

# English Phrases and Idioms with Personal Names and their Croatian Equivalentents

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Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Goran Schmidt

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## Abstract

Language is the most important part of human communication. People use language to share their thoughts, feelings, ideas, and problems. In order to be more effective and interesting, languages are rich in various expressions. One of the most interesting ways of expressing is by using idioms. An idiom is an expression or “a set phrase of two or more words that means something different from the literal meaning of the individual words” (The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms). Idioms make languages more expressive and therefore, they make an important part of both English and Croatian. Taking that into consideration, this research is based on the analysis of idioms with proper names in the English language and their equivalents in the Croatian language. It is based on a corpus which consists of 30 randomly selected phraseological units from various dictionaries.

The thesis is divided into five major parts. The first part is an introduction that briefly explains how the research itself was conducted. The second part discusses some basic theoretical terms that are important for the understanding of this research. The third part explains how the analysis itself was conducted. The most important part is the fourth one which includes the analysis of 30 chosen idioms with proper names in English, as well as their equivalents in Croatian. If there is no equivalent, a paraphrase for the idiom will be provided. The fifth, and last, part is the conclusion that sums up the whole research by explaining the significance and the role of idioms in both English and Croatian language.

Keywords: English, Croatian, language, phraseology, phraseological units, proper names

Abbreviations used:

AHDI - The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms

BFHJ - *Baza frazema hrvatskog jezika*

CD - Cambridge Dictionary

FD - The Free Dictionary by Farlex

HEFR - *Hrvatsko - engleski frazeološki rječnik*

MWD - Merriam-Webster Dictionary

OD - Oxford Dictionaries

UD - Urban Dictionary



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# 1 Introduction

Language is “a systematic means of communicating ideas or feelings by the use of conventionalized signs, sounds, gestures, or marks having understood meanings” (MWD). Languages are constantly changing and growing. Different historical events and people have an impact on language and its changes. The best way to show this is through idioms as they are shaped through time and are inspired by real life events. In others words, idioms make an important part of any language “because of the tone and the colour they give the vocabulary and the insight they provide into the history of a language community and its culture” (Fiedler 2007: 7). However, idioms are tricky since their meaning is not always transparent, so non-native speakers sometimes have a hard time understanding them.

This is why this research is based on 30 English idioms with proper names, their meanings and translations into Croatian. The idioms are randomly chosen from 8 dictionaries.

Since this research deals with idioms, and idioms are a part of phraseology, it is essential to define basic terms related to phraseology. This is done throughout the first part of the thesis. The second part is the in-depth analysis of 30 idioms, their definitions, and possible translations into Croatian. The third part will explain the reached conclusions on the equivalence between English and Croatian.

## 2 Theoretical background

This research is based on phraseological units with proper names in English and their equivalents in Croatian. In order to understand its aim, it is crucial to define some terms related to phraseology, phraseological units, and linguistics in general.

### 2.1 Introduction into Phraseology

This research deals with phraseological units, therefore it is important to know that phraseology is “the study of structure, meaning and use of phraseological units” (Omazić, 2005: 2). However, Sabine Fiedler, a German linguist, explains that this term has more than one meaning. One of those meanings is “the field of study (phraseology research), and the other meaning is “to denote the set of linguistic units that are investigated in this field. The latter consists of phraseological units, which constitute the phrasicon, i.e. the block or inventory of idioms and phrases” (Fiedler, 2007: 15). They are also sometimes referred to as “fixed expressions”, “idioms”, or “phrasemes.” However, Fiedler emphasizes that those terms are not entirely synonymous since the term “idiom” “has rarely been applied to idiomatic uses only, but also serves as a hypernym to cover many kinds of conventional multi-word units” (ibid.).

### 2.2. Phraseological Units

Phraseological units are an interesting part of language because their meaning is rarely transparent. The combination of known words that together gain a new meaning never ceases to surprise us. Phraseological units have unique characteristics which distinguish them from other word combinations.

