

The Big Dutch Idioms Dictionary

Meanings, Origins, and Usage — with Humorous
Illustrations to Make Learning Easy

Marieke Jansen



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Welcome to the World of Dutch Idioms!

So, you've been learning Dutch. You can order a *koffie verkeerd*, navigate the Albert Heijn, and even complain about the weather with the best of them. But then it happens. Your Dutch colleague says something about *de kat uit de boom kijken* (watching the cat out of the tree), and while you're picturing a feline stuck on a branch, everyone else is nodding in understanding. Suddenly, you feel like you're on the outside looking in again.

If that sounds familiar, you're in the right place. The secret to truly connecting with a language and its culture lies beyond grammar rules and vocabulary lists. It lives in the quirky, colorful, and often hilarious world of idioms and proverbs. These expressions are the heartbeat of the Dutch language. They are little windows into the Dutch soul, revealing a history of farming, seafaring, and a famously direct way of looking at the world. Mastering them is the difference between speaking Dutch correctly and speaking it with confidence and flair.

This book is your personal guide to becoming a Dutch language "insider." We've gathered over 200 of the most essential Dutch idioms and organized them into thematic chapters, from expressions about animals and nature to those about work and ambition. For each idiom, you'll find:

- **A literal translation**, so you can appreciate the often-funny mental image.
- **What it really means** in a clear, simple explanation.
- **A practical example** to see the idiom used in a natural, everyday context.
- **Its fascinating origin** to discover the history and culture behind the phrase.
- **A humorous illustration** to help you visualize the meaning and make it stick.

Learning a language is a journey, and idioms are the scenic route, filled with delightful discoveries. I hope this book makes your journey into Dutch not only easier but also much more enjoyable. Get ready to surprise your Dutch friends and colleagues with your newfound knowledge.

Veel plezier!

— *Marieke Jansen*

Inhoud

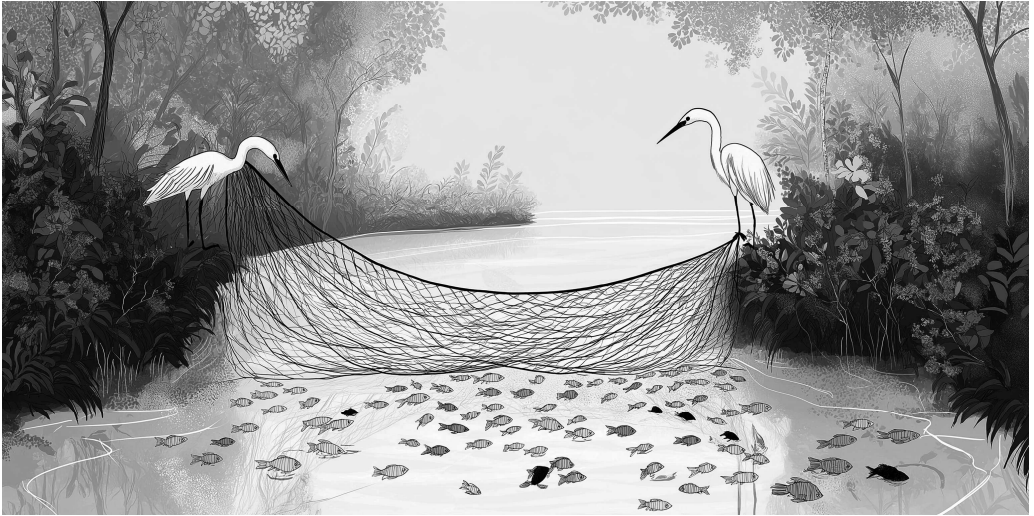
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Should there be any errors in the book, please let me know! If you notice a mistake, feel free to contact me via linktr.ee/taaltrainingen. I greatly appreciate your feedback, as together we can continue to improve the quality of this book.

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1. Animals and Nature

Achter het net vissen



What the words literally say:

You're trying to fish in a spot where someone else's net has already been.

What we mean by it:

You're too late for something fun or important, or you've missed an opportunity.

