

ENGLISH IDIOMS AND SLANG WORDS DERIVED FROM FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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Abstract

The usage of certain words or phrases which are derived from foreign languages is, more often than not, associated with a well-adjusted person, who pays special attention to his/ her means of expression. The English language is extremely abundant in idiomatic expressions which originate in various modern languages and which are regarded as “international expressions”, since we encounter them in most modern languages, either we speak about French, Italian, Spanish or German. In addition, a great number of slang terms are derived from modern languages, too. Our article has tried to focus on the idiomatic expressions and slang words which originate in different foreign languages, in an attempt to give a list, as comprehensible as possible, of these expressions.

Keywords: *expression, slang, idiom, meaning, language*

Résumé

L'utilisation des mots ou expressions dérivés des langues étrangères est, souvent, associée avec une personne équilibrée qui accorde une attention particulière à son mode d'expression. La langue anglaise abonde en expressions idiomatiques qui ont leur origine dans différentes langues modernes et qui sont considérées des «expressions internationales», du moment que nous les retrouvons dans la plupart des langues modernes, soit qu'il s'agit de la langue française, italienne, espagnole ou allemande. En plus, un nombre considérable de termes idiomatiques proviennent aussi de différentes langues étrangères. Le présent article a essayé de mettre en discussion les expressions idiomatiques et les termes colloquiaux qui ont leur origine dans de différentes langues étrangères, dans l'essai d'offrir une liste, plus complète que possible, de ces expressions.

Mots-clés: *expression, argot, idiome, sens, langage*

Our everyday language abounds in all kinds of expressions which might seem familiar but whose meaning we often don't know. There are many cases in which we are only guessing what a certain expression means, therefore we are afraid of putting it into a certain context so as to avoid public embarrassment. Even if we are not obliged to use these phrases, it is advisable to know their meanings, so that we can use them correctly in a conversation and thus make a good impression.

We have tried to render a list, as comprehensible as possible, comprising words

or phrases that belong to the idiomatic linguistic domain, as well as words or expressions connected with the colloquial register, which derive from several foreign languages. Each entry contains a definition of the word or phrase, an example and a note on the origin of the idiom or slang expression. We have had as reference books “*Oxford Idioms. Dictionary for Learners of English*”¹ and “*Dicționar de argou englez-român*”². Here are some examples:

a big cheese = an important person with much influence in an organization;

e.g. *My cousin is a big cheese in the fashion industry.* Note: the word *cheese* in this idiom comes from the Urdu word *chiz*, meaning *thing*.

action gagnée = sexual intercourse; e.g. *Their date ended in some action gagnée.*

Note: this slang word comes from French, meaning *gained action*.

a cushy number = an easy job; a pleasant situation that other people would like; e.g. *My new assignment seems a cushy number.* Note: the word *cushy* in this idiom comes from a Hindi word, meaning *easy* or *pleasant*.

adios muchachos! = farewell, everyone!; e.g. *All right, then, adios muchachos, see you tomorrow!*; the end; e.g. *If you keep smoking like that, it will be adios muchachos sooner or later.* Note: this slang expression comes from Spanish, meaning *goodbye, guys*.

a fait accompli = something that has already happened or been done and that you cannot change; e.g. *I bought a one-way ticket to France and I presented my parents with a fait accompli.* Note: this idiom comes from French.

a faux pas = an action or a remark that causes embarrassment because it is not socially correct; e.g. *I made a faux pas when I told her my secret.* Note: this idiom comes from French, meaning *wrong step*.

a lingua franca = a shared language that is used for communication by people whose main languages are different; e.g. *As we travelled to a Latin-American country, we used Spanish as a lingua franca.* Note: this idiom comes from Italian.

amigo = friend, comrade; e.g. *Well, amigo, that's it for now!* Note: this slang word is used in the American English and it comes from Spanish, meaning *friend*.

