

Lost in translation: five common English phrases you may be using incorrectly

English is a language rich with imagery, meaning and metaphor – and when we want to express ourselves we can draw upon a canon replete with beautifully turned phrases, drawing from the language's Latin, French and Germanic roots, through Chaucer and Shakespeare right up to myriad modern wordsmiths – not to mention those apt aphorisms that English has appropriated from other languages.

So why is it we so regularly misuse some of these phrases? Here are five of the most common sayings that have somehow become lost in translation.

The proof is in the pudding

This is a confusion of a proverb first recorded in 1605 in its correct form: "[The proof of the pudding is in the eating](#)". One of the reasons for the confusion is that the word "proof" is being used in the older sense "test" – preserved today in a proofreader who checks the test pages (or "proof") of a book before publication. Confusion was further encouraged by the tendency for people to use a shortened version of the proverb – the proof of the pudding.

Since the word "proof" is today more commonly used to mean "evidence", the phrase was reworded as if it implied that the evidence for some claim can be located in a pudding. The true explanation of this phrase is quite simple – especially for fans of the Great British Bake-Off – it doesn't matter how fancy the decoration and presentation, the true test of a pudding is in how it tastes. Or, more generally, the success of something can only be judged by putting it to its intended

use.

The exception that proves the rule

This phrase is most commonly used to argue that something that doesn't conform to a rule somehow validates it. This can hardly be the correct use, however, since the claim that all birds can fly is invalidated rather than confirmed by the discovery of penguins or emus. This confusion is often attributed to an incorrect understanding of the word "prove", which it is claimed is here being used to mean "test". According to this explanation, the phrase means that an exception is the means by which a rule is tested. If the exception cannot be accounted for, the rule must be discarded.

However, the real confusion lies in the use of the word "exception". Rather than referring to something that does not conform to a rule, "exception" here refers to something that has been deliberately excluded from it. The phrase derives from a translation of [a Latin legal maxim](#), *Exceptio probat regulam in casibus non exceptis*, which may be translated as "the exception confirms the rule in cases not excepted". So a shop sign stating the exception, "Open late on Thursdays", implies a rule that the shop does not open late on the other days of the week.

Off your own back

This phrase is often used to refer to something done using one's own initiative. But in origin it is a cricketing idiom, and should correctly be "off your own bat" – distinguishing runs scored through the batsman's skill from "extras" accrued without hitting the ball (byes, wides, no-balls, overthrows). This phrase is one of many cricketing idioms in regular use in English. The traditional association of cricket with fair play and good sportsmanship has given rise to expressions such as "play with a straight bat", meaning to behave honestly, and

“it’s just not cricket”, to refer to any behaviour that flouts common standards of decency.

If we find ourselves in a tricky situation we may be “stumped”, or “on a sticky wicket”. Someone who has lived to a ripe old age is said to have enjoyed a “good innings”, a phrase which compares long life to a successful period spent at the batting crease, while euphemisms for death include “close of play”, or the “drawing of stumps”.

One foul swoop

This phrase, used to refer to something that happens all at once, or in one go, should properly be “one fell swoop”. It is first recorded in Shakespeare’s play Macbeth, where it is used by Macduff on learning of the cruel murder of his wife and children by the tyrannical king: “All my pretty ones? Did you say all? O hell-kite! All? What, all my pretty chickens and their dam, at one fell swoop?”

“Fell” is an archaic word meaning “fierce” or “deadly”, which only survives in this phrase and in the word “felon”.

Macduff’s use of the phrase imagines Macbeth as a ferocious bird of prey diving down to carry off his family in its cruel talons. Because the word “fell” is otherwise obsolete, people frequently replace it with a similar alternative, most commonly “foul”, but sometimes “full” and even “fowl” (even though chickens are hardly known for their aggressive swooping).

Begs the question

This phrase is often used as if it means “raises the question”, but that is not its original application. It originates in [a logical principle](#) discussed by the Greek philosopher Aristotle that refers to the practice of assuming

something that an argument sets out to prove.

A crude example of this logical fallacy might be an argument that claims that, since Britain would be better off outside the European Union, the referendum vote was a positive outcome. Since this conclusion is based on an unproven assumption, it carries no force.

More commonly, arguments of this kind are subtle attempts to argue on the basis of an untested claim, so that the phrase is frequently used to mean “evades the question”. Much of our confusion may be blamed on the 16th-century translator who chose to render the Latin name for this fallacy, [*petitio principii*](#), rather inaccurately as “beg the question”, instead of using a more literal – albeit somewhat less snappy – formulation such as “laying claim to a principle”.

All of which raises the question of common usage. Can we be said to be using a phrase incorrectly if it has assumed a new meaning by being repeatedly used in a certain way? That’s a whole different story.

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