USE YOUR BODY

ZOLTÁN Ildikó Gy.

Abstract

The present paper is a study on English idioms which contain words denoting parts of the body. The possible or at least probable origin and interpretation is given, as far as possible, together with parallel examples from Romanian and Hungarian, in order to underline obvious similarities or, on the contrary, surprising differences and particularities.

If you attempt a comparative study of idioms in different languages, there are several possibilities of grouping them, even within a certain topic, like that of parts of the body.

Quite a few sayings, phrases and idioms have the same or similar form in several different languages, since they can be traced back to a common source:

a. Greek or Roman mythology; the Bible; widely known tales, fables or anecdotes;
b. beliefs and superstitions;
c. experiences of everyday life, practical common sense or the unwritten rules of elementary decency, which must have been pretty much the same everywhere).

In other cases the same idea, action or attitude is expressed in quite a different way in various languages, especially in those which do not have a common origin, a shared cultural background or at least territorial contact. Any comparative study of languages has an additional beauty (or difficulty?) if the languages involved are of different origin: English is Germanic, Romanian is a Romance language and Hungarian is Finno-Ugrian. But, in contrast to English, Romanian and Hungarian do have a long history of territorial

BDD-A3008 © 2006 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:59:14 UTC)

contact and even co-existence, especially in Transylvania, and effects of the implicit interaction between the two languages are quite obvious in both.

The third group would be of those idioms which are so typical of a certain language (in our case, English) that they can be considered unique and matchless.

I. Identical or similar form

Achilles' ***heel*** = the only vulnerable spot in a person or thing that is otherwise strong; a serious or fatal weakness/ fault
R: ***călcâiul*** *lui Achile*
H: *(valakinek vagy valaminek az) Achilles-****sarka***

In Greek mythology, the nymph Thetis dipped her infant son Achilles in the water of the River Styx to make him invulnerable, but the heel by which she held him during this was not touched by the water. He was ultimately killed in battle during the siege of Troy by a poisoned arrow that was shot in his one vulnerable spot.

an ***eye*** *for an* ***eye*** *(and a* ***tooth*** *for a* ***tooth****)* = retaliation/ retribution in kind, a punishment that is as cruel as the crime
R: ***ochi*** *pentru* ***ochi****,* ***dinte*** *pentru* ***dinte***
H: ***szem****et* ***szem****ért,* ***fog****at* ***fog****ért*

In the Old Testament, Exodus 21 is concerned with the judgements that the Lord tells Moses to set before the people of Israel. One of them is: (21:24) "And if any mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe."

to show one's ***teeth*** = to show or reveal one's true character or real intentions
R: *a-şi arăta* ***colţii*** = to show one's fangs
R: *a-şi da arama pe faţă* = to reveal its/ one's copper
H: *kimutatja a* ***fog****a fehérét* = to show the white of one's teeth

Besides the figurative meaning of these expressions, the concrete original picture is also still clear and suggestive: it refers to those animals (especially dogs or wolves) preparing to bite or attack, which raise their upper lip threateningly to express their anger or readiness to attack and fight.
R A parallel Romanian expression for this is *a-şi da arama pe fată* (to reveal its/ one's copper). The core of counterfeit coins was usually of copper, covered/ varnished with a thin layer of gold or silver. As this 'coating' gradually wore off in time, the underlying (hidden) copper began to show through and the coin could no longer pass as a piece of precious metal.

to foam/ froth at the ***mouth*** = to be very angry

BDD-A3008 © 2006 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:59:14 UTC)

R: *a face spume la* ***gură***
H: *habzik a* ***száj****a*

In a bodily seizure a person or an animal involuntarily produces a large amount of saliva from the mouth. A rabid dog (fox or wolf) or a raving lunatic may behave in an unpredictably menacing or aggressive way.

to lead somebody by the ***nose*** = to persuade somebody to do what one wants; control somebody completely; mislead somebody easily

R: *a duce/purta de* ***nas*** *pe cineva*

H: ***orr****ánál fogva vezet valakit*

The expression exists in the same form in most of the other Indo-European languages: Latin, Italian, French, German, Russian, Bulgarian, etc. It was based on the practice of fitting a ring in the noses of unruly or 'disobedient' animals (especially bears or bulls) and lead them by it. The slightest tug or twitch caused sharp pain to the animal and thus it was forced to obey and follow its master, no matter how strong or fiery it was.

