

# Wizarding Idioms in Harry Potter Books and Their Croatian Translations

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Sveučilište J. J. Strossmayera u Osijeku

Filozofski fakultet

Preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i sociologije

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**Idiomi vezani uz čarobnjaštvo u romanima o Harryju Potteru i  
hrvatskim prijevodima**

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## **Abstract**

Readers throughout the world have been astounded by the "Harry Potter" book series. A story about a magical world, that has its own culture, traditions, and most importantly, language form.

Wizarding idioms are idioms that were created by the author, especially for Harry Potter's magical world. These idioms were taken from actual English idioms with the same meaning, indicating their genuine origin.

According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, an idiom is a phrase that is specific to a certain language because it combines words in a different manner or because its meaning cannot be deduced from the meaning of its parts.

The goal of this study is to examine 26 idioms from the Harry Potter books that use wizarding jargon. Additionally, this research demonstrates the Croatian translation and interpretation of idioms that involve wizarding terminology. The analysis of the idioms includes a wizarding idiom, its literal English equivalent, a wizarding idiom that has been translated into Croatian, and its real Croatian equivalent.

**Key words:** idiom, idiomaticity, phraseology, Croatian, English, Harry Potter

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## **Introduction**

Every language contains colloquialisms, reflecting the knowledge of the general public. Idiomatic language is language as used naturally by a native speaker when speaking or writing. An idiom's meaning typically depends on the particular context in which it appears. Idioms exist in every language, although they hardly ever translate fully from one language to another. Harry Potter's wizarding realm has its own slang terms known as "wizarding idioms." Many of them, however, appear to be drawn from equivalent real English idioms, suggesting their true origin. Using magical terminology, the author creates her own idioms.

The phenomenal success of J. K. Rowling's fiction book series, "Harry Potter," has stunned readers all over the world. Harry Potter is a story about a magical realm that exists apart from the real world. Language patterns, cultural references, and literary ideals abound in Harry Potter.

## **Research Design**

This research analyses how idioms containing magical terminology are used and translated in the Harry Potter books. This research includes an analysis of 26 different idioms from the *Harry Potter* book series. These wizarding idioms were picked out at random. Wizarding idioms are idioms that originated from English but are specially modified by J.K. Rowling to contain terminology common to *Harry Potter* book series. The idioms used in the novels containing magical terminology are compared to the English idioms they are based on, the way the wizarding idioms are translated in the Croatian version of the book series.

## **Aim of the paper**

The purpose of this research is to analyze 26 idioms from the *Harry Potter* book series containing wizarding terminology. Also, this research shows how idioms containing wizarding terminology are translated into Croatian.

## Phraseology

According to Sabine Fiedler (Fiedler 2007: 15) in her coursebook, *English Phraseology*, the term phraseology has two different meanings. It can first be used to refer to the area of study, and secondly, to the group of linguistic constructions that are studied in this area. The topic of analysis is the phraseological unit, which also includes the phrasicon - a collection of idioms and phrases.

### Defining idiomaticity and idiomatic expressions

The term "idiomaticity" denotes the regular occurrence in which it is difficult or even impossible to determine an expression's meaning from the meaning of the words that make up its component parts. Language learners are particularly affected by this phenomenon because they frequently understand the meanings of every word in a phrase but are unable to infer the expression's meaning. (Fiedler 2007)

In other words, as stated by McCarthy and O'Dell (2010:6), idioms are phrases whose meaning cannot be inferred from the words alone. The use of idioms is crucial for effective interpersonal communication. However, idioms can make a language more engaging and lively in everyday speech.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, an idiom is defined in three ways:

1. "an expression in the usage of a language that is peculiar to itself either in having a meaning that cannot be derived from the conjoined meanings of its elements (such as up in the air for "undecided") or in its grammatically atypical use of words (such as give way)"
2. a: "the language peculiar to a people or to a district, community, or class: DIALECT"  
b: "the syntactical, grammatical, or structural form peculiar to a language"
3. "a style or form of artistic expression that is characteristic of an individual, a period or movement, or a medium or instrument"

