"IT'S RAINING CATS AND DOGS" – WEATHER IN ENGLISH IDIOMS

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Abstract

The notoriously changeable and unpredictable weather of the British Isles has provided a constant preoccupation for its inhabitants since time immemorial. Their acute awareness of its effects has become evident not only in their outlook upon life, but also in their way of thinking and its linguistic expression: language, particularly idioms. The present paper is not an attempt to exhaustively list all the English expressions that contain references to the weather, but to present the probable or possible origin of a few more interesting or intriguing 'specimens'.

Keywords: idiom, word, weather, origin, meteorological

Summing up the definitions of several dictionaries, the word '*weather'* refers to the state of the atmosphere at a particular time and place. It is described in terms of variable day-to-day meteorological conditions such as temperature, moisture, cloudiness, wind velocity, precipitation, and barometric pressure. On planet Earth it occurs primarily just below the troposphere, in the lower atmosphere, and is driven by air pressure differences influenced by solar energy and the movements of the Earth. Climate is defined by the average weather conditions of a particular region over a longer period of time.

The word itself can be traced back to the same roots as *'wind'*. In Old and Middle English the Anglo-Saxon word was *weder*, from the Proto-Germanic *wedran* – related to the Old Saxon *wedar*, Old Norse (Icelandic) *veðr*, Old Frisian and Middle Dutch *weder*, Old High German *wetar*, and German *Wetter*, all meaning "storm, wind, weather". The Danish *veir* and Swedish *väder* are also allied to the German *'Gewitter',* "storm", the Icelandic *land-viðri, '*land-wind"; the Russian *vietr,* "wind, breeze", and the Lithuanian *wëtra,* "storm". All of the above are from the Proto-Indo-European *we-dhro,* "weather", the base being *we-* "to blow". Probably influenced by the -ð- of the Icelandic variant, the -th- in the English word appeared in the 15th century, first in pronunciation and then in writing. The use of *'to weather'* as a verb meaning "come through (some kind of negative experience) safely" is from the 17th century; in the sense of "undergo change, wear away by exposure (to the weather)" from the 18th.

The weather of the British Isles has been notoriously changeable and unpredictable for as long as their inhabitants can remember, so it shouldn't surprise anyone that it has traditionally been the main topic of conversation and also the inspiration for so many idioms and expressions.

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WEATHER

*a fair-**weather** friend* = somebody who is loyal only for as long as things are going well, when it involves no trouble for him, but who abandons you when you are in difficulty and cannot be relied on in a crisis (*A friend in need* …)

*to be / feel under the **weather*** = slightly unwell, in low spirits, depressed, out of sorts – this is supposedly the effect thundery weather has on people's mood

*to make heavy **weather** of something* = to exaggerate the difficulties of dealing with a problem, to take excessive pains over a relatively simple task - 'heavy weather' has the specific nautical meaning of violent wind accompanied by heavy rain or rough sea. The original reference is to a ship that rolls about a great deal and handles badly in difficult conditions, requiring much effort to be controlled.

*to keep a/one's **weather** eye open /on something* = to remain alert or watchful; to observe something very carefully and steadily, especially for (possibly unusual or unpleasant) changes or developments, so as to be prepared in case of trouble – another nautical term, describing sailors constantly looking in the direction where the wind is blowing from and watching for any changes in the weather conditions.

*fine / lovely **weather** for ducks* = wet, rainy weather

*brass monkey **weather*** = extremely cold weather

The actual phrase for describing such conditions is *'cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey'*. One possible explanation comes from a quaint naval yarn that tells about the days when warships carried cannon and shot was stacked on a brass tray, or 'monkey', beside each gun. When the temperature dropped very low the metal tray would contract and the cannon balls rolled off the pyramid. Of course this raises the question why sailors continued to use inconvenient metal trays. The answer is that they probably never did, for evidence to support the story is lacking.

An alternative theory has an ornament, commonly found in drawing rooms in both Britain and America in the 19th century, as the source of the idiom. The ornament was of the 'Three Wise Monkeys': one covering its eyes, one covering its ears, and the third covering its mouth – "See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil". Sometimes there was a fourth monkey, standing for the principle "do no evil" of this code of conduct, depicted with crossed arms. (In some sets, however, this fourth monkey appeared covering his genitals.) The monkeys originated in China and were introduced to Japan by a Buddhist monk in the 8th century, the most notable representation being a set of carvings in the Nikko Toshogu Shrine.

