

## A SEA OF WORDS

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**Abstract:** English is an extraordinary language, very rich in metaphors, and the intention of this paper is to show that many of the figures of speech that we use daily derive from the language and customs of the sea. There are very many ordinary, everyday expressions as, for example "to rummage", "to cross the line" and others, which were in fact born at sea as part of the jargon that English-speaking seamen have used for ages. The nautical field is a very rich source of inspiration; therefore the nautical terms constitute an important heritage that has been passed down to us by entire generations of seafarers. Language has always been of great interest and concern to people, and especially to seamen who enriched their language with idioms and metaphors that, over the centuries, have been passed on from ship to shore.

**Key words:** sea jargon, metaphor, idiom, nautical term, seafarer.

England is an island. Being an island, obviously it is surrounded by the sea. Therefore the English language has absorbed much of the sea into the words and phrases we use daily, and in most cases we are not aware of that. The historical significance of the sea is easy to see when one looks at the English language. Many words and expressions originate from their relationship with the sea. The language used from early times was penetrated by numerous nautical terms. The nautical terms became the one universal language understood by different cultures, becoming a kind of Lingua Franca of the seafarers. Along the centuries, new words and phrases have entered into the language from this perpetual bond to the seas and the oceans of the world. The English language gained many attachments during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when the British naval and merchant ships traveled the seas.

Great Britain's maritime history, which is a rich one beyond all doubt, has essentially affected both the spoken and the written language all over the English speaking world. Tens and hundreds of words and expressions have invaded the language as a direct consequence of the Britain's role as a maritime nation, and they suffered the processes of being moved from the specialised indigenous of mariners, into every field of modern English. Maritime expressions, such as "taken aback" "batten down" and "log" are used on a daily basis, usually without any awareness on the part of the user of their source.

Some familiar words and phrases come unexpectedly from their use on the sea; from commonly used words like overwhelm (from the Middle English word meaning "to capsize") and casual (from the term "a casual" used to describe the wages paid to seamen between regular payments) to expressions like a "square meal" (from the square tray upon which the main meal of the day was served on early British warships) and "Please stand by" (an expression derived from the command for sailors to be ready).

There are several books, texts, dictionaries that deal with nautical terms, some of them are very thoroughly written, some of them are quite superficial (Jeans, 1998), nevertheless all of them try, in one way or another, to bring to surface all kinds of words, phrases, expressions, idioms, sayings, proverbs related to the nautical area.

Some of the authors consider that the maritime expressions have been roughly divided into two groups: those that retain transparent links to the maritime past, such as "run aground" or "all at sea", and those expressions, such as "at loggerheads" or "taken aback", that are now so far removed from their origins that they are unlikely to be recognised as having any nautical significance to anyone other than a maritime specialist or historian (Isserlis, 2008).

Below there is a part of a list of some of the more common words and phrases that relate to our connection to the sea (the explanations contain the nautical meaning and the common meaning):

**Abreast:** Meaning along side the beam of a ship. Now a common expression, "keeping abreast of a situation" means staying in touch with or keeping up with;

**All at sea:** Nautical expression to describe the condition of a vessel lost out of site of land. Now the expression or its shortened form "at sea" is used to describe someone who is confused, bewildered and unable to understand;

**At a loose ends:** A nautical term for a rope when unattached and therefore neglected or not doing its job. Thus "tying up loose ends" indicates having done a complete job or having dealt with all the details;

**At a rate of knots:** To go at top speed. This is used to describe someone who is traveling or driving very fast;

**Bitter End:** The last part of a rope or final link of chain. The end attached to the vessel, as opposed to the "working end" which may be attached to an anchor, cleat, other vessel, etc. Today the term is used to describe a final, painful, or disastrous conclusion (however unpleasant it may be);

**Cock Up:** In port, the yard arms where slewed inboard by the cock up crew and neatly braced so that they would not foul other ship's rigging or dock equipment. Today, a "cock up" is a mistake or making a mess of something;

**Feeling Blue:** Today "feeling blue" means being sad or depressed. It comes from a custom that was practiced when a ship lost its captain during a voyage. The ship would fly blue flags and have a blue band painted along her hull when she returned to port;

**Give Leeway:** From the practice of allowing extra room off a dangerous lee (downwind) shore in case of error or mishap in order to allow the vessel extra distance to maneuver in an emergency. Today it is used to describe being more patient with someone or giving a little extra room to maneuver;

