

THE USE OF IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING. CASE STUDY, EXPRESSIONS RELATED TO CATS

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Abstract

Idiomatic expressions are a fascinating subject for study, and it is impossible to learn or teach a language without talking about it. In this paper, the authors discuss certain syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic aspects of the idiomatic expressions on cats. The complex social and cultural meaning requires not only an understanding of their grammatical and syntactic structures but also a shared knowledge of the language and the culture it transmits, which creates a certain complicity and synergy between speakers. Furthermore, the correct interpretation of idiomatic expressions is often a source of difficulty for learners of a foreign language, even if they know the meaning of the lexicon (Gross G., 1996). Understanding these expressions in the age of globalization is essential for intercultural communication and comprehension. The French and German languages are full of expressions and proverbs referring to cats, the meaning and origin of which can sometimes seem obscure. We will illustrate this complexity with examples of idiomatic expressions on cats, along with their etymology.

Key words: idiomatic expressions, cat, etymology, phraseology

According to the *Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language*, as well as the *New Universal Dictionary* (2006) and the *Illustrated Explanatory Dictionary* (2007), the word *cat* is a derivative of the interjection with which the cute feline is called: *pis!*. This interjectional etymology can also be found in Ciorănescu's etymological dictionary ("the basic idea must be that of silent walking"), whose origin seems to be a remark by Lazăr Șăineanu, in his 1887 *Essay on the Semasiology of the Romanian Language* ("the names *mîță* and *pisică*... would therefore both be onomatopoeic"). The *Dictionary of the Romanian Language* (DLR, t. VIII, letter P, 1974) still contains the dominant explanation (*pis* + the suffix *-ică*), suggesting an alternative-by referring to the dialectal Turkism *pisik*. The arguments for the borrowing explanation, most likely from Turkish, are much stronger than a hypothetical interjectional derivation. The word *cat* is attested in Romanian in the *Pravila de la Govora* (1640) and appears in the *Bible of Bucharest* (1688): "the creeping things that creep on the ground, the cat and the mice". In the *Buda Lexicon* (1825), most meanings and expressions are grouped under the term *mâță*, but *pisică* is also recorded.

Sextil Pușcariu described, in the *Romanian Language*, the regional distribution of the two terms: "In Muntenia and southeastern of Ardeal

they say *cat*; in the rest of Romania, they say *mâță*. As a Romanian uses one or other of these two words, you can tell where he comes from" (1976, p. 209). In the Redhouse 1998 *Turkish-English/English-Turkish Dictionary*, the noun *keci* appears as a common term for *cat* in present-day Turkish, but *pisi*, the name of the animal "in children's language", is also recorded; and is said to be used as a calling interjection. Several studies and dictionaries of Turkish languages (Kurtuluş Öztopçu, Dictionary of the Turkic languages, 1996; Turkic languages, 2004, etc.), as well as lexicographic pages on the internet (wikipedia, wiktionary) indicate the wide spread of the variants *pisik*, *pişik*, *pişi* within this language family, primarily in Azerbaijani and Turkmen. It is therefore quite possible that *cat* is a word of Turkish origin in Romanian, borrowed as such, and which easily formed a feminine by assimilating the final *-ic* with an already existing suffix that also had the feminine *-ică*. *Mâță* is probably a substrate element (with a corresponding Albanian one), but similar forms also exist in Slavic (Balkan) and even Romance languages; *cotoi* is derived from a borrowing from Slavic (*kot*), but it has also been assumed to have a possible overlap with the old Latin term. (Zafiu, 2010).

In French, the noun *chat* is a late derivative (appearing around 1175) of the Latin form *catulus*

