CHAPTER-III
HISTORY OF IDIOMS

3.1 Origin

The word Idiom’ is derived from French ‘idiome’ or Latin ‘idioma’ from Greek ‘idioma-matos’=private property, idos=own or private. Idioms originate and develop without the knowledge of speakers of a language. Sometimes without knowing we speak idiomatically. Surprisingly, as my observation, illiterate folk language is richer in idioms than the language of white collar’s Idioms are more fluent and occur often in rustic language than the sophisticated, a sort of textual city language, whether it is English, Kannada or may be Tamil. It is far from true to say that idioms are only colloquial expressions. Idioms are used copiously in literature and in holy texts. We can not change the order of occurrence of an idiom. An idiom on the face of it looks odd and illogical, but we can not improve upon it.

An idiom is a group of words which, when used together, has a different meaning from the one which the individual words have. Many verbs accompanied with prepositions or adverbs acquire an idiomatic sense. It can also be seen that metaphors enter largely into idiomatic phraseology.

For example:

~How do you know about John’s illness?

~Oh, I heard it on the grapevine.

Of course, the second speaker does not mean he heard the news about John by putting his ear to a grapevine! He is conveying the idea of information spreading around a widespread network, visually similar to a grapevine. Idioms do give various shades of meaning.
We use idioms to express something that other words do not express as clearly or as cleverly. We often use an image or symbol to describe something as clearly as possible and thus make our point as effectively as possible. For example, the phrase “in a nutshell” suggests the idea of having all the information contained within very few words. Idioms tend to be informal and are best used in spoken rather than written English.

For example, we shall see the origin of the idiom “kick the bucket”. As in Wiktionary (en.wiktionary.org/wiki/kick_the_bucket) there are many theories as to where this idiom comes from, but the OED (Oxford English Dictionary) discusses the following:

- A person standing on a pail or bucket with their head in a slip noose would kick the bucket so as to commit suicide. The OED, however, says this is mainly speculative;
- The OED describes as more plausible the archaic use of “bucket” as a beam from which a pig is hung by its feet prior to being slaughtered. To kick the bucket, then originally signified the pig’s death throes;

Bucket is a dereveration of the word old French word buchete (meaning butcher) hence to kick the buchete- and the change into English but relation on the meaning.

A more credible explanation is given by a Roman Catholic Bishop, The Right Reverend Abbot Horne, F.S.A. He records on page 6 of his booklet “Relics of Popery” Catholic Truth Society London, 1949, the following:

- After death, when a body had been laid out, ... and ....the holy-water bucket was brought from the church and put at the feet of the corpse. When friend came to
pray..... they would sprinkle the body with holy water...... it is easy to see how such a saying as “kicking the bucket” came about. Many other explanations of this saying have been given by persons who are unacquainted with catholic custom”.

Verb

Kick the bucket

1. (idiomatic, euphemism) To die

   The old horse finally kicked the bucket.

2. (idiomatic, slang) of a machine, to break down such that it cannot be repaired.

   I think my sewing machine has kicked the bucket. 56

Let us study the origin of some more idioms.

Wolf in sheep’s clothing

Meaning

Someone who looks harmless but may actually be very dangerous.

Usage

Never trust strangers on the street, for they may be wolves in sheep’s clothing!

Origin

In a story by Aesop, the famous Greek storyteller, a hungry wolf killed a sheep and wore its skin to get to the flock of sheep and kill some more. The sheep all thought that the wolf was also one of them and this dangerous animal hid under the sheep’s skin, and managed to fool the flock! 57

56 en.wiktionary.org/wiki/kick_the_bucket
57 Idioms are Fun, p27
In Kannada also we have similar idiom.
Gomukha vyaghra\textsuperscript{58}/gamuk v\_gr/
Meaning - a lion in the mask of cow.

**Make a mountain out of a molehill**

**Meaning**
To make anything sound or look larger than it actually is.

**Usage**
When Uncle Benny catches a cold he thinks he has a raging fever. He's always making mountains out of molehills.