### 2.3. Characteristics of Phraseological units

The first distinguishable characteristic of PUs is their polylexemic structure. If something is 'polylexemic' it means that it consists of at least two words. Fiedler explains that “flame” is a simple word lexeme, “flameproof” is a complex word lexeme, but “an old flame” is a multi-word lexeme/phraseological unit.

Another important characteristic is stability, as a phraseological unit is “conventionalized in content and structure” and “only over considerably long periods of time will PUs, if ever, change their

meaning (Fiedler, 2007: 19). Therefore, the meaning of a phraseological unit “*A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush*” is only understandable within this word order.

The third characteristic is lexicalization. This term describes “the fact that a PU is retained in the collective memory of a language community” (Fiedler, 2007: 21). Fiedler emphasizes that the coinage of a multi-word lexeme/phraseological unit is not different from the coinage of a simple word lexeme.

The fourth, and last, characteristic is idiomaticity. This means that the meaning of a phraseological unit is hard to decipher from the meaning of its constituents. This means that one can know the meaning of the words “pull” and “leg” without understanding the phraseological unit “to pull someone’s leg”.

## 2.4. Phraseological units with proper names

“PU’s with onymic constituents represent a fascinating subgroup because they are deeply rooted in the cultural tradition of a language community. A look into historical dictionaries is often necessary to learn about an event, place, or person that left their marks in the language in this way” (Fiedler, 2007: 59). However, sometimes there is more than one theory on how a phraseological unit was coined.

Some phraseological units with proper names originate from ancient literature and Greek mythology; for example, *Herculean task* or *the sword of Damocles*.

“Designations of nationality as constituents of PUs may refer to rivalries between countries dating from the past or ethnic stereotypes” (Fiedler, 2007: 61). Examples for this type of phraseological units are *Dutch courage* or *go Dutch*.

Using some proper names such as John, Jack, or Harry in the phraseological units has a task to denote the common or average person or object. For example, *Jack is as good as his master* or *every Jack*.

### 3 Research Design

This research is based on 30 phraseological units with proper names in English and their equivalents in Croatian. The analysis of phraseological units includes:

- a) meaning of an idiom from a dictionary
- b) example sentence
- c) Croatian equivalent or a paraphrase
- d) degree of equivalence (complete, partial, or zero).

Gläser in her article “The Translation Aspect of Phraseological Units in English and German” suggests that the equivalence can be:

- a) Complete – “the target language offers an equivalent with the same denotational meaning” (Gläser, 1984: 126).
- b) Partial – “idioms strikingly differ in their referential base of a metaphor or metonymy; their connotational or stylistic meanings” (Gläser, 1984: 127).
- c) Zero – “there is no approximate expression in the target language” (Gläser, 1984: 128).

After the analysis, the origin (if it is known) of the phraseological unit is briefly explained.

#### 3.1. Corpus Description

The corpus for this research was collected from 8 different dictionaries. I randomly chose 30 idioms that contain proper names. The translations were found in *Hrvatsko – engleski frazeološki rječnik* and *Baza frazema hrvatskoga jezika*. In some cases, the translation could not be found, so I paraphrased the phraseological units.

#### 3.2. The Aim

The aim of this research is to show that phraseological units are “a group of words in a fixed order that have a particular meaning that is different from the meanings of each word on its own” (CD) and as such make an abundant impact on the language as a whole. Their value can be seen in the creativity of their structures, uniqueness, and frequency of use.

## 4 Corpus Analysis

### 1) put the fear of God into

- a) “terrify someone” (AHDI 855)
- b) “The school counselor put the fear of God into the girls when she talked about AIDS (AHDI 855).”
- c) “*utjerati/tjerati strah u kosti*” (HEFR 735)
- d) partial equivalence “

“This phrase alludes to a time when most people had a mingled feeling of dread and reverence toward the deity” (AHDI 855). Here, the equivalence is partial since the two idioms share the keywords, but the Croatian version does not include the proper name “God”.

