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Book Review: Take My Word for It: A dictionary of English Idioms

Gerald Leonard Cohen

Missouri University of Science and Technology, gcohen@mst.edu

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edited by Gerald Cohen
Department of Arts, Languages, & Philosophy
Missouri University of Science & Technology
Rolla, MO 65409
gcohen@mst.edu

Please note: For the present academic year (Oct. 2022 – May 2023) *Comments on Etymology* has appeared only twice (January and May 2023), with no subscription fee for current individual subscribers. University subscriptions this year included a free copy of my 2015 book *Origin of the Term Jazz*, the result of some 30 years of research.

For the coming academic year (Oct. 2023 – May 2024) there will be no fee for those of you presently on the subscription list. I do this because time pressure from other matters might interfere with the usual publication schedule.

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BOOK REVIEW

Take My Word For It: A Dictionary Of English Idioms.

by Anatoly Liberman. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press. 2022. 322 pages.

Reviewed by Gerald Cohen

This book is a scholarly gift to word lovers. Liberman, now in his mid 80's and with a lifetime of research in historical linguistics, especially etymology, has devoted himself to the considerable task of treating over a thousand English idioms and doing so only after making a major effort (almost always successful) to check whatever has been published about them. It is state of the art in this regard, while serving also as a stimulus for further research.

Besides the entries the book contains an annotated list of dictionaries and other reference works, plus three indexes:

1. a 3-page theme-index, e.g., biblical allusions, drinking habits, nautical phrases (65 items), fish, insects.
2. a 23-page word-index, e.g., *amuck*, in: *run amuck*.
3. a 17-page name-index, e.g., Johnson, Samuel (1709-1784), in *can't cry bo to a goose*.

Of particular interest too are Liberman's general observations in 'A Historian's View' (pp. 1-9), e.g., one that illustrates a major challenge facing a researcher of idioms (p. 5).

'The origin of idioms is a particularly fertile field for guesswork. Anyone may suggest why we say *by hook or crook* and *it rains cats and dogs*. Yet truth in this area is more evasive than it may seem, and fantasies are particularly dangerous because they are so hard to counter. One often has solid facts to reject a wrong word etymology (the vowels may not match, or the consonants may be incompatible). But in the study of idioms only historical facts are needed.

'Wild hypotheses proliferate. ...'

In approaching his task, Liberman comes with an impressive scholarly background (over twenty books, hundreds of published articles, broad range of historical linguistics courses taught, etc. His latest book

is therefore one of considerable erudition, although, not surprisingly, there are many idioms for which no convincing origin has yet been found; that is part of the nature of the field.

Here are a few of the book's thousand plus items, which illustrate its varied entries:

Cheese it

Liberman first presents the references: *NQ* 1881 VI/3: 188, 373; 1881 VI/3: 475; VI/4: 38. Then he continues:

'An exclamation of warning: Stop it.' Its synonyms, mentioned in the correspondence, were *hek*, *nix*, and the near universal *barley*. The expression was well known in New York. One (fanciful?) idea about the origin of the slangy phrase was "suggested by the readiness and cleanness with which cheese may be cut with the knife" (p. 188). Or "has this expression any connection with the fact that many school dinners wind up with cheese?" (p. 475). The *OED* suggests tentatively an alteration of *cease*. *OED*: 1811.'

I can help Liberman on this one. His item's last question about 'many school dinners wind[ing] up with cheese' is on the right track. More specifically, Tamony 1939 ('The Allusion in *Cheese It*') includes the following sentence:

'*Cheese it* is an allusion to the immemorial custom of taking cheese at the end of the meal.'

That article was apparently overlooked by lexicographers (cf. *Webster III*: 'origin unknown'), and I therefore reprinted it with some comments of mine as Tamony 1989 (in my *Studies in Slang* series, vol. 2, pp. 109-111).

Incidentally, numerous additional attestations of 'cheese it' in mid-19th century cant are given in Cohen (2007: 7-8).

Cut and run

I was unaware of the nautical origin of this idiom. Liberman first presents three reference items and then writes:

“To make a speedy departure from a hazardous situation rather than deal with it”. The nautical origin of the phrase was pointed out but without comment, probably because it is non-controversial: to escape imminent danger, the ship would depart; cut at the rigging and anchor, and sail with the wind; hence the metaphorical sense. *OED*: 1704.’

Incidentally, Liberman’s theme-index has sixty-five idioms with a nautical connection.

It rains cats and dogs.