**Origin**
This saying originated in ancient Greece but not in its present form. When people began using it in England much later, they put in the words beginning with 'm' just so that it would be easy to remember and fun to use.\textsuperscript{59} In Kannada we say it as ‘attavannu betta maadu’.\textsuperscript{60}

**Six of one and half a dozen of another**

**Meaning**
One and the same.

**Usage**
Roy doesn’t mind eating vegetables or meat. To him it's six of one and half a dozen of another.

**Origin**
Isn’t six equal to half a dozen? They are one and the same! Any two things that mean or add up to the same are referred to this way.\textsuperscript{61}

In Kannada it is ‘āliya alla magala ganda’ meaning ‘not son-in-law but daughter’s husband’. It is an idiom with the sense of ‘six of one and half a dozen of another.

\textsuperscript{59} Idioms are Fun, p20
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid, p134
Out of the frying pan and into the fire.

**Meaning**

From a bad situation into one that is worse.

**Usage**

Reggie escaped the bears but as he came out of the bush, bees stung him. That’s what I call out of the frying pan and into the fire.

**Origin**

If you were in a frying pan, you would be in a lot of trouble. Imagine how it would be if you accidentally fell into the fire next. That’s like going from bad to worse.62

In Kannada we say ‘baanaleyinda benkige’ meaning literally same.

**Once in a blue moon**

**Meaning**

Very rarely

**Usage**

Nowadays, Daddy takes us to see a real good movie only once in a blue moon.

**Origin**

I am sure you would have seen a white moon and sometimes a yellow moon and may be a slightly greyish moon. But tell me have you ever seen a blue moon? Most probably not! In the same way anything that happens very rarely is said to be taking place once in a blue moon.63

62 Idioms are Fun, p97.
63 Ibid. p75.
Blue Moon

The term Blue Moon means something that happens rarely, as in "once in a blue moon". It is rare that in one calendar month you would see a second full moon or "blue moon". This is an event that is seen as absurd and can never occur. Although the moon is never actually "blue", unless a lot of dust is kicked up into the atmosphere, then the moon can almost appear blue. Some events in history that have caused this effect and made the moon appear as blue include: The eruption of Krakatoa in 1883, late Indian monsoons in 1927, and forest fires in Canada in 1951.

This is from another website visitor:

Blue moon is actually an astronomical term when there are two full moons in a month. Also, when there are two new moons in a month, that's called a Black Moon.64

In Kannada we say 'hunnime amavasyegomme'.

Get something off your chest

Meaning

To talk about something that is bothering or worrying you.

Usage

Sandra always goes to her favourite Aunt Martha, when she wants to get something off her chest.

Origin

If you have done something wrong you feel guilt in your heart. It's like a weight on your chest since the chest is the place where the heart is. So by talking about it you feel better, as if the weight has been taken off your chest.65 In Kannada it is 'yede melina bhara kadime madiko'.

64 IdiomSite.com is part of the Bored.com network.
65 Idioms are fun, p147.
Apple of your eye

Meaning

A thing, which is very precious to you.

Usage

Robbie is such a fine child. It's no wonder he's the apple of his mother's eye.

Origin

In the past people used to call the black round portion of our eyes that we call the pupil, the apple of the eye. This was due to its shape, which is like an apple. And can we see anything without our pupils? Since the pupil is such an important part of the eye, anything that is very dear to us is called the apple of our eye.66

Often daughters or sons are referred to as the "apple" of their parent's eye. This phrase originates from King David, who wrote in Psalm 17 to ask God to remember and love David as His child: "Keep me as the apple of Your eye, hide me in the shadow of Your wings." (Ps 17:8).67

In Kannada we have similar idiom as 'kanmani', literally meaning pearl of eye. 'Kannu' means eye and 'mani' stands for a precious pearl.

Of course, we can translate idioms from one language to another as above. But often idioms pose a big problem in translation. As for 'Hercules task' we have our native idiom 'bhageeratha prayatna' and 'hara sahasa'. Idioms get their meanings from the native culture, history and mythology.

'kicked the bucket' as 'negedu bidda,' 'shetedu hoda'; 'kill the goose that lays the golden eggs' as 'bangarada motte iduva koli konda hage'(killing a hen which lays

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66 Idioms are fun, p84.
67 IdiomSite.com is part of the Bored.com network.
golden eggs). Familiar bird to us is hen, not goose. So we say 'koli' not 'goose'. With little modifications we translate idioms like these, but in case of some idioms I found it difficult and impossible.

A Picture Paints a Thousand Words

This term which means a story told by pictures as well as a vast amount of descriptive text comes from the quotation 'One picture is worth ten thousand words', Frederick R. Barnard in Printer's Ink, 8 Dec 1921 retelling a Chinese proverb.