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or *gattus* which replaced *feles* (from *feline*) and probably comes from an African language (Berber and Nubian have similar terms). Latin appears to be the origin of Romance names (Italian *gatto*) as well as Celtic (English *cat*), Germanic (German *Katze*) and Slavic (Russian *kot*). *Chat* is both the name of the zoological species *felis*, which may or may not include the larger species (tiger, lion, jaguar, panther, etc.), and specifically and commonly that of a small domestic animal (*felis domesticus*), in particular the male of the species, alongside the feminine *chatte* (1200-1250). After referring to the haret, the expression *chat sauvage* was extended to other species (in Quebec, "raton laveur"). Similarly, in Vietnamese French, several wild felines are known as *chat doré*, *chat marbré* and *chat pêcheur*. The word *cat*, the name of a familiar animal, at first (in Old French and Classical French) little appreciated, except as a rat and mouse hunter, then (in the 19th century) became a beloved and protected companion, has inspired numerous expressions, mostly in the masculine form (whereas the same words in Italian are divided between the masculine and feminine forms), sometimes in opposition to *chien*, *rat* or *souris*. Examples include *ne pas trouver un chat* (before 1778) "to find no one", then (*il n'y a pas un chat* "there is no one"; or *avoir un chat dans la gorge* (1835). Some of them deserve clarification: *écrire comme un chat* (1853) can be understood from the paronymic *griffe / greffe* and *greffier*, the modern slang name for cat; *donner sa langue au chat* is an attenuation of *jeter sa langue (à manger) aux chiens*, a ferocious symbolic self-mutilation. More explicable, *acheter chat en poche*, in Belgian French, to buy a cat in a bag, "to buy sth. without having seen it, without really knowing what it is. The word *chat* has been given several specialized meanings based on an analogy with the shape of a part of the animal's body or with its supple gait. It refers to a kind of instrument with claws that was once inserted into a fire hydrant to ensure that there was no depression (1704). *Chat à neuf queue* (cat with nine tails) is the name given to the swift (1845).

The slang meaning "woman's sex", assumed by both the masculine (15th c.) and feminine *chatte*, also in the slang form *chagatte*, a form derived from a code in *ga-* (c. 1950), is probably due to a homonymic encounter with *chas* "hole, slit", but also to the comparison of pubic hair with the coat of an animal. *Chat* is also used as a compositional element in *poisson-chat* or in choreography, *saut de chat* or in meteorology, *queue de chat*, which signifies a small, elongated white cloud. (Rey A., 2016).

MATERIAL AND METHOD

In the following, we have selected the most important idiomatic expressions containing the word "cat" in German and French and have sought to identify similarities and differences in etymology and equivalents in other languages.

- **wie die Katze um den heißen Brei gehen** (how the cat beat around the bush)

Cats don't like hot food. If it is still too warm for them, they try to taste it very carefully again and again and walk around the bowl to try the food (e.g. a milk porridge) on all sides. This tasting has become a metaphor for someone who is not straightforward, someone who does not want to approach a subject directly but who is similarly cautious or anxious around it.

- **das ist alles für die Katz'** (it's all for the cat)

This saying probably comes from a story by the fable teller Burkard Waldis, "The Blacksmith and the Cat." In it, a blacksmith always made his customers pay for what his work was worth to them. Although he did very good work, the customers always just said thank you when they were at the blacksmith's, because they didn't really want to pay anything. The blacksmith became more and more grumpy because he always had to work for nothing. So he took an old fat cat, tied it up in his workshop and said to the cat with every "thank you" from the customer: "Cat, I'll give you this. The cat, however, could not live on empty words and starved to death. So today, if something has been in vain or for nothing, one also says, "All for the cat."

- **der Katze die Schelle nicht umhängen wollen:** to tell the unpleasant truth

The mice decide to put a collar on the cat to prevent it from creeping up on them. But when it comes to carrying out the decision, there is no mouse willing to take on the tricky business. The fable appears in German as early as 1350 in Ulrich Boner's 'Edelstein'. Boner's source was Odo's 26th fable 'de muribus et cato'; a Latin poem from a 14th century manuscript collection in Paris is probably also derived from this. In the 16th century the fable recurs in Arlotto, Joh. Pauli and Hans Sachs, and from here it reaches into the popular tradition of the 19th and 20th centuries. La Fontaine gave it its classical form in French.

Sebastian Franck records in his collection of proverbs: "Wer will der Katzen die Schellen anhencken?" (Who wants to ring the bells of a cat?). Anders Lehmann p. 32 ('Anschläg' 13): "When cats mouse, they don't attach bells". The young Goethe adopted the saying in the first version of his 'Götz': 'So now that it comes to the point, there is no one but the faithful Gottfried von Berlichingen who may hang the bell on the cat'. Bismarck said in a speech (Reden VIII, 387): 'Precisely in the position in which I am, I consider it my duty to hang the bells on the cat, to discuss the matter openly'. So in English 'who shall hang the

bell about the cat's neck?, in Dutch '*de kat de bel aanbinden*'; in French '*attacher le grelot (au chat)*'; and the similar expression appears also in Italian and Spanish. (Sillner L., 1973).

