Iulian Boldea, Dumitru-Mircea Buda, Cornel Sigmirean (Editors)
MEDIATING GLOBALIZATION: Identities in Dialogue
Arhipelag XXI Press, 2018

PROPER NAMES USED IN IDIOMS

Cristina Gabriela Marin

Lecturer, PhD, University of Craiova

Abstract: The present paper aims at obtaining a better view of idiomacity as a cross-cultural phenomenon of language in use. Idioms are seen as a special category of English language which are not only determined through their structure, but also they show a specific type of behaviour in language use.

Keywords: twofold meaning, name constituent, cross-cultural phenomenon, structure, fixed expression.

1. Introduction

The present paper seeks to find out what information is given is given in the data on each person or locality that has lent its name to the idiom. The types of idioms adopted for this classification are: Noun phrase (NP), Verbal phrase (VP), prepositional phrases, irreversible binomials, stereotyped similes. My interest in proper names in English idioms arose when reading about them most notably the three-volume Book of English Idioms by V.H. Collins. Moreover, this interest took the form of finding out the origin of these expressions and the origins of the people and places that had lent their identities to such phrases. Each English idiom studied in this article carries a proper name constituent. According to Moon[i1] „the term idiom has a twofold meaning: first, it is a particular manner of expressing something in language, music, art, etc. which characterize a person or a group. Secondly, an idiom is a particular lexical collocation or phrasal lexeme, peculiar to a language".

An overview of the personal names involved in the expressions indicates the following types of sources:

-*the Bible*: (doubting Thomas, the mark of Cain, like Daniel in the lion's den)

-*literary texts or internationally known works*: (Aladdin's cave from the Arabian Nights, Stevenson Jekyll and Hyde, Mary Shelley, etc.;

-*classical heritage* (i.e. mythology and figure of Greek and Roman antiquity): Nessus' shirt, Achilles heel, etc. ;

-*popular culture*: Darby and Joan (after the couple mentioned in an 18th century balad), pleased as Punch (after Mr Punch from the traditional children's puppet show „Punch and Judy";

[1]Moon, R- Fixed expressions and idioms in English, A Corpus-based approach, p.67

BDD-V4606 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:56:33 UTC)

-*real people/legendary figures*: Florence Nightingale (the famous nurse), peeping Tom (after the tailor that according to legend peeped at Lady Godiva when she rode naked through Coventry), Morton's fork (after John Morton who was the archbishop of Canterbury and chief minister of Henry VII who used an argument to drew up a code of rules to govern), sweet Fanny Adams (after the 8 year-old victim in a murder case in 1867), happy as Larry (after the famous Australian boxer Larry Foley 1847-1917).

2. Practical direction

Finding idioms in a general dictionary is a slow and laborious task and it is hoped that this article will provide assistance to both teachers and students in a practical way. The article has a practical direction by offering in the section below a list of some common/uncommon English phrases, expressions or idioms used by using proper names which will assist you in developing and enriching your vocabulary.

Custer's last stand- any man who goes down to defeat in a spectacular manner. Custer[2] was an American general whose troops were wiped out in an Indian ambush.

A Blimpish point of view- any reactionary or unprogressive point of view that harks back to the pre-war period in Britain. Colonel Blimp, a red-faced elderly colonel invented by David Low, the celebrated cartoonist, was a familiar figure of fun in the 1930-s.

to have Hobson's choice- to have no choice at all, Tobias Hobson, a seventeenth-century Cambridge carrier, who hired out horses to the undergraduates of the university, never allowed his customers to choose a horse but insisted on their taking the horse nearest the stable door, so that they had no choice at all.

keeping up with the Joneses- trying to maintain the same standards of material comfort one's neighbours who are represented by the ordinary name of Jones.

like the Alice in Wonderland- an imaginary world where the inhabitants are all insane and the laws of logic and reason have been suspended.

to be as pleased as Punch- absolutely delighted usually with oneself over some achievement. Punch is always portrayed as laughing or singing with pleasure at his own escapades.

a Frankestein monster-the product of an inventor's imagination which destroys his creator. The phrase is taken from the famous horror story by Mary Shelley about a young student F. , which describes how he made the monster which became so powerful that eventually destroyed him.

waiting for Godot- waiting forever because Godot never comes (from the play Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett)

Rabelaisian wit- the earthy humour characteristic of the great writer F. Rabelais (1494-1553)

Machiavellian cunning- the most subtle and unprincipled cunning. In this treatise on state-craft the Prince Machiavelli[3] tried to establish the principles of political power which be maintained were based on realism rather than conventional morality.

[2] General George Armstrong Custer (1839-1876) who developed a strong reputation during the Civil War.