A Doubting Thomas

A site visitor wrote the following regarding this idiom:

This saying originated from the Bible. It is the story about when Jesus returns (after his crucifixion) and visits his disciples (Joh 20:19). All of the disciples are there except Thomas (Joh 20:24). When the others tell Thomas that they had seen Jesus he doesn't believe them and makes the comment, (Joh 20:25) "But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe. Then Jesus makes a believer out of him when he returns eight days later and sees Thomas and says, (Joh 20:27) Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing. (Joh 20:28) And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God.

A House Divided Against Itself Cannot Stand

This term's origin comes from the bible

(Matthew 12:25). 'And Jesus knew their thoughts, and said unto them, Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand'.

46
A Leopard Can't Change His Spots

When people state that they can't change who they are—their nature—they sometimes use the phrase "A leopard can't change his spots" (it's used in much the same way as "you can't teach an old dog new tricks"). The phrase about leopards is descended from the Bible, in the book of Jeremiah: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots?" (Jer 13:23)

Absent Without Leave

A military originated term which is often shortened to AWOL. Not present without permission is what this term has come to mean.

All Your Base Are Belong To Us

The phrase "All Your Base Are Belong to Us" is from a Japanese video game called Zero Wing. It was a bad translation that turned into a joke among gamers. It now appears on many websites having nothing to do with video games.

Apple of My Eye

Often daughters or sons are referred to as the "apple" of their parent's eye. This phrase originates from King David, who wrote in Psalm 17 to ask God to remember and love David as His child: "Keep me as the apple of Your eye, hide me in the shadow of Your wings." (Ps 17:8).

Emails from site visitors:

Email: This can't be the origin of "apple of my eye" because in the original hebrew it doesn't say that. Literally it is "the little man of my eye." Since it has the same idiomatic meaning, it is translated "apple of my eye" into English. "apple of my eye" doesn't come from Psalms. Sorry.
Back Seat Driver

This idiom comes from the habit many people have of giving too much advice (unwanted advice) to the driver of an automobile from the backseat. This idiom means 'someone who watches and criticizes'.

Back To Basics

This term which means to retract to the way it used to be and with decency/values originated in 1993 when the UK prime minister John Major said during one of his speeches, 'It is time to get back to basics: to self discipline and respect for the law...

* A website visitor who is in his/her 40's claims to have used this term well before 1993

* This is from another website visitor:

Try doing it till 1992 and it gives 600+ occurrences and so on... Usage does seem to jump between 1992 and 1994, but the usage of any other term like "Back Seat Driver" jumps in the same proportion, which probably reflects only the proliferation of the Net, and discards any theory of John Major giving the word an impetus! Cheers, and hope it helps.

- Rahul.

Back To Square One

Meaning back to the beginning this idiom was first heard on football radio commentaries during games. Football isn't easy to commentate on on the radio so they had the idea of splitting up the field into notional numbered squares so that listeners could be told where the ball was. Whenever the game restarted after a break it was 'back to square one'.
Bad Hair Day

A bad hair day is one of those days when nothing seems to be going right. Originated in the 1992 movie Buffy the Vampire Slayer. This was the exact lines from the film:

Buffy (Kristy Swanson) to the one-armed vampire Amilyn (Paul Reubens):

"I'm fine but you're obviously having a bad hair day."

This is from a website visitor:

I don't know when Jane Pauley retired from the anchor position on the Today show, but during their final goodbye, he referred to Jane as having had good hair days and bad hair days. This reference may predate the Buffy the Vampire Slayer reference that is now li Baker's Dozen.

A regular dozen is twelve, but a baker's dozen is 13. Years ago in England there were strict penalties for those who gave short weight. During this era Bakers were usually not educated and terrible counters. So to avoid any penalties, the bakers would give 13 instead of 12 or a dozen, just in case they miscalculated.

This is from a website visitor:

The Baker's Dozen comes from Colonial America where bakers were hung for making the loaf light. That is why they give 13 instead of 12. Additionally, they decided to use the Avoirdupois pound instead of the Apothecary. The Avoirdupois weight is the French standard of dry measure. All of our dry measures in America today (tsp, tbsp, cup, etc.) are Apothecary except the pound which is still Avoirdupois. The Avoirdupois pound is 30 grams heavier than the Apothecary measure.
This is from another website visitor:

I think this actually originated from the fact that even though you follow the same exact recipe, two batches can turn out differently (weather, humidity, etc.) So to be sure that the batch is ok, the baker adds one extra to be tasted when the baking is complete - leaving a full dozen to sellsted on your site.