**Give me some slack:** An expression that originated during the docking of a ship. One would alternately tension the line in your hands and then release. The call would be to "give me some slack" when it was your turn to "haul". Today, it still means much the same thing as when used in referenced to the boating world. The term is also now used synonymous with "give me a break";

**Keep an even keel:** A nautical term for keeping a boat upright, not heeling over to either side. Today the expression is used when describing a persons emotions. To "keep an even keel" is to remain level headed or emotionally stable;

**Old Salt:** Nautical term for old, retired sailor or someone with many years of sailing experience. The term is also used to mean a "genuine" kind of a person;

**Rise and shine:** This was part of a traditional naval morning call-out to the crew. The expression is now used outside the Navy meaning to awaken and be alert;

**Under Way:** This is a naval expression meaning to get moving. The expression is used to mean that something is in progress of moving forward;

**Windfall:** This is synonymous with a stroke of luck, a turn of luck, or a financial gain. Originally the word was used to refer to a rush of wind which would help a vessel's forward movement. Today, it means a stroke of good luck;

**Windward:** This word means to be upwind. It is now also a naval expression meaning to gain an advantage.

The examples can go on with some other nautical-inspired phrases which you can use in your everyday conversations in order to colour them up. Here are some terms you can thank a sailor for:

### **To be taken aback**

"Aback" is what sailors say when the wind changes suddenly and flattens the sails against the mast. Strong gusts of wind can even blow the ship backward—thus, "taken aback." "Aback" is what sailors say when the wind changes suddenly and flattens the sails against the mast. Strong gusts of wind can even blow the ship backwards: thus, "taken aback."

### **By and large**

Both "by" and "large" are nautical terms. To sail "by" means to sail a ship very close to the line of the wind, and to sail "large" means the wind is on the quarter. Sailing "by and large" made it easier for the crew to keep the ship on course, even in difficult conditions.

### **Left high and dry**

No support? No resources? Then you just might be high and dry, like a ship that's been grounded because the tide went back out.

### **Hard and fast**

A ship that's been beached so firmly that it's stuck probably got jammed in the sand hard and fast. Now it's immovable and unchangeable - just like hard and fast rules.

This list could go on and on, but we are going to present other linguistic categories, such as idioms. English, as we already mentioned above, is flooded with sea words and phrases. The language is saturated with maritime history. In the same time, English is an idiomatic language - sprinkled with phrases and figures of speech. Some people criticize the English language for being illogical. Indeed, idioms provide a good example for their argument. But I believe that the strength and beauty of English is rooted in the fact that it is illogical. Language is simply a means to an end - not an end in itself. Language is simply a means of expressing the human mind. The mind is illogical. So this aspect is obviously reflected in the language we speak (Gill, website).

What is an idiom? The Oxford dictionary gives the following definition: a group of words established by usage and having a meaning not deducible from those of the individual words; b. a form of expression peculiar to a language, person or group of people (e.g. Mariners). Idioms add colour and rich imagery to the spoken words. (Latin: idioma = own, private property). Alec Gill provides a list of nautical / seafaring jargon used by landlubbers in everyday speech, expressions that turn into vivid and colourful idioms which make the language funnier and not boring at all. This list again is a long one, but we are going to give samples of idioms, which we consider interesting and entertaining in the same time:

**All hands on deck / All told:** Everyone should gather together to their stations / positions and prepare for action....;

**Give a hand:** Can you help me for a moment; the use of the singular word "Hand" indicates that this is a nautical phrase. A seafarer always had to keep "one hand for himself" to hold on to the rigging for safety reasons. Therefore, he only had one hand free to help anyone else. Thus, the phrase / request for "a hand";

**Know (learn) the ropes:** Applied to a novice learning a new job; have a detailed knowledge of the ship's rigging;

**Plumb the depths:** Find out what is going on; using a lead weight on a line to determine the unseen depth of water below the ship;

**Fathom something out:** I cannot understand something or someone; to determine the depth of something. "I cannot fathom it out!" - my lead-line was not long enough to reach the bottom;

**Pipe down:** Stop being aggressive or noisy, cease talking; a naval colloquialism derived from the boatswains' call of this name meaning "hands turn in". An official order to be quiet and not talk so loud. Navy's version of Army's "Lights out";

**Tell it to the marines!** Usually a remark that greets any tall story; King Charles II disbelieved that there were flying fish in the South Seas after he has been told of their existence by Samuel Pepys. However, a Royal Marine, who was standing close by, confirmed that it was true. And if an upstanding, trusted Royal Marine believed the yarn, then it must have some validity. Apparently, British PoWs were forced by the Japanese to broadcast a message to their fellow soldiers that

everything was fine. They concluded their false tale by declaring "...tell that to the soldiers, tell that to the navy, and tell it to the Marines!" Which told every British soldier that it was a pack of lies...;

