

The Cat is on the Table

A potential neologism



Accustomed to searching for empty spaces potentially suited for exhibitions, San Francisco-based curator Chris Fitzpatrick recently stumbled upon a good looking empty phrase. A group of artists, writers, curators and researchers joined him to see if something or someone was already showing in there. The following names were found on the tape with the recorded conversation: Mirene Arsanios, Deric Carner, Dina Danish, Gintaras Didžiapetris, Marcella Faustini, Kevin Killian, Agnieszka Kurant, Raimundas Malašauskas, Nicolas Matranga, W.P. McNeill, Darius Mikšys, Jacopo Miliani, Kristina Lee Podesva, Post Brothers, Carson Salter, Jennifer Teets, Viktor Tikrai and Xiaoyu Weng.

CF *Thanks everyone for coming, and feel free to wander about how you like. This should be informal. As we're here now – warbling on the magnetic surface of audio tape – I'll start by saying that, lately, I've been thinking about the phrase "the cat is on the table" and how it sounds similar to*

other, more familiar, idiomatic expressions, such as "the writing is on the wall," or "the proof is in the pudding."

KLP Or "When the cat is away, the rats get on the table and dance," which is an expression in Swedish.

CF *Oh, that's even more awkward than the English "when the cat's away, the mice will play," it doesn't rhyme.*

KLP I think the phrase rhymes in Swedish though.

CF *I see...A lot of idioms shelter cats, and probably in every language. So I was hoping we could all dissect the phrase, as if it were itself a beast, and possibly even dislocate its literal meaning to reintroduce the phrase anew as a neologism – as a new idiom that had always been there.*

NM Where?

CF *Exactly. Somebody asks, "Where is the cat?" and you answer, "The cat is on the table." Hearing the phrase immediately evokes the literal image of a cat situated in some position atop a table, but to my ears the phrase also elicits some other, still undefined, idiomatic meaning.*

PB But not only one meaning necessarily.

NM No, I meant, dislocate the literal meaning of what from where? At least tell us what cat and whose table.

CF I'm really not sure. Maybe this cat is an orphan. I first came across it in the English/Italian version of the Rosetta Stone – "il gato è sul tavolo." The Rosetta Stone is an interactive software application for learning foreign languages, where you talk to the computer through a Janet Jackson type of combination headphone/microphone. It's just a prepositional phrase. My fear is that until we figure out why this literal cat is on the table (however figuratively sturdy it may be) or how it got there, the cat's just going to stay there, when it could go other places, do other things.

NM Would the phrase have stuck out at you in the same way if you had read it in a phrasebook?

CF Maybe not. There's definitely something about saying it out loud to a computer. The Rosetta Stone just seems crazy at first. You don't memorize. There's no translation. You just get thrown directly into foreign speech – enunciating sounds, stuttering and mumbling in an alien space – choking on the new shapes the mouth has to make to produce pronunciations – where you have to stammer and figure it out to survive. The first steps were a swamp for me, so "the cat is on the table" became a sort of buoy, this comedic life raft, or maybe just more of a lighthouse, but its beams weren't leading to any firm shore.

PB Then where were they leading?

CF Anywhere, and that's a big part of the issue here – what does it mean when it can mean anything? It may well summarize being lost in a new foreign language. For me, it already works as an expression for when you can't express something. It could be a write-off or resignation for when you're stammering, pointing, and miming, beet-faced and reduced to pre-verbal gestures. When you run out of words you just yell, "the cat is on the

table" in whatever language you're trying to speak.

VT And doing that gives you a certain guarantee of navigating the situation safely – cats have nine lives, don't they?

MF Seven.

VT Cats only have seven lives in Brazil?

JM They have nine lives in Italy.

XW Cats, luckily, have nine lives in China too.

MF Well, what can I say? The third world is perpetually short-changed.

VT What happens to the other two lives, to the remainder? Do they carry over somewhere?

DM They end up as cousins at Schrödinger's house.