BDD-V4606 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:56:33 UTC)

like the Luddites-a term of abuse for anybody who opposes the introduction of labour-saving machinery which may threaten his livelihood. The phrase comes from the „Luddite" mechanics who attempted to destroy the new machinery in the Midlands and North of England which had been installed to replace their handicrafts.

on a Napolenic scale-on a huge, ambitious scale.

to be a Shylock- to be a ruthless, pitiless money-lender who will extract the last penny from his debtor.(Merchant of Venice, W. Shakespeare).

a Don Juan- a man who is always falling in and out of love, one who has an insatiable love for women. He is the central figure in Mozart's Don Giovanni and Byron's Don Juan.

Jekyll and Hyde personality- someone who alternates great kindness and nobility of character with extreme brutality and barbarism. The phrase is taken from Robert Louis Stevenson's novel which depicts the good Dr Jekyll changing into evil Mr Hyde.

a Procustean bed- a harsh, inhumane system into which the individual is fitted by force regardless his own needs or wishes. The phrase is taken from the name of a Greek robber who forced his victims to lie on a couch. If they were too long, he chopped off their feet and if they were too short, he stretched their bodies to the required length.

like a Sphinx- an expressionless face which conceals a secret.

the Oedipus complex- the association of patricidal fantasies and feelings of guilt in the mind of a young boy.

Aladdin's cave- a place full of riches and good things.

to play Cupid- to play the match maker Cupid (Greek-Eros) son of Venus(Aphrodite) was the god of love.

opening Pandora's box- accepting a dangerous present which will bring every conceivable ill upon one's head. From the Greek myth which relates how Pandora, the first woman ever made, was given a box by the gods whose contents when released would afflict the human race ever after.

the sword of Damocles/like the sword of Damocles(hanging over somebody)- the danger that looms ahead and threatens our well-being. From the legend of King Dionysius, who made his courtier Damocles sit under a sword that hung from the ceiling by a single hair, in order to demonstrate to him the precariousness of a king's life which he so much envied

the Midas touch- a person is said to have „the Midas touch" when all his business ventures prosper spectacularly. The phrase comes from the legend of Midas, king of Phrygia, who anything he touched might turn into gold was granted by the gods as a reward for his hospitality to Dionysius' tutor.

[3]" The Prince" describes immoral behaviour, such as dishonesty and the killing of innocents, as being normal and effective in politics.

BDD-V4606 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:56:33 UTC)

to cut the Gordian knot- to take decisive action in order to gain one's ends. There was an ancient legend that the first person to untie the Gordian knot would gain the empire of Asia. Many travellers had failed to unravel the knot, but the Alexander of Macedonia solved the problem.

to raise Cain- to create a terrible row, to explode with anger.

they are like David and Jonathan- inseparable friends.

be to a David come to judgement- to show judgement and wisdom beyond one's years.

a David and Goliath situation- a situation in which one adversary is hopelessly outmatched by the other.

to out-herod Herod- to exceed Herod in cruelty and wickedness.

to play Judas- any display or affection whose purpose is to conceal an act of treachery.

CLASSICAL AND MYTHICAL NAMES

an Adonis- any young man of striking beauty. The phrase is sometimes used as a light-hearted compliment.

beyond the dreams of Croesus- unimaginable riches.

A simple Simon-someone who is easily taken in (from the nursery rhyme: „ Simple Simon met a pie man going to the fair...").

a proper Charlie- a fool. The name refers to the people who were employed by King Charles I. These men had a reputation for stupidity.

A silly Billy- a foolish fellow (the nickname for William IV who was considered none too bright.)

To give a Roland for an Oliver- to give as good as one gets, to retaliate effectively.

As dead as Queen Anne- said in reply to news that is no longer new.

Lady Bountiful- a country lady whogave half her money to charity.

BIBLICAL NAMES

the Old Adam- the primitive, sinful nature of a man who is concealed under a veneer of good breeding and education.

Jack of all trades- a man who knows a little of many jobs but none properly.

Jack is as good as his master- there is no difference between the boss and the worker.

Jack Sprat- a small/undersized boy/man. The sprat is a very small fish.

every Jack has his Jill- every man can find the right woman if he looks for her.

before one could say Jack Robinson- in a moment, before one could turn around.