The use of idioms is crucial for interpersonal communication, but idioms can also enhance the appeal and vibrancy of a language in everyday speech. According to McCarthy and O'Dell (2010:6), idioms and idiomatic phrases can also be used in different contexts, such as:

- a) Using an idiom to highlight a situation
- b) Using an idiom to make comments about others
- c) Using an idiom to describe a condition
- d) Using an idiom to express agreement with the speaker before you
- e) Using an idiom to add interest to anecdotes.
- f) Using an idiom to draw the reader's attention. Strong meanings behind idioms are regularly employed in headlines and commercial slogans. In certain cases, the writer will use word play or a pun in place of the common expression

## **Analysis**

### (1) “I’m only yanking your wand, I’m Fred really- ”

Context: This wizarding idiom is said to Alastor Moody by Fred Weasley in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. When six of Harry Potter's friends are transformed into Harry. Alastor Moody is assigning pairs in which they will be traveling, and Fred and George decide to mess with him by confusing him with which is which.

Derived from: “I’m yanking your chain.”. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “yanking your chain” means to “deceive someone in a friendly or playful

way or play a joke on someone” (Croatian equivalent: “*samo te zezam...*”)

Croatian translation: “*Samo te vučem za štapić, ja sam stvarno Fred...*”

Translation derived from: *vući nekoga za nos* (to pull sb.’s leg); pulling someone by the nose is equivalent to or very close to "yanking your chain" and is thus a suitable translation in this context. When the "nose" component is changed to another item, such as a "wand" in this example, the construction is still recognizable.

(2) “Oh, Aberforth is just **the tip of the dung heap.**”

Context: This wizarding idiom is said by Rita Skeeter in *Harry Potter and Deathly Hallows*. Aberforth Dumbledore is the younger brother of Albus Dumbledore. When talking about how Dumbledore had a murky past, Rita Skeeter is asked if she is referring to Aberforth. He was convicted for misuse of magic and is therefore the black sheep of the family. However, according to Rita Skeeter, Aberforth's problematic behavior is just "the tip of the dung heap", meaning that there are much worse things to worry about than a problematic younger brother.

Derived from: “The tip of the iceberg”. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, it describes “a small part of something (such as a problem) that is seen or known about when there is a much larger part that is not seen or known about”. (Croatian equivalent: “*vrh ledene sante*”)

Croatian translation: “*Aberforth je samo jedna karika u jako gadnom lancu...*”

Translation derived from: *biti karika u lancu* (to be a link in a chain); a link in a chain means to be a part of a bigger process. At first glance, the translation is not adequate because a chain and an iceberg are two completely different things. However, the idioms carry a closely similar meaning. Just like how the “tip” is a part of the

iceberg (a part of something bigger), so is a “link” a part of a chain (a part of something bigger).

(3) **“Don’t count your owls before they are delivered.”**

Context: This idiom is said to Harry Potter by Albus Dumbledore in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. Harry Potter is convinced he will not be able to continue attending Professor Snape's class because he won't get an 'outstanding' on his exams. Professor Dumbledore tells him not to necessarily expect failure, which would lead to not being able to continue attending Professor Snape's class.

Derived from: “don’t count your chickens before they hatch”. According to Cambridge Dictionary, it means that one should not create plans that rely on positive outcomes until certain that the positive outcomes occurred. (Croatian equivalent: “*Ne pravi ražanj dok je zec u šumi.*”)

Croatian translation:

Translation derived from: “*Ne pravi ražanj dok je zec u šumi.*”. This idiom could have been translated better into Croatian. Translated this way, the idiom has very little connection to the idiom it was derived from, which makes it hard for the reader to fully understand its context. Instead, it could be translated as “*Ne pravite ražanj dok je erumpent (ili bilo koje adekvatno magično biće) u šumi.*”. This way, the meaning of the translated idiom would be much closer to the idiom it was derived from.