### 2) Murphy’s law

- a) “if anything can go wrong, it will” (AHDI 697)
- b) “We may think we’ve covered all the details for the benefit, but remember Murphy’s law” (AHDI 697).
- c) “*Murphyjev zakon*” (BFHJ)
- d) Complete equivalence

This idiom refers to Edward Aloysius Murphy Jr., an aerospace engineer, who worked on safety-critical systems.

### 3) John Hancock

- a) “a person’s signature” (CD)
- b) “Put your John Hancock at the bottom of the page” (CD).
- c) *Potpis*
- d) Zero equivalence

John Hancock was an important statesman, who signed the United States Declaration of Independence. This idiom comes from the fact that his signature was a lot larger than the others’.

#### 4) peeping Tom

- a) “a person who secretly watches others, especially for sexual gratification” (AHDI 803) or “a man who tries to secretly watch women when they are wearing no clothes” (CD)
- b) “The police caught a peeping Tom right outside their house” (AHDI 803).
- c) *voajer*
- d) zero equivalence

According to legend, “peeping Tom” was a tailor who broke the rules and looked out the window when Lady Godiva walked naked in the streets. He broke the rule and was punished for his sin – he was struck blind (and in some versions, dead).

#### 5) even Steven

- a) “Exactly equal; also, with nothing due or owed on either side.” (AHDI 309)
- b) “I've paid it all back, so now we're even-steven” (AHDI 309).
- c) “*Biti kvit*” (BFHJ)
- d) partial equivalence

The name Steven is used in this idiom simply because it rhymes with the word “even”.

#### 6) John Doe/Jane Doe

- a) “An average undistinguished man; also, the average citizen.” (AHDI 567)
- b) “This television show is just right for a John Doe” (AHDI 567).
- c) *nepoznata osoba, nepoznati, N.N.*
- d) zero equivalence

This idiom is mostly used with the name John Doe, but John Q. Public, Joe Blow, Joe Doakes, or Joe Zilch also work. If it is a female then Jane Doe is the most common version. This idiom is used for an unknown man in legal proceedings. This has zero equivalence with Croatian since Croatian does not use any imaginary name for someone unknown.

**7) an Adonis**

- a) “a very beautiful or sexually attractive young man” (CD)
- b) “She walked in on the arm of some blond Adonis” (CD).
- c) *Adonis; Adon*
- d) Complete equivalence

In Greek mythology, Adonis is the god of attraction, fertility, and beauty. He is a male counterpart for Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty and love. As the god of beauty, his name is a synonym for an attractive and desirable young man.

**8) John Bull**

- a) “a character who represents a typical Englishman or the English people in general” (CD)
- b) “John Bull is traditionally depicted as a fat man wearing a waistcoat with the British flag on it” (CD).
- c) *Englez*
- d) Zero equivalence

John Bull is a satirical character created by John Arbuthnot, a Scottish physician and satirist. In literature and politics, the name John Bull is a conventional personification of England and of English character. In Croatian, there is no equivalence since it would be translated simply as “*Englez*”.

**9) uncle Sam**

- a) “the US, or its government, sometimes represented by an image of a tall, thin man with a white beard and a tall hat” (CD)
- b) “He owed \$20 000 in tax to Uncle Sam” (CD).
- c) *Sjedinjene Američke Države*
- d) Zero equivalence

Uncle Sam is a common national personification of USA. It originated when Samuel Wilson, a meat packer from New York was sending barrels of beef to the USA and stamped the barrels with the “U.S.” which others referred to as “Uncle Sam’s” instead of “United States”. Everybody liked the story and accepted the nickname.