Whether or not the phrase was inspired by the ornament, in America around the middle of the 19th century *brass monkey* began to appear in statements about the weather, both excessively hot and extremely cold. Herman Melville in *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas* (1847) has Shorty describe weather that was "'ot enough to melt the nose h'off a brass monkey". By the late 19th century, however, the term was largely confined to cold conditions and in its different variants the monkey alternately lost

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its ears, tail, toes or whiskers. What else could possibly freeze off the poor creature? The answer came around the turn of the 20th century, when the expression was coarsened into its present form, occasionally shortened to *brass monkey weather* or *it's brass monkeys*.

Meanwhile, during the early 20th century, there was a flurry of alternative politer versions, but it is the more risqué phrase that has eventually won out, and the brass monkey now loses its balls in every English speaking country where the temperature drops below zero.

RAIN

it never ***rains*** *but it pours* = *when it* ***rains****, it pours* = misfortunes or difficult situations tend to follow each other in rapid succession or to arrive all at the same time; when things go wrong, they go disastrously wrong

to be/ feel as right as ***rain*** = just the way it should be, quite all right, perfectly well again, esp.

when compared with what might be expected or an earlier condition, e.g. after a minor illness or accident – a pun on the original meaning of 'right' = straight.

come ***rain*** *or shine* = *blow high, blow low* = come what may, whatever the circumstances

to ***rain*** *cats and dogs* = to rain very hard

The expression could almost be considered the epitome of 'nonsense' English idioms, so frequently has it been cited as an example. The true origin of the phrase is unknown, but it has proved so intriguing for etymologists (both professional and amateur) that they have come up with an impressive variety of explanations over time, their theories ranging from the fanciful through the supernatural to the down-to-earth.

There are conjectures according to which the idiom might derive from foreign terms similar in sound. One such word is the Greek expression *'cata doxa'*, meaning 'contrary to experience or belief'; 'an unlikely occurrence' – referring to inordinately and unbelievably heavy rainfall. The other is the obsolete French word *'catadoupe'*, 'waterfall'. The Latin version *'catadupum'* was originally *Catadupa*, from the Greek *Katadoupoi*, the name of the celebrated first cataract on the Nile near Aswân, Egypt – hence the meaning 'to rain waterfalls'.

Norse mythology and medieval superstition could also be the source that inspired the phrase. Odin is the Scandinavian counterpart of the Anglo-Saxon Woden, the god of storms, often depicted accompanied by dogs or wolves as his attendants, so these animals became associated with winds and storms. Witches, on the other hand, were credited with the ability to raise storms and cause rainfall at will, apparently with the sole purpose of riding their brooms in such disagreeable meteorological conditions. On these flights they were accompanied by their familiars (Lat. *famulus* = servant), or spirit slaves (allegedly demons in disguise) – mostly in the shape of cats, especially black ones. Moreover, witches were believed to occasionally take the form of cats themselves, so the latter came to be seen as harbingers of storms and heavy rain.

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Alternatively, some speculate that the idiom is connected to the expression *'to fight like cat and dog'* and might have been coined by someone who thought the pandemonium of a raging thunderstorm was reminiscent of the din caused by these animals when at each others' throats, the antipathy between the two species being well-known since time immemorial.

It is an older misconception (revived at the end of the 1990s due to a widely-circulated story on the Internet) that centuries ago cats and dogs might have landed in the street because the deluge had literally washed them off slippery thatched roofs. Considering the disposition of the animals involved, we can easily dismiss this theory as implausible. Dogs are not exactly fond of heights, so they are very unlikely to ever take shelter at roof-level, or even under it – in the attic, for example; and no cat in its right mind would stay *on* a roof in the pouring rain.

The most probable explanation lies in the prosaic reality of the Middle Ages (continuing up to the 17th century), when the streets of larger towns and cities were filthy, sanitation was rudimentary at best and the sewage system was practically non-existent. Rubbish often accumulated between the houses, cluttering up the gutters in no time whenever there was a more serious cloudburst. The fallen rainwater rushing along the streets would carry not only the debris, but also the dead bodies of household animals, either thrown out previously onto the heaps of garbage or drowned in the flooded streets. The sight of these bodies floating by or lying around after the waters had retired might have made the more gullible believe that the animals had fallen, among the raindrops, from the skies.

Finally, since in different parts of England and the English-speaking world it can just as well *rain stair-rods, pitchforks, darning needles*, or *hammer handles* (all describing the shaft-like appearance of the thickly falling drops), even *wolves and tigers* or *chicken coops*, it might simply be a rather expressive hyperbole to describe this meteorological phenomena.