(4) **“Hold yer Hippogriffs, I haven’t finished me story yet!”**

Context: This wizarding idiom is said by Hagrid in *Harry Potter and the Order of Phoenix*. Hagrid is telling a story about how he went on a trip to convince giants to help Dumbledore fight Voldemort. Hermione interrupts him, so he tells her to "hold her Hippogriffs".

Derived from: “hold your horses”. According to Cambridge Dictionary, it is used to urge someone to carefully re-examine their decision or viewpoint about anything. (Croatian equivalent: “*Ne zalijeći se!*”, “*Ne budi brzoplet!*”)

Croatian translation: “*Ne trči pred hipogrife, nisam još gotov s pričom!*”

Derived from: “*Ne trči pred rudo!*”. This idiom is properly translated because it contains enough elements of the idiom it was derived from.

(5) “Well, **it’s no good crying over spilt potion**, I suppose...”

Context: This wizarding idiom is said by Arabella Figg in *Harry Potter and the Order of Phoenix*. Dumbledore had Harry Potter followed and protected, but Harry still performed magic in front of a muggle. Therefore, Mrs. Figg says "it is not good crying over spilt potion".

Derived from: “cry over spilled milk”. According to Cambridge Dictionary, meaning to express regret or sadness about something that has already occurred; used to highlight that something is not beneficial.

Croatian translation: “...*pa, nema smisla plakati nad prolivenim čarobnim napitkom...* ”

Translation derived from: “*Plakati za prolivenim mlijekom.*” The translation of this idiom fits adequately because the idiom that the wizarding idiom was derived from (“cry over spilled milk”) translates exactly the same into Croatian (“*Plakati za prolivenim mlijekom.*”).

(6) “**I wouldn’t come near you with a ten-foot broomstick.**”

Context: This wizarding idiom is said by Harry Potter to Rita Skeeter in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Rita Skeeter wrote a story on Hagrid being a half-

giant, giving him bad reputation. When she asks Harry to join her and Bozo, her photographer, Harry says that he wouldn't come near her "with a ten-foot broomstick.

Derived from: "to not touch something or someone with a ten-foot pole". According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, it means not to refrain from approaching or engaging with (someone or something). (Croatian equivalent: *ne bih ga dotaknuo ni štapom od 10 metara...*)

Croatian translation: "*Ne bih vam se približio ni mrtav.*"

Translation derived from: (*Ne bih vam se približio*) *ni mrtav* (I wouldn't even go near you dead). The translation of this idiom matches the meaning, although it could have been translated better. For example, it could have been translated like: "*Ne bih vam se približio ni sa metlom od deset metara.*" so its meaning is closer to its Croatian equivalent.

(7) "But all the stuff he said about other cloaks, and they're not exactly **ten a Knut**, you know, is true!"

Context: This wizarding idiom is said by Ron Weasley in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. Ron is talking about how other invisibility cloaks are not "ten a Knut", meaning they're not cheap, yet they are not as good as Harry's invisibility cloak.

Derived from: "ten a penny" or "dime a dozen". According to Cambridge Dictionary, it is used to describe something that is very common, and usually of low value. (Croatian equivalent: *imati nečega kao 'pljeve'*)

Croatian translation: "*Ali sve što je rekao o drugim plaštevima, kojih, usput budi rečeno, baš i nema na bacanje, istina je!*"

Translation derived from: *ne imati nečega na bacanje* (there are no such ...to throw away). This translation does not fully match its meaning. The original meaning of the wizarding idiom (ten a penny) is used to describe the value of something, while the Croatian translation is used to describe quantity. The idiom (or even the whole chapter) never states that there are few wizarding cloaks, just that they are expensive. This could have been translated as “*Ali sve što je rekao o drugim plaštevima, koji, usput budi rečeno, baš i nisu jeftini, istina je!*”.

