

THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF SPECIFIC IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS IN THE FRENCH LANGUAGE

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Abstract: This article examines the diachronic development of French idiomatic expressions, tracing their origins from the Middle Ages to the modern era. By analyzing the transition from literal professional jargon (maritime, military, rural) to figurative linguistic "blocks," we explore the mechanisms of semantic drift and cultural preservation. The study highlights how social changes such as the decline of the feudal system or the industrial revolution have left "linguistic fossils" in the French language. Understanding these evolutions allows students to perceive the French language not as a static set of rules, but as a living historical archive.

Keywords: Historical linguistics, diachrony, etymology, idiomaticity, French culture, semantic drift.

1. Introduction

Language is a graveyard of dead metaphors. What we use today as a casual figure of speech was once a literal description of a daily reality. In the French language, idiomatic expressions act as "linguistic fossils," preserving the habits, tools, and social structures of past centuries. To understand why a Frenchman says he is "*haut comme trois pommes*" (high as three apples) or why he "*donne sa langue au chat*" (gives his tongue to the cat), one must look backward.

As Rey (2007) notes, the history of idioms is the history of the people who spoke them. This article explores the trajectories of several iconic expressions to demonstrate how historical context shapes modern semantics.

2. The Mechanics of Historical Figement

The process of an expression becoming "idiomatic" is a journey from the free to the frozen.

2.1. From Literal to Figurative

Originally, most idioms were literal observations within a specific technical field. Over time, the technical context disappeared, but the phrase remained, now carrying a metaphorical meaning. Gaston Gross (1996) refers to this as the "autonomization" of the phrase. The expression breaks away from its source and enters the general lexicon.

2.2. Semantic Bleaching

This is the process where the original, vivid meaning of a word fades, leaving only its functional or idiomatic sense. In the expression "*tout de suite*" (immediately), the word "*suite*" (follow-up) has lost its independent meaning to serve a purely temporal function.

3. Case Studies: Expressions Born from History

3.1. The Medieval and Feudal Legacy

Many expressions date back to the Middle Ages, reflecting a society obsessed with honor, chivalry, and basic survival.

- "Gagner ses éperons" (To win one's spurs): * *History*: In the age of knighthood, a young squire literally received gilded spurs during his dubbing ceremony to signify he had reached the rank of knight.

- *Evolution*: Today, it is used in professional contexts to mean proving one's worth or earning a promotion (Guiraud, 1980).

- "Crier haro sur le baudet" (To raise a hue and cry against the donkey): * *History*: Based on La Fontaine's fables, but rooted in the "Clameur de haro," a medieval legal process to stop a criminal.

- *Evolution*: It now signifies collective public condemnation of a scapegoat.

3.2. The Influence of Rural and Peasant Life

Until the 20th century, France was primarily an agrarian society. This is reflected in the sheer volume of "animal" and "harvest" idioms.

- "Mettre la charrue avant les bœufs" (To put the plow before the oxen): * *History*: A literal mistake in farm labor that would make work impossible.

- *Evolution*: It serves as a pedagogical metaphor for poor logic or rushed planning.

- "S'occuper de ses oignons" (To mind one's onions):

- *History*: Attributed to the 19th century, where women were allowed a small plot of land to grow onions for personal profit. Telling someone to mind their onions was telling them to mind their private income (Schapira, 1999).

4. The Nautical and Military Contribution

France's history as a naval power in the 17th and 18th centuries injected hundreds of maritime terms into daily speech.

4.1. The "Grand Siècle" of the Navy

- "Arriver à bon port" (To arrive at a good port): * *History*: A literal prayer and goal for sailors facing storms and pirates.

- *Evolution*: Now used for any successful completion of a project or journey.
- "Veiller au grain" (To watch for the squall):
- *History*: A "grain" was a sudden, violent wind at sea. Sailors had to watch the horizon to lower sails before the wind hit.
- *Evolution*: Stylistically, it conveys a sense of cautious alertness in business or politics (Bally, 1951).

Semantic Shifts: When Meanings Flip

Sometimes, an expression survives but its meaning changes entirely a phenomenon known as "semantic drift."

5.1. The Case of "Donner sa langue au chat"

In the 19th century, the expression was actually "*jeter sa langue au chien*" (to throw one's tongue to the dog). The idea was that if you had nothing left to say, your tongue was "meat" for the dogs.

- *Evolution*: Over time, the "dog" (a lowly animal) was replaced by the "cat" (a mysterious, secretive animal), and the verb "throw" became "give." This shifted the nuance from "giving up" to "entrusting a secret to a silent guardian" (Rey, 2007).

5.2. "Sentir le soufre" (To smell of sulfur)

- *History*: Originally related to the Inquisition and the burning of heretics (sulfur was associated with the devil).

- *Evolution*: In modern secular France, it describes something scandalous or morally suspicious, losing its literal religious terror but keeping its stylistic "heat."

6. Why Do Expressions Die or Survive?

Mejri (1997) argues that an idiom survives if its "image" remains powerful even if the "object" disappears.

- *Survivors*: We still say "*décrocher le pompon*" even though few people still ride the wooden carousels where one had to catch a tassel to win a free ride. The image of a "prize" is universal.

- *Extinctions*: Expressions like "*chercher midi à quatorze heures*" (to look for noon at 2 PM) are fading because the 24-hour clock and digital time have made the "absurdity" of the image less intuitive to younger generations.

7. Conclusion

The evolution of French idioms is a testament to the resilience of human metaphor. These expressions allow us to communicate with the "ghosts" of French history the knights, the

sailors, and the peasants. For bachelor students, studying the history of these phrases is not just an etymological exercise; it is a way to develop a "stylistic ear" for the nuances of the language. As Galisson (1991) aptly stated, to speak a language is to carry its history in one's mouth.

8. References

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