From Ancient Greece to TikTok: The evolution of idioms

English is everywhere – spoken by around 1.35 billion people, or roughly 17 per cent of the world's population. And for most of them, it's not their first language. With so many different voices shaping it, it's no surprise that English has changed dramatically over time. These changes might come from different cultures where English is spoken, new global trends or even social media. At the same time, some old expressions and quirky phrases from long ago – even as far back as Ancient Greece – are still being used today.

Dr Barbara McGillivray and Iacopo Ghinassi are two language experts. They carried out a research project to study some of these expressions. The research analysed millions of online documents to track the emergence and frequency of expressions. They wanted to find out where these phrases come from, how they are created and how they are being used by different age groups.

Spilling beans or tea? – new words, old ideas

Although there are lots of classic expressions that have been used for hundreds of years, new ones or different versions of these appear all the time. For example, *spill the beans* (originally used in the early 1900s) had a resurgence in the 1990s. *To spill the beans* means to share secrets or gossip. A newer version of this phrase, *spill the tea*, has skyrocketed in popularity since 2017. *Spill the t*ea was originally used in African American and LGBTQ+ communities but has taken off on social media and is now commonly used among young people.

All that glisters is not gold – old sayings, reused and recycled

Phrases often get reused or become popular again, years after they first emerge. This linguistic reinvention is nothing new. The saying *all that glisters is not gold* was made famous by Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice*, but it actually comes from a much older English phrase from 1229. This phrase has also changed over time to *all that glitters is not gold*, as the verb 'glisters' has fallen out of fashion. Other phrases, like *bucket list*, became popular almost overnight. It was almost unknown before the 2007 film *The Bucket List, a*nd now there are thousands of online posts about what you should have on *your* bucket list (the things you should try to do or experience before a particular time or before you die).

How different generations use slang

The researchers also looked at how people of different ages use language online. Older people might not even understand a lot of the phrases that younger generations, like Millennials and Gen Z, use. Expressions like *glow up* or *no cap* often make no sense to older people, as they are slang phrases that have mostly spread online. But some phrases bridge the generational divide and are used by everyone. *Keep it real* has been around since the 1960s and is still being widely used today. *YOLO* (you only live once), made popular by the rapper Drake in 2011, is now used by people of all ages – again, probably because of its use on social media.

The global roots of English expressions

The study also looked at English phrases that come from other languages. Many of these can be directly translated from one language to the other. For example, *moment of truth* is believed to come from the Spanish *hora de la verdad*, a bullfighting term. Other phrases change their meaning when they are adopted in English. The phrase *chin-chin*, which people say when they drink together, comes from the Chinese word *qǐng* (which means 'please').

What idioms tell us

Idioms and expressions add colour and creativity to language. But they can also tell us something more – about history, popular culture and how different generations communicate. Young people often use idioms in new ways or create new phrases to reflect today's world. But these phrases also connect us to the past and to shared human experiences. Language changes, just as we do.