

Common Expressions

Have you ever heard the expressions, “Bring home the bacon” or “I’ll eat my hat.” An expression is a saying that does not have a literal meaning. In Spanish, expressions are known as *dichos*. Here's the meaning behind some of the sayings commonly used today.

“Bring home the bacon” means to return with a victory or to bring home some cash. But the saying got its start in twelfth-century England, where each year a side of salted and cured bacon was awarded to the married couple who had lived in the greatest harmony for that year. Couples were interviewed by a panel of bachelors and maidens, who asked a series of questions to see which was the most worthy couple. The tradition continued into the late nineteenth century.

“I’ll eat my hat” is what people say when they vow to eat their hats if something happens. They don't really mean that they will actually gobble up their caps. Uttering these words is a sign of how confident a person is that something will occur. *Hatte* was an unpopular European dish that included eggs, veal, dates, and saffron. If someone said that he or she was willing to “eat hatte,” you could be sure that he or she felt assured about an outcome.

“Eating humble pie” dates back to the eleventh century. All the members of a poor English family did not eat the same foods when they sat down for a meal. For example, if the meal was deer, the male head of the family, along with his eldest son and other close male friends, got to eat the tenderest portions of the animal. The man's wife, other children, and members of the friends' family were given the deer's *umbles* to eat. Umbles included the animal's tongue, liver, heart, brain, kidneys, and intestines. To make umbles more appetizing, they were heavily seasoned and baked into a pie. Americans added an *h* to the word *umble*, and to this day, “eating humble pie” has retained an offensive tone. Today, it means being forced to acknowledge one's shortcomings or deficiencies.

Unit 3

“That takes the cake” is an American expression meaning “to be the most outstanding.” Cakewalk contests were popular among African-American residents of the South. In these contests, cakes were awarded to the person who could strut or “cakewalk” most imaginatively. Some of the most creative steps were later incorporated into tap dancing routines.

“Did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed?” is a common English expression meaning “Why are you grouchy?” or “Is something wrong today?” In Spanish, the same expression is “*Comiste gallo?*” which literally means “Did you eat the rooster?” The expressive meaning is, “Why are you biting at everyone?”

- “Time is of the essence” is a way of saying that something is urgent and must be dealt with immediately. What are some situations in which you might hear that expression, and who might be saying it?

- “How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?” is another common saying. People use it to describe a tedious concern with irrelevant details. Why would that saying fit that situation?

- One of this week's words – *reluctant* – is related to the following saying: “You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink.” Explain why.