaping a situation by the thinnest margin imaginable. For what can be thinner than the non-existent skin on our teeth?

Green eyed monster

Meaning

Comes from Shakespeare's *Othello* and casting about for a vivid way to describe jealousy, the Bard of Avon remembered that many cats have green eyes. Not necessarily correctly, he seems to have considered cats to be cruel and vindictive.

Therefore, in *Othello* (Act III), he called jealousy the green-eyed monster - comparing it with a cat that to a human appears to play with the bird or mole it has captured and is about to eat.

Let the cat out of the bag

Meaning: Disclose a secret

Relates to the fraud of substituting a cat for a piglet at markets. If you *let the cat out of the bag* you disclosed the trick - and avoided buying a pig in a poke (bag).

A skeleton in the closet

Meaning: A secret source of shame, potentially ruinous if exposed, which a person or family makes efforts to conceal.

The phrase 'a skeleton in the closet' was coined in England in the 19th century. 'A skeleton in the closet' undoubtedly originated as an allusion to an apparently irreproachable person or family having a guilty secret waiting to be uncovered. The close-at-hand domestic imagery of a closet or cupboard gives a sense of the ever-present risk of discovery. What isn't clear is whether the origin of the phrase lies in fiction or with real life, so to speak, skeletons'.

Speak of the devil"

Is the short form of the idiom "Speak of the devil and he doth appear" (or its alternative form "speak of the devil and he shall appear.").

Meaning:

It is used when an object of discussion unexpectedly becomes present during the conversation. For example, if Beth and Lance start discussing Brian while he isn't in the room, and Brian walks into the room, Beth or Lance might say, "Speak of the devil!"

It can also be used about a topic that quickly becomes relevant, such as the onset of rain or a car breaking down. Used in this sense it can be seen as an alternative to the phrase "tempting fate".

Deriving from the Middle Ages, this proverb (which was, and to a certain extent still is, rendered as "*Talk of the Devil...*") was a superstitious prohibition against speaking directly of the Devil or of evil in general, which was considered to incite that party to appear, generally with unfortunate consequences. The phrase lost its overt message during the 19th century, during which it became a warning against eavesdroppers ("No good of himself does a listener hear, Speak of the devil he's sure to appear"), and by the 20th century had taken on its present meaning.

'to have a chip on your shoulder'

Meaning:

One carries a chip on one's shoulder as a form of physical challenge, inviting opponents to knock the chip off and so provoke a fight. These fights began in 1756 when navy laws changed so that ship workers could no longer take home large quantities of timber and were restricted to carrying whatever they could carry on their shoulder. The concept is now metaphorical, describing people who hold a grudge or grievance that readily provokes fury or disputation.

'it cost me an arm and a leg'

Meaning:

A large, possibly exorbitant, amount of money. Portrait painters used to charge more for larger paintings and that a head and shoulders painting was the cheapest option, followed in price by one which included arms and finally the top of the range 'legs and all' portrait.

'when pigs fly'

Meaning:

A humorous or sarcastic remark, used to indicate the unlikeliness of an event. The original version of the succinct 'pigs might fly' was 'pigs fly with their tails forward', which is first found in a list of proverbs in the 1616 edition of John Withals's English-Latin dictionary - *A Shorte Dictionarie for Yonge Begynners*:

'Pigs fly in the ayre with their tayles forward.'

Meaning:

Other creatures were previously cited in similar phrases - 'snails may fly', 'cows might fly' etc., but it is pigs have stood the test of time as the favoured image of an animal that is

particularly unsuited to flight. It is probably the bulkiness of the creatures and their habit of rooting in earth that suggests an intensely ramping nature

'my cup of tea'

Meaning:

In the early 20th century, a 'cup of tea' was such a synonym for acceptability that it became the name given to a favoured friend, especially one with a boisterous, life-enhancing nature. William de Morgan, the Edwardian artist and novelist, used the phrase in the novel *Somehow Good*, 1908, and went on to explain its meaning:

"He may be a bit hot-tempered and impulsive... otherwise, it's simply impossible to help liking him." To which Sally replied, borrowing an expression from Ann the housemaid, that Fenwick was a cup of tea. It was metaphorical and descriptive of invigoration.

People or things with which one felt an affinity began to be called 'my cup of tea' in the 1930s. Nancy Mitford appears to be the first to record that term in print, in the comic novel *Christmas Pudding*, 1932:

I'm not at all sure I wouldn't rather marry Aunt Loudie. She's even more my cup of tea in many ways.

'Sealed with a loving kiss'

Meaning:

The full version of the acronym SWALK. SWALK was often written on envelopes sent by servicemen to sweethearts during World War II (WWII). It was a polite alternative to the risqué 'NORWICH' ((k)nickers off ready when I come home).