- **Die Katze im Sack kaufen** (buying a pig in a poke): buy sight unseen (also French '*acheter le chat en poche*' and Italian '*comprare la gatta in sacco*'). In the colloquial language of the present day, the idiom is often used in relation to the so-called 'rehearsal nights' and to justify premarital sexual intercourse ('Man kauft doch kein Katze im Sack!'). The folk book of 'Till Eulenspiegel' is the first to tell the tale of the cat in a sack that was sold as a hare. Hans Sachs transformed the same Eulenspiegel joke into a mockery of the furriers ('Ewlenpiegel mit der kaczen'). The cat 'in' or 'out' of the sack, however, first belongs to the Eulenspiegelschwank, and the coincidence of Schwank and idiom is not surprising here, because in the Eulenspiegelschwänken, as in Bruegel's idiom, the linguistic expressions are taken literally. The original idiom was then extended to the form found in Fischart: "Ir werd mir kei katz im sack verkaufen". Both phrases combined are still found in Thomas Mann ('Die Entwicklung des Dr. Faustus', Frankfurt a.M. 1949): "If it is reckless to 'buy a cat in a bag', selling it in one is even less advisable". In addition, the Swabian proverb: 'Fools and old women are bought in a sack'.

The expression "**a rupe pisica (în două)**" ["to break the cat (in two)"] - with the meaning "to (suddenly) take an important decision", "to make up one's mind, giving up hesitation" - is much used lately in colloquial language as well as in publicity and even political language: "Cum se rupe pisica la liberali" (headline, in *Adevărul*, 22.09.2006); "Who is breaking the cat?" (*Cotidianul*, 12.10.2006). The expressiveness of the locution is marked by intrinsic violence and arouses enough negative reactions; animal lovers, in particular, revolt at a brutal and unjustified image. Some even comment on it, half-jokingly, half seriously; to the advice "in conclusion: break the cat in two and move on with your life" (forum.aboutchildren.com), the response is: "But why should the cat suffer from this story?!!!! After all, what's her fault?" (ibid.). Because the frequency of the phrase has increased greatly in recent years, many speakers consider it a recent innovation. It appears in the DLR (*Dictionary of the Romanian Language*, 1974): "a rupe pisica" means "to be energetic, determined, bold, to know how to impose one's will"; the illustrative quotation comes from D. Udrescu's *Glosarul regional Argeș* (1967): "Hey, boy, you didn't break the cat from the beginning, you got burnt!". And the variant of the expression that includes the synonym *mîță* - in the form *a rupe mîța in doua*, recorded both in the DEX and in the DLR, with the gloss "to be strong-willed, energetic, courageous" (DEX) - has old and respectable attestations: "Fii român verde și rupe mîța în două" (C. Negruzzi); "Ei! bravo! Acu văd și eu că ești bărbat, om verde, colea, care rupe mîța-n două"

(V. Alecsandri); In a note from the *Poezii populare*, Alecsandri also states that "un om vrednic, care rupe mîța-n două, după proverbul popular, plătește mult în ochii româncei" ["a worthy man, who breaks the cat in two, according to the popular proverb, pays a lot in the eyes of the Romanian woman"]. From courage and strength to effective decision is a small step, the semantic evolution of the expression being perfectly explicable. In popular parlance, *pisica* and *mîță* also have the value of "the name given to objects, instruments, devices, parts thereof, etc. that catch or pull something or stick into something". '*Mîță*' has no less than 23 popular and regional meanings, designating a mechanism for stopping a cart, an iron hook, a chain, the oyster, an iron plate, etc.; one of its most widespread meanings in the old language was the anchor of a ship. Incidentally, the third term in the synonymous relationship *cat - mîță* is manacle: coming from the Latin *cattus*, fem. *catta*, with the suffix *-grip*, the word was used in the old language to designate the cat; it has been preserved, thanks to the same metaphorical evolution of its synonyms, to designate "various objects that are attached, stuck, or enclose something, as the cat catches with its claws" (Dictionary of the Academy): it is also the anchor, or a piece of wood or iron that fixes the cart, the beams of the house, etc. ; object referent also has the current meaning today ("metal rings, linked together by a chain, with which the hands and feet of prisoners are bound") (Zafiu R., 2006).

Donner sa langue au chat

Admitting that you cannot find the solution and give up because you cannot guess anything. Thus, the language, becomes useless and is entrusted to the cat, an ingenious animal, full of knowledge and wisdom.

Les chiens ne font pas les chats

This proverb literally means that children resemble their parents, and refers to the physical and character similarities that can be observed between them. The etymology remains unknown, but the logic speaks for itself: obviously, cats and dogs cannot mate... From a genetic point of view, this means that certain traits are inevitably passed on – it is in the blood!

