

A Brief History of Some Words and Phrases

By Lord Sir Paul de Marseilles

It is estimated that there are approximately 2,500 languages in the world and English is one of the most common. It is a language which is extremely flexible and adaptive. Our language evolved from Old English, a language which is different than the tongue we currently speak. As noted by Bill Bryson, the author of "The Mother Tongue: English and How it Got that Way", there are approximately 4,500 Old English words which are still in current usage. The Oxford English Dictionary has almost 650,000 words in it not including technical terms. Old English words and phrases constitute less than 1 percent of the words being used in the English Language today.

The Anglo-Saxons adopted words and phrases from Romans and Greeks (words such as "forum", "republic", and "veto"), the Norman French ("justice", "baron", "prince"), the Scandinavians ("log", "trust", and "skull"), the Dutch ("landscape", "cookies", "caboose") and the Spanish ("rodeo", "bronco", and "canyon"). Etymology is the study of the origin of words and phrases. Etymologists estimate that the English language had borrowed words from over 50 languages by the 16th Century. When one considers that the United States became the home of millions of immigrants with different languages, the growth of the English language through words and phrases from other languages is not particularly surprising. This growth doesn't mean that we can all still understand each other perfectly. Take someone from New England and have them try to speak with someone from England, Scotland, or Wales. The language may be common, but the use of the words and phrases are not.

I have provided just a few examples of some of the words and phrases which are in common use today and a short history of their origin. I hope that you enjoy them.

Ancient Origins

"Been Sacked" or "to get the Sack": In today's usage, these phrases mean that someone was fired or terminated. Etymologists believe that there are two possible origins for these phrases. Some point to the ancient Romans who, as part of their capital punishment, would simply tie a criminal into a sack and throw them into a river to drown. Other nations and countries subsequently adopted this means of punishment as well. Others trace these phrases to craftsmen during the Medieval Ages who would bring the tools of their trade to work in a sack. The sack would be handed to their employers during the workday. They would "get the sack" at the end of the day which meant that their services were no longer required.

"Not worth His Salt": We use this phrase to describe an individual who is not very good at what he does for a living. The origin of the phrase calls back to the Romans who partially paid their soldiers with salt, a substance which was extremely valuable. An individual who was not worth his salt was not worth paying. The English word "salary" actually comes from the Roman word for salt ("sal").

"Draconian": A Draconian punishment is one which is out of proportion to the offense which has been committed. The use of this word can be traced back to the ancient Greeks. In 7th Century B.C., the authorities in Athens appointed Draco to draw up a criminal code for punishment. The Code was so severe that almost every offense was punishable by death. It was called the Draconian Code.

"Washing Your Hands of Something": We use this phrase to describe an individual who no longer wants to be involved in the activity. Most Etymologists trace the origin of this phrase to the New Testament in the Bible. Pontius Pilate washed his hands shortly before turning over Jesus to the crowd who eventually crucified him.

Norse Origins

“Raining Cats and Dogs”: We use this phrase to describe a storm of unusual intensity. The common consensus among Etymologists, although widely debated, is that the phrase harkens back to Old Norse legends. Cats were believed to have the power to conjure storms and dogs were symbols of the wind. The original use of this phrase meant a hard driving rain with howling wind. Other Etymologists point to the use of the phrase to describe a rain so hard that cats and dogs drowned in the water and could be seen floating in the streets or gutters.

“To Egg on”: This phrase means to encourage another to do something risky or dangerous. The phrase actually comes from the Old Norse word “Eggja” which means “to incite” usually with the business end of a sword.

“Berserk”: This term today is used to describe someone who is wildly destructive or frenzied in behavior. The word actually comes from the Old Norse term “Berserkr” which meant “bear shirt” and was used to describe Norse warriors who fought in bearskins and were almost unstoppable in combat.

Medieval Origins

“The Upper Crust”: We use this phrase to describe the elite or wealthy. It actually has origins in the medieval dining custom of passing the bread during dinner first among those of noble or higher social stature. They would tear off the crust of the bread to eat it and the remainder of the bread would then be passed down to those of lower social standing. Those who were wealthy or noble literally had the opportunity to eat the upper crust.

