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不合理變合理 諺語就是正理

Idioms即成語、諺語或俚語,言簡意賅,寓意深遠,確是學習英語易懂易記的法門。可是不少成語的字面意思卻叫人摸不着頭腦,甚至不完全合乎文法,卻慣用俗成。

蛋糕吃了就消失

Have one's cake and eat it too解作兩者兼得,多以否定句出現,表示「魚與熊掌不可兼得」:You cannot have your cake and eat it too, by being engaged and still dating around!(你已訂婚卻仍沾花惹草,事難兩全矣!)

但細心一想,不應該是「You cannot eat your cake and have it too」嗎?蛋糕進肚子後,就不能再擁有這甜點。現在的俚語卻指「先有後吃」,不太合原意吧。

這俚語首見於英國劇作家John Heywood於1546年編寫的《The Proverbs of John Heywood》,當時確是eat先於have,但在約二百年後演變成「have one's cake and eat it too」,通行至今。

俄語德語更直接

普遍而言,先發生的事情放首,再以連接詞and引導接連之事:I got on the bus and found no seat. (我上巴士後發現沒有座位。)但and亦可連接兩個同時發生的事:I am having breakfast and reading (我在早餐時閱讀),因此have your cake and eat it too亦未嘗不可。

反觀俄語及德語中意思相同的俚語就更直接,英語直譯分別為you can't sit on two chairs(一人不可坐兩椅)和you can't dance at two weddings(一人不可能同時在兩個婚禮上起舞)。

另一叫語法學者爭論近四世紀的俚語就是if worst comes to worst,解作苦無良策時的處理方法:If worst comes to worst, we'll have to cancel our holiday plan if you haven't yet fully recovered. (若你仍未完全康復,大不了取消我們的度假計劃吧。)

糟糕還可更糟糕

這俚語的爭論點有二:最高級的比較形容詞(superlative)不是要有the嗎?另外,不是由worse演變為worst較合理?

這俚語初見於英國伊麗莎白一世時代的著名諷刺作家Thomas Nashe,於1596年出版的小冊子:If the worst come to the worst, a good swimmer may do much. 他比較遇到溺死和燒死這兩個致命情況時,善泳

者較有利。

Nashe的原句最合文法,在bad的最高級比較形容詞worst之前用上定冠詞(definite article),come亦因在if這類conditional sentence(假設條件句)以subjunctive form(虛擬動詞態)出現,不需因the worst乃單數主語(singular subject)而加s。

最差結果只是死

但到了1719年,英國小說家Danial Defoe在《Robinson Crusoe(魯賓遜漂流記)》中寫道:If the worse came to the worst, I could but die.(最壞的結果也不過是死。)不少語言學家亦認同由worse惡化為worst,更能形容走下坡的事態發展。

時至今日,較流行的版本倒是不太合邏輯和沒有定冠詞的if worst comes to worst (由最糟至最糟)。

要注意,別一見到best 或worst此等最高級比較詞便盲目加the,worst作形容詞或名詞時可加上其他 personal pronoun(人稱代詞):A flattering friend is your worst enemy.(獻媚的朋友反而是你最大的敵人。)或he was at his worst after the huge break-up.(分手後他一直萎靡不振。)

Worst作副詞亦不用the: Not only did she forget his name; worst of all, she didn't recall they once dated. (她不單忘記他的名字,更糟的是她完全沒印象曾和他約會。)■鍾可盈博士 <u>恒生管理學院</u>英文學系高級講師

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