BDD-V4606 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:56:33 UTC)

a Jack in the box-a toy man who springs out of a box as soon as the lid is lifted. (used as idiomatic expression)

John Bull[4]- the typical Englishman (was described by Arbuthnot in his history of John Bull)[5].

to hoist the Jolly Roger[6]- to challenge the authority of the act

to rob Peter to play Paul- to give one person what rightfully belongs to another.

to be a Peter Pan- to be a male adult who mentally remains fixated on his childhood.

to be Paul Fry- someone who is always interfering on other's people affairs.

a doubting Thomas- a sceptic, someone who will believe the evidence of his eyes. Thomas, a disciple of Christ was unwilling to believe in his resurrection until he had seen the marks left by the nails on the hand of Christ.

a peeping Tom[7]- a person who takes pleasure in peeping nude women.

I'm all right, Jack!- is the slogan of self-seeking opportunist who will forget his friends for the sake of his own interests.

a Jack in office- a self-assertive official who misuses his authority

a Parthian shot- a cutting remark made by someone on leaving which gives the victim no opportunity of retaliating

to have Philistines tastes-someone without cultural interests.

A good Samaritean- someone who goes out his way to help a stanger in distress, although the stranger has no claim on him. The phrase has been taken from Christ's parable of Good Samaritean, Luke X, 29.

There are too many chiefs and not enough Indians-there are too many highly paid directors and managers and not enough men to carry out orders.

The Mandarin mentality- Mandarin was the name given to the officials in the Chinese Civil Service who had ruled China for centuries before the Communist Revolution. This mentality is one of the ruling class, self-satisfied, domineering and very conscious of its superiority to the rest of the country.

A Bohemian life- in some countries the name „bohemian" was a synonym for „gypsy" in the mistaken belief that gypsies came from Bohemian. It means an irregular, unconventional way of life and is often applied to writers and artists.

The Russian soul- a vague, unfulfilled yearning for a better, spiritual life which would bring consolation and relief to the suffering masses.

[4]John Bull is a national personificationof the United Kingdom in general and England in particular used especially in political cartoons. He is usually depicted as a stout, middle-aged, country-dwelling, jolly man.
[5]a series of five pamphlets written in 1712.
[6]was the traditional name for the flags flown to identity a pirate ship about to attack during early 18 th century.
[7]after the tailor that according to legend peeped at Lady Godiva when she rode naked through Coventry.

BDD-V4606 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:56:33 UTC)

Russian roulette- gamblers would stake their lives by putting a bullet in one of the six chambers of a revolver and then holding it to their head and pressing the trigger.

A Tartar (term of abuse)- a grim, uncivilized, bad-tempered person who makes a lot of trouble. Tartars are Asiatic of Turkish origin and are said to be notorious for their savagery in war.

To catch a Tartar- to take prisoner a man who makes so much trouble that one regrets ever having captured him.

The Amazons- active, assertive women in different walks of life. The Amazons were a legendary tribe of women who fought on horseback against ancient Greeks.

Spartan simplicity- absolute simplicity in one's way of living; the simplest diet and the avoidance of luxury and comfort in any form. The phrase has been taken from the Spartans who were the most disciplined and austere people in the ancient Greece.

LANGUAGE AND NATIONALITIES

Broken English/French/Spain- badly spoken English containing many mistakes in grammar and pronunciation.

Queen's English- correct, grammatical English. It may be spoken in any accent, provided it is clear and intelligible.

Received English- a phrase coined by Professor Daniel Jones[8] for the socially most acceptable accent. It is the only accent that it is not tied to any particular region but is local to the whole country. Jones called it" received" because at one time this pronunciation was an essential condition for being received in best society.

Plain English- 1) blunt, outspoken English

2) good, clear easily understood English as opposed to the jargon that is sometimes employed by civil servants.

To Welsh on someone- to trick or swindle someone to break a promise, often in connection with some businesses. The phrase reflects hostility in former times between the Welsh and British.

Go Dutch- each person pays his own bill in a restaurant. A practice favoured by students or young people who are working.

A Dutch party- a party to which each contributes some food and drink.

Double Dutch- nonsense, meaningless words.

To talk to someone like a Dutch uncle-to lecture with excessive seriousness. Dutch courage- false courage acquired by drinking.

I'm a Dutch man if.....-a way of denying a supposition.

[8](1881-1967) head of Department of Phonetics at University College, London.

BDD-V4606 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:56:33 UTC)

Prussian efficiency- a general term for all the qualities associated with the history of Prussia: energy,throughness,patience and discipline.

Teutonic thoroughness-especially characteristic of Prussia. The German had a reputation for studiousness, theoretical analysis and research in depth, in contrast with Anglo-Saxon empiricism.

To take French leave- to leave without first obtaining permission.

Gallic humor- humor that is logical and intellectual wit rather than humor.

To make a Roman holiday- to organize a gruesome show for the public.(the words are taken from a quotation from Byron's Childe Harold's Pilgrimage)

When Greek meets Greek- when two men of formidable strength engage in a combat the contest will be hard and severe.