Ball and Chain

Believed to have originated in Britain, this term has come to mean 'wife'. Originating from the presumption that a man's wife has held him down thus, keeping him from doing the things he really wanted to do in life.

Emails from site visitors:

Email: The ball and chain referred to a device used to ground hitch a buggy horse where there was no hitching post available. The driver would set the weight on the ground and affix the end of the short chain to the bridle. The weight was sufficient to make the horse believe it was a solid post. A similar device was employed to slow a hunting dog that ranged too far. The drag would slow the animal sufficiently to avoid flushing game out of gun range.

Balls to the Wall

Dating back to the 1950's, this refers to an all-out effort. The phrase originated from an aviation term. On airplanes, the throttle control handles and the fuel mixture are often topped with grips that are ball shaped, thus referring to pilots as "balls." If you push the ball forward close to the front wall of the cockpit your result would be a top speed.
We received an email from a site visitor concerning this idiom:

I have never heard the explanation that you gave for balls to the wall and I am a pilot. That doesn't mean it isn't true, but it doesn't sound right. My understanding is that the phrase comes from the automatic speed control for a diesel-generator such as those used on submarines. There is a hydraulic governor, which maintains the diesel at constant speed regardless of the load on the generator. Inside the governor, round counterweights are attached to a vertical drive shaft. The weights (balls) are on hinged arms. As the engine spins, the drive shaft spins and slings the balls outward toward the walls of the governor housing. The faster the engine turns, the closer the balls get to the wall, i.e., engine at high speed, balls to the wall. The ends of the arms opposite the balls were attached to a shaft, which moved a needle valve against or away from its seat, thereby controlling fuel flow. As the engine speed increases (generator load decreasing), the balls move out, forcing the needle into the seat, restricting fuel flow, and slowing the engine back down. Through various springs and other devices, this allows the engine to maintain an almost constant speed as the load on the generator changes.

We received an email from another site visitor concerning this idiom: I am a retired U.S. Navy aircrew man who spent 17 years flying on Lockheed P-3 aircraft and the term we used for max speed usually on take off's is balls to the wall. Like the in the first explanation "balls to the wall" the throttles for the four engines have ball shape grips. The pilots will tell the flight engineer to set the throttle for take off, which are balls to the wall. When pushed far forward toward the fire wall is max throttle. "Balls to the Wall", is a very old saying in the U.S. Navy P-3 community.
Barking

(Barking mad) - Shortened from barking up the wrong tree. From the early days of hunting with dogs who went to a tree without any quarry in it. It means to be reaching the wrong conclusion when told something, but has come to mean someone rather insane or having strange ideas.

Beeswax

This term which dates back to the 1930's is commonly found in the phrase 'none of your beeswax'. It actually has nothing to do with 'wax'. It is just an intentional malapropism for business.

The following is a theory sent in by a site visitor:

I just thought I would offer some information. My U.S. History teacher (who knows thousands of little weird facts about all colonial life) told us that "Mind your own beeswax" was a phrase used by women in the colonial period. Women would stand next to the fire stirring wax to make candles together. They had to be careful not to let the wax or fire burn their huge dresses or hair. So when someone would comment on the job another was doing, they used the phrase "mind your own bee's wax". Now, mind you, I can not prove it, but it seemed legitimate to me and worth a thought. Anyways, love the site. (I would love to know where the phrase "wet behind the ears" comes from though; my friends and I were discussing it the other day) Also, maybe a bigger "send in meanings/request an idiom" button would be helpful.

Another site visitor emailed this:

This phrase was coined many centuries ago when women used bees' wax on their faces to smooth the skin. If they say too close to the fire,
without the protection of a winged-back chair to block the heat from their faces, the wax would start to melt. At times it would be noticed that one of the women would be staring at another so she would say, "mind your own beeswax." If a woman would smile with bees' wax on her face it would crack. Hence, the phrase, "to crack a smile."

Big Apple

Dating back to the early 1920's, this term refers to all horse racetracks around the city of New York. These tracks were the "big" money courses and the word "apple" refers to the prize. A few years later the term was used by musicians to describe the whole city. In the 1970's the term was used in a NYC tourism ad campaign and became famous.