Example:

Sem komt bij de bakker voor chocoladekoekjes. "Sorry," zegt de bakker, "ze zijn net uitverkocht." Sem's moeder zegt: "We vissen achter het net. We hadden eerder moeten komen."

Origin:

In the river hangs a large fishing net. The net catches all the fish trying to swim past. You're standing downstream from that net, fishing. But before the fish can reach you, they've already been caught by someone else. You are literally fishing behind the net.

Als de kat van huis is, dansen de muizen op tafel



What the words literally say:

When the cat's away, the mice dance on the table.

What we mean by it:

When the boss or group leader is gone, people often do things that aren't actually allowed.

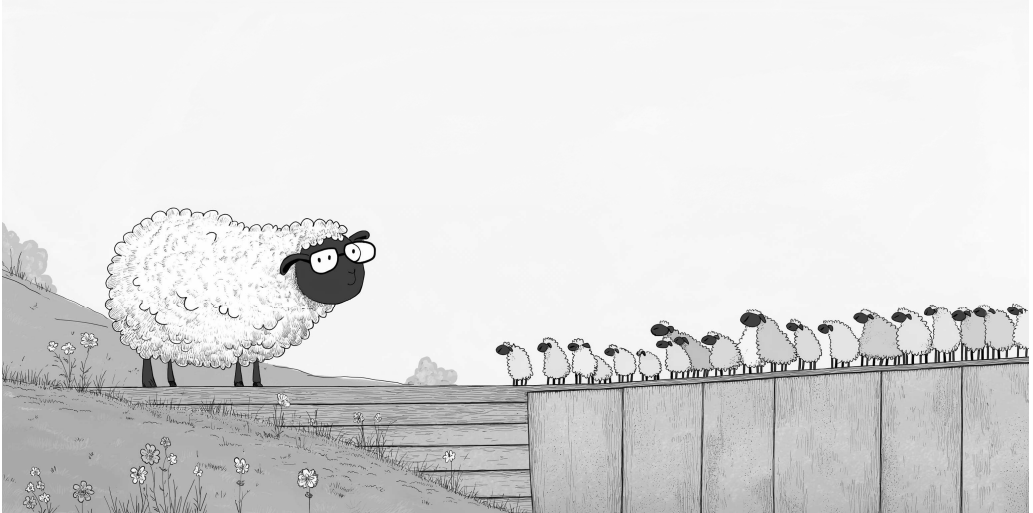
Example:

De meester van groep 7 moet even de klas uit. Als hij weg is, gaan de kinderen kletsen en door de klas lopen. "Als de kat van huis is, dansen de muizen op tafel," zegt de juf van groep 8 die langsloopt.

Origin:

The expression is based on a simple observation of the natural behavior of cats and mice. Normally, mice hide out of fear of the cat, but when the cat is away, they become more free and dare to come out. They then move to places where they would otherwise never go, like the table. This image became a metaphor for people (especially children) who behave differently when authority is absent.

Als er één schaap over de dam is, volgen er meer



What the words literally say:

When one sheep dares to cross a dam, other sheep will follow.

What we mean by it:

When one person dares to do something new, others will dare to do it too.

Example:

Niemand durft als eerste te dansen op het schoolfeest. Dan begint Noah te dansen. Opeens dansen er steeds meer kinderen. "Zie je wel," zegt de juf, "als er één schaap over de dam is, volgen er meer."

Origin:

Sheep are herd animals that like to follow each other. Farmers know that if they can get one sheep to cross a dam or bridge, the rest will often follow automatically. The first sheep sometimes needs encouragement, but after that it becomes much easier. People often behave the same way: we look at what others do before taking action ourselves.

Als paddenstoelen uit de grond schieten



What the words literally say:

Mushrooms suddenly appear from the ground in large numbers.

What we mean by it:

When a lot of something suddenly appears in a short time.