A Greek gift- a gift which brings only trouble and sorrow (from Vergil's Aeneid).

A perfect Babel/ a Babel of sounds- an uproar in many different languages.

the walls of Jericho[9] didn't fall down in a day- if you want to defeat your enemy, you will have to fight very hard.

His/her road to Damascus[10]- a dramatic change of mind in some burning issue.

Mecca[11]- a place which has a strong appeal for enthusiast. It is the birthplace of the prophet Mohammed and a holy place for Muslims.

REAL/IMAGINARY PLACES

An El-Dorado- an imaginary country where the traveller can make a fortune without any effort.

To live in Eden- a place of sheer bliss and delight.

To consign to Limbo- to put art of one's mind once for all. Limbo was a place adjoining hell

which accommodate unbaptized infants.

In the land of Nod- asleep (to nod off- to be asleep).

Shangri-la/like Shangri-la- a state of mind lacking in drive and interest, chill placidity. Shangri-la is the paradise described in James Hilton's Lost Horizon (1933)[12] up in the mountains of a buddist country. The people lived there in perfect peace and serenity.

[9]A city near Jordan River in Palestinian territories.
[10]Capital of the Syrian Arab Republic.
[11]The birth place of Muhammad being regarded as the holiest city in the region of Islam.
[12]The novel explains the origin of Shangri-La, a fictional utopian lamasery located high in the mountains of Tibet.

BDD-V4606 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:56:33 UTC)

To meet your Waterloo- to suffer a final, decisive defeat. The phrase has been taken from Napoleon's defeat by Wellington at the Battle of Waterloo. It is usually applied to an unexpected defeat after a string of successes.

Rome was not built in a day- nothing of value has never been achieved without great effort. To fiddle while Rome burns- to occupy oneself with trifles during a crisis.Legend has it that Emperor Nero fiddled while Rome burned.

All roads lead to Rome- Rome has always possessed a special importance- as the capital of the ancient world, then as capital of Christendom. As the seat of the papacy, Rome commands the allegiance of six hundred million Catholics.

See Naples and die- Naples is the most beautiful city in the world and you have seen Naples, you may die happy. There is a small town near Naples called „Mori" which is the Italian equivalent for „die" where thousands once died of typhoid and cholera, so this is a joke-phrase.

the Venice of the North- there are three cities in the north of Europe which boast they are compared to Venice: Bruges, Amsterdam and Stockholm.

castles in Spain- unreal wealth and splendour which only exists in the mind of the dreamer(see castles in the air).

the gnomes of Zurich- Swiss bankers so called because they were the guardians of huge treasures under the earth.

An Olympian detachment- an impersonal, unemotional view of human conflict. From Olympus, the home of Greeks where Zeus reigned.

You are not at the Ritz!-the Ritz is a hotel in Piccadilly (London) which has made a name for excellence of its cooking and accommodation.

To send to Conventry- to punish somebody for disloyalty to his companions or workmates by refusing to speak to him.

To carry coals to Newcastle- to bring a thing to a place where it is famous for, like trying to sell wine to the French or kimonos to the Japanese.

Off to Gretna Green- couples who were under age in (English law) would run together to get married at Gretna Green, a small town on the English-Scottish border. Here the conditions for marrying under Scottish law being less strict than under English, this was an option for couples who had not obtained the consent of their parents.

Like a Marathon- a long-drawn –out contest and event which calls for great endurance. The name has been taken from the Battle of Marathon between the Greeks and Persians, fought in 490 B.C. The messenger who announced the result of the battle, fell dead on his arrival in Athens after running nearly 23 miles.

CONCLUSION

Languages are living organisms and therefore new words and phrases are coming to life and this process is the most obvious in idiomatic expressions. This article is intended to be an

BDD-V4606 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:56:33 UTC)

attempt of representing a learning material which may facilitate the access to the English which is a language rich in idioms. Without them English would lose variety and humor, especially in speaking. All in all, the paper has attempted to tackle a new kind of approach to the proper names used in idioms as this is a subject less discussed in scholarly papers. It also, represents a translation tool which may enable translators or teachers to have a better understanding of both literary and internationall known works and classical heritage.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Collins, V.H. (1962) Book of English Idioms, Vol. I, Bristol, Longman
Collins, V.H. (1963) Book of English Idioms, Vol. II, Bristol, Longman
Collins, V.H. (1964) Book of English Idioms, Vol. III, Bristol, Longman
Webster's Encyclopaedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language, (1989), New York, Portland House, New York.

http://www.merriam-webster.com accessed on 12th January 2018

BDD-V4606 © 2018 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:56:33 UTC)