bambinos = tabs of meth; e.g. *Please, I am begging you, give me 5 bambinos!* Note: this slang word comes from the Italian word *bambino*, meaning *baby* + the noun suffix *-os*, which is a Spanish plural noun suffix.

beaucoup = great in quantity or amount; e.g. *I am aware that I owe him beaucoup money.* Note: this slang word comes from French, meaning *a great heap*, from *beau*, meaning *fine, great* + *coup*, meaning *a stroke, a throw, a heap*.

be in hock to somebody = owe money; e.g. *I am in hock for 5000 dollars.* Note: the word *hock* comes from the Dutch word for *prison*.

bodega = a small grocery shop, especially in a Spanish-speaking

¹ *Oxford Idioms. Dictionary for Learners of English*, Oxford University Press, 2006.

² Volceanov, George, Nicolae, Raluca, Volceanov, George Paul, *Dicționar de argou englez-român*, București, Editura Niculescu, 2015.

neighbourhood; e.g. *Go to a bodega and buy some wine!* Note: this slang word comes from mid 19th century, from Spanish³.

bona nochy! = good night!; e.g. *See you tomorrow! Bona nochy!* Note: this slang expression comes from the Italian phrase *buona note*.

bronco = a stud, a very potent young man; e.g. *I have never imagined he is such a bronco.* Note: this slang word comes from Mexican Spanish, short for Spanish *potro bronco*, meaning *untamed colt* (in Mexican Spanish: *wild horse, half-tamed horse*). *Bronco* is an apparently nasalized variant of Latin *broccus*⁴.

burro = a smuggler who is bringing drugs into a country; e.g. *The police caught a burro who was trying to cross the border.* Note: this slang word has its origin back to early 19th century and it is used in American English. It comes from Spanish, meaning a *small donkey used as a pack animal*.

camisa = shirt; e.g. *The doctor told him to take off his camisa.* Note: this slang word comes from Spanish, derived from Late Latin *camisia*⁵, meaning *nightgown*.

carte blanche (*to do something*) = total freedom or authority to do anything you like; e.g. *The policeman was given carte blanche to investigate the murder case.* Note: this idiom comes from French, meaning *blank paper* on which someone could write their own conditions for an agreement.

cassava = a tramp stamp, a woman of loose morals; e.g. *You shouldn't get involved with that woman. You know she is a cassava.* Note: this slang word comes from French *cassave*, meaning *tropical plant cultivated for its edible, tuberous roots*, Spanish *casaba* or Portuguese *cassave*, from a Haitian word, Taino (Arawakan) *caçabi*. It was earlier used in English as *cazabbi* (1550's)⁶.

c'est la vie = used when you are disappointed about something but know that you must accept it; e.g. *I wonder why people tell lies all the time; well, c'est la vie.* Note: this idiom comes from French, meaning *that's life*.

charas = cannabis (cultivated in India); e.g. *When I asked him whether he had been taking any drugs, he answered he took some charas.* Note: this slang word comes from the Hindi word *caras*, meaning *resin of the hemp plant*⁷.

chi-chi = fancy, fussy; e.g. *You are pretty chi-chi, Sam!* Note: this slang expression comes from the French word *chichi*, meaning *airs, fuss*⁸.

ciao! = a greeting word, either hello or goodbye; e.g. *Ciao, my friend! How are you doing?* Note: this slang word comes from Italian.

cojones = testicles; e.g. *If you had cojones, you wouldn't treat women like that!* Note: this slang word comes from Spanish.

³ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/bodega>

⁴ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/bronco>

⁵ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/camisa>

⁶ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/cassava>

⁷ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/charas>

⁸ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/chi-chi>

déjà vu = the feeling that you have previously experienced something which is happening to you now; e.g. *I had a strong sense of déjà vu as I stepped into his apartment.* Note: this idiom comes from French, meaning *already seen*.

dinero = money; e.g. *I need dinero to buy that expensive suit.* Note: this slang word comes from Spanish.

el cheapo = a bargain, very cheap; e.g. *I found a really el cheapo skirt at the mall today.* Note: this slang expression comes from the Spanish *el* + the English *cheap* + the Spanish *-o* (masculine noun ending).

el primo = cool, great, excellent; e.g. *The Prime Minister made a great speech. It was el primo.* Note: this slang expression comes from the Spanish word *el* + the Italian word *primo*.

el ropo = a cheap, strong cigar; e.g. *Why don't you try this el ropo, for a change?* Note: this slang expression comes from Spanish.

enchilada = arrogant, conceited; e.g. *I refuse to have anything to do with this enchilada.* Note: this slang word is used in American English, from Mexican Spanish. It is used by stupid people who think they speak Spanish⁹.

femme fatale = an attractive and dangerous woman; e.g. *That woman was a femme fatale for him.* Note: this idiom has its origin back to early 20th century and it is derived from French. The meaning of the French expression is *fatal woman*.

gata = cop, bobby; e.g. *Run as fast as you can, that gata is after you!* Note: this slang word is used in American English, from Spanish, meaning *female cat*.

ganja = marijuana; e.g. *How much does that ganja cost?* Note: this slang word has its origin back to early 19th century and it is derived from the Hindi word *gājā*, from Sanskrit *grñja*, meaning *a highly potent form of cannabis*¹⁰.

gung-ho = cooperative, extremely enthusiastic about something; e.g. *I warned these gung-ho teenagers about the consequences of their actions.* Note: this slang expression comes from Mandarin Chinese; *kung* means *work*, while *ho* means *together*¹¹.

gusto = beer; to drink beer; e.g. *Can I have another pint of gusto, please?* Note: this slang word comes from Italian, meaning *taste*.

head honcho = the person in charge, the boss; e.g. *Everybody knows he is the head honcho in our group.* Note: this slang expression is used in American English and it is derived from the Japanese word *hanchō* (*han* means *squad*, while *chō* means *head, chief*), meaning *group leader*¹².

hey presto = people say this when they have just done something so quickly and easily that it seems to have been done by magic; e.g. *You just push the button and, hey presto, a perfect cup of tea!* Note: the word *presto* comes from Italian, meaning *quick or quickly*.

⁹ <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=enchiladas>

¹⁰ <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/ganja>

¹¹ <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/gung-ho>

¹² <https://www.etymonline.com/word/honcho>

his/ your, etc. raison d'être = the most important reason for somebody's / something's existence; e.g. *Her children seem to be her only raison d'être*. Note: this idiom comes from French. *Raison d'être* means *reason for being*.

holla! = bye bye!, good bye!; e.g. *That's it for now! Holla!* Note: this slang word comes from the French word *holá*.

hombre = man; e.g. *What's up, hombre?* Note: this slang word comes from Spanish. It originally designated a man of Spanish descent¹³.

je ne sais quoi = a good quality that is difficult to describe; e.g. *I have always liked her. She has that je ne sais quoi that really appeals to me*. Note: this idiom comes from French and it has a humorous effect. The meaning of this French expression is *I do not know what*.

joie de vivre = a feeling of great happiness and enjoyment of life; e.g. *After her divorce, Mary felt that it was time to put a little joie de vivre back into her life*. Note: this idiom comes from French, meaning *joy of living*.

keep schtum/ shtum = say nothing; e.g. *You should keep schtum about this fishy business*. Note: the word *schtum / shtum* is a Yiddish word from the German *stumm*, meaning *silent*.

klutz = a clumsy, awkward person; e.g. *Be careful with that vase, you klutz!* Note: this slang word comes from the Yiddish word *klots*, meaning *wooden beam*¹⁴.

loco = mad, insane; e.g. *He must have been loco to do something like this*. Note: this slang word is used in American English, from the Spanish word *loco*, meaning *insane*.