Blackmail

The word "blackmail" became popular in the 1800's and comes from the clan chieftains who ran protection rackets on farmers in Scotland. If the farmers didn't pay the mail (an old term for rent), the chieftains would steal their cattle and crops. Since this was considered evil, it was considered "black".

Blind leading the blind

Another common phrase is the "blind leading the blind", by which it is meant that the person in charge of the situation knows no more about it than those whom he is leading. This is Biblical in origin, coming from Jesus: "Let them alone; they are blind leaders of the blind. And if a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall in a pit.".
Blue Sky

This is from a website visitor:

Ones outlook on life or business situation is all "Blue Sky" no clouds to block the view. A very foolish outlook for when your looking at "Blue Sky" you will not see hazards in your path.

Blue Moon

The term Blue Moon means something that happens rarely, as in "once in a blue moon". It is rare that in one calendar month you would see a second full moon or "blue moon". This is an event that is seen as absurd and can never occur. Although the moon is never actually "blue", unless alot of dust is kicked up into the atmosphere, then the moon can almost appear blue. Some events in history that have caused this effect and made the moon appear as blue include: The eruption of Krakatoa in 1883, late Indian monsoons in 1927, and forest fires in Canada in 1951.

This is from another website visitor:

Blue moon is actually an astronomical term when there are two full moons in a month. Also, when there are two new moons in a month, that's called a Black Moon.

Brass Monkey

The following idiom was sent in by one of our website visitors...

This is from a website visitor:

History: The Brass Monkey - In the heyday of sailing ships, all war ships and many freighters carried iron cannons. Those cannon fired round iron cannon balls. It was necessary to keep a good supply near the cannon. But how to prevent them from rolling about the deck? The best storage method devised was a square based pyramid
with one ball on top, resting on four, resting on nine, which rested on sixteen. Thus, a
supply of 30 cannon balls could be stacked in a small area right next to the cannon.
There was only one problem -- how to prevent the bottom layer from sliding/rolling
from under the others. The solution was a metal plate called a "Monkey" with 16
round indentations. But if this plate were made of iron, the iron balls would quickly
rust to it in the salt air environment. The solution to the rusting problem was to cast
the monkey out of brass. Thus the "Brass Monkey." Few landlubbers realize that brass
contracts much more and much faster than iron when chilled. Consequently, when the
temperature at sea dropped too far, the spacing between the indentations and the
indentations themselves would shrink so much that the iron cannon balls would come
right off the monkey. Thus, it was quite literally, "Cold enough to freeze the balls off
a brass monkey!" And all this time, you thought that was an improper expression,
didn't you?

This is from another website visitor:

Don't let anybody convince you of this. It's rubbish. There's no evidence that
such brass plates existed. Although the boys bringing charges to the guns from the
magazine were known as powder monkeys and there is evidence that a type of cannon
was called a monkey in the mid seventeenth century, there's no evidence that the
word was ever applied to a plate under a pile of cannon shot. The whole story is full
of logical holes: would they pile shot into a pyramid? (hugely unsafe on a rolling and
pitching deck); why a brass plate? (too expensive, and unnecessary: they actually used
wooden frames with holes in, called garlands, fixed to the sides of the ship); was the
plate and pile together actually called a monkey? (no evidence, as I say); would cold
weather cause such shrinkage as to cause balls to fall off? (highly improbable, as all
the cannon balls would reduce in size equally and the differential movement between
the brass plate and the iron balls would be only a fraction of a millimetre). What the
written evidence shows is that the term brass monkey was quite widely distributed in
the US from about the middle of the nineteenth century and was applied in all sorts of
situations, not just weather. For example: from The Story of Waitstill Baxter, by Kate
Douglas Wiggin (1913): “The little feller, now, is smart’s a whip, an’ could talk the
tail off a brass monkey”; and from The Ivory Trail, by Talbot Mundy (1919): “He has
the gall of a brass monkey”. Even when weather was involved, it was often heat rather
than cold that was meant, as in the oldest example known, from Herman Melville’s
Omoo (1850): “It was so excessively hot in this still, brooding valley, shut out from
the Trades, and only open toward the leeward side of the island, that labor in the sun
was out of the question. To use a hyperbolical phrase of Shorty’s, ‘It was ‘ot enough
to melt the nose h’off a brass monkey.’ ” It seems much more likely that the image
here is of a real brass monkey, or more probably still a set of them. Do you remember
those sculptured groups of three wise monkeys, “Hear no evil, See no evil, Speak no
evil”? Though the term three wise monkeys isn’t recorded earlier than the start of the
twentieth century, the images themselves were known much earlier. It’s more than
likely the term came from them, as an image of something solid and inert that could
only be affected by extremes.