**Shiver my timbers!** Expression of surprise - especially when a ship runs aground. Shiver is used in the sense of 'shatter' - splinter into pieces. Timbers = the wooden hull; more used in the theatrical sense of stage sailors or authors of children's books;

**Cut and run:** To escape by a sudden manoeuvre; to cut a ship's anchor cable in an emergency and make sail in a hurry - especially when the anchor ropes were made of hemp. This happened when the Spanish Armada was anchored off Calais. Most of the captains cut their cables on the approach of Howard's fire ships;

**May day!** Distress signal/call for help because life in peril; Mae West - when life-belts around waist one looked like the buxom Mae West! This expression is a corruption of two French words of distress 'Venez M'aider!' (Come Help Me!). The English not only shortened this plea for help, but also made it rhyme.

And the examples are flowing, but we put an end to this list as there are some other mixtures of words, sea words again, worth mentioning, which, when are brought together form the well known proverbs and sayings. Therefore we can add the term nautical to these proverbs; this list is a little bit different from the others because the proverbs related to the sea are from all over the world, not only those with an English origin. They are very diverse as they were born from different cultures and that makes them more attractive. The proverbs have a multitude of origins, among which we can mention: Arabian, Bulgarian, Chinese, Danish, French, German, Greek, Scottish, even Latin, and so on, but the one and only element they have in common is the sea. Here are some examples:

- Breton proverb: *No matter how treacherous is the sea, a woman will always be more so.*
- Bulgarian proverb: *If you want to drown yourself, don't torture yourself with shallow water.*
- Chinese proverb: *No matter how big the sea may be, sometimes two ships meet.*
- Danish proverb: *A ship on the beach is a lighthouse to the sea; Better lose the anchor than the whole ship.*
- English proverbs: *Worse things happen at sea; Make not your sail too big for your ballast; The ship that will not obey the helm will have to obey the rocks.*
- French proverb: *If the seawater were hotter we could catch boiled fish.*
- German proverb: *God will help a seaman in a storm but the pilot must still remain at the wheel.*
- Greek proverbs: *Where there is a sea there are pirates; Women are as changeable as the sea.*
- Irish proverbs: *Nodding the head does not row the boat; There are finer fish in the sea than have ever been caught.*
- Italian proverbs: *After the ship has sunk, everyone knows how she might have been saved.*
- Latin proverbs: *Each man makes his own shipwreck.*
- Russian proverbs: *Not everything is a mermaid that dives into the water; Once you have fallen into the water, you're not scared of water any more.*
- Scottish proverb: *Waves will rise on silent water.*
- Turkish proverbs: *A ship with two captains sinks; The sea never buys fish.*

All the phrases we use in conversations have to come from somewhere, and many of these have origins from the sea and sailing ships in particular. Our journey at sea keeps on going

with a list with the most common sayings, 16 in number, with origins from the sea:

**Above board** – meaning honest or hiding nothing. On a ship, "above board" signifies the top deck, masts and sails, everything above the ship's boards, open to view.

**Bitter end** – meaning the absolute end of something. The cleat or post where the anchor cable was tied was called the "bitt" or the "bitts." So when an anchor was let out as far as possible, and had reached the extreme end of its tether, it had reached the "bitter end."

**Clean bill of health** – meaning a certification that someone is healthy. This comes from a paper issued to a ship's captain at the beginning of a voyage, proving that the vessel had not come from a port infected by plague or other dangerous diseases. Proof that the ship was unlikely to carry disease made it more likely to be welcomed in a new port.

**Clean slate** – meaning a new beginning. An officer of the watch made notations in chalk on a piece of slate near the ship's wheel, describing the ship's speed and direction. At the end of each watch, the entries would be written permanently in the ship's log, and the slate would be wiped clean for the next officer's notations.

**Down the hatch** – meaning swallowing something quickly. On sailing ships, cargo was lowered down into a hatch, a large opening in the deck, for storage in the hold. The open hatch seemed to swallow up the goods, much as a thirsty sailor might swallow a mug of beer.

**First rate** – meaning the very highest quality. British ships were rated according to size and armament. Smaller ships – "fifth rates" might carry only ten cannons, and have only a small budget for supplies and almost nothing aboard that was not absolutely necessary, while a "first rate" would carry over a hundred cannons and have a correspondingly large budget for supplies and luxuries.