II. Same idea – different phrasing

to be (getting) long in the ***tooth*** = getting rather old, ageing
R: *ți-ai mâncat mălaiul* = you have eaten your maizena (= cooked maize flour)
H: *megette kenyere javát* = he/ she has eaten the greater part of his/ her bread
The expression is closely related to the saying 'Don't look a gift horse in the mouth' – only this time from the point of view of the horse . The saying advises you to take what is given to you (as a present or for free) without examining it too critically. It has similar forms both in Romanian: 'Calul de dar nu se caută de dinți' (= you don't search the teeth of a gift horse) and Hungarian: 'Ajándék lónak ne nézd a fogát' (= don't look at the teeth of a gift horse).

The horse's pairs of permanent teeth appear in succession at definite ages and as a horse gets older, its gums retract, making the teeth look longer. Since there's no possible way of concealing this, the handiest method to establish the approximate age of a horse is to take a look at its teeth: the longer the teeth, the older the horse.
R From an anthropological point of view, we have to consider this formula as the reflection of a pragmatic social sentence. The so-called "primitive" societies were characterised by the lack of elders and gerontocracy. The harsh conditions of existence explain practices which might seem ruthless and cruel to modern man, such as infanticide and the suicide of old people who were, in fact, abandoned just like the crippled or the sick.
H The saying took root in the Hungarian language during the Turkish (Ottoman) occupation in the 16-17th century. According to the belief of the Turks, Allah allocates a certain amount of bread for each of us at our birth and people live until they consume their share of bread. Sometimes Allah scatters the bread in different parts of the world and then one has to go from one place to the other and eat the bread there.

Whether it comes from this belief or not, the phrase is in close relationship with several others in which the figurative meaning of "bread" is 'living', 'livelihood', whatever

BDD-A3008 © 2006 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:59:14 UTC)

one needs to make both ends meet: *kenyeret keres* (= to earn one's bread), *kenyér nélkül marad* (= to be left without bread), *kenyérbe esett* (= to fall into bread – to find a living/ job), *a kenyerét eszi* (= to eat sy's bread), *kenyérpusztító* (= bread destroyer), *egy kenyéren van* (= to be on the same bread with sy), *a maga kenyerén van* (= to be on one's own bread), etc.

the apple of sy's ***eye*** = a person or thing one is extremely fond and proud
R: *a iubi / drag ca lumina* ***ochi****lor* = to be dear to sy/ to love like the light of one's eyes
H: *valakinek a* ***szem****e fénye* = to be the light / shine of somebody's eye

In old English the pupil was known as the 'apple' because it was thought to be a spherical and solid body. Since the pupil is a crucial and indispensable portion of the eye, it serves as a symbol of something or somebody cherished and valued by the person mentioned.

Both the Romanian and Hungarian version refer to the importance of not only the pupil, but the whole eye and consequently, a person's eyesight.

the evil ***eye*** = a look that shows one's disapproval or ill will; a glance thought capable of working harm or laying a curse

R: *a fi rău de* ***ochi*** = to be of bad eye
H: *rossz* ***szem****mel néz* = to look at sg/ sy with bad eyes
H: ***szem****mel verés, megver vk-t* ***szem****mel* = to beat/ hit/ strike somebody with the eye

The superstition according to which some people can cast a spell, bewitch or charm somebody, cause harm or evil just by looking at them with an "evil eye" was very wide-spread in the Middle Ages, and the reason for several witch trials. It was believed to be an ability especially of those who had been breast-fed for an unusually long time, including three Good Fridays. However, its origins go further back in time: it was already known to the ancient Greeks, the Romans and the Germanic peoples. This explains the fact that it has similar variants in several languages.

to pull the wool over somebody's ***eye*** = to deceive or trick somebody in order to gain an advantage
R: *a arunca praf în* ***ochi*** = to throw dust into somebody's eyes
H: *port hint / vet a* ***szem****ébe* = idem

The literal origin of the English phrase is in the wool wigs commonly worn by gentlemen well into the 19th century. 'Wool' was a humorous term for hair or a wig. If you pulled one of them over the wearer's eyes, he would be unable to see what was going on.