**(8) “Poisonous toadstools don’t change their spots.”**

Context: This wizarding idiom is said by Ron Weasley to Hermione Granger in *Harry Potter and the Order of Phoenix*. When talking about Professor Snape, Hermione suggests that this year, he might be a bit better. Ron reminds her that “poisonous toadstools don't change their spots”.

Derived from: “a leopard can't change its spots”- used to suggest that a person's inherent character, habits, etc. cannot be changed. (Croatian equivalent: *Vuk dlaku mijenja, ali ćud nikada.*)

Croatian translation: “*Otrovna gljiva pjege mijenja, ali ćud nikada.*”

Translation derived from: “*Vuk dlaku mijenja, ali ćud nikada.*”. This translation matches its original meaning as there are enough constituents from the idiom that the translation is derived from.

**(9) “cat’s among the pixies”**

Context: This wizarding idiom is said by Mrs Figg in *Harry Potter and the Order of Phoenix*. After Harry performs magic in front of a muggle, Mrs. Figg informs him that it is too late to be sorry for it, because the "cat is among the pixies".



Derived from: “set the cat among the pigeons”. According to Cambridge Dictionary, it means to say or do anything that stirs up conflict or enrages many people. (Croatian equivalent: *prouzročiti neprilike*)

Croatian translation: “*ali sad je zmaj odnio šalu*”

Translation derived from: *vrag odnio šalu* (Jokes aside/apart). This translation matches its original meaning as there are enough constituents from the idiom that the translation is derived from.

(10) “Left to see someone about a batch of cauldrons that **fell off the back of a broom.**”

Context: This wizarding idiom is said by Mrs Figg in *Harry Potter and the Order of Phoenix*. Mrs. Figg is talking about how Mundungus left to see someone about a batch of cauldrons that were stolen, or "fell off the back of a broom".

Derived from: “fell off the back of a lorry”. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, it is a humorous way of saying that something has been obtained dishonestly

Croatian translation: “*pala s nečije metle*”

Translation derived from: the idiom is not derived from a Croatian idiom; it is a literal translation.

(11) “...we might as well **be hanged for a dragon as an egg**”

Context: This wizarding idiom is said by Mrs Figg in *Harry Potter and the Order of Phoenix*. Mrs. Figg and Harry are trying to get Dudley to safety after Harry performed magic in the muggle world to save them from Dementors. Mrs. Figg tells him to keep his wand out and to forget about the Statue of Secrecy (a law that forbids wizards from performing magic in the muggle world) because there are going to be consequences anyway, so they might as well keep breaking the rules, in order to ensure their safety.

Derived from: “be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb”. According to Cambridge Dictionary, it means that you have no reason not to carry out the worse action because the punishment for the bad action and the worse action will be the same.

Croatian translation: “*ionako smo nastradali, pa kad već griješimo, griješimo korisno*”

Translation possibly derived from: *kad je bal, nek je maskenbal*

(12) “wasn’t room **ter swing a Kneazle**”

Context: This idiom is said by Hagrid in *Harry Potter and the Order of Phoenix*.

Kneazle is a cat-like creature of magical origin. It has the amazing ability to spot questionable character. Hagrid is telling a story about his trip to find the giants and convince them to fight for Dumbledore against Voldemort. They found three giants hiding in a cave that was so small and cramped that there "wasn't room ter swing a kneazle".

Derived from: “not enough room to swing a cat”. According to Cambridge Dictionary, it is used to describe a very small space.

Croatian translation: “*Ne bi unutra više stala ni žustrica*”

Translation derived from: the idiom is not derived from a Croatian idiom; it is a literal translation.

(13) “**You look like you have seen a Dementor**”

Context: This idiom is said by Ron Weasley in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. Ron and Hermione encounter Professor Umbridge. Hermione is surprised and slightly scared. Ron tells her she looks like she had "seen a Dementor".