macaroni = nonsense, stupid things; e.g. *Stop telling me all these macaroni!* Note: this slang word comes from southern Italian dialectal *macaroni*, a name for a kind of pasty food made of flour, cheese and butter¹⁵.

machismo = aggressive male behavior; e.g. *His machismo does not impress me at all*. Note: this slang word comes from American Spanish, from the Spanish word *machismo* (*macho*, meaning *male* + *-ismo* – a Spanish noun ending), meaning *male virility, masculine pride*¹⁶.

macho = a virile man; e.g. *He enjoys behaving like a macho all the time*. Note: this slang word is derived from the Spanish word *macho* (as a noun it means *male animal*; as an adjective it means *masculine, virile*).

mañana = tomorrow; e.g. *See you mañana!* Note: this slang word comes from Spanish.

mariposa = a homosexual; e.g. *His behaviour made me suspect he is a mariposa*. Note: this slang word comes from the Spanish word *mariposa*, meaning *butterfly*. Here, the word is a Mexican slang for a faggot.

¹³ <https://e.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/hombre>

¹⁴ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/klutz>

¹⁵ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/macaroni>

¹⁶ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/machismo>

massage = to manipulate; to flatter someone; e.g. *You don't have to massage me. I will help you, anyway.* Note: this slang word has its origin back to late 19th century, from the French word *masser*, meaning *knead, treat with massage*¹⁷.

mau-mau = to intimidate, to harass, to terrorize; e.g. *The gang of criminals never ceased to mau-mau the people in this town.* Note: this slang expression is derived from Mau Mau, the name of a group of anti-British insurgents in Kenya, who were noted in Europe for their extreme violence and brutality¹⁸.

mauve = who seems to have a homosexual orientation; e.g. *He seems to have a mauve behaviour.* Note: this slang word comes from the French word *mauve*, meaning *reddish-purple aniline dye*.

megillah = a long story, a complicated matter; e.g. *This seems like a complete megillah to me.* Note: this slang word comes from the Yiddish word *megillāh*, meaning *scroll, roll*¹⁹.

mensch/ mensch = person of strength and honour; to remind, to talk about someone; e.g. *I have always looked up to him, as he is a real mensch.* Note: this slang word comes from Yiddish *mentsh*, from German *mensch*, meaning *man, person*²⁰.

mucho = very much, many, to a great extent; e.g. *I love you mucho!* Note: this slang word comes from Spanish and it has a humorous effect.

nada = nothing; e.g. *What did he give you? He gave me nada.* Note: this slang word comes from Spanish.

numero uno = the best; e.g. *He just came numero uno in a race.* Note: this slang word comes from Italian *numero uno* or Spanish *número uno*, meaning *number one*.

on the qui vive = paying close attention to a situation, in case something happens; e.g. *He's always on the qui vive for an employment opportunity.* Note: this idiom comes from French; *qui vive* means *who lives*.

papa = a word some females use to describe their sex partner or just boyfriend; e.g. *Meet my papa!* Note: this slang word has its origin back to late 17th century, from French, via Late Latin, from Greek *papas*²¹.

par excellence = (only used after the noun it describes) better of all the others of the same kind; e.g. *He is known to behave as a manipulator par excellence.* Note: this idiom comes from French.

primo = excellent, first-class; e.g. *This is a primo merchandise!* Note: this slang word comes from Italian *primo*, meaning *first, chief*.

plus ça change (plus c'est la même chose) = some things never really change, even if time or people involved may be different; e.g. *Even if Samuel promised us he wouldn't lie to us, we found out that he went to the seaside last summer without telling*