### 10) slip someone a Mickey Finn

- a) “a drug added to a drink, especially an alcoholic drink, in order to make the person who drinks it unconscious” (CD)
- b) “He must have slipped his wife a mickey”. (CD)
- c) *Staviti nešto u piće*
- d) Zero equivalence

The idiom “Mickey Finn” or just “Mickey” is a slang for a drink mixed with some kind of a drug, usually a sedative. According to MWD, Mickey Finn was a worker in Chicago’s Lone Star Saloon and he was accused of drugging and robbing the customers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There is no equivalent with a proper name in Croatian.

### 11) nervous Nellie / Nelly

- a) “an unduly timid or anxious person” (AHD 703)
- b) “He's a real nervous Nellie, calling the doctor about every little symptom”. (AHD 703)
- c) *Nervozan; živac*
- d) Partial equivalence

The name “Nellie” was chosen because of alliteration since it does not refer to a person named Nellie. In Croatian, it would be translated with a paraphrase since there is no complete equivalent with a proper name.

### 12) have the Midas touch

- a) “If someone has the Midas touch, that person is financially successful in everything they do”. (CD)
- b) “Do you remember John from school? It turns out he has quite the Midas touch and is a billionaire now” (CD).
- c) *“Midin dodir; zlatni dodir”* (BFHJ)
- d) Complete equivalence

The kind Midas was a king of Phrygia and was granted a wish by the gods. He was greedy and wanted to turn everything he touched into pure gold. He regretted his wish when his food and drink turned into gold and he withdrew this wish when he lost his daughter to gold.

### 13) not know someone from Adam

- a) be unable to recognize someone (AHDI 723)
- b) “Although I have worked here for two months, I've never seen the department head; I wouldn't know her from Adam” (AHDI 723).
- c) “*Ne poznavati nekoga; nemati pojma o komu čemu*” (AHDI 723)
- d) Partial equivalence

This idiom originates from the Bible. Adam was the first man alive and he lived long before anyone else so nobody would be able to know or recognize him. In Croatian there is no idiom with this meaning that includes the name “Adam” but there is an expression with a similar meaning “nemati pojma o komu”.

### 14) Johnny-on-the-spot

- a) “Johnny-on-the-spot” (AHDI 667)
- b) “He always is there at the right time, a real Johnny-on-the spot” (AHDI 567).
- c) “*Na licu mjesta; u pravi čas*” (AHDI 567)
- d) Partial equivalence

“Johnny” in this idiom does not refer to a real person, it is used as a generic male name. This idiom does not have a complete equivalent in Croatian since the Croatian idiom does not include a proper name.

### 15) Not on your Nellie

- a) there is no possibility of that (CD)
- b) “The short answer to this is, not on your Nellie, sunshine (HEFR 426)
- c) “*Ni u ludilu*” (HEFR 426)

- d) Zero equivalence

Nellie is a “cockney rhyming slang for not on your life. Nelly rhymes with smelly, which leads to smelly breath, breath leads to breathing to keep alive, leading to not on your life” (UD). Since it originates from cockney slang, there is no equivalent in Croatian.

### **16) from your lips to God’s ears**

- a) Idiom expressing a wish that the desires of the person to whom the saying is spoken will come true (UD).
- b) “John: Hopefully, my investments are going to return 400%! Mike: From your lips to God's ears” (UD).
- c) “*Iz tvojih usta u Božje uši*” (BFHJ)
- d) Complete equivalence

There are two meanings of this idioms. The first meaning is literal, a person wants his wish to be granted by God. The second meaning is sarcastic meaning “good luck with that”. In Croatian, the literal translation works as an idiom and the equivalence is complete.

### **17) Not in a month of Sundays**

- a) “If you say that something will not happen in a month of Sundays, you mean that it is very unlikely to happen” (CD).
- b) “He's never going to get that finished in a month of Sundays!” (CD)
- c) “*cijela (čitava) vječnost, dugo (dulje) vremensko razdoblje*” (AHDI 840)
- d) zero equivalence

“A month of Sundays” represents a long period of time so if something will not happen during that time it is unlikely that it would happen at all. It does not have an equivalent in Croatian but its meaning is quite transparent.