AK Cats rub up against furniture or doorways when they want to mark the item as "theirs." They also spray furniture with urine to mark their territory. So "the cat is on the table" may mean that he just pissed on it to mark the territory. This cat on a table could be a hypothetical flag, just like the flag on the moon – a colonization.

DD The cat is on the table the cat is on the table...it's difficult to repeat this sentence really fast. The words break down, and there's no cat and there's no table. There's only the sound of the cat on the table: Crssshhhh crssssshhhhhh.

WPM I think the term you may be looking for is "semantic satiation," a related phenomenon in cognitive neuroscience.

CF Well my hope is that some subtext might pop out from in between the cat and the table. The phrase feels bound up in something else, something somehow more collusive and cryptographic, suggestive, or some kind of code language. I mean, in the Rosetta Stone, "the cat is on the table" is literally a password. Well, it's really a pass-phrase – if your Italian accent is off, you have to keep repeating "il gatto è sul tavolo" over and over until you get it right, or you can't move on.

PB Did you know that in the Second World War, the BBC frequently broadcasted nonsensical "personal messages" through their overseas service? They were really commands for secret agents. One message was the inverse of your phrase "Mimi's cat is asleep under the table." Those agents weren't talking about cats, tables, sleep, or Mimi. I suspect that "the cat is on the table" was originally a means of passage – a shared code for only the initiated to enact, burrowing through radio waves, but fashioned to pass unnoticed. But then again, "the cat is on the table" isn't a consistent, regularized code to be memorized, but maybe more of a "one time code."

CF What do you mean by "one time code"?

PB A prearranged signal intended to be used only once to convey a simple message – either to execute or abort some plan or to confirm that it has succeeded or failed.

CF So, like military surplus, the cat trickled out of the language of espionage and found a lasting home in the Rosetta Stone software?

JM I once heard "the cat is on the table" described as a "typical sentence" for learning English.

WPM One of the insights linguistics gives you is that there's no such thing as a "typical sentence." Language is too varied for a category as broad as "sentence" to have any kind of meaningful exemplar. I imagine "the cat is on the table" is a favorite phrase of language teachers because it's short, simple, and describes a culturally non-specific everyday situation. I call this kind of bland locution "clean-room sentences" and they're a genre unto themselves. You're always having to come up with phrases on the spot to illustrate this or that grammatical phenomenon, so linguistics examples over-represent objects and situations that occur in classrooms and offices. Pens are always sitting on tables. People are eternally giving one another books.

CF It's a sort of inside joke at this point, isn't it?

WPM Actually, jokes about language instruction form a sub-genre of comedy that travels well. The comedian Eddie Izzard has a bit about the only French he knows being a few classroom non-sequiturs like "the mouse is on the chair" and "the monkey is in the tree," so whenever he goes to France he has to take along a mouse, a chair, and a monkey. I have a language-instruction tape bit in which I say things like, "Pedro is having a party. Say who he will invite," as deeply and melodiously as I can.

CS This is about language then, but not quite about conversation. If anything, our being here and trying to figure out what "the cat is on the table" actually means is similar to having a conversation with a computer program, or to the similar type of conversation that we might have with a language tape: people talking to a record, and the record talking to them – a single call, and a bunch of responses.

DC One New Zealander I know complained that language courses don't work for "people like us."

NM What are we like?

DC We're interested in language structurally and want to talk about whatever the hell Derrida was talking about and not "the cat sat on the hat." It's a funnier story with her accent...

CF *Sometimes we're too interested in meta-self-reflexivity as well. How does that swampiness sit with you, W.P., being a linguist and all?*

WPM Unlike other sciences, well, at least more so than other sciences, the object of study in linguistics is the thing that makes the study possible. You write articles in standard grammatical English about the grammatical standards of English. I personally don't like to make too much of this particular variety of tail-swallowing because I find it quickly leads down a goopey, mystical, how-can-we-really-say-anything philosophical rat hole which – aside from being so totally sophomore year – is specifically uninteresting to linguists, since it hinges on a paradox that is the starting point of our work, and not some mind-blowing conclusion. Nevertheless, linguists are aware of the distinction between the language that they study and the meta-language they employ to study it.