¹⁷ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/massage>

¹⁸ <https://www.yourdictionary.com/mau-mau#websters>

¹⁹ <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/megillah>

²⁰ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/mensch>

²¹ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/papa>

us a thing. Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose. Note: this expression is a well-known French saying, whose meaning is *the more it changes, the more it stays the same.*

prima dona = a person who thinks he / she is very important because he / she is good at something, and who behaves badly when he / she does not get what he / she wants; e.g. *Stop acting like a prima dona – the world does not revolve around you.* Note: this idiom comes from Italian and it is used disapprovingly. *Prima dona* is the main woman singer in an opera performance or an opera company. The meaning of this idiom is *first lady.*

puta = a woman of low morals; e.g. *She is a puta, you know.* Note: this slang word comes from Spanish, meaning *prostitute.*

run amok = to behave in an uncontrolled way; e.g. *He ran amok when the manager fired him.* Note: this idiom comes from Malay; *amok* stands for *attack fiercely.*

savoir faire = the ability to behave in the appropriate way in certain situations; e.g. *Sarah is well-known in her family for her savoir faire.* Note: this idiom comes from French, meaning *know how to do.*

schlub = a coarse or contemptible person; e.g. *I don't want to have anything to do with that schlub.* Note: this slang word is used in American English and it is derived from Yiddish, meaning *blockhead*²².

schnook = an unimportant or stupid person; e.g. *He simply acted like a schnook at the party.* Note: this slang word comes from the Yiddish word *shnuk*, meaning *elephant's trunk* or perhaps from the German word *schnucke*, meaning *a small sheep*²³.

soup du jour = the style of the day; e.g. *I am not interested at all about the soup du jour.* Note: this slang expression is a partial translation of the French phrase *soupe du jour*, meaning *soup of the day*²⁴.

souvenir = an illegitimate child who was born as a consequence of the relationship between a French woman and a British soldier; e.g. *The lieutenant left Mary a wonderful souvenir, her beautiful daughter, Angela.* Note: this slang word comes from French, meaning *a remembrance of memory.*

tête-à-tête = a private conversation between two people; e.g. *Don't disturb them! They are having a tête-à-tête.* Note: this idiom comes from French, meaning *head-to-head.*

the big enchilada = the most important person or thing; e.g. *Mr. Smith is the big enchilada in our factory.* Note: this idiom is used in American English, it has an informal usage and a humorous effect. The word *enchilada* comes from Spanish and it designates a Mexican dish with meat and a spicy sauce.

the crème de la crème = the best people or things of their kind; e.g. *Only the crème de la crème were invited to that fancy party.* Note: this idiom comes from French, it has a humorous effect.

the head honcho = the person who is in charge; the boss; e.g. *You shouldn't*

²² <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/schlub>

²³ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/schnook>

²⁴ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/soup%20du%20jour>

behave as the head honcho all the time. Note: the word *honcho* in this idiom comes from the Japanese word *hanchō*, meaning *group leader*.

the nouveau riche = people who have recently become rich and like to show how rich they are in a very obvious way; e.g. *As member of the nouveau riche, he wasn't well-regarded by high society*. Note: this idiom comes from French, meaning *new rich*.

the / his pièce de résistance = the most important part of a group or series of things; e.g. *Everybody knows his Maths knowledge is his pièce de résistance*. Note: this idiom comes from French.

the whole caboodle = everything; e.g. *He lacks the common sense, the humanity, the whole caboodle*. Note: this idiom comes from the Dutch word *boedel*, meaning *possessions*.

tour de force = an extremely skilful performance or achievement; e.g. *James Cameron's last film was a cinematic tour de force*. Note: this idiom comes from French, meaning *an act of strength*.

tutti-frutti = a ridiculous individual; homosexual; e.g. *He usually dresses like a tutti-frutti*. Note: this slang expression comes from Italian, meaning *all fruits*, from *tutti* (plural of *tutto*, meaning *all*) + *frutti* (plural of *frutto*, meaning *fruit*)²⁵.

vis-à-vis = in relation to; in comparison with; e.g. *What's your opinion vis-à-vis your employer?* Note: this idiom comes from French and it originally meant *face-to-face*.