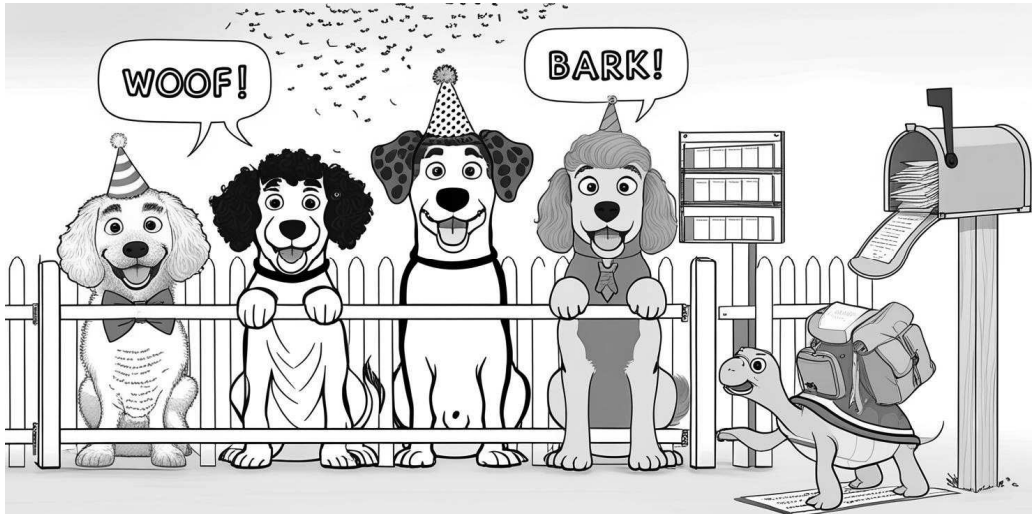
Example:

In Tims wijk bouwen ze veel nieuwe huizen. "Het lijkt wel of de huizen als paddenstoelen uit de grond schieten," zegt Tim. "Vorige week was hier nog een leeg veld, en nu staan er al vijf huizen!"

Origin:

Mushrooms grow from fungi that live underground in a network of fine threads. When it's moist enough and the temperature is right, mushrooms appear above ground. These can emerge in large numbers simultaneously in a short period of time, as if they just "shoot out of the ground".

Blaffende honden bijten niet



What the words literally say:

Dogs that bark a lot usually don't bite.

What we mean by it:

People who make many threats or act tough are often not as dangerous as they seem.

Example:

Ruby was bang voor de grote hond van de bureu omdat die altijd hard blafte als Dani langsfietsde. Maar haar vader legde uit: 'Blaffende honden bijten niet. Deze hond maakt veel lawaai om te waarschuwen, maar hij is eigenlijk heel lief.' De volgende keer bleef Ruby rustig toen de hond blafte, en inderdaad, de hond kwam kwispelend naar hem toe voor een aai.

Origin:

This expression is based on dog behavior. When a dog barks, it's usually just warning and often doesn't intend to actually attack. A dog that wants to bite will often be quiet instead and not warn with barking. This dog behavior became a metaphor for people who make a lot of noise or threats, but take little action.

De kat uit de boom kijken



What the words literally say:

You're watching a cat sitting in a tree and waiting to see what it will do.

What we mean by it:

You calmly wait and see how something goes before joining in or saying something.

Example:

Op de eerste schooldag in de nieuwe klas zat Stijn stil in een hoekje. Hij praatte met niemand en keek alleen hoe de andere kinderen met elkaar omgingen. 'Stijn kijkt de kat uit de boom,' legde de juf aan de stagiaire uit. 'Hij wil eerst zien hoe alles hier gaat voordat hij meedoet. Over een paar dagen voelt hij zich vast meer op zijn gemak.'

Origin:

This expression comes from cat behavior. Cats are cautious animals that, when they climb a tree and feel threatened, first carefully observe the situation before coming down. They wait until they're sure it's safe. People who first wait and observe before making a decision or taking action behave just like that cat in the tree.

De huid niet verkopen voor de beer geschoten is



What the words literally say:

You don't sell the skin (fur) of a bear before that bear is shot or killed.