“Red Letter Day”: We think of a red letter day as one that has meaning or significance. In the Middle Ages, religious holidays on calendars would be marked in red letters so that people could remember them. Many would pay attention since most religious holidays were also feast days which provided free food and drink.

“Eating Humble Pie”: This phrase is used to describe someone who is forced to make an apology or is to be humbled in some way. The origin of this phrase comes from medieval practice of feasting following a hunt. The nobility would enjoy the best parts of the deer or an animal. The remainder would be served to others in a dish frequently called an “umble pie” which was a dish made out of the liver, heart, and guts of the animal. The “eating of umble pie” was an acknowledgment of one’s less than sterling social status.

“Shambles”: Shambles is a term used to describe something that is untidy or chaotic. The word actually comes from the Saxon word “Scamel”, a word used to describe a stall displaying meat. The shambles was the street containing butcher’s shops. At the end of the day, there would be unwanted meat, blood and other related byproducts of the trade spread throughout the street.

“Licking His Chops”: This phrase means someone who is eager with anticipation. The phrase can be traced to the Anglo-Saxons’ “Chops” meaning the mouth or jaw. An individual who was “licking his chops” was actually licking his lips like a wolf or dog in anticipation of a meal.

“High Horse”: We describe someone who is on his high horse as an individual who is aloof or snobbish. Etymologists trace the history of this phrase back to the war horses which were capable of bearing fully armored Knights and thus tended to be taller and larger than regular horses. Knights who sat upon these horses would literally be above everyone else and capable of looking down upon those who were not Knights.

“The Thinking Cap”: An individual who has put on his or her thinking cap is pondering a problem. This phrase comes from the early legal system in England when a Judge would put on a black cap to show that he had considered all of the evidence and was now thinking about his ruling.

“No Quarter neither Asked nor given”: The modern meaning of this phrase is that there will be no mercy given under any circumstances. The word “quarter” is the Old English word for mercy. In Medieval times, a black flag raised before battle would signify that no mercy was going to be given to prisoners. It would be a fight to the death.

“Burning a Candle at Both Ends”: We use this phrase today to describe someone who is working harder than normal. The origin of this phrase comes from medieval tradesmen who would work deep into the night and would literally burn a candle at both ends to provide additional light to work by.

Renaissance and Beyond

“Bedlam”: We use this word to describe something that is incredibly or insanely busy. One of the first hospitals in London was St. Mary of Bethlehem in 1247. Henry VIII dedicated the hospital to the treatment for the insane. The word Bethlehem was shorted to Bedlam. By the 1700s, this hospital was open to the public for entertainment and educational purposes.

“Skeletons in the Closet”: In modern usage, this phrase is used to describe someone who is hiding some type of secret. The origin of this phrase comes from a time during the early medical profession when it was illegal to dissect corpses for medical research. These laws remained in effect in England until the 1830s and resulted in a “lively” trade among grave robbers. Medical professionals were believed to hide bodies or skeletons in the closets of their offices or teaching facilities.

“Blackmail”: We use this word to describe the extorting of money by use of threat of exposing something or by threats of force. This term actually comes from Scotland in the 1600s. Mail was an old Scottish term for rent or tribute. Tenants would pay their rent in silver or gold which was also known as “Whitmal” or “white mail”. “Black mail” was payment in the form of labor, cattle or was the money paid to smugglers and rival clans to keep them from stealing goods, cattle, or even people.

“The Cat got your Tongue”: The modern usage of this phrase is to describe someone who is suddenly silent. The origin of this term comes from the Middle Eastern practice of cutting out the tongue of a blasphemer or liar. The tongue would be fed to cats or other animals who wandered the streets. The cat literally had someone’s tongue.

And that is a quick message from the History Corner.

Sources: Bill Bryson, *The Mother Tongue: English and How it Got that Way* (Perennial, 1990); Albert Jack, *Black Sheep and Lame Ducks, the Origins of Even More Phrases We Use Everyday* (Perigee Books, 2005); Harry Oliver, *Flying by the Seat of your Pants, Surprising Origins of Everyday Expressions* (Perigee Books, 2008); David Feldman, *Who Put the Butter in Butterfly* (Barnes and Noble Books, 2005); Martha Barnette, *Dog Days and Dandelions: A Lively Guide to the Animal Meanings Behind Everyday Words* (St. Martin’s Press, 2003).

