ENGLISH IDIOMS WHICH ORIGINATE IN SOME FAMOUS QUOTATIONS

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Abstract: Our article aims at focusing on phrases belonging to the idiomatic linguistic compartment, which had as a source of inspiration a lot of famous English quotations. A lot of well-known expressions taken out from different books, poems, songs, cartoons, magazines, fairytales, as well as phrases uttered by politicians, have become part of the language. There are phrases which are known and used all over the world, most of them bearing interesting meanings. All these quotes are used in different situations by different people, in an attempt to offer advice or underline certain ideas, principles and values of a given society. Our article is focused on this particular domain of the English phraseology, since famous quotations have had a profound influence on the English language.

Keywords: quote, book, poem, song, Shakespeare.

The domain of the English idioms that originate in some famous quotations is bountiful. We have tried to render a list, as comprehensible as possible, comprising a variety of idiomatic expressions. The expressions are arranged alphabetically, each one of them is explained and an example is provided. Unless a word is used in all parts of the English-speaking world, the country of origin or the country in which the word is most prevalent is given between brackets. Each entry contains a note on the origin of the idiom. We have had as a reference book *"Oxford Idioms. Dictionary for Learners of English"*[1]. Here are some examples:

- *a babe in the woods* (American English) = a person who lacks experience of life and who is too willing to trust other people; e.g. *I am a babe in the woods when it comes to money investment.* This idiom comes from an old song *The Children in the Woods* in which two children are left alone in the woods by a man who was paid to kill them.
- *a brave new world* = a situation that is meant to improve people's lives but is often a source of extra problems; e.g. *The government promised us a brave new world of prosperity and well-being*. This idiom comes from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The expression was later used by Aldous Huxley as the title of his most famous book, in which a vision of the future was described.
- *a catch-22 situation* = a difficult situation from which there is no escape because you need to do one thing before doing a second, and you can not do the second thing before doing the first; e.g. *No one wants to support me until I am successful, but I cannot succeed without any support. Catch-22* is the title of a novel by Joseph Heller, in which the main character pretends to be crazy in order to avoid dangerous situations in war. The authorities say that he cannot be crazy if he is concerned about his own safety.
- *a dog in the manger* = someone who selfishly stops other people from enjoying something which he / she cannot enjoy; e.g. *He behaves like a dog in the manger whenever he refuses to give his little brother the toys he wants*. This phrase comes from Aesop's fable

[1] *Oxford Idioms. Dictionary for Learners of English*, Oxford University Press, 2006

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about a dog which lay in a manger (= a long open box) filled with lay. In this way he stopped the other animals eating the hay, even if he could not eat it himself.

- *a double whammy* (American English) = two unpleasant situations that happen at the same time and cause problems for someone / something; e.g. *My wife suffered a double whammy when her car broke down the same day she was robbed.* This idiom comes from the 1950's American cartoon *Lil Abner*. One of the characters could *shoot a whammy* (= use magic power to make something bad happen to somebody) by pointing a finger with one eye open, or a *double whammy* with both eyes open.
- *a Jekyll and Hyde* = a person with two separate personalities, one good and one evil; e.g. *I don't understand how Tom can be so rude; I have always considered him the nicest person on earth. He is a real Jekyll and Hyde.* This idiom comes from Robert Louis Stevenson's novel *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, in which Dr. Jekyll takes a drug which separates the good and bad sides of his personality into two characters. All the negative aspects go into the character of Mr. Hyde.
- *all's well that ends well* = if the final result is good, earlier difficulties are not important; e.g. *I know how hard you have worked to become a doctor. But you know the saying: All's well that ends well.* This is the title of a play by Shakespeare.
- *an ugly duckling* (familiar speech) = a person or thing that at first does not seem attractive or likely to succeed but that later becomes successful or admired; e.g. *She hasn't always been successful; it was a time when she was a real ugly duckling*. This idiom comes from a children's story by Hans Christian Andersen, in which a young swan is raised with ducklings. They have to stop teasing him about his ugliness when he grows into a beautiful swan.
- *a place in the sun* = a very favourable position, especially in one's professional life; e.g. *When I was accepted at Cambridge University, I really felt that I had found my place in the sun.* This idiom is a translation of a phrase used in Pascal's *Pensées* in the seventeenth century.
- *a rose by any other name (would smell as sweet)* = what matters is what something is, not what it is called; e.g. *He was disappointed when his job title was changed from "assistant" to "adjunct". Doesn't he realize that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet?* This idiom comes from Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*.
- *as mad as a hatter* = crazy, insane; e.g. *You are as mad as a hatter if you think I will betray my best friend.* The *Mad Hatter* is a character in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Because of the chemicals used in hat-making, workers often suffered from mercury poisoning, which can cause loss of memory and damage to the nervous system.
- *as pleased as Punch* (British English) = very pleased; e.g. *My cousin was as pleased as Punch when he found out he was admitted to that prestigious university.* This idiom refers to the character Mr. Punch in the traditional puppet play *Punch and Judy*.
- *a / your fairy godmother* = someone who helps you unexpectedly when you most need help; e.g. *My boss played fairy godmother by deciding to raise my salary.* The *fairy godmother* is the magical character in the story of *Cinderella* who helps Cinderella go to the ball.
- *a wind / the winds of change* = an event or a series of events that has started to happen and will cause important changes; e.g. *There is a wind of change in the attitude of politicians.* This phrase refers to a speech made by the British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan to the Parliament of South Africa in 1960.
- *be hoist / hoisted by / with your own petard* (British English) = be caught in the trap