vino = a type of wine which is cheap or of inferior quality; e.g. *Let me offer you some vino!* Note: this slang word comes from the Italian or Spanish word for *wine*.

volte-face = a complete change of opinion or plan; e.g. *This was a total volte-face in his attitude towards her*. Note: this idiom comes from French, being an adaptation of an Italian phrase which refers to turning to face the opposite direction.

your, his, etc. bête noire = a person or thing that annoys you and that you don't like; e.g. *I couldn't believe I ran into my old bête noire, Samuel, the other day*. Note: this idiom comes from French, meaning *black beast*.

Many idioms and slang expressions are nearly universal, expressing similar ideas in various languages. They can offer us some valuable insight into the language we are learning. There are hundreds or even thousands of idiomatic expressions or slang phrases that are shared across different languages.

More than half of the words which comprise the English vocabulary are of foreign origin. As we have noticed throughout this survey, the French language is an important source of idiomatic and slang words or expressions for the English vocabulary. A great number of French words or phrases entered the English vocabulary as early as the Middle Ages, since French was not only the prevailing language in politics but also the medium by which European culture came into Great Britain. After the Norman Conquest, a big number of French words and expressions entered the English language. English picked up words or even full expressions from French, especially those used by

²⁵ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/tutti-frutti>

high society, by the educated people. Most of the English idioms derived from foreign languages are of French origin: *faux pas*, *femme fatale*, *carte blanche*, *c'est la vie*, *déjà vu*, *joie de vivre*, *on the qui vive*, *plus ça change* (, *plus c'est la même chose*), *savoir faire*, *vis-à-vis*, *your*, *his*, etc. *bête noire*. As regards the English slang expressions derived from French, they are fewer in relation to the influence exercised by other languages over the English language.

As far as the Spanish influence is concerned, this was predominantly manifested in American English, since many American States were partially Spanish colonies. Spanish is the most studied language in the USA. English slang words or expressions derived from Spanish are numberless. One of Latin America's biggest and most influential countries is Mexico. Slang words or expressions, like *adios*, *muchachos!*, *amigo*, *bodega*, *burro*, *dinero*, *el ropo*, *gata*, *hombre*, *macho*, *nada* are used in Latin-American people's daily conversations. Nevertheless, many idioms or slang words that English has acquired from Spanish originally came from other languages, especially Latin: *bronco*, *camisa*, but also from Taino language: *cassava* or Japanese: *head honcho*.

Regarding the Italian idioms and colloquial expressions that are used in the English language, they are numerous, the most common areas in which they can be found being: food and cooking (*gusto*, *macaroni*, *vino*), music (*prima dona*) or daily conversations (*bona nochy!*, *ciao!*, *hey presto*, *numero uno*, *tutti frutti*). Some of these English idioms or slang expressions that have Italian origins bear an entirely different meaning in Italian as compared to the equivalent term / terms in English, especially because these are phraseological expressions or colloquial phrases which do not make sense literally, but within a certain context.

English has a number of idioms or slang expressions derived from Yiddish, a Germanic language that is spoken in Israel, Eastern Europe and some parts of the United States where Jewish families settled. Because of historical immigration, some Yiddish words may be more used in American English than in British English. As it is a Germanic language, many Yiddish words are similar to some German words: *keep schtum*, *klutz*, *megillah*, *mensch*, *schlub*, *schnook*.

Other languages that have influenced English more or less are: Mandarin Chinese (the most frequently used dialect in China and Taiwan): *gung-ho*, Hindi: *a cushy number*, *charas*, *ganja*, Urdu: *a big cheese* or Malay: *run amok*.

We can conclude that the English language has been influenced by many languages, over the years, and that a proper and correct usage of all the idioms and slang expressions derived from foreign languages is essential for an efficient communication. Learning about the origins of these idioms and colloquial expressions can help us make better sense of how these expressions work in modern contexts.

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