Derived from: “You look like you have seen a ghost”. According to Cambridge Dictionary, it is said for someone who appears frightened. (Croatian equivalent: *izgledaš kao da si ugledao duha*)

Croatian translation: “*izgledaš kao da si ugledao Dementora*”

Translation derived from: “*izgledaš kao da si ugledao duha*”. This translation matches its original meaning as there are enough constituents from the idiom that the translation is derived from for the reader to recognize the meaning of the wizarding idiom.

(14) “It was as Harry **dodged another bludger...**”

Context: This idiom is said by Ron Weasley in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*. Harry is playing Quidditch, his broom started spinning and he thought he was going to fall but he regained balance and did not fall.

Derived from: “dodged a bullet”. According to Cambridge Dictionary, it means to just barely dodge a thing or some circumstance that turn out to be undesired, terrible, risky, or otherwise detrimental. (Croatian equivalent: *bilu je za dlaku*)

Croatian translation: “*Nezgoda se dogodila kad se Harry izmaknuo još jednom maljcu.*”

Translation derived from: the idiom is not derived from a Croatian idiom; it is a literal translation.

(15) “**I could eat a hippogriff**”

Context: this wizarding idiom is used by Ron Weasley in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Ron is impatiently complaining that he is hungry, while everyone waits for the Great Hall doors to open and the sorting ceremony for the first years to start.

Derived from: “I could eat a horse.”. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, this idiom is used to describe someone who is very hungry. (Croatian equivalent: *mogao bih pojesti vola*)

Croatian translation: “*Mogao bih pojesti i hipogrifa.*”

Translation derived from: “*mogao bih pojesti vola*”. This translation matches its original meaning as there are enough constituents from the idiom that the translation is derived from for the reader to recognize the meaning of the wizarding idiom.

(16) “**Working like house-elves**”

Context: This wizarding idiom is said by Ron Weasley in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Harry and Ron have been making up predictions, and Hermione asks if don't they think it's a bit obvious the predictions are made up. Ron is offended by this because they have been working really hard, or "like house-elves" .

Derived from: “Working like dogs”. According to the Cambridge Dictionary it means to work incredibly hard. (Croatian equivalent: *naraditi se kao pas*)

Croatian translation: “*A mi tu crnčimo kao kućni vilenjaci!*”

Translation derived from: “*crnčiti (raditi 'kao crnac')*”.

(17) “**Time is Galleons, little brother,**”

Context: This idiom is said by Fred Weasley in *Harry Potter and the Order of Phoenix*, right after Fred used the apparition spell, a form of magic that enables its users to instantly travel from one location to another by materializing.

Derived from: "Time is money.". According to the Cambridge Dictionary, it is used to emphasize the point that you shouldn't waste time because you could be making money with it. (Croatian equivalent: *Vrijeme je novac.*)

Croatian translation: "*Svaka je sekunda važna, braco.*"

Translation derived from: the translation of this idiom was paraphrased from the source text

(18) **"Like losing a Knut and finding a Galleon"**

Context: This idiom is said by Albus Dumbledore in *Harry Potter and the Order of Phoenix*. Wizards use Knut and Galleon as money and Knut's worth is lower than Galleon's. When Fudge went to Hogwarts intending to punish Harry Potter, instead thought he found the proof of Dumbledore's treachery regarding him, Dumbledore used this wizarding idiom to illustrate the situation.

Derived from: "losing a sixpence and finding a shilling". According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, it means to lose something of a small value, only to find something of greater value.

Croatian translation: "*Pa to je kao da ste izgubili knut i našli galeon, zar ne?*"

Translation derived from: the translation of this idiom was paraphrased from the source text

(19) **"What in the name of Merlin are you doing? "**

Context: This wizarding idiom is said to Hermione Granger by Ron Weasley in *Harry Potter and the Order of Phoenix*. Hermione is knitting hats for house-elves. She then covers up the hats with rubbish, tricking house-elves who don't want to be free into thinking they've been set free by finding the hat. When she's

setting up the hats for elves to find, Ron is wondering "what in the name of Merlin" is she doing?