### **18) play Lady Muck**

- a) “a woman who thinks she is very important and should be treated better than everyone else.” (CD)
- b) “Perhaps the Prime Minister should pay more attention to what she hears when she visits Scotland, instead of trying TO PLAY LADY MUCK.” (HERF 134)
- c) “*glumiti damu, praviti se finom (profinjenom), izigravati damu, hiniti finoću*” (HEFR 134)
- d) partial equivalence

This idiom is based on a real person, in the early 20th century, Lady Norah Docker lived a scandalous life. Her name became a term to describe a woman who thinks highly of herself. With time, the name 'Lady Docker' developed into the derogatory word “Lady Muck”. Croatian version does not include any proper name so the equivalence is partial.

### 19) grin (smile) like a Cheshire cat

- a) “smile broadly, especially in a self-satisfied way” (AHDI 442)
- b) John ended the set with a beautiful serve, an ace, and couldn't help grinning like a Cheshire cat. (AHDI 442).
- c) “*smijati se od uha do uha, veselo se smijati*” (HEFR 814)
- d) partial equivalence

The idiom “grin like a Cheshire cat” came from the children's story Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll which was published in 1865. The equivalence is partial.

### 20) For God's sake

- a) “An exclamation showing surprise, impatience, anger, or some other emotion, depending on the context (AHDI 362).
- b) “For God's sake, I didn't expect to see you here (AHDI 263).
- c) “*Za ime Božje, za Boga miloga, tako ti Boga, ako Boga znaš /izražavanje čuđenja, zgražanja, usrdne molbe itd*” (HEFR 279).
- d) Partial equivalence

This idiom is “used to emphasize requests or orders when you are angry or have lost patience” (CD).

### 21) the real McCoy or McCoy

- a) the genuine thing (AHDI 870)
- b) “I love informational picture books, and this one is the REAL MCCOY” (HEFR 742)!
- c) “*prava stvar, ono što je izvrsno, odlične kvalitete, nešto poželjno*” (HEFR 742)
- d) Partial equivalence

“This idiom has a disputed origin, but the most likely source is its use to distinguish welterweight champion "Kid McCoy," the name used by Norman Selby (1873-1940), from other boxers using his name to capitalize on his popularity [c. 1900]” (AHDI 870).

### 22) go for a Burton

- a) “to be lost, broken, or ruined” (MWD)
- b) “I keep saying I want to be more disciplined with my weight but, after a month, it seems TO GO FOR A BURTON,' Hatton said” (HEFR 858).
- c) “*Otići; odlaziti k vragu propasti, propadati, otići, odlaziti u propast, zauvijek nestati, nestajati*” (HEFR 858)
- d) Zero equivalence

The origin of this British idiom is unknown, but it got popularized during the Second World War.

### 23) Judas kiss or the kiss of Judas

- a) “an action or relationship that is ultimately ruinous” (AHDI 587)
- b) 'Official acceptance,' he declares in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, 'is the one surest sign of fatal misunderstanding, and is the KISS OF JUDAS. It is a disease' (HERF 594).
- c) “*Judin poljubac, izdajnički poljubac pod krinkom prijateljstva*” (HEFR 594)
- d) Complete equivalence

This idiom refers to Judas Iscariot’s betrayal. He betrayed Jesus by revealing his identity when he kissed him.

#### 24) Work like a Trojan

- a) “work very energetically and hard” (AHDI 1179)
- b) “The boss had us working like Trojans to get the project ready on time” (FD).
- c) “*raditi kao sivonja*” (HEFR 698)
- d) Partial equivalence

This idiom originates from Homer. He wrote about Trojans, describing them as hard-working and brave people. Croatian equivalent does not include a proper name “Trojan” therefore the equivalence is partial.