Il n'y a pas un chat

This expression, which is still widely used today, is an image of the situation when you walk through an area that is supposed to be busy (in the street...) but is strangely empty. Or more simply, it literally means "there's nobody here". In general, it is used to illustrate the fact that a district is dead, at night for example, when it should not be, as it also expresses astonishment. The exact origin of the term is unknown, but some believe it refers to the female sex... For others, it refers to the idea that stray cats are the animals most often seen outside.

La nuit, tous les chats sont gris

This saying is used to say that in the dark, even in the figurative sense, the differences between individuals are erased. This means that some

people choose to present themselves in a particular environment in order to show themselves in a different light or to erase their uniqueness.

Il n'y a pas de quoi fouetter un chat

This proverb means "it is not serious" and dates back to at least the sixteenth century. In fact, the association of "chat" (cat) and "fouetter" (to whip) goes back a long way and, according to some hypotheses, means "to fuck" in the sense of "to fuck" a cat - or rather, a pussy... However, there is no evidence for this unattractive etymology, and we prefer to stick with the expression as we know it, even if we still don't know what the poor animal did to deserve such a punishment!

Avoir d'autres chats à fouetter

Logically, the expression would have been derived from our previous *il n'y a pas de quoi fouetter un chat*. It means "to have other things to worry about" and is used to emphasise the fact that we have far more important things to do than what we're talking about. It is thought to date back to around the same time and to have crystallised in the 17th century, when it was commonly used in theatre and literature; Balzac, for example, uses the expression around 1850.

Jouer au chat et à la souris

This expression illustrates the sadistic nature of the cat that plays with its prey before killing it... It is used to describe someone who makes another person languish, manipulates them, makes certain promises without saying what they intend to do, etc., which is a way of keeping their victim at their mercy.

Chat échaudé craint l'eau froide

This is a very old expression, appearing in the 13th century in the Roman de Renart. It illustrates the fact that a person who has had a bad experience in a given context will avoid finding themselves in that situation again or will show distrust.

Comme chien et chat

This adage clearly means "do not get along", as cats and dogs are reputed not to like each other. Even though there is often evidence to the contrary, this belief is well established and has been since medieval times: people used to say that they were friends like cats and dogs. The current form dates from the 17th century and can

even mean "to hate each other", "not to be able to feel each other", etc.

Avoir un chat dans la gorge

It's one we use a lot, and we can't help but find it bizarre! In fact, its origins lie in a confusion between "matou" and "maton", which referred to a lump in milk... So it's easy to understand the meaning behind it: "to have something that scratches or tickles the throat". Strangely enough, the English speakers have the same saying about a frog!

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The cat was blamed for a multitude of vices, such as gluttony, laziness, and perfidy. These vices and the ambiguous relationship between man and cat can be found in many expressions in all languages. For example, if someone is "greedy like a cat" - "gourmand comme un chat"; if they are insincere, they are "false, pathetic, mealy-mouthed, in short, hypocritical like a cat" - "hypocrite comme un chat"; if they are lazy instead of working, they "stretch like a cat" - "s'étire comme un chat".

The cat is symbolically linked to the notion of femininity. Indeed, the ancient Egyptians deified the cat in the guise of the famous goddess Bastet, who first took the form of a majestically erect cat, then a woman with the head of a cat. A musical goddess of joy, Bastet was both the mistress of the home and protector of childbirth, and she also embodied serene femininity and fertility. This symbolic association between women and cats is no accident. In French slang, the female sex is known as "chatte" or "minou".

The variety of features of this complex animal, so fertile in the collective imagination, can be found in the expressions grouped in the table below, along with their meanings and equivalents in other languages.

Idiomatic expressions and fixed expressions	Meaning	Context of use	Other languages equivalent
avoir un chat dans la gorge	having difficulty getting sounds out from the throat	<i>Je ne peux pas parler, j'ai un chat dans la gorge.</i>	have a frog in one's throat/ einen Frosch im Halse haben
donner sa langue au chat	let it go	<i>Je ne trouve pas la réponse. Alors, je donne ma langue au chat.</i>	to give up/ das Handtuch werfen/ a se da bătut
à bon chat, bon rat	The opponents are of equal strength	<i>"Vous la frappiez avec son même trait, à bon chat bon rat." » Scarron, Jodelet</i>	two can play at that game / a buen gato, buen rato