**Footloose** – meaning not having any attachments. The top of a sail is the "head" and the bottom is the "foot." A sail that is footloose dances in the wind, doing whatever it pleases.

**Know the ropes** – meaning to be familiar with all the aspects of something. A sailing-era ship had literally miles of ropes strung around it, holding sails, steadying masts, providing handholds and securing loose objects. Each rope had a particular name, and each knot in these ropes had a specific use. "Knowing the ropes" of a sailing ship took at least a year of on-the-job training.

**Not enough room to swing a cat** – meaning too crowded for working. On board ship, the "cat" was the whip used for punishment, a cat-o-nine-tails. Whippings were done with all the crew on deck to see. Given the large number of crew, and the small space on deck, if the sailors crowded too close, there might be not enough room to swing the "cat."

**Pipe down** – meaning to become quiet. The last signal aboard a ship was when the bosun used a special whistle to "pipe the crew down," signaling them to go below and be quiet for sleep.

**Press into service** – meaning to force someone or something to do a job they don't usually do. The British navy always needed more sailors than volunteered. To make up the difference, they sent out officials to "impress" non-sailors into the Navy, by hauling them off to the ship in chains if necessary. The term "impress" was quickly shortened to "press" and the groups forcing the impressions were a "press gang," who "pressed" civilians into the service.

**Scuttlebutt** – Meaning gossip. A butt was a barrel containing liquid. To "scuttle" meant to drill or knock a hole in something. On board a ship, a scuttled butt was a container of water,

#### CONCLUDING QUOTE:

*"There is a tide in the affairs of men  
Which, taken at the flood,  
Leads on to Fortune.  
Omitted, all the voyage of your life.  
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.  
On such a full sea are we now afloat  
And we must take the current when it serves  
Or lose our Venture".*

Brutus in JULIUS CAESAR (4,3,216)

opened for drinking. As folks gathered around the sailing-era equivalent of a water cooler, they traded gossip.

**Showing your true colors** – meaning to reveal your actual nature. "Colors" were naval slang for a national flag. Often warships carried the flags of many nations, and would fly a flag not their own in order to deceive an enemy ship. Just before battle was joined, the attacking ship would fly its true colors, its actual national flag, revealing its origin and intention to attack.

**Three sheets to the wind** – meaning drunk. Most people would think a "sheet" referred to a sail, but in fact "sheets" are the rope which hold a sail in place. A sail with three sheets flapping in the wind would be wildly out of control.

**Touch and go** – meaning that a chance for something is possible but very uncertain. A ship could be badly damaged if its bottom struck a sand bar or a rock. But it was possible for the ship to touch briefly on a sandbar, and then go on – a very dangerous situation.

**Turning a blind eye** – meaning to deliberately ignore something. Horatio Nelson was England's greatest naval hero and perhaps it's bravest, being seriously wounded and partially blinded in battle. A much more timid commander once signaled Nelson was to break off fighting during the Battle of Copenhagen. Nelson famously held the spyglass to his blind eye, told his subordinates "I see no signal," and continued to fight, winning the battle an hour later.

In relation with the above mentioned nautical sayings we found out, searching the internet, a sample of a lesson plan, which is part of the "Denis Sullivan" Education Programming, addressed to advanced level students.

The objectives of the lesson plan are: 1. Students will understand the origin of some modern day words and phrases; 2. Students will use nautical phrases in a short story. The materials used: 1. Copy of vocabulary list; 2. Copy of "That's from Where?" worksheet. The activity consists in: 1. Split the students in groups of 2 or 3. Hand out the worksheet "That's from Where?"; 2. Give them 20 minutes to complete the modern meaning column on the worksheet; 3. Bring the group together to go over their answers; 4. Then go over the nautical meaning and have them fill in the appropriate column. The head of the worksheet looks like that:

#### That's from where?

Nautical Origins to Commonly  
Used Modern Words and Phrases

**Task:** Many words and phrases commonly used today were born from nautical heritage. For each of the following words or phrases determine the modern and the traditional nautical meaning.

Word/Phrase	Modern meaning	Nautical meaning
Above board		
Batten down the hatches		

Conclusively, many words and phrases that have been adopted into everyday use originate from seafaring, mainly from the days of sail. Practically, all of these are metaphorical and the original nautical meanings are now forgotten. There is another interesting aspect, in the way that the association of travel and metaphor is significant in that the word metaphor derives from ancient Greek for "to carry" or "to travel". And last but not least, the influence of other languages and other cultures is evident in many of the long list of English phrases that have nautical origins (see the above list of proverbs).

by William Shakespeare

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