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CIR's Corner

April 2026 – Issue #46



Hello everyone! "CIR's Corner" is my monthly article about international exchange and cultures around the world. I will introduce a variety of interesting international topics.

This Month's Topic: English Idioms

English is a very colorful and expressive language, partly thanks to the frequent use of idioms in everyday speech. Therefore, a basic understanding of idioms is essential when communicating with native speakers. However, they can be difficult for language learners since their meanings can't be guessed from the words themselves. Many students ask me about the meanings of idioms in my English classes, so this month I'm going to introduce a few common ones. How many of these idioms do you know?

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• **A dime a dozen**

Meaning: very common; not special

Origin: A dime means ten cents, and a dozen means twelve, so the phrase literally means, "twelve for ten cents." It was used by merchants to advertise goods that were cheap and plentiful, such as eggs or apples.

Example: *Mirin* is not common in supermarkets in the US, but in Japan it's a dime a dozen.

• **Beat around the bush**

Meaning: to talk in a roundabout way; to avoid getting to the point

Origin: In the past, hunters used to beat around bushes with long sticks in order to chase out their prey.

Example: Japanese people often beat around

the bush. Americans are more direct.

• **Bite the bullet**

Meaning: to do something difficult or unpleasant that you don't want to do or have been putting off

Origin: It is said that before anesthetics



were discovered, soldiers who were injured on the battlefield used to put a bullet in their mouth and bite down on it in order to endure the pain of surgery.

Example: My car broke down, so I bit the bullet and bought a new one.

• **Cost an arm and a leg**

Meaning: extremely expensive

Origin: If one loses a limb, it cannot be rebought no matter how much money one has.



Example: With the weak yen and war in the Middle East, a trip to the US right now will cost an arm and a leg.



- **Cut corners**

Meaning: to do something in the easiest, fastest, or cheapest way and negatively affect its quality

Origin: In the age of horse-drawn carriages, instead of turning properly, drivers would sometimes round a corner diagonally, and they would occasionally hit the curb with their wagon wheel.

Example: They cut corners when building the house, so now there are many problems.



Using ditto marks (") might be considered cutting corners.

- **It's not rocket science.**

Meaning: easy; not difficult

Origin: During the Cold War, the "Space Race" was all over the news. Rockets and space exploration were complicated and difficult to understand for the layperson. Therefore, "it's not rocket science" came to sarcastically describe something easy.

Example: Anyone can boil an egg. It's not rocket science.

- **Kill two birds with one stone**

Meaning: to get two good results with one action

Origin: When I was taking Japanese in college, I was surprised to learn that the same expression exists in Japanese (一石二鳥 *isseki nichō*, literally "one stone two birds"). I wondered where it first came from, and actually the Japanese phrase was translated from the English one during the Meiji era. The English expression has been used since the 17th century, and originally comes from Greek mythology.

Example: If I quit smoking, I'll kill two birds with one stone. I can save money, and it'll be good for my health.

- **Let the cat out of the bag**

Meaning: to tell a secret by mistake

Origin: A long time ago, livestock markets used to sell live piglets in bags. However, some sellers would try to trick customers and keep their more valuable piglets by putting comparatively worthless cats in the bags instead. The buyer would not discover the trick until they returned to their farm, opened the bag, and were surprised to discover a cat inside!

Example: I am planning a surprise birthday party for my mother, so don't let the cat out of the bag!



My cat gets into bags willingly.

- **Take with a grain of salt**

Meaning: to listen with skepticism; to not completely believe something

Origin: *Naturalis historia* (Natural History), the oldest book to survive from Ancient Rome, contains a recipe that was believed to make one immune to poison. It says to drink a small amount of potion mixed with various herbs, and to "take it with a grain of salt." The salt was to make the poison mixture easier to swallow.

Example: The weather forecast said it will rain today, but I'll take that with a grain of salt. It's usually wrong.

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