acheter chat en poche	conclude a contract without seeing the object of the sale	« <i>Je ne suis pas de ces gens qui, comme on dit, conseillent d'acheter chat en poche... Venez par ici... Vous les examinerez tout à votre aise</i> » Eugène Sue - <i>Atar-Gull</i>	to buy a pig in a poke/ cu mâța-n sac; a vinde pielea ursului din padure/ die Katze im Sack kaufen
appeler un chat un chat	be straightforward and to the point	« <i>La fonction d'un écrivain est d'appeler un chat un chat. Si les mots sont malades, c'est à nous de les guérir. Au lieu de cela, beaucoup vivent de cette maladie.</i> » Jean-Paul Sartre - <i>Qu'est-ce que la littérature ? dans Situations philosophiques</i>	call a spade a spade/ al pan, pan y al vino, vino/ chiamare nero il nero e bianco il bianco/ a spune verde-n față
avoir d'autres chats à fouetter	have more important concerns	<i>Je pensais que vous aviez d'autres chats à fouetter.</i>	to have other fish to fry/ a avea altele pe cap/ avere altre gatte da pelare
chat échaudé craint l'eau froide	any unfortunate experience should serve as a lesson in prudence	« <i>Je suis un mari indignement trompé et qui ne veut pas l'être une seconde fois... Chat échaudé craint l'eau froide</i> » André Theuriot - <i>La maison des deux barbeaux</i>	ein gebranntes Kind scheut das Feuer/ once bitten, twice shy/ cine s-a fript cu ciorbă, suflă și-n iaurt
comme chien et chat	in perpetual conflict	<i>Vous êtes comme chien et chat.</i>	wie Hund und Katze/ like cats and dogs/ como perros y gatos/ come cane e gatto
de la bouillie pour les chats	a job badly done	« <i>L'article de Wikipédia sur Michel Foucault est de la bouillie pour les chats. Il est si mauvais qu'il n'est pas améliorable.</i> » Oliver Postel-Vinay - <i>booksmag.fr - Août 2009</i>	a dog's breakfast ; a dog's dinner/ rahat cu mac; rahat cu perje
écrire comme un chat	to write illegibly	<i>Son médecin écrit comme un chat.</i>	write like a spade
il n'y a pas de quoi fouetter un chat	it's not important	<i>Monsieur le Président, on parle de sanctions sévères de la part du gouvernement, mais il n'y a pas de quoi fouetter un chat.</i>	there's nothing to make a fuss about
il n'y a pas un chat	there is absolutely nobody	« <i>Pas un chat dans les rues du village; tout le monde était à la grand'messe.</i> » Alphonse Daudet - <i>Lettres de mon moulin</i>	hier ist kein Schwein/ ain't nobody here but us chickens/ sólo hay cuatro gatos/ il n'y a pas un rat/ nu-i nici țipenie (de om)
il ne faut pas réveiller le chat qui dort	it's better to leave things as they are so as not to rekindle a quarrel	« <i>susciter ou réveiller un danger par imprudence</i> » (Rabelais, III, ch. 14)	you should let sleeping dogs lie
jouer au chat et à la souris	giving hope to someone you have already defeated	<i>Ils jouent au chat et à la souris au lieu d'avoir une relation saine et normale.</i>	play cat and mouse/ giocare al gatto e al topo
les chiens ne font pas des chats	we inherit our parents' character traits	<i>Chez lui, les chiens ne font pas de chats, il a hérité la même prouesse de son père.</i>	the apple doesn't fall far from the tree/ a padres gatos, hijos mininos/ ce naște din pisică șoareci mănâncă
quand le chat n'est pas là, les souris dansent	in the absence of the authority, people do as they please	<i>Le chef n'est pas là aujourd'hui et les employés sont venus en retard. Alors, quand le chat n'est pas là, les souris dansent.</i>	while the cat's away the mice will play/ când pisica nu-i acasă, șoarecii joacă pe masă

CONCLUSIONS

Before becoming one of mankind's favorite pets, the cat long had a bad reputation. Certainly, in ancient Egypt, the feline was the object of a veritable cult. This natural predator was considered a divine animal because it chased mice and rats away from stored grain. But in Western symbolism, throughout the Middle Ages, it was viewed with suspicion. The cat, and the black cat in particular, are naturally associated with bad luck and evil. And if this devil animal has given rise to so many beliefs over the centuries, it is above all because it has always been a medium of the human imagination. We have seen that the expressiveness of idiomatic expressions forms a linguistic and cultural richness and that there are similar expressions between Romanian, German, English, and French related to the cat, that reflect the same conceptions of the world.

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