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In a recent meeting it struck me – not for the first time – how difficult it must be for learners of English to understand phrases that we mostly take for granted but which seem on the surface to bear little relationship to the meanings they convey.

The language examples were idiomatic phrases, which native speakers and learners with sufficient experience know to process as complete ideas, but where an analysis in terms of their component parts might not make a great deal of sense.

One was the phrase “The proof of the pudding will be . . .”. The original full idiom is “The proof of the pudding is in the eating”, meaning that the value or success of something has to be tested by trying it out, just like you can only really tell if something you have cooked is a success by tasting it.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, this idiom or proverbial phrase dates back to the early 17th century, so there has been plenty of time for it to become established and for the elliptical form “the proof of the pudding” to arise.



Proving the pudding

Language Matters

I have also heard this idiom shortened to “The proof is in the pudding”. Indeed, the St Louis Post-Dispatch (Dec 21, 2018) cites Devon Allman of the band the Allman Brothers. In discussion of a new album, he said that “at the end of the day, the proof is in the pudding, and the pudding is that record”.

The other phrase was “shift the dial”, as in “we must shift the dial in the matter of . . .”. If a learner was to look up the component words in a dictionary, they

might hazard that the phrase means something to do with moving a clock from one place to another. However, the intended meaning was that the group concerned needed to make a radical change with regard to the issue being discussed.

The meaning might derive from the notion of getting a better or different signal on a transistor radio by turning the knob, or dial, that controls the tuning. In our digital and push-button world, the origins of this idiom must be getting increasingly opaque.

Most native speakers and advanced

learners will easily understand such phrases, taking them as a whole, rather than analysing them into their parts and reconstituting a meaning based on the meanings of the parts. The meaning of the whole phrase is usually figurative, rather than literal. This is common with multi-word expressions such as idioms.

One of our recent graduates, Aileen Xinqing Wang, investigated in her PhD research whether coaching learners of English about the origins of idiomatic expressions might help them learn their meanings. Aileen asked learners to guess the figurative meanings of idioms such as “bark up the wrong tree” or “jump the gun”.

The literal underpinnings were then explained (eg, “jump the gun” from athletics, meaning to start running before the starter’s pistol has been fired) and the learners were again asked to guess the figurative meaning. If necessary, the figurative meanings were then explained to them.

A week later the same students were given the same idioms and asked to recall their meanings. Aileen found that accuracy was higher if the students had been successful in inferring the figurative meaning for themselves from the explanation of the literal meaning.

So although the literal sense of some of these idioms may be lost in the mists of time, having them explained can sometimes help learners make some sort of connection and enable them to make sense of and learn these idiomatic phrases.

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No time to lose on global food crisis

Views from around the world. These opinions are not necessarily shared by Stuff newspapers.

Hunger is stalking the world. Seven years ago, the United Nations vowed to eradicate it by 2030. Yet the number of people affected globally reached 828 million last year, and an unprecedented number – 345m – are currently experiencing acute food insecurity, the UN has warned.

Covid-19 and the climate emergency had seen that tally rise. But the war in Ukraine has exacerbated increases in freight and fertiliser costs due to rising fuel prices, and has blocked ports; Ukraine and Russia previously accounted for almost a third of global wheat exports.

Even in wealthier countries, the cost of living

Viewpoint

crisis is seeing more parents going hungry to feed their children. In low-income countries, where people already spend two-fifths of their income on food, rising prices are truly deadly.

Though G7 leaders pledged an extra US\$4.5 billion to tackle the food crisis last month, that was just a fraction of the \$28.5b that experts say is needed. Beyond that, a substantive shift in global agricultural policies is needed. Countries should redirect domestic support towards sustainable farming, reducing their reliance on imports. Others, notably the US, should prioritise grain for human consumption over biofuels. Above all, action must be taken urgently.