What we mean by it:

You shouldn't make plans with things that are not yet certain.

Example:

Jochem was zo blij toen hij hoorde dat zijn team misschien de finale van het schoolvoetbaltoernooi zou spelen. Hij vertelde iedereen dat ze zeker zouden winnen en had zelfs al een plekje vrijgemaakt op zijn kamer voor de beker. 'Je moet de huid niet verkopen voor de beer geschoten is,' waarschuwde zijn vader. 'Jullie moeten eerst nog de halve finale spelen.' En inderdaad: Jochems team verloor de halve finale en kwam helemaal niet in de finale.

Origin:

Two hunters wanted to sell a bearskin. But they hadn't caught the bear yet. They went to look for the bear in the forest. Suddenly, the bear stood before them. The first hunter climbed fearfully into a tree. The second hunter lay down on the ground. He pretended to be dead. The bear came close and sniffed at the hunter. After that, it walked away. Later, the hunter said: "The bear whispered something in my ear. He said that I should catch him first."

Een kat in het nauw maakt rare sprongen



What the words literally say:

When a cat no longer sees a way out, it makes strange and unexpected jumps to escape.

What we mean by it:

People who no longer see a way out can panic and do strange or unexpected things.

Example:

Toen Omar nog maar vijf minuten had om zijn rekentoets af te maken en hij nog tien sommen moest, begon hij zomaar antwoorden op te schrijven zonder na te denken. De meester zag het en zei later: 'Een kat in het nauw maakt rare sprongen. Je was in paniek en deed daarom dingen die je normaal nooit zou doen. Volgende keer begin je gewoon eerder aan je toets, oké?'

Origin:

The proverb comes from the behavior of cats in stressful situations. If a cat is cornered and can no longer get away, it makes wild leaps to escape. Just like people sometimes do crazy things when they panic and no longer see a way out.

Er als de kippen bij zijn



What the words literally say:

You are as quick to arrive somewhere as chickens flocking to something.

What we mean by it:

You react very quickly. You are there immediately when something happens or when there is a chance.

Example:

Toen de juf aankondigde dat er vrijwilligers nodig waren voor het schoolfeest en dat die helpers extra taart zouden krijgen, was Jurre er als de kippen bij. Nog voordat de juf was uitgesproken, stond zijn hand al in de lucht. Hij was altijd de snelste als er iets leuks te doen was, zeker als er ook nog iets lekkers te krijgen was!

Origin:

This expression comes from the behavior of chickens. When a farmer scatters feed or when something edible falls on the ground, chickens come running very quickly. They peck quickly and eagerly at the food before other animals can get it. This image of chickens being quick to arrive somewhere was later used for people who don't want to miss what's happening and are there immediately when there's something to gain.

Hoge bomen vangen veel wind



What the words literally say:

If a tree is tall, it catches more wind than smaller trees.

What we mean by it:

If you are important or well-known, you receive more criticism than others.

Example:

Toen Laura werd gekozen als klassenvertegenwoordiger, was ze eerst heel blij. Maar al snel merkten haar klasgenoten op dat ze te laat was voor een vergadering en dat ze vergeten was de ideeën van de klas door te geven. 'Hoge bomen vangen veel wind,' troostte de meester haar. 'Als je een belangrijke taak hebt, letten mensen extra goed op wat je doet en zijn ze sneller kritisch.'

Origin:

This expression comes from the natural observation that tall trees catch more wind than low trees or bushes. Tall trees protrude above the shelter and are therefore more exposed to storms and wind. In the same way, people in high positions are more exposed to criticism and opposition. The expression teaches us that fame or an important position not only has advantages, but also disadvantages.

Met de kippen op stok gaan



What the words literally say:

You go to roost with the chickens.

What we mean by it:

You go to bed very early, just like chickens that go to sleep at sunset.