Equivalents of the Romanian and Hungarian expressions can be found in Latin, German and several Slavic languages. Originally it was the enemy's eyes in which you were supposed to throw dust during a battle or a hand-to-hand combat. It must have happened quite often that one of the fighters picked up a handful of dust and threw it between his opponent's eyes, blinding him and thus rendering him defenceless for enough time to deliver a decisive blow or sword-cut.

An older Hungarian variant: '*port hint/ rúg a szemébe'* suggests that there might have been another observation at the origin of the phrase. The trick described above is also used by animals: the pursued fox is supposed to kick sand or earth into the eyes of the

BDD-A3008 © 2006 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:59:14 UTC)

fox-hound close on its heels, and sometimes fighting dogs or wolves use the same tactics to confuse their rivals.

wet behind the ***ears*** = innocent, inexperienced, callow, naïve
R: *a avea / cu caș la gură / nu i-a căzut încă cașul de la gură* = to have whey at/ around the mouth / the whey hasn't yet fallen off his mouth
H: *tejfölösképű* = creamy-faced/ -cheeked / *zöldfülű* = green-eared
H: *a tojáshéj még nem esett le a fenekéről / még a fenekén van* = the eggshell hasn't yet fallen off his behind / is still on his behind

In the English variant the allusion is to a new-born animal – a colt, a calf or a fawn – that starts out being wet all over and needs to be 'licked into shape' by its mother. It will dry last in the small indentation behind the ears.

The 'whey' in the Romanian expression is a mark left by the mother's milk which a suckling – whether a baby or a very young animal – has been feeding on.

The Hungarian 'creamy' face or cheek would be that of a young lad who hasn't yet started to shave. The 'greenness' of the ears implies the same rawness as that of unripe fruit; and the eggshell would obviously stick to the behind of a freshly hatched chicken.

If you're young enough to be still wet behind the ears, or be still breast-fed, or still have eggshell on you buttocks – well, you can't have had much experience in life.

III. Typically English

(to be) born with a silver spoon in one's ***mouth*** = (to be) born into a rich family of high social standing

It is an old tradition for godparents to give their godchild a spoon or perhaps more at the time of christening. Among the wealthy, it was usually a silver spoon. Sometimes it was a set of twelve, each with the figure of a different apostle at the upper end of the handle, hence the term 'apostle spoons'.

to put one's foot in one's ***mouth*** = to say or do something wrong, tactless, inappropriate, offensive or embarrassing; commit a blunder or indiscretion

Prince Philip of Great Britain is said to have coined the term "dontopedology" to express the same unfortunate tendency. Combining this old saying with the "foot-and-mouth disease" of livestock in a play on words, the phrase *'foot-in-****mouth*** *disease'* emerged in America. The expression has since been applied to more than one politician or other public figure on both sides of the Atlantic.

to keep a stiff ***upper lip*** = to remain stoical; not to complain or show emotion or fear in an adverse situation; calmness a the of trouble

The saying probably arises from the fact that a prelude to crying is a trembling of the upper lip; the advice is to keep it firm and not weep. This is a tendency particularly associated with the British character, although the phrase is apparently of American origin from the mid-19th century. However, there is another British expression at least as old as the first: "Keep your pecker up." which suggests a similar attitude when faced with difficulty or danger.

BDD-A3008 © 2006 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:59:14 UTC)

with (one's) ***tongue*** *in (one's)* ***cheek*** / ***tongue****-in-****cheek*** = saying something that one does not seriously mean, or saying the opposite of what one really means, esp. as a joke or with irony

It's almost impossible to say something intelligibly with your tongue in your cheek. The origin here is probably the way you say something and *then* put your tongue in your cheek, as you might wink, to show that you are not being serious or perhaps to stop yourself from laughing. Putting one's tongue in one's cheek can also be a gesture of contempt or sly humour.