#### 25) A Solomon solution

- a) marked by notable wisdom, reasonableness, or discretion especially under trying circumstances (MWD)
- b) Rather than forcing a SOLOMON SOLUTION, this debate needs a creative and reinforcing synthesis of the alternatives (HEFR 662).
- c) *salamunsko (solomunsko, salomonsko) rješenje, pravedno (mudro, dotljivo) rješenje (odluka)* (HEFR 662)
- d) Complete equivalence

Solomon was the king of Israel who was known for his great wisdom.

#### 26) An act of God

- a) an unforeseen and uncontrollable natural event, such as a hurricane, fire, or flood. (AHDI 12)
- b) The publisher shall publish the work within twelve months except in case of delay caused by acts of God such as fires or floods or other circumstances beyond its control (AHDI 12).
- c) “*viša sila, najjača (nezemaljska) sila, nešto čemu se čovjek ne može suprotstaviti (oduprijeti), nešto pred čime je čovjek nemoćan*” (HEFR 697); *sila Božja* (BFHJ)
- d) Zero equivalence; partial equivalence

In Croatian there are more versions of this idiom. It does not always contain the proper name “God”.

### 27) It's (all) Greek to somebody

- a) “way of saying that you do not understand something that is said or written” (CD)
- b) “This new computer program is all Greek to me” (AHDI 441).
- c) “*to je špansko selo za koga, to su španska sela za koga, to je potpuno nepoznato, o tome nitko ništa ne zna*” (HEFR 695)
- d) zero equivalence

This idiom was coined by Shakespeare in the 16th century, although the first usage was literal.

### 28) cross the Rubicon

- a) “irrevocably commit to a course of action, make a fateful and final decision” (AHDI 236)
- b) “Most EU states have crossed the Rubicon and adopted the euro” (CD).
- c) “*prijeći Rubikon, prelaziti Rubikon, donijeti veliku (neopozivu, sudbinsku) odluku, učiniti odlučan korak*” (HEFR 665)
- d) complete equivalence

This idiom draws its roots from Julius Caesar’s times. It refers to the time when Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon river and started a civil war in Rome.

### 29) Dear John letter

- a) “a letter written to end a romantic relationship” (CD)
- b) Susie couldn't wait for her boyfriend Sam to finish his one-year deployment in Iraq, so she sent him a Dear John letter over the Internet three months into his deployment to tell him she was seeing someone else (UD).
- c) *Pismo prekida; pismo za prekid*
- d) Zero equivalence

This idiom became popular during The Second World War since many love letters began with this idiom.

**30) As rich as Croesus**

- a) “Very wealthy” (AHDI 875)
- b) “They're rich as Croesus, with their penthouse, yacht, and horses” (AHDI 875).
- c) *Bogat kao Krez*
- d) Complete equivalence

Croesus was the last king of Lydia. He was very rich as he derived his wealth from king Midas.



## 5 Conclusion

This research is based on 30 idioms with proper names in English and their translation into Croatian. Phraseological units with proper names are analyzed because they are a great representation of how culture, history, and tradition shape languages. Their impact on languages is so great that even today we use ancient Greek or Roman expressions. Therefore, Croatian and English phraseological units overlap almost completely when it comes to phraseological units with proper names that originate from ancient times or mythology. Greek and Roman culture have had an enormous impact on the whole world and their importance is recognized worldwide.

Some phraseological units originated in England or in United States and are a pure representation of their culture. That is why they sometimes have zero equivalence with Croatian idioms. However, sometimes idioms have found their way into Croatian language by leaving out some of the words; for example, *play Lady Muck* would be translated as “*glumiti damu, praviti se finom (profinjenom), izigravati damu, hiniti finoću.*” Also, idioms can be coined separately in English and in Croatian. This is how a partial equivalence is achieved.

To conclude, phraseological units make an important part of both English and Croatian. Both languages have been influenced by world history as well as the history of their own lands and that is why their phraseological units sometimes overlap but also differ.

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