Break A Leg

This phrase dates back to the 1920’s and is superstition against wishing an
actor good luck. Many people think the origin comes from when in 1865 John Wilkes
Booth, who was an actor, broke his leg while leaping to kill President Lincoln during a
play at the Ford’s Theatre. But, this does not really seem like it is related to good luck.
Some stage actors think it has to do with bending your knee when you bow, like at the
end of a successful play.
A site visitor wrote the following regarding this idiom:

In a short view of your idiom site came up with a couple of errors at once.

Break a leg—Booth didn't jump to kill Lincoln, Booth, having shot Lincoln, jumped to the stage to escape and in doing so broke his leg.

This is from another website visitor:

Break a leg is cited as superstition against good luck, which is what I originally thought it meant, too. Recently, however, I was informed that "leg" refers to the side curtains and it suggests that the applause ought to be so great that the legs fall break from the stage. I can't say how truthful this necessarily is. The side curtains are, however, called legs, so it's entirely possible.

This is from another website visitor:

I would like to make a comment about "break a leg." The original origins of "break a leg," began in theatre ballet productions where they came out for curtain calls. The rod that allows for the curtain to be raised and lowered is called the "LEG". So "break a leg," means truly to get so many curtain calls that the leg breaks in two. Might want to put that out there and correct your site.

This is from another website visitor:

I'm heavily involved in theatre, and so have heard of several theories of the origin of the term. Here is the most persistent one that I hear: Any time a person or an object moves through or past a drop, they are said to be "Breaking Curtain." The thin curtains that mask the wings are referred to as "legs" Therefore, to enter from the wings, an actor must first "Break a leg." Back in the day, particularly in the era of vaudeville, variety shows consisting of assorted talent acts were fairly common, and often the crowd's reaction led to a person being either allowed to finish their act, or
forced off the stage, but even a few minutes in the limelight was good exposure for an actor. Ergo, even if their performance wasn't great, or if the actor was shot down before he got a chance to perform, he still had managed to get his name and face out there by breaking the legs.

Buckaroo

Reference to Cowboy. The origin was Spanish; the Spanish word for cowboy is "Vaquero"—to Vaquero—-to Buckaroo

Bullpen

This is the area where relief pitchers throw their warmup pitches before entering the game. Nobody knows the exact origin, but one theory is that there used to be ads for "Bull" Durham Tobacco on the outfield walls next to where the pitchers would warmup.

A second theory comes from the fact that when fans arrived late, they were herded like bulls into a roped off section which came to be known as the bullpen. This was the same area where pitchers warmed up.

A third theory is that pitchers who were taken out of the game had been "slaughtered" like a bull; and the new pitcher would suffer the same fate.

This is from a website visitor:

Actually, there are some people who know where this term came from. Several years ago during a tv or radio Giants game the color commentator had the answer (I think it was Jon Miller at ESPN). When the Giants were in New York, they played at the old Polo Grounds, (since demolished). When it opened in the 1880's, there was a stockyard or pen with bulls that was beyond the left field wall.
Carry her over the threshold

Referring to the now common practice of a newlywed man carrying his wife through the front door of their new home. In colonial times, many houses did not have wooden floors. Instead, dirt, sticks, leaves, etc. were pressed onto the ground to create an even surface. This mixture was known as "thresh." However, when it rained the water would leak through the rooftop and the thresh would wash right out the front door. In order to solve this problem, a man would nail a wooded board, known as the threshold, into the base of the doorframe to catch the thresh. When a man and woman were married, the man would carry his new wife over the threshold so she wouldn't trip.

Catch-22

Originated from a 1961 novel by Joseph Heller, where one bureaucratic regulation is dependent on another, which in turn is dependent on the first

A site visitor emailed this:

A Paradox - a situation or statement which seems impossible or is difficult to understand because it contains two opposite facts or characteristics.