Example:

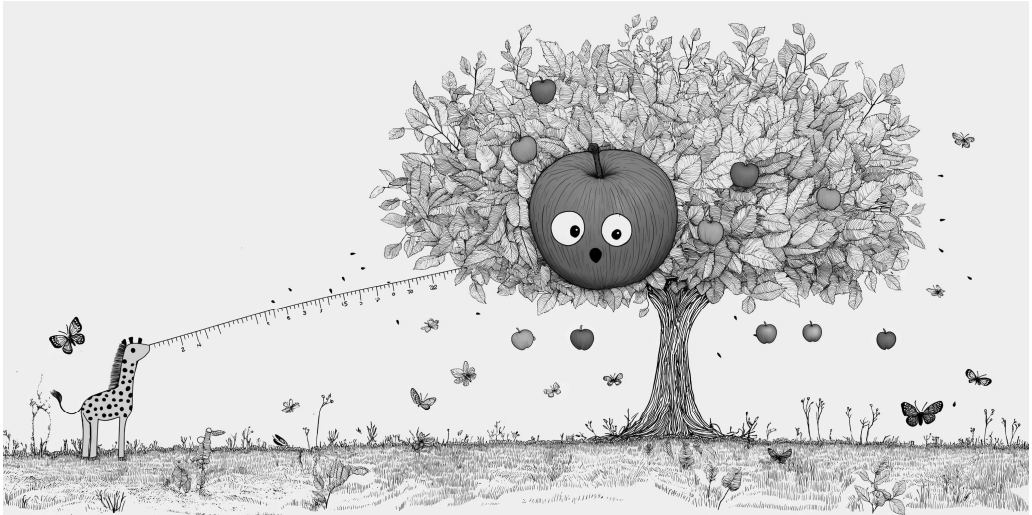
Oma en opa kwamen op bezoek en zouden blijven logeren. Na het avondeten, toen het pas acht uur was, zei opa al dat hij moe was en naar bed ging. 'Opa gaat altijd met de kippen op stok,' lachte oma. 'Hij staat ook om vijf uur 's ochtends weer op, net als de haan die kraait bij zonsopgang!'

Origin:

Chickens have a perch in their coop where they sit in the evening to sleep. At sunset, they seek out this perch and stay there all night. In the past, when there was no electric lighting, people also went to bed early because it got dark after sunset and there was little to do.

2. Familie en Thuis

De appel valt niet ver van de boom



What the words literally say:

An apple that falls from a tree lands close to that tree on the ground.

What we mean by it:

Children often resemble their parents. They do the same things or have the same habits.

Example:

Toen Milan voor de derde keer deze week te laat op school kwam, zuchtte de juf: 'De appel valt niet ver van de boom.' Ze wist dat Milans vader ook altijd overal te laat kwam. Milan had niet alleen het rode haar van zijn vader geërfd, maar ook zijn gewoonte om de tijd te vergeten.

Origin:

The proverb has existed since the 17th century and comes from Germany. In German they say: "Der Apfel fällt nicht weit vom Stamm." An apple that falls from a tree always lies close to the tree on the ground. In the same way, children often resemble their parents a lot – they do the same things or have the same habits. Just like the apple that stays lying close to its tree.

Eigen haard is goud waard



What the words literally say:

Your own hearth (fireplace or stove) is worth as much as gold.

What we mean by it:

There's nothing better than your own home. Being home is the best thing there is.