CF *Sophomore year has a big pull in the art field, for better or worse. I guess "the cat is on the table" is more like kindergarten and the New Zealander reminds me of the mat under the table illustration. The cat is under the table, the cat is on the mat, the mat is under the table, and the mat is under the cat. Sometimes I think language instructors are just secretly fucking with us. If we*

can decide on what it means, do you think we can get "the cat is on the table" inserted into one of those pocket translation phrase-books for tourists?

PB Of course.

DD Let's face it, yes, it's true that sometimes cats can be on tables, but it's more common for books to be on tables. When I learned English, it was "the book is on the table", but a cat and a book can sometimes both be on the table. Do you remember the Seinfeld episode where Kramer invents a coffee table book about coffee table books that has also four foldable legs, so it could turn into a coffee table, too?

RM A cat can be a table, yes.



PB The feet, the four-legged-ness, of cats and tables might be important. A cat might be a table from time to time, but a cat on a table is always a cat on a pedestal, elevated, put on display. They have the same aspirations to verticality that we do.

GD There's a scene from the diaries of the Lithuanian poet Alfonsas Nyka-Nyliūnas, whose work I enjoy reading a lot; whenever he'd try to read a book, his cat would come next to him on the table and casually sit on the open book and make herself comfortable. The cat would go to sleep very soon after. I'm convinced that the intimacy we experience while reading a book is attractive

to a mute intellect. A cat on a table is an idiom said in a cat's language.

CF *But if it were translated into English, would the cat be saying something like, "I am also a book, it's time to read me" or "I will now go to sleep, watch me read through osmosis"? When "the cat is on the table" I can imagine one parent griping to another about their attention-starved child who won't leave them alone.*

GD I'm not sure how much I should try to explain. Claude Lévi-Strauss already ended one of the best books ever written with a sentence about the exchange of winks between a human and a cat.

CF *That's Tristes Tropiques, right? Maybe "the cat is on the table" could acknowledge those rare, fleeting, affective moments that can't be expressed, when we allow ourselves to interrupt our own distractions.*

GD It's an expression performed, instead of told.

KK You see something similar ritualized at CFA-compliant cat shows, where you often hear the saying "the cat is on the table." The showing of the cat has been compared to the moment in the Catholic Mass when the wafer of bread and the chalice of wine become, literally, the body and blood of Christ. I'm sure you know the moment at which the cat is moved from cage to grooming table then lifted to the show table to endure the scrutiny of a few hundred strangers.

CF *Actually, I've never been to a cat show.*

KK When you do, try not to move a muscle and, if you're on your cell phone, just text in, "The cat is on the table" and the guy on the other line, if he has any heart at all, will type in, "Got it,

bye" and you can silently palm it, or pocket it, while you watch the judges circle the table the requisite three times, perhaps posing some brief, apropos and above all well-modulated questions to the trainer.

CF *You've experienced this more than once?*

KK In my life there have been a few special times of hush, my original circumcision for one, the birth of my son for another, meeting John Cage on Folsom Street just by chance, and also, any time the cat is on the table.

CF *So the phrase may have originated through the Cat Fanciers' Association, but is also used, more figuratively – and sort of like Gintaras' hinting at Lévi-Strauss' winking – to describe any moment of taciturn pause?*

KK Stemming from CFA circles, I think it's more like exaggerated respect. Respect exaggerated beyond ordinary conventions of courtesy – perhaps something of camp to it?

CF *A more extreme example of the vernaculars would be "house signs." Deaf children who are unable to communicate with their parents will invent their own gestural language. I wonder what "the cat is on the table" looks like in sign language?*

NM Ask Koko.

CF *The gorilla?*

NM Yeah, she loves Manxes. These cats have no tails, sort of like gorillas. Koko probably liked that.