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that you were preparing for someone else; e.g. *Though he tried to take us in, he was eventually hoist by his own petard.* This idiom comes from Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*. A *petard* was a small bomb.

- *be (like) ships that pass in the night* (familiar speech) = (of people) meet for a short time, by chance, and perhaps for the only time in your lives; e.g. *During my adolescence I had many friends, but as years went by, many of them turned out to be just ships that pass in the night.* This expression is taken from a poem by Longfellow: "Ships that pass in the night, and speak each other in passing …".
- *be over the moon* (British English, familiar speech) = be very happy and excited; e.g. *She has been over the moon ever since she found out she is pregnant.* This idiom comes from a line in an old children's poem: "Hey diddle, diddle, the cat and the fiddle, the cow jumped over the moon …"
- *Big Brother (is watching you)* = a leader, a person in authority or a government that tries to control people's lives; e.g. *Since we live in a computerized world, Big Brother is constantly watching every move we make.* This expression comes from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a novel by George Orwell, in which the leader of the government, Big Brother, had total control over people. The slogan *Big Brother is watching you* reminded people that he knew every move they made.
- *cut / untie the Gordian knot* = solve a difficult problem with forceful action; e.g. *The police cut the Gordian knot by sending their best officers at the crime scene.* This idiom comes from the legend in which King Gordius tied a very complicated knot and said that whoever untied it would become the ruler of Asia. Alexander the Great cut through the knot with his sword.
- *discretion is the better part of valour* (British English) = it is better to avoid a dangerous situation than to confront it; e.g. *You'd better not try to climb that sheer cliff; you know that discretion is the better part of valour.* This idiom comes from Shakespeare's play *Henry IV*.
- *from the sublime to the ridiculous* = used to describe a situation in which something serious or important is followed by something silly or insignificant; e.g. *His career as a painter range almost all the time from the sublime to the ridiculous. From the sublime to the ridiculous is only one step* is a translation of a phrase that was first uttered by Napoleon Bonaparte.
- *gild the lily* = try to improve something which is already perfect, and so spoil it; e.g. *You look perfect. Don't put any make-up. You would be gilding the lily.* This idiom comes from Shakespeare's play *King John*. *Gild* means "to cover something with a thin layer of gold". A *lily* is a very beautiful flower.
- *grin like a Cheshire cat* = smile mischievously; e.g. *He sat there grinning like a Cheshire cat when he saw his friend stumbling over the coffee table.* The *Cheshire cat* is a character in Lewis Carroll's book *Alice in Wonderland*.
- *have one's pound of flesh* = demand the full amount that someone owes you, even if this will cause them trouble or suffering; e.g. *They want the entire sum of money we owe them by next Tuesday. They want their pound of flesh.* This idiom comes from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, in which the moneylender Shylock demanded a pound of flesh from Antonio's body if he could not pay back the money he borrowed.
- *hope springs eternal* = human beings never stop hoping; e.g. *I don't think she is going to forgive him for having betrayed her, but you know the saying: hope springs eternal.* This phrase comes from Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*: "Hope springs eternal in the human breast."