CLOUD

a ***cloud*** *on the horizon* = something unpleasant that is threatening, a matter for concern

to cast a ***cloud*** *over* = to spoil something

(to be) under a ***cloud*** = under suspicion or in disrepute, in trouble or disgrace

every ***cloud*** *has a silver lining* = something good will always come from a difficult or unpleasant moment, situation, etc.; however unfortunate one's circumstances, there is always some consolation or compensation to be found, such as a positive or hopeful aspect to a bad situation that may not be immediately apparent

cloud*-cuckoo-land* = imaginary country where everything is perfect, usually implying a lack of understanding of reality. If you say that someone is living in such a place he or she is living in an imaginary world that is idealistic and impractical and bears little resemblance to reality (Aristophanes: The Birds)

on ***cloud*** *(number) nine* = extremely happy or content; in a state of ecstasy

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In the ten-part classification of heavens in Dante's Paradise (*Divina Commedia*) the ninth was next to the highest (the empyrean) and thus closest to the divine presence.

with/ have one's head in the ***clouds*** = *to be in the clouds* = (of a person) to be a dreamer, out of touch with reality, idealistic, daydreaming, not attending to what is going on

WIND

to take the ***wind*** *out of someone's sails* = frustrate/ embarrass somebody by unexpectedly anticipating an action or remark; to cramp somebody's style, impede his momentum, reduce their self-confidence , esp. by suddenly doing something that places him/her at a disadvantage. The expression alludes to a ship or boat sailing so close to another on the windward side (sometimes deliberately, e.g. in a race) that the latter is deprived of wind and lacks the power to move.

to sail close to the ***wind*** = to verge on indecency, dishonesty or disaster, nearly break a rule of acceptable behaviour. In a sailing boat this means to sail as nearly straight into the wind as possible, as is consistent with using its force.

three sheets to the ***wind*** = drunk – another idiom of nautical origin

to put the ***wind*** *up somebody* = to alarm, frighten or make somebody nervous

to get/ have the ***wind*** *up* = to be(come) afraid, alarmed, anxious, worried, nervous

to get/ have the ***wind*** *of something* = get a hint of or hear indirectly about something, begin to

suspect that something is happening – literally, to smell something in the wind

(to be) in the ***wind*** = to be about to happen

to cast/ throw / fling (caution, fear, doubt, etc.) to the ***wind****(s)/ the four* ***winds*** = to neglect, abandon, often recklessly – the four winds are the north, south, east and west winds.

to see which way the ***wind*** *blows* = to wait before making a decision to find out how the situation is likely to develop = *to see which way the cat jumps/ how the land lies*

straw in the ***wind*** = a slight but significant hint of future developments, a small incident that shows what kind of thing may happen in the future – from the action of throwing straw up in the air to test which way the wind is blowing.

it's an ill ***wind*** *(that blows nobody any good/ that profits nobody)* = few things are so bad that no one profits from them; almost any unfortunate happening benefits someone in some way – used especially as a comment on someone's good fortune when it has been occasioned by someone else's misfortune, or suggesting that the speaker recognises that some good has come of an apparent misfortune.

a ***wind****fall* = an unexpected piece of good luck, esp. an unexpected legacy; something worth having that comes to one without any personal exertion

a ***wind****bag* = somebody talkative but incapable of action, a bombastic speaker who promises more than he or she can perform

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STORM

to ride the ***storm*** */* ***whirlwind*** = to confront a crisis resolutely; to control or deal with a situation of great disorder or violence

to weather/ ride out the ***storm*** = survive a difficult time; deal successfully with or escape unharmed from a dangerous situation

to take something/ somebody by ***storm*** = to have a great and rapid success; to impress greatly and immediately . Literally, to capture a military objective by a sudden violent attack.

like a dying duck in a ***thunderstorm*** = having a dejected, hopeless or despairing expression; (behaving) in a weak, pathetic and sad manner. The miserable demeanour of ducks during thunder has been proverbial since the late eighteenth century.

the eye of the ***storm*** = the most intense part of a tumultuous situation – from the meteorological phenomenon of the calm region at the centre of a storm or hurricane.

any port in a ***storm*** = in adverse circumstances one welcomes any source of relief or escape; one has to accept any possible solution or way out when one has difficulties. Literally true of a ship seeking shelter from rough weather.

the lull/ calm before the ***storm*** = a period of unusual tranquillity or stability that seems likely to presage difficult times

a ***storm*** *in a teacup* (AE *a* ***tempest*** *in a teapot*) = great anger, violent agitation or excitement about a trivial matter – the title of a farce written by William Bernard in1854.