CF *What is it with you and Koko?*

NM Koko understands English when she hears it and she also can speak with

American Sign Language and Gorilla Sign Language. She learned to sign GSL from her trainers, not the Rosetta Stone. She asked for a cat, so they brought her a whole bunch and she chose a Manx. She named it “All Ball” and treated it like her own baby, but it died. Eventually, she picked two other Manx kittens – named them “Lipstick” and “Smokey”. I don’t know what those names look like in GSL, but in ASL, you sign the word “cat” by mocking whiskers coming out of your face. A table is signed with one hand and forearm above the other, in opposite directions, to mime a flat surface. Most people could mistake “cat” for moustache or “table” for something about *I Dream of Genie*, but the sign for “on” seems the most easily misunderstood because it looks like you’re either cradling a baby or asking what time it is, depending on who’s signing.

NM It could be interesting to introduce “the cat is on the table” as a gestural idiom, but we’d have to be careful. Koko was charged with sexual harassment!

PB What?

NM “Nipples” and “people” sounded similar to her.

(Noise.)

PB Am I outing myself as a progeny of pudgy people when I point out that none of you – slimmer and more attractive as you are – have mentioned the primary use of the table?

CF To eat?

JT I asked Alex Cecchetti the other day and he thought “the cat is on the table” might have come from Italian people when they ate at a Chinese restaurant for the first time.

XW They were probably in Guangdong Province.

PB Here’s a better example: at the Savoy Hotel in London, a wooden cat, called “Kaspar”, is invited to dinner in order to round out unlucky parties of thirteen.

NM A baker’s dozen, go on.

PB Wooden or not, Kaspar could symbolize how the finickiness of a cat’s taste offers a model for a discerning, classy palate. My point is that cats at dinner are not necessarily a sign of surplus, but can also signal a lack. In 1996, during the economic crisis in Argentina, cat-eating was necessary due to famine. Don’t forget that to be “on the table” is a possibility – an offering. In some cultures in Cameroon and Peru, there are special ceremonies featuring cat-eating that are thought to bring good luck. In Korea, cat meat used to be boiled for medicinal tonics. Up until a recent law was enacted, cats were still eaten in some regions of southern China, so Alex may be right about the Italians at the Chinese restaurant.

CF *It’s an absent presence on the table, is that your point? Are you just hungry?*

PB Think about it, in Italy I know you ate both rabbit and horse, and each for the first time, right? Throughout the ages in Europe, cats have often served as succulent substitutes for rabbit. Would you eat cat?

CF *I can’t even pet a cat.*

PB That’s my point. The rabbit signifies the pastoral, while the cat is a creature serenading the moon. It may imply a hierarchy of domestication, but I think eating cats indicates the poverty of the city,

as well as its necessary alienation from the production of food.

CF *I see, so you’re saying that when “the cat is on the table” the state of economic affairs is at its worst.*

AK In Poland we say that if there is a shortage of fish, a cancer can also pass as a fish.

PB During the First and Second World Wars cats were nicknamed “roof rabbit”. I wonder if the person who first inserted “the cat is on the table” into these language programs your talking about wasn’t actually making a subtle joke in reference to nineteenth-century French cuisine. Apparently masquerading cat meat as “gibelotte de lapin” became almost a cliché during this period. The scandal of felicide for stew was a common subject in the news. A restaurant historian wrote about it well in *Cabinet*.

DM When the cat is walking on the table, the cat is waiting to be killed. “The cat is on the table” could also refer to some notion or idea of stupidity.

PB I agree a table’s not a safe heaven. It’s a dangerous place for a cat, except maybe for a cat at the poet’s house Gintaras mentioned. But cats know what they’re doing, although they pretend not to know.

CF *I do like Derrida’s lecture about the time his cat saw him naked. Its eyes became some sort of mirror, and he apparently felt embarrassed standing there, then even more embarrassed by his embarrassment.*

PB Meta-embarrassment.

NM Projecting human thoughts onto a cat is about as enticing as eating one.

And Derrida’s projecting sexual thoughts too, which is gross.