(to make/ lose/ spend money) ***hand*** *over* ***fist*** = very rapidly

The earliest version of the phrase appears in nautical context as 'hand over hand', with reference to the movement of a person's hands when rapidly climbing a rope or hauling it in. Later it was used figuratively to mean 'advancing continuously and rapidly', esp. in the context of one ship pursuing another. It became used more generally to indicate rapidity, esp. in the handling of money, suggesting the image of somebody stowing away a fistful of money with one hand while the other hand reaches for more.

to pull somebody's ***leg*** = to deceive or fool somebody playfully, to tease somebody
pull the other one/ ***leg*** *(it's got bells on)* = used to express suspicion that one is being deceived or teased

Earlier it was sometimes 'draw his leg'. The image may be in gently tripping somebody up – that is, fooling or confusing him.

(to win) ***hands*** *down* = (to win/ triumph) easily and decisively, finish way ahead of the field

Originally a horse-racing expression which meant that a jockey was so certain of victory in the closing stages of a race that he could lower his hands, thus relaxing his hold on the reins and ceasing to urge on his mount.

(straight/ right) from the horse's ***mouth*** = (information) from the person most closely concerned with the subject being discussed, from an authoritative or believable source

One possible explanations is the one which relates the expression to "Don't look a gift horse…" or "long in the tooth" – if you want reliable information about the age of a horse you intend to buy, that's where you can get it from.

According to another explanation, it refers to the presumed ideal source for a racing tip and hence of other useful information.

Idioms are one of the most difficult parts of the vocabulary of any language because they have unpredictable meanings or collocations and grammar. As these special connotations and pragmatic meanings are not obvious to people who are unfamiliar with that idiom, the real meaning of the statement is usually missed. Similarly, someone may use an idiom without realising it will be interpreted as critical or disapproving, and therefore unintentionally cause the wrong reaction in the person they are talking to.

One of the main difficulties for learners is deciding in which situation it is correct to use an idiom, i.e. the level of style (neutral, informal, slang, taboo, etc.

BDD-A3008 © 2006 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:59:14 UTC)

idioms). Learners of English may also have difficulty deciding whether an idiom is natural or appropriate in a certain situation. Another difficulty is that of fixed idioms and idioms with variants. It is most important to be exact in one's use of fixed idioms, as an inaccurate idiom may mean nothing to a native speaker. Above all, it is extremely unwise to translate idioms into or from one's native language. One may be lucky that the two languages have the same form and vocabulary, but in most cases the result will be utterly bewildering to the English native speaker – and possibly highly amusing. (Seidl 1988)

Nevertheless, idioms are, at the same time, one of the most interesting parts of the English vocabulary. They are interesting because they are colourful and lively, and because they are linguistic curiosities. They tell us not only about mythology, history, tradition, beliefs and customs; but more important, about the way of thinking and the outlook upon life of the people who speak the language that has produced them.

REFERENCES

Courtney, Rosemary 1994, *Longman Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs,* Essex England: Longman Group UK Limited

Dumistrăcel, Stelian 1997, *Expresii româneşti*, Iaşi: Institutul European

Flavell, Linda and Roger 2002, *Dictionary of Idioms and their Origins*, Kyle Cathie LTD, London

Kertész, Manó 1922, *Szokásmondások*, Budapest: Révai Testvérek R.T.

O. Nagy, Gábor 1988, *Mi fán terem?,* Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó

O. Nagy, Gábor 1966, *Magyar szólások és közmondások*, Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó

Manser, Martin 1990, *Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins*, London: Sphere Books Ltd.

Rogers, James 1994, *The Dictionary of Clichés*, New Jersey: Wings Books

Seidl, Jennifer 1988, *English Idioms*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Tăbăcaru, Octavian 1999, *Dicţionar de expresii idiomatice al limbii engleze*, Bucureşti: Editura Niculescu SRL

Warren, Helen 1994, *Oxford Learner's Dictionary of English Idioms*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

A magyar nyelv történeti-etimológiai szótára 1967, Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó

The COBUILD Dictionary of Idioms 1995, London: Harper Collins Publishers

The Longman Dictionary of English Idioms 1979, Longman Group UK Limited

The Oxford Dictionary of Idioms 1999, New York, Oxford University Press Inc.

The Penguin Dictionary of English Idioms 1994, Penguin Books Ltd.

The Wordsworth Dictionary of Idioms 1993, Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd

The Wordsworth Dictionary of Phrase &Fable 1993, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd.

BDD-A3008 © 2006 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.34 (2026-11-13 23:59:14 UTC)