THUNDER

to look as black as ***thunder*** = to look very angry

blood and ***thunder*** = melodramatic or sensational violence in a film, book, etc.

to steal someone's ***thunder*** = to forestall a person's attempt to be impressive, receive congratulations, or get publicity for something by doing, saying or using what he had intended to before him; to use someone else's ideas or inventions to your advantage, to adopt their own special methods as yours

The source of the phrase is an anecdote about John Dennis (1657-1734), the critic and playwright who invented an effective device for creating stage thunder for the production of his play *Appius and Virginia* in 1709. The play itself failed and was withdrawn, but shortly afterwards Dennis heard the improved thunder effect in a performance of *Macbeth*. His reaction was recorded by contemporaries either as "Damn them! They will not let my play run, and yet they steal my thunder," or "That is my thunder, by God; the villains will play my thunder but not my plays!" Whatever the actual words might have been, Dennis' righteous indignation at having his idea thus pirated gave rise to a phrase that has been popular ever since.

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LIGHTNING

like greased ***lightning*** / *a streak of* ***lightning*** = unbelievably fast, as fast as possible, so fast you barely have time to see it

as if struck by ***lightning*** = when something unexpected has just had such an impact on you that shock and amazement has left you dumbfounded and paralysed

lightning *never strikes in the same place twice* = an unusual accident, mishap, etc. is very unlikely to be repeated exactly; calamity never occurs twice – alluding to the popular folk belief that lightning never strikes the same spot twice.

a ***bolt*** *from/ out of the blue* = a complete surprise, something unexpected and shocking, a sudden event or unanticipated piece of news. It refers to the unlikelihood of a lightning streak from a cloudless blue sky. The two are seldom associated, which makes their rare meeting a surprise and gives rise to the broader simile:

out of a/the (clear) ***blue sky*** = unexpectedly, without warning

RAINBOW

to chase a ***rainbow*** / ***rainbows*** = pursue an illusion; venture on a fruitless quest
Rainbows are real enough to the eye but unreachable, and people have been aware of that for centuries. That some would still try to, could probably be explained by the ancient belief in:

the pot/crock of gold at the end of the ***rainbow*** = a large but distant or illusory reward. The old legend in folklore is that if one reaches the spot where the curve of a rainbow touches the ground and digs there, one will be sure to find a pot of gold. Hence visionaries, wool-gatherers, day-dreamers, etc. are sometimes called *rainbow chasers*, because of their habit of hoping for impossible things.

SNOW

to be ***snowed*** *under* = to be overwhelmed, e.g. with a great deal of work

(as) pure as (the) driven ***snow*** = very pure in one's character or moral behaviour (often used ironically in conversation to mean the exact opposite)

to sell ***snow*** *to Eskimos* = to take something to a place where it is already plentiful; to engage in a completely unnecessary activity = *to carry coals to Newcastle*

a ***snow*** *job* = a colloquial version for *cover-up*, a (usually concerted) effort to flatter, deceive or overwhelm someone or to distract his/ her attention from the reality of the matter, especially some embarrassing information

not to have / stand a ***snowball****'s chance in hell* = to have no chance at all, be certain to fail

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ICE

to break the ***ice*** = to ease the nervousness or formality in a social situation by a friendly act, conversation, etc.; to overcome the first shyness etc. in a new situation. Originally it meant to create paths that allowed ships to move through icy waters.

to cut no ***ice*** *(with somebody)* = to make no impression at all, fail to produce the desired effect. Comes from figure skating where the blade/edge should be sharp enough to cut the ice; or perhaps from the practice of cutting ice from rivers or lakes and storing it for summer refrigeration.

to skate/ walk on thin ***ice*** = to do something dangerous, take a great risk, argue from a weak position. If you go fast enough and don't stop, thin ice will hold you up as long as you are moving, but you're 'playing with fire'.

Finally, a popular and widely-known English children's poem and tongue-twister (which can also be very useful in teaching the differences in spelling of the words involved) that illustrates the typical resigned attitude of Britons towards the weather:

> Whether the weather be mild or whether the weather be not,
> Whether the weather be cold or whether the weather be hot,
> We'll weather the weather whatever the weather,
> Whether we like it or not.

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