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- *if the mountain will not come to Muhammad, Muhammad must go to the mountain* = if someone refuses to come and see you, you must go and see him / her; e.g. *Since you cannot come to France, I will visit you in Romania – if the mountain won't come to Muhammad, Muhammad must go to the mountain*. This idiom comes from a story about the prophet Muhammad, who once sought proof of his teachings by ordering a mountain to come to him. When it did not move, he maintained that God had been merciful, because if it had indeed moved they all would have been crushed by it.
- *jam tomorrow* (British English) = a useless promise of something that will never happen; e.g. *His promise that he will always be faithful to her has been nothing but jam tomorrow*. This idiom comes from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871), in which the Queen says to Alice: "The rule is, jam tomorrow and jam yesterday but never jam today."
- *kill the golden goose / kill the goose that lays the golden egg / eggs* = ruin or destroy something that brings one wealth; e.g. *If the manager sacked Jim, his best employee, it would be like killing the golden goose.* This phrase comes from an old Greek story about a farmer who had a goose that laid golden eggs. The farmer thought that if he killed the goose, he could get all the eggs inside. However, by killing the goose, he lost everything.
- *let the genie out of the bottle* = do something that causes a permanent change in people's lives, especially one which might make a situation worse; e.g. *When I revealed my secret to everyone, I let the genie out of the bottle.* In Arabian stories, a *genie* is a spirit with magical powers that lives in a bottle or a lamp.
- *no shit, Sherlock!* (slang) = used when you think someone has said something that is obvious or that you already know; e.g. *"I think that smoking is bad for your health." "No shit, Sherlock!" Sherlock* in this expression refers to *Sherlock Holmes*, the fictional detective.
- *open sesame* = an easy way to achieve something that is usually very difficult to obtain; e.g. *High grades do not necessarily represent an open sesame to a future successful career.* This phrase comes from the story *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*. The words *open sesame* opened the door of the thieves' cave where they kept their treasure.
- *Parkinson's law* = used to say that work will always take as long as the time you have to do it; e.g. *I don't know why this essay is taking me so long; Parkinson's law, I guess*. This idiom comes from the title of a book by C. Northcote Parkinson about inefficient administration.
- *pie in the sky* (familiar speech) = ideas that are not practical; false dreams or hopes; e.g. *She is hoping to become a great actress one day, but, in my opinion, it's all pie in the sky.* This idiom comes from a song written in 1911 by Joe Hill, who worked to improve the rights of workers in America. The song criticizes religion for creating false hopes in the poor: "Work and pray, Live on hay, You'll get pie in the sky when you die."
- *pomp and circumstance* = formal and impressive ceremony; e.g. *The queen was welcomed with all the pomp and circumstance she deserved.* This expression comes from Shakespeare's play *Othello* and refers to the impressive clothes, decoration and music that are part of an official ceremony.
- *Prince Charming* = a man who seems to be a perfect companion because he is attractive, kind, etc.; e.g. *I know that I will eventually find my Prince Charming*. This idiom refers to a character in fairy tales such as *Cinderella*.

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- *shuffle off this mortal coil* = die; e.g. *Great artists will continue to live in our memory even after they have shuffled off this mortal coil.* This phrase comes from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.
- *some are more equal than others* = used to say that different people or groups are not really equal, although they appear to be so; e.g. *It is said that people are created equal, but some are more equal than others.* This idiom is used by one of the pigs in George Orwell's book *Animal Farm*: "All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others."
- *sour grapes* = used to describe the behavior of someone who pretends that something they cannot have is of little value or interest; e.g. *When she was asked to speak her mind regarding her friend's theatrical performance, she said it was ok, but I think that's just sour grapes.* This phrase comes from one of Aesop's fables. A fox cannot reach some grapes so he decides that they are too sour to eat.
- *the buck stops here* = used for telling someone that you are prepared to accept responsibility for something; e.g. *I know that what I have done is wrong. The buck stops here.* This idiom was first used by the US President Harry S. Truman to mean that he did not *pass the buck.*
- *the corridors of power* = the places where important decisions in government are made; e.g. *John wishes he were in the corridors of power someday, so he is doing his best to achieve that.* This phrase comes from the title of a book by C.P. Snow, published in 1964.
- *the cupboard is bare* (British English) = used to say that there is no money for something; e.g. *She is repeatedly asking money from her parents, but the cupboard is bare.* This idiom comes from a children's nursery rhyme about Old Mother Hubbard, who had nothing in her cupboard to feed her dog.
- *the / a curate's egg* (British English) = something that has both some good and some bad things about it; e.g. *I think his performance is a bit of a curate's egg*. This expression comes from a story in the magazine *Punch*. A polite *curate* (= an assistant to a priest) is given a bad egg while eating in the house of a senior priest. When asked if he likes the egg, he answers that "parts of it are excellent".
- *the die is cast* = a decision that cannot be changed has been made; e.g. *Once the manager had decided to fire him, he knew that the die had been cast and there was nothing he could do about it.* This idiom was first uttered by Julius Caesar when he took his army across the river Rubicon. Its basic meaning is *the dice has been thrown*.
- *the emperor's new clothes / the emperor has no clothes* = used to describe a situation in which everyone suddenly realizes that they were mistaken in believing that somebody / something was very good, important, etc.; e.g. *He finally realized that the emperor had no clothes and that he was being deceived all this time.* This phrase comes from a story by Hans Christian Andersen, in which two men offer to make an emperor a new suit from a very light material which they say stupid people cannot see. When the emperor puts on the suit, nobody wants to appear stupid so they all praise his new clothes. However, when a little boy asks why the emperor has no clothes on, everybody admits that they can see no clothes and that the emperor is naked.
- *the green-eyed monster* = jealousy personified; e.g. *She often succumbs to the green-eyed monster when she sees her husband surrounded by beautiful women.* This idiom comes from Shakespeare's play *Othello*.
- *the lion's share (of something)* = the largest part of something that is being shared;

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e.g. *Every time mother makes us a pie, my little brother wants the lion's share.* This phrase comes from one of Aesop's fables. The lion is helped by other animals to kill a stag, but then refuses to share it with them.