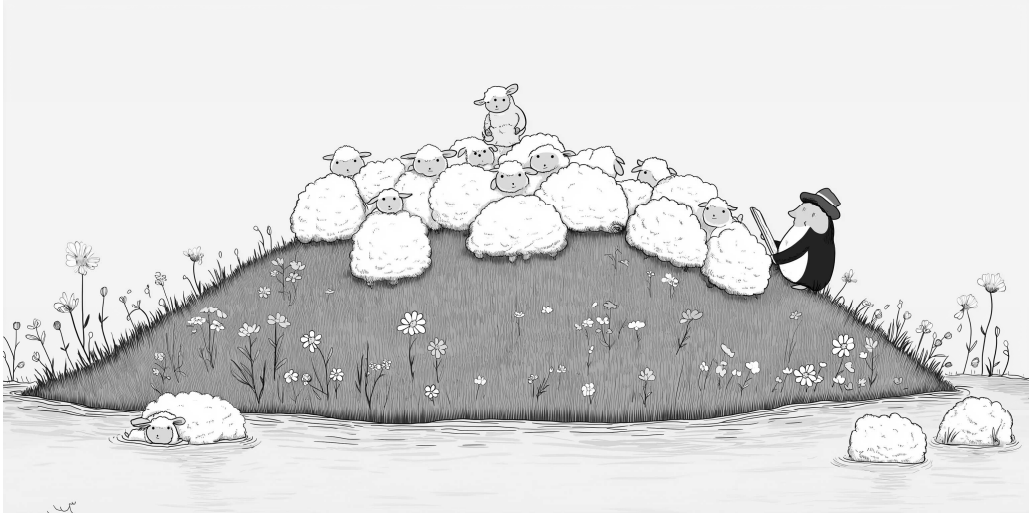
Example:

Yara logeerde een week bij haar neef en nicht tijdens de verbouwing van haar huis. Ze had het erg naar haar zin, maar toen ze eindelijk weer naar haar eigen kamer kon, was ze dolblij. Ze kroop meteen onder haar eigen dekbed met haar knuffels om zich heen. 'Eigen haard is goud waard,' zei haar moeder lachend toen ze Yara zo tevreden zag in haar eigen vertrouwde omgeving.

Origin:

In the Middle Ages, the hearth was the most important part of the house. People cooked there and warmed themselves. Having your own hearth meant having your own home. At home, you had a warm, safe place where you could be yourself. You could eat, sleep, and be together with your family in peace. That's why people said that having your own home was as valuable as gold.

Je schaapjes op het droge hebben



What the words literally say:

You have put your sheep in a dry place, not in the water or in the mud.

What we mean by it:

You have saved or earned enough money to live without worries.

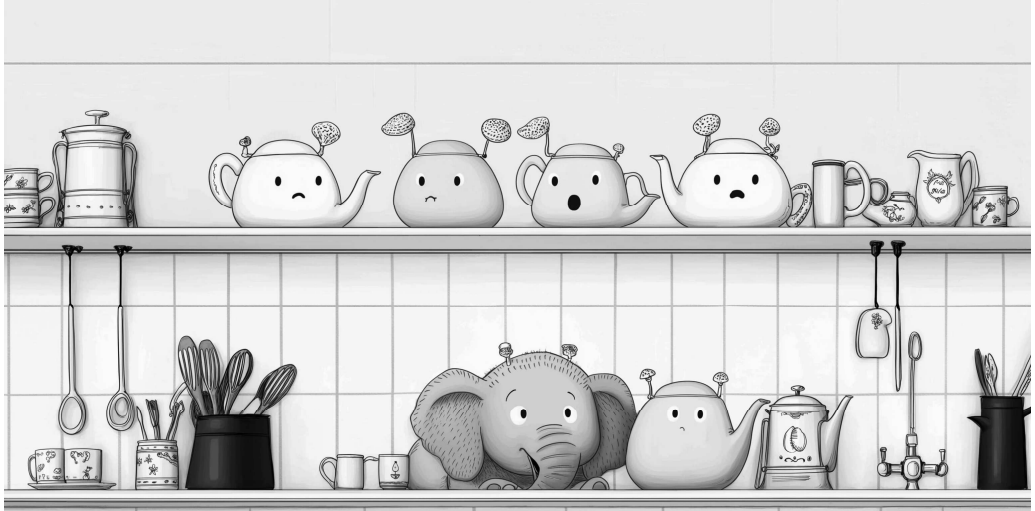
Example:

Finn's opa en oma werkten altijd heel hard in hun bakkerij. Toen ze 65 waren, konden ze eindelijk met pensioen. Ze verkochten hun bakkerij en gingen in een klein huisje aan zee wonen. 'Nu hebben we onze schaapjes op het droge,' zei opa tevreden tegen Finn. 'We hebben genoeg gespaard om lekker te kunnen genieten zonder zorgen over geld.'

