

If the idiom fits, wear it

by Sabine Eiche

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Back in Italy, I remember a friend saying that you know you're fluent in a foreign language once you can tell jokes in it. He might have added, "and once you've mastered idioms."

Defined as an expression peculiar to a language, idiom has its origins in the Greek word "idioma," meaning peculiarity. At a time when our vocabulary is becoming increasingly technical and abstract, idioms continue to provide the spark that makes language pulse with life. Idioms are vivid – they're word pictures. Often they're rooted in history, mirroring the characteristics of the people.

Long ago, when society was more rigidly structured, clothes had specific associations, and this gave rise to many idioms. Gloves used to be laden with significance. Challenges were made by "throwing down the glove." "Glove money" is another way of saying bribe or perquisite – according to an ancient custom, if someone wanted to bribe counsel to defend their cause in court, they presented him with a pair of gloves. The phrase "an iron fist in a velvet glove" is attributed to the 16th century Emperor Charles V. When two people are "hand in glove" they're close together, usually for a dishonest purpose. "With gloves off" means to oppose something without restraint. It alludes to pugilists who boxed with bare fists – with no gloves to soften the blow.

Fighting is also the context of the expression "keep your shirt on," meaning don't lose your temper. Originally clothes were valuable possessions, so before a fight a man would strip off his shirt to keep it from being torn.

Hats were once as essential an item of dress as gloves. It used to be possible to recognize a person's rank or profession from the type of hat they wore. Thus "to wear several hats" means to hold several offices or have various responsibilities. When a lady wanted to attract a man she'd "set her cap at him," that is, wear her most becoming head-dress. "At the drop of a hat" means right away – from the practice of dropping a hat as the signal for a race or fight to begin. To "keep something under your hat" signifies to keep something to yourself, to keep it a secret. Removing your hat was a sign of courtesy, and the phrase "to take off your hat to someone" means to express admiration for someone's achievement.

Sleeves often figure in idioms. If you "wear your heart on your sleeve" you're showing your feelings. To "have something up your sleeve" is to have something others don't know about – think of a magician with tricks concealed in his sleeve. When you "laugh up your sleeve" you're laughing surreptitiously, as if hiding your face in your sleeve (medieval sleeves were voluminous). To stay with sleeves – doing something "off the cuff" means without preparation, like an after-dinner speaker relying on notes he's scribbled on his shirt cuff.

I, too, often feel unprepared – especially tackling the subjunctive mood of an Italian verb. Then, like airplane pilots in the 1930s, who relied mainly on their instincts because they had few navigational instruments, I "fly by the seat of my pants."