- *the milk of human kindness* = kind feelings; e.g. *There is much of the milk of human kindness in her; she is so friendly and generous.* This expression comes from Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*. Lady Macbeth regrets that her husband doesn't have the ambition that she has.

- *the primrose path* = an easy life that is full of pleasure but that causes you harm in the end; e.g. *If we had followed his example, we would have been walking down the primrose path to ruin.* This expression comes from Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*.

- *there is / lies the rub* = that is the main difficulty; e.g. *A: "All you have to do is arrive at the station by five p.m., when the train leaves." B: "But there is the rub – I don't find the key to the apartment and I cannot leave the house without locking the door."* This idiom comes from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

- *there's method in somebody's madness* = there is a reason for one's behavior and it is not as strange or as stupid as it seems; e.g. *I always read the newspaper backwards. But there's method in my madness – the fashion column is on the back page.* This idiom comes from Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*: "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't."

- *there's no rhyme or reason to / for something / without rhyme or reason* = no sense or logical explanation; e.g. *He behaved irrationally, without rhyme or reason.* This expression comes from Shakespeare's *As you like it*: "But are you so much in love as your rhymes speak?" "Neither rhyme nor reason can express how much".

- *the silent majority* = the large number of people in a country who think the same as each other, but do not express their views publicly; e.g. *The ruling party is counting on the silent majority to support its immigration policy.* The US President, Richard Nixon, used this phrase during the Vietnam War.

- *the slings and arrows (of something)* = the problems and difficulties (of something); e.g. *She turned out to be incapable of dealing with the slings and arrows of her new position in the company.* This idiom comes from Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*: "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune".

- *the wish is father to the thought* = we believe a thing because we want it to be true; e.g. *I hoped I would see Tom again and the wish was father to the thought. He called and announced me that he would come back from England in a couple of days.* This phrase comes from Shakespeare's play *Henry IV*.

- *tilt at windmills* = waste time fighting imaginary enemies or resolve issues that are unimportant or impossible to overcome; e.g. *Back in the old days, fighting against racism was synonymous with tilting at windmills.* This idiom comes from Cervantes' novel *Don Quixote*, in which the hero thought that the windmills he saw were giants and tried to fight them.

- *time is money* = time is valuable; e.g. *Don't waste my time with such trifles. Time is money, you know.* This saying was first used by the American politician Benjamin Franklin in 1748.

- *wear your heart on your sleeve* = show other people your emotions; e.g. *It is not in his nature to reveal his true feelings; he never wears his heart on his sleeve.* This phrase is taken from Shakespeare's play *Othello*: "For I will wear my heart upon my sleeve, For days to peck at."

- *your salad days* = the time when you are young and unexperienced; e.g. *Back in my salad days I used to go to my grandparents' in the country every summer.* This idiom comes from Shakespeare's play *Antony and Cleopatra*.

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- *your wish is my command* = I am ready to do anything you ask me to do; e.g. *I will go and buy some strawberries for you. Your wish is my command.* These are the words of the genie in the story about Aladdin in *The Thousand and One Nights*.

English idioms are an important part of both written and spoken English. It is common knowledge that one will not be thoroughly at home with the English language unless he / she can both understand and use different words or phrases correctly. Our article has tried to focus on the most frequently used idioms which originate in some famous quotations.

As we have noticed so far, the name of William Shakespeare appears in a third of the entire list of famous words or expressions. The great Shakespeare has left an immense phraseological legacy in the English language. Some of the quotes from his works have become so used, partly because of their beauty, partly owing to the motivational power they convey or owing to their wisdom. Therefore, Shakespeare stands out as one of the greatest producers of speech in the English language. Our everyday speech is full of words or phrases invented by Shakespeare. "They have become so common that we may not realize they were first introduced by Shakespeare. (…) Clarity of expression and the use of ordinary diction partly account for the fact that many of Shakespeare's phrases have become proverbial in everyday speech, even among people who have never read the plays. It is also significant that the passages most often quoted are usually from plays written around 1600 and after, when his language became more subtle and complex."[2]

Greek stories or fables, Arabian stories, fairytales, Hans Christian Andersen's stories, as well as political discourses are also important sources for English idioms. "Great literature has always been filled with idioms to describe characters and settings in vivid, memorable terms. Whether the authors were the first to coin a phrase or were simply making the best use of the language they heard around them, idioms add sparkle and wit to the works in which they are employed. If writers are lucky, their sentiments will be memorable enough to continue being used for hundreds of years."[3]

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