Origin:

This expression comes from the agricultural sector. In the past, farmers let their sheep graze on areas outside the dikes that could flood at high tide. When there was a threat of high water, the sheep had to be brought to higher, safe areas. Farmers who brought their sheep to safety in time had their 'sheep on dry land' and did not have to worry about losing their flock. Over time, this expression has come to represent financial security.

Kleine potjes hebben grote oren



What the words literally say:

Small pots or jugs have large handles (ears).

What we mean by it:

Children hear and understand more than adults often think.

Example:

Mama en papa waren in de woonkamer aan het praten over een verrassing voor oma's verjaardag. Ze dachten dat Lotte in haar kamer aan het spelen was, maar toen ze later aan tafel zat, vroeg ze plotseling: 'Krijgt oma echt een nieuwe fiets?' Mama en papa keken elkaar verbaasd aan. 'Kleine potjes hebben grote oren,' zuchtte papa. 'Je was dus toch aan het luisteren!'

Origin:

The expression compares children to small pots. On a pot or jug, the handles on the side are called 'ears'. Small pots often have relatively large ears to be able to lift them. Just like small children (the pots) often listen very well and remember what adults say, even when they think the children are not paying attention.

Met het verkeerde been uit bed stappen



What the words literally say:

You get out of bed with your wrong leg first.

What we mean by it:

You are having a bad day where everything goes wrong, and it makes you grumpy.

Example:

Niets wilde lukken voor Max vanochtend. Hij morste melk over zijn ontbijt, kon zijn lievelingstrui niet vinden en miste bijna de schoolbus. 'Je bent duidelijk met het verkeerde been uit bed gestapt,' zei zijn juf toen hij boos binnen kwam stampen. 'Laten we proberen om de rest van de dag wat beter te maken.'

Origin:

This expression probably comes from old superstitious ideas. In the past, people thought it brought bad luck if you stepped out of bed with your left foot first. The left side was often seen as the 'wrong' or 'unlucky' side. If your day started badly, people said you had gotten out of bed with the wrong (left) leg.

Oost west, thuis best



What the words literally say:

Whether you go east or west, home is best.

What we mean by it:

No matter where you go, your own home is still the nicest place to be.

Example:

Janneke was zo blij geweest toen ze hoorde dat ze op zomerkamp mocht. Een hele week zonder ouders, met vrienden in het bos! Maar na vijf dagen begon ze toch haar eigen bed te missen, en het eten van haar moeder, en zelfs haar kleine broertje. Toen ze thuiskwam, rende ze haar moeder in de armen. 'Oost west, thuis best,' glimlachte haar moeder, terwijl ze Janneke stevig knuffelde.

Origin:

This is an old Dutch proverb that has existed for centuries. It expresses a universal feeling that occurs in many cultures: the attachment to your own home. It doesn't matter in which direction you travel (east or west), the familiarity and comfort of your own home remains the best. It is a simple rhyme that is easy to remember and therefore widely used.

Over het paard getild zijn



What the words literally say:

Someone has lifted you up and over a horse.

What we mean by it:

You have been praised or spoiled too much. As a result, you think too highly of yourself and behave arrogantly or conceitedly.

Example:

Toen Mason de hoofdrol kreeg in de schoolmusical, was iedereen heel trots op hem. Maar na een tijdje werd hij over het paard getild door alle complimenten. Hij begon te denken dat hij beter was dan de andere kinderen, wilde niet meer oefenen en verwachtte dat iedereen naar hem zou luisteren. De juf moest een gesprek met hem hebben om hem weer met beide voeten op de grond te krijgen.

Origin:

In the past, servants helped their masters onto a horse. Sometimes they gave such a hard push that the master fell off on the other side of the horse. If people help you too much or give you too many compliments, you can start to think that you are very special and important. Just like someone sitting on a high horse looking down on others. Then we say you have been lifted over the horse.