KLP Now we have to deal with this putatively nonsense phrase by taking an obvious route, which is both Freudian and spoonerist. In swapping pussy for cat and extending “on the table” to “to lay one’s cards on the table” there’s a crude, but clear rendering of “laying one’s pussy on the table”.

PB So “the cat is on the table” is a cougar’s cry? A cat in heat makes insane noises, but it’s speech. And a cougar is a type of cat, very wild, but only up to a certain age, then it’s “Grimalkin”. That’s what one of the witches in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* calls her cat. The “Gri” means “grey” and the “malkin” part means “cat”, but altogether it refers to a promiscuous or eccentric woman, an evil looking cat and an elderly woman. Also, the word “malkin” evolved over years from representing a floor-mop to grey pubic hair.

NM Is that where the estranged, spinster cat lady comes from?

PB Hundreds of years ago, many, many cat ladies were burnt at the stake.

CF *Right, cats have a long history with magic and witchcraft, which could be an inroad for us. I still remember Isobel Gowdie’s old formula for shape shifting into a cat:*

*I shall goe intill ane catt,
With sorrow, and sych, and a blak shott;
And I sall goe in the Divellis nam,
Ay will I com hom againe.*

NM You should probably switch back now; you’re allergic.

PB Honestly Chris, after all this maybe a new idiom just isn’t ambitious enough.

Do you know the term “snowclone”? It’s a kind of infinitely moveable phrase, a cliché defined by its multi-use. Snowclones are statements like, “grey is the new black.” That’s a template that’s so familiar you can substitute just about anything for “grey” and people will get the reference. It’s a rhetorical trope, like “to X or not to X”, or “I’m not an X but I play one on TV.”

CF *I’m all for your ambition, but “the cat is on the table” already functions a bit like a snowclone, doesn’t it? In the dimension of language courses, books or pens are just as often on the table, not only a cat. So, at the very least, it’s an accidental snowclone.*

PB But the problem is how limited it is. The question is how do we get the template operating outside of language courses, into the mouths of people who aren’t familiar with the cat?

CS Actually, it’s hard to hear it on language tapes, but AAVE, African American Vernacular English, aka “Jive” is an English dialect that floats far out in the smoky margins of Rosetta Stone. It takes on a different meaning: the cat, a fellow man, a friend, is on the table, up for consideration.

CF *That would make it a pretty archaic cat. The word “cat” seems to have fallen out of favor, like “that’s hype” or “that’s fresh” for something extremely pleasing, or even the term “Jive” when referring to itself. Shifting fashions in colloquialisms have done little to keep cats off tables. So, in other words, can a cat purr in Jive?*

CS Archaic idioms are crossing our path all the time. Especially simple images like “the cat is on the table” have a way of lingering. Like a schoolbook line drawing – if a line drawing of a car / coche / voiture is simple enough, it’ll be

reprinted, edition-after-edition, regardless of the way car design evolves. Slang drifts, politics change. Cats were on the table – other cats are on the table now. But you’re right. Imagine it being spoken as Jive. Say it out loud.

CF *The cat. Is on. The table.*

CS It sounds like men planning, making decisions about the material of people – now stuck echoing on language tapes in a ten-second call-and-response. Yes, any image this simple has history. Maybe even more than we think. 20th century American afrocentrism drew heavily from Egyptian culture – the culture of cats. Think about the Black Panther party and Sun Ra; this coded line drawing you call “the cat is on the table” could be older than we think. So it’s significant to note that the cat is also on another tabulecognate: the tablet. Literally, and in the earliest sense of “literal”, the cat is on the Rosetta Stone.

CF *Farnsworth, have you been recording this whole time?*

FO Of course.

CF *Good.*



In addition to this transcript, a textual project Chris Fitzpatrick created in collaboration with Marcella Faustini will be presented at The Barber Shop in Lisbon, Portugal, followed by *Il gatto è sul tavolo / The cat is on the table*, a group exhibition Fitzpatrick is curating at Spazio A in Pistoia, Italy. Dedicated to Daisy May Fitzpatrick, 1991–2011.