



"IDIOTMATIC" (SIC)

BY DAVID LOWE

French expressions and idioms are a good way to better understand the French, but they can also be extremely confusing, and sometimes funny if you translate them literally. Why don't "I busy myself with my onions", and mind my own business you might say? But language betrays a people, giving valuable clues to how they really are and not what they pretend to be. I know that Levi-Strauss and Roland Barthes have dealt with this but... I'd like to "add my grain of salt". Not that it will make any difference: *Ce n'est pas aux vieux singes qu'on apprend à faire des grimaces*, or as we say: "You can't teach an old dog new tricks".

For example, *faire l'andouille*. When I first heard this, I thought that the *andouille* was some sort of farandole dance. Do the twist, do the sausage. If *faire l'andouille* means being stupid, then *faire l'andouillette* means being moderately stupid, I suppose.

When a recent French president said *il avait la banane* ("he had the banana"), I tried to find some subtle link between the fruit and the head of the Fifth Republic. The banana for us English is inextricably linked with the art of burlesque, but so, come to think of it, is the behaviour of your recent heads of state.

Les doigts dans le nez strikes us as being particularly odd. We say "with your eyes closed", and I could imagine Zidane in his heyday scoring a goal "with his eyes closed", but I certainly couldn't imagine him doing it "with his fingers in his nose".

Poser un lapin, despite my research, seems totally devoid of sense. Never make a romantic rendezvous in the natural habitat of rabbits. The person you're meeting might see a rabbit and think the rendezvous was off, saying something like *Ah, la vache!* on seeing the rabbit. A chance to "roll a spade" lost.

Sometimes there is just a difference of animal. The English equivalent of *Il ne faut pas réveiller le chat qui dort* is "Let sleeping dogs lie"; *J'ai une faim de loup*, "I could eat a horse", but *Je ne suis pas dans*

mon assiette ["I'm not in my plate", i.e. "I'm not feeling well"]!

Our equivalent of *un chat dans la gorge* is "a frog in your throat", which is quite ironic as the French are the ones who eat frogs not the English, so you have much more chance of having a frog and not a cat in your throat. And never "two without three", *mettre la charrue avant les bœufs*. We say "Don't put the cart before the horse". I suppose that there are more oxen in France than in England. *Il ne faut pas vendre la peau de l'ours avant de l'avoir tué* is a particularly macho version of our "Don't count your chickens before they're hatched".

But *revenons à nos moutons* or, as we don't say, "Let us get back to our sheep". "Sleep like a log" in English; *dors comme un bébé* in French. Logs make less noise than babies in my experience.

"When the cat's away, the mice will play" – in France the mice show their joy by dancing, a typical French exaggeration.

L'habit ne fait pas le moine. The English equivalent, "You can't judge a book by its cover" was the title of a '60s hit by Bo Diddley. I can't imagine Bo Diddley singing "the clothes don't make the monk" to a rock 'n' roll rhythm. We are not quite *sortis de l'auberge*, but the English don't regard being trapped in a pub as a problem. The longer we stay in the *auberge* the better.

I suppose I must start to round up before you "get the cockroach" (*avoir le cafard – merci Baudelaire*), but I'm mixing entomology with etymology here. Maybe you think I'm just "looking for the little beast" (*que je cherche la petite bête*), or "splitting hairs". When I left home this morning, it was "the cold of a duck", and "raining ropes", "I almost fell in the apples". "The carrots are cooked", I said to myself. "I had a blue fear" that "that was the end of the beans".

What to conclude, I don't know, or as the French say "I give my tongue to the cat".