Caught With Your Pants Down

This idiom means while you were peeing or pooping someone walked in and caught you doing it.

Charley Horse

This term for a pulled muscle is originally a baseball term, dating to at least 1888. Most sources list the origin as obscure. No one knows who Charley was or why he may have had a lame horse.
Mencken, however, gives two possible explanations. Mencken does not plump for them and to my ear they sound horribly strained. The first is that it is named after Charlie "Duke" Esper, a southpaw pitcher who "walked like a lame horse." Esper, however, did not make his major league debut until 1890, so while it is possible that the term derives from him, the dates make it seem unlikely.

The second is that it comes from a lame horse owned by Charley, the groundskeeper in a Sioux City ballpark. Mencken gives no dates for this one.

Chip on his Shoulder

This idiom simply means to carry a grudge. It dates back to the 19th century. Fighters would put a chip on their shoulder and dare others to knock it off.

Chow Down

Meaning to sit down and eat, this idiom originated some time in the past by the U.S. military. The exact time on the origin is unclear.

Clear Blue Water

This idiom is believed to have originated from the conservative party in Great Britain sometime in the early 1990's. We use it today to describe the discernable distance that is between two parties in politics (reguarding ideas).

Close but no Cigar

If you come close to achieving success but reach a disappointment due to failure you are 'close but no cigar'. Many years ago slot machines gave out cigars as prizes. Also, early carnival games also gave out cigars as prizes.

Cock and bull story

'A Cock and Bull story' is a form of Chinese whispers. It comes from a long time ago when the two most popular pubs in a village were The Cock and The Bull. If a story started in The Cock, by the time it got to The Bull it had been either twisted or exaggerated.
We received this email from a site visitor:

I heard a more fullsome account than the one you give. Very similar, but it is of the roads between places in England there were many, many pubs, the most popular names of pubs being The Cock and The Bull. By the time a story had travelled along the roads, from pub to pub, Chinese Whispers had taken effect. I am not sure it doesn't even date back to Chaucer and the Inns used by travelers, where news only traveled by means of word of mouth from Inn to Inn, and unsavoury and elaborate stories abounded. The difference being, it was not just a couple of pubs in a village, but many pubs, all over the country, from town to town. I don't think merely being heard in two pubs is "enough" for a Chinese whisper to be fully "Cock and Bull" in nature. I also heard a similar story but the pubs were all along a certain road in London, not sure which. Another slant is that is means the kind of story someone gives to cover up the truth, "an elaborate Cock and Bull story".

Cyber

The combination form cyber-, used in such terms as cybernetics and cyberspace, was coined in 1948 by Norbert Wiener (1894-1964), an American mathematician. He derived it from the Greek kubernetes, or steersman, which is also the root of the word govern.

Wiener may have based his word on an 1830s French usage of cybémétique, which meant the art of governing.

Hit The Nail on the Head

To precisely define the conclusion of an argument or discussion. From the old practice of stricking a 'nail' when agreeing a sail between traders. The nail was a stone or post standing nearly waist high and two or three feet in diameter, the parties to the deal would place the money they were offering on the 'nail', and when the deal was agreed it was hit by both parties.
3.2: DEFINITIONS

id\-i\-om [ id\, am ] (plural id\-i\-oms) noun

Definitions:

1. fixed expression with nonliteral meaning: a fixed distinctive expression whose meaning cannot be deduced from the combined meanings of its actual words

2. natural way of using language: the way of using a language that comes naturally to its native speakers

3. stylistic expression: the style of expression of a specific person or group

4. distinguishing artistic style: the characteristic style of an artist or artistic group

[Late 16th century. Directly or via French< late Latin idioma< Greek, "property, peculiarity" < idios]

The above definitions are from website.

Various dictionaries and encyclopedias of the world have defined idiom differently.

1. John Ayto's 'BloomsBury Dictionary of word origins' derives Idiosyncracy as –Greek idios meant of a particular person, personal, private, own'. Among the words it has contributed to English are idiom (etymologically 'one's own particular way of speaking').