Derived from: "in God's name". According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, it is used to informally to strengthen a question or to convey surprise or rage.  
(Croatian equivalent: *za ime Božje*)

Croatian translation: "*Tako mu Merlina, što to radiš?*"

Translation derived from: the idiom is not derived from a Croatian idiom; it is a literal translation.

(20) **"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me"**

Context: this wizarding idiom is said by Hagrid in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. When picking up Harry for the very first time, Hagrid forgets to give him his owl.

Derived from: "Gallopin' gals". It is used to describe surprise or shock.

Croatian translation: "*Gajde mu njegove, sad sam se istom nečeg sjetio.*"

(21) **"Erumpent in the room"**

Context: this wizarding idiom is said by Ron Weasley in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*.

Derived from: "Elephant in the room". According to Cambridge Dictionary, this idiom is used to describe something that should be obvious and easy to understand.

Croatian translation: "*Erumpent u sobi*"

Translation derived from: the idiom is not derived from a Croatian idiom; it is a literal translation that requires the reader to understand the idiom “Elephant in the room” in order to understand the translation. Therefore, it is not an adequate translation of the idiom.

(22) “The fire's lit, but the cauldron's empty”

Context: This wizarding idiom is said by Ivor Dillonsby in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. He used it to describe Bathilda Bagshot.

Derived from: “The lights are on, but nobody's home”. According to Cambridge Dictionary, this idiom is used to describe a person who is considered not very smart.

Croatian translation: “*Vatra još gori, ali kotlić je prazan.*”

Translation derived from: the idiom is not derived from a Croatian idiom; it is a literal translation that requires the reader to understand the idiom “The lights are on, but nobody's home” in order to understand the translation.

(23) “they’ll be onto you **like bowtruckles on doxy eggs**”

Context: This wizarding idiom is said by Aberforth in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*.

Derived from: “like white on rice”. According to Cambridge Dictionary, it is used to describe something in proximity, inseparable

Croatian translation: “*a smrtonoše se obrušavaju na krivca **ko prutci na vileničina jaja***”

Translation derived from: cannot be inferred

(24) “old Dodgy Doge can **get off his high hippogriff**”

Context: This wizarding idiom is said by Rita Skeeter in *Harry Potter and Deathly Hallows*.

Derived from: “get off one’s high horse”. According to Cambridge Dictionary, it is said to a person that speaks and acts as if he or she is better or smarter than anyone else. (Croatian equivalent: *spustiti se na zemlju/ neka se spusti na zemlju*)

Croatian translation: “*ne mora se zgražati nad točnošću svojih podataka*”

Translation derived from: the idiom is not derived from a Croatian idiom



## Conclusion

In this research, 20 different wizarding idioms were analysed according to their meaning in "real English" and their translation into Croatian. Idioms were frequently derived from characters who were natives of the wizarding realm. In many cases, the idiomatic expression was translated literally when a similar idiomatic expression in Croatian existed. For example, the wizarding idiom "Oh, Aberforth is just the tip of the dung heap" is translated as "*Aberforth je samo jedna karika u jako gadnom lancu...*", which roughly translates back as "to be a link in a chain", as opposed to its original meaning "the tip of the iceberg". The meaning of the original wizarding idiom is different from the translated version. The wizarding idiom could have been translated as "*Aberforth je samo vrh gadne sante leda...*".

After analyzing these idioms, and their translations into Croatian, it is shown that some idioms can be literally translated into Croatian, and still have idiomatic meaning. However, it is also shown that some idioms are impossible to translate idiomatically. These idioms are translated by paraphrasing the meaning with non-idiomatic language. Therefore, showing us that every language is unique.

Wizarding idioms are just more creative versions of already existing idioms, created precisely for the cause of *Harry Potter* book series

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