



LANGUAGE EXPERT
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EXPRESSIONS

To go to the dogs

According to The Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners, if a place or an organisation is going to the dogs, it is not as good as it was in the past. People often say things like “This country’s going to the dogs. Things aren’t like they were 30 years ago” or “This train service is going to the dogs. The trains are always late. The seats are uncomfortable and the fares are high”. The origin of this expression is believed to be in ancient China where dogs, by tradition, were not permitted within the walls of cities. Consequently, stray dogs roamed the areas outside the city walls and lived off the rubbish thrown out of the city by its inhabitants. Criminals and social outcasts were often expelled from cities and were sent to live among the rubbish – and the dogs. Such people were said to have “gone to the dogs”, both literally in that that was where they were now to be found, and metaphorically in the sense that their lives had taken a distinct turn for the worse.

I heard it through the grapevine

The expression ‘through the grapevine’ (or sometimes ‘on the grapevine’) is commonly used to mean ‘unofficially’ rather than through an official announcement, for example ‘I heard it on the grapevine that they’re planning to make some people redundant’. Rumours and gossip are spread ‘on the grapevine’ but why ‘the grapevine’? The term originated in the USA and comes from the telegraph system invented in the 19th century by Samuel Morse. The system required thousands of kilometres of telegraph wire to be installed, held in place several meters above the ground by telegraph poles placed at regular intervals along the telegraph route. People thought the wires and poles looked like the strings used to train vines so the telegraph lines became known as ‘the grapevine’. During the American Civil War rumours were often spread via the telegraph lines. When people were asked whether a particular story was true, they would often reply ‘I heard it through the grapevine’.



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To have a skeleton in the cupboard

If someone has a skeleton in the cupboard (or closet in US English), it means that they have a dark or embarrassing secret about their past that they would prefer to remain undisclosed. The expression has its origins in the medical profession. Doctors in Britain were not permitted to work on dead bodies until an Act of Parliament permitting them to do so was passed in 1832. Prior to this date the only bodies they could dissect for medical purposes were those of executed criminals. Although the execution of criminals was far from rare in 18th century Britain, it was very unlikely that a doctor would come across many corpses during his working life. It was therefore common practice for a doctor who had the good fortune to dissect the corpse of an executed criminal to keep the skeleton for research purposes. Public opinion would not permit doctors to keep skeletons on open view in their surgeries so they had to hide them. Even if they couldn't actually see them, most people suspected that doctors kept skeletons somewhere and the most logical place was the cupboard. The expression has now moved on from its literal sense!

To pull someone's leg

If you try to pull someone's leg, you try and make them believe something that isn't true. "You're pulling my leg!" is another way of saying "I don't believe what you're saying" or "You must be joking!". It often has humorous associations but the origin of the expression has nothing to do with making jokes or telling funny stories. It has its origins in the criminal world of 18th and 19th century London. In those days street robbers often worked in gangs of two. One would trip up the unsuspecting victim and the other would remove his money and other valuables while he was lying on the ground. The robber didn't literally pull the victim's leg but caused him to stumble and fall and then lose his valuables. If your leg is pulled now, you don't lose your money but you might betray your ignorance and lose your temper.



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To kick the bucket

This is a colloquial expression for 'to die' and is often used in a fairly light-hearted way, usually to talk about the deaths of well-known public figures as opposed to close family members or friends. Some believe the origin of the expression goes back to the days when public executions were the norm for various crimes from theft to murder. Hanging was the preferred method of execution and trees were often used for this purpose. A rope would be attached to a strong branch and a noose placed around the victim's neck. The victim would then be forced to stand on an upturned water bucket. This was then kicked away and the victim's neck would be broken, causing, one would hope, instantaneous death.

Hobson's choice

We use this expression when we mean there is no choice whatsoever. For example, in a situation where you want something to drink and you discover that you only have tea, you might say "It's Hobson's Choice, I'm afraid. We only have tea". The expression is said to derive from the business practices of a 17th century stable-owner called Thomas Hobson. Unlike other stable-owners, Hobson did not give his customers any choice when they hired a horse from him. He always gave them the horse that happened to be nearest the door. Hobson would not change this practice, no matter how important or rich the customer was. If the customer did not want to take the horse nearest the door, he would not get one at all. Now in any situation where there is only one option, we can call it Hobson's Choice.