2. Mario Pei and Frank Gaynor define idiom in Dictionary of Linguistics as (p95) (1)Any expression peculiar to a language, conveying a distinct meaning, not necessarily explicable by, occasionally even contrary to the general accepted grammatical rules- (2)The idiom is a term denoting the general linguistic or grammatical character of a language.
3. The unabridged edition of "The Random House Dictionary of the English Language" defines idiom (p659.) as – n.1. an expression whose meaning cannot be derived from its constituent elements, as kick the bucket in the sense of "to die". 2. a language, dialect, or style of speaking peculiar to a people. 3. a construction or expression peculiar to a language. 4. a distinct style or character, as in music or art: the idiom of Bach.

4. Longman’s Dictionary of contemporary English puts it clearly that idiom (p706) is a group of words with a meaning of its own that is different from the meaning of each separate word put together: ‘Under the weather’ is an idiom meaning ‘ill’. 2. literally a style of expression in writing, speech, or music, that is typical of a particular group of people.

5. Webster's new 20th century Dictionary defines 'idiom' as an accepted phrase, construction, or expression contrary to the usual patterns of the language or having a meaning different from the literal.

6. The New Dictionary of cultural Literacy, Third Edition. 2002. defines idiom as – A traditional way of saying something. Often an idiom, such as “under the weather”, does not seem to make sense if taken literally. Someone unfamiliar with English idioms would probably not understand that to be “under the weather” is to be sick.

7. Chamber’s 21st Century Dictionary defines Idiom as an expression with a meaning which cannot be guessed at or derived from the meanings of the individual words which form it □ The idiom ‘to have a chip on one’s shoulder’ is of US origin. 2 the syntax, grammar and forms of expression peculiar to a language or a variety of language. 3 the language, vocabulary, forms of expression, etc used by a particular person or group of people. 4 the characteristic style or forms of expression of a
particular artist, musician, artistic or musical school, etc. •idiomatic/Idiomo- matk/ adj
1 characteristic of a particular language. 2 tending to use idioms; using idioms correctly affluent idiomatic French. •idiomatically adverb. ☸ 16c: from French idiome, from Latin idioma, from Greek idios own.

8. Cambridge dictionary defines idiom as- 1[c] a group of words in a fixed order that have a particular meaning, that is different from the meanings of each word understood on its own. To “have bitten off more than you can chew” is an idiom that means you have tried to do something which is too difficult for you. 2[CorU] FORMAL the style of expression in writing, speech or music that is typical of a particular period, person or group: Both operas are very much in the modern idiom.

9. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines idiom as - 1[C] a group of words whose meaning is different from the meanings of the individual words: ‘Let the cat out of the bag’ is an idiom meaning to tell a secret by mistake. 2[U,C](formal) the kind of language and grammar used by particular people at a particular time or place 3 [U,C] (formal) the style of writing, music, art, etc. that is typical of a particular person, group, period or place: the classical/contemporary/popular idiom.

3.3. Nature Of Idioms

Although English language is rich in idiomatic expressions, their number is beyond our guess.

In the study page B12 of the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary the answer for the question what are idioms? are given.

- An idiom is a phrase whose meaning is difficult or sometimes impossible to guess by looking at the meanings of the individual words it contains. For example, the phrase be in the same boat has a literal meaning that is easy to understand, but it also has a
common idiomatic meaning: I found the job difficult at first. But we were all in the same boat; we were all learning.

Here, be in the same boat means ‘to be in the same difficult or unfortunate situation’.

- Some idioms are imaginative expressions such as proverbs and sayings:
  
  Too many cooks spoil the broth.
  (if too many people are involved in something, it will not be well done.)

- If the expression is well known, part of it may be left out: well, I knew everything would go wrong- it’s the usual story of too many cooks!

- Other idioms are short expressions that are used for a particular purpose:
  
  Hang in there! (used to encourage somebody in a difficult situation)
  
  Get lost! (a rude way of saying ‘go away’)

- Many idioms, however, are not vivid in this way. They are considered as idioms because their form is fixed:
  
  for certain in any case

the idioms which are found in regional languages can not be translated accurately in English or any other foreign languages. If you try to translate it the result would be ridiculous and sometimes highly amusing. For example, the idiom ‘draw the chair’.

[Excerpts from an important article (web source) on Nature of Idioms are given in the Appendix-I]
"to be Indian in thought and feeling and emotions and experiences, yet also to court
the graces and submit to the discipline of English for expression, is a novel
experiment in creative mutation".  

—Iyengar

C. D. Narasimhaiah:

Narayan's writing now belongs not to his own state or country but is considered by
competent English and American critics to be a contribution to English literature.  