Liberman devotes almost two pages to all the attempted explanations (very valuable compilation!) but finds them unconvincing. I will now advance one more, even though he will likely add it to the list of fanciful conjectures:

Since all attempts to connect cats and dogs semantically to a downpour have failed, maybe the solution needs to be sought elsewhere, viz., in the well-known expression *to fight like cats and dogs* (i.e., furiously). Maybe someone originally said something like ‘It was raining so hard, it was like cats and dogs fighting,’ and then by shortening, ‘it was raining cats and dogs.’

Full disclosure: After I wrote the above lines I checked the internet, and my suggestion turns out to be not entirely original. A children’s book (Meikle 2010: 396) says: “Raining cats and dogs” means it’s raining extremely hard – so hard in fact that with the rain and wind it might even sound like a cat and dog fight.’

Put the kibosh on.

Liberman had followed the discussion of this expression in *Comments on Etymology* and in the book *Origin of Kibosh* (Cohen, Goranson, Little 2017), and he also wrote about the expression several times in his *Oxford Etymologist* blog. He correctly rejects numerous suggestions about the expression’s origins and, eventually, following the thesis of *Origin of Kibosh*, concluded in *Take My Word For It* (the bracketed comment just below is mine):

‘At the moment, *kurbash* [a sticklike whip made of hippopotamus or rhinoceros hide and used as an instrument of punishment in the Mideast] has the greatest potential.’

The three authors of *Origin of Kibosh* would state the case just a bit more strongly (we consider the derivation from *kurbash* to be certain), but Liberman’s statement of support of *kibosh* from *kurbash* is very welcome and took some daring: *OED3* (despite making progress on the subject) still says ‘origin unknown’ for *kibosh*, but I believe Liberman is on firm ground in his more favorable assessment. See Cohen et al. (2019: 4-6), section titled ‘Compiled Evidence That *Kibosh* (In *Put The Kibosh On*) Originally Referred to a Whip’. Also: Cohen et al. (2017: 23-26).

The compiled evidence consists of seven items, and here is one:

French-Sheldon’s 1892 book *Sultan to Sultan* defines *kibosh* as ‘a rhinoceros-hide-stick’ (i.e., a *kurbash*). The parenthetical comment ‘rhinoceros-hide stick’ appears in the quote below (from p. 200):

‘Witnessing the event, Hamidi’s *kibosh* (rhinoceros-hide stick) went whistling through the air as he impulsively plunged through the stream to chastise the frightened askari.’

As an important footnote, I always point out that Stephen Goranson and Matthew Little were the ones who (independently) first suggested that *kibosh* derives from *kurbash*, and Goranson deserves the lion’s share of credit for finding the evidence to support that thesis.

Sold down the river.

After listing several references (*ANQ* 2, 1942: 85, 138; *ANQ* 3, 1943: 46). Liberman writes:

“‘Betrayed and deserted’. The question was asked in connection with the baseball expression *sold down the river* (meaning “retired from a major league”). The answers unanimously pointed to the time when slaves were auctioned to plantations in the southern states and transported down the Ohio River and the Mississippi.

Perhaps the popularity of the phrase is due to the description in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. *OED*: colloquial, originally U.S., 1921.'

On a personal note, one of my interests is words and expressions that owe their origin and/or popularity to literature, and Liberman here provides one more possible item for the list.

Take the cake.

I had always thought this expression derived entirely from the cakewalk of American black slaves, and maybe it really did, but Liberman points to the Irish possibly playing a role:

"To carry off the honors". The custom is supposed to have Irish roots. The Irish seem to have taken the phrase to America, where it contributed to the creation of the cake walk dance. The cake walk dance was suggested in 1892 and in 1955.

[*NQ* 1892 VIII/1: 69, 176, 364; 1892, VIII/2: 215; *NQ*, 1955, 200: 357]. The contributors cited a Greek analog. Games with a cake being a prize were common in rural England (pp. 69 and 215). The article in *ANQ* [1, 1888: 147] confirms the reference to Irish and supplies a few details. *OED*: 1847 (*take the cakes*), 1884 (*take the cake*).'

Additional items of interest in the book (and this is a very small sample) include:

between the Devil and the deep sea; by and large; call a spade a spade; Charley horse; cloud nine; curry favor; cut the mustard; eat crow; get into a scrape; get the sack / receive the canvas; go the whole hog; Goody two-shoes; hair of the dog that bit you; in a huff; kick the bucket; no great shakes; pull one's leg; red tape; rule of thumb; run amuck; spit(ten) image; touch cold iron; touch wood.

This book has extensive material of interest for both scholars and educated laymen. By its very nature the material illustrates the wide range of activities that have produced idioms in our language and thereby enriched it beyond measure. There are already many popular books of idioms on the market, but none with the breadth of material

and up-to-date scholarship found in *Take My Word For It*.

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