

NAUTICAL ORIGIN OF CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH COLLOQUIALISMS

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INTRODUCTION

The origin of contemporary English colloquialisms has its roots in various layers of historical and professional etymological sources of the English language, but since Britain was always a sea country and a marine power depending on the surrounding seas, the large bulk of contemporary colloquialisms descend from marine domain. The sea served always as means of island protection from the invaders and British people depended on the sea as a considerable source of food, like catch of fish. Britain always had a strong elaborate fleet that helped the country not only to defend itself but also to open new lands and make them British colonies, like Canada, Australia, India, etc. No wonder that many everyday English phrases are of nautical/ marine origin. In this research we studied fifty-three colloquialisms of nautical origin and decided to systemize them according to their contemporary status in today's English. Not many languages can boast such amount of nautical/marine words and phrases as the English language. The astonishing amount of English idiomatic speech owes to the nautical language of the past. English is extraordinary rich in metaphor and many of the figures of speech that people speaking English use every day derive from the language and customs of the sea which fact sometimes we even don't realize. This article is the first attempt of describing and systematizing the idioms and metaphors that over the centuries have been passed on from ship to shore.

The big part of the studied marine terms is connected with marine superstitions, the history of which dates back to the very first days of seafaring. At the time when the first ships appeared and the first voyages started to be organized, the mariners didn't have any maps or navigational aids, they relied mostly on their intuition, professional experience and skills. The long expeditions required not only a solid stock of food and water on board but also psychological support for the people in the open ocean that could not communicate with their relatives and families ashore. The big helper in this situation were believes and that is how marine superstitions began to appear. Many of them exist up till now and people often refer to them on land.

In this article we described only those of the researched nautical phrases and expressions that are either used in the contemporary English colloquial

language or those used mainly by the seafarers but are generally understood by all the speakers of English. The methods used were mostly historical comparative and contemporary comparative. We hope that the suggested work will trigger the interest not only of the seafarers and people related to the marine business, but also to all those interested in the etymology of marine/nautical ESP.

The idea of this article is to investigate the nautical origin of the well-known colloquialisms of contemporary English. When people use such expressions as *take it easy, fair and square, ship-shape* etc. they are not aware of where they come from and definitely not many people connect the words with nautical etymology while in reality they are of marine origin. The research was based on several fundamental resources, the results were thoroughly analyzed and we have come to the conclusion that theoretically all the studied terms may be divided into three groups:

1. Originally nautical terms but now everyday English colloquialisms that still can be recognized as phrases connected with marine sphere.
2. Terms that no longer are used by mariners but well known to native speakers.
3. Terms that still refer to maritime sphere.

The next stage of our research was to compare the percentage of the studied expressions to identify which of them are more frequently used and which are not.

1. Group 1. Originally nautical terms but now everyday English colloquialisms that still can be recognized as phrases connected with marine sphere

Here the expressions are presented in an alphabetic order and not according to their value of frequency of usage.

When we hear the expression “*blue ribbon*” we usually think of two things: of “*blue*” as a color of royal and noble origin like in the expression “*blue blood*” and ‘*ribbon*’ as a sign of some prize or trophy awarded for something supreme in a contest won by the winner like different exhibitions, horse shows, etc. The main event in a competition is often called “*blue ribbon event*”¹. Originally it was connected with non-official but very prestigious contest, it was a trophy awarded to the passenger vessel that made the fastest crossing of the Atlantic Ocean. The first vessel to hold the Blue Ribbon was a Cunard liner, the Acadia, the last was United States in 1952, with a speed of nearly 36 knots.²

¹ Jeans P.D. An Ocean of Words. A Dictionary of Nautical Words and Phrases. Toronto, Ontario : Carol Publishing Group, 1998. 180 p. P. 16.

² Ibid.

No wonder the blue color always is associated with the color of sea waters, that's why there are many expressions containing the word, but the meaning of some phrases containing the adjective "*blue*" are not always connected with the color like in "Navy blue" which really means the dark blue color of the Navy uniform. English speakers use the expression "*true blue*" when they characterize the individuals who exhibit the qualities of "steadfastness and trueness" i.e. when they speak of someone's "faithfulness, unswerving loyalty and honesty".³

The expression "*out of the blue*" (also "*like a bolt from the blue*") is definitely known to all people speaking English as "unexpectedly",⁴ without warning, suddenly. The expression has definitely entered the contemporary English, but still the connection with the marine theme can be observed. The etymology of this phrase is also of nautical roots. It is short for "*out of a clear blue sky*" and is an analogy to a sudden change in the weather when, from a good breeze under a cloud dappled blue sky, a demon squall can appear and wreak havoc on the ship, the historians give a documented example of such a situation in the spring of 1878 when ship *Eurydice* was on last few miles of her journey home to Portsmouth from Bermuda. The day was calm. The weather was sunny, all sails set and nothing was ill-omened and betokened a thunderstorm. The seamen were relaxing on deck. Then without warning a dark cloud appeared, a squall struck and *Eurydice* sank with 368 men on board. Within half an hour the weather was perfect again.

What do people think of when they hear the expression "*to have a bone in one's teeth*" immediately a picture of a contented dog with a bone in its teeth rushing happily in seeking for a shelter to indulge itself with tasting the bone visually appears. Or maybe one thinks of a person who is moving freely and briskly with an air of determination and purpose. This is the contemporary meaning of the expression. The origin of it roots back to marine usage. If you look at a picture of any tall ship of 17–18th century, a caravel or any other sailing vessel of the time you usually see the way she cuts the waves in the nice weather with her bow and a white foam round the bow. A "*bone*" in this expression is this foam at the bow or cutwater as the vessel moves through the water. When the foam is quite marked, the ship is said "to have a bone in her teeth" just because of the resemblance to a bone. Nowadays we do not see sailing tall vessels very often but the expression remained in the language.

It's very hard to find an English speaker who hasn't at least once in his lifetime used the colloquialism "*it's double Dutch for me*" meaning "I don't

³ Jeans P.D. An Ocean of Words. A Dictionary of Nautical Words and Phrases. Toronto, Ontario : Carol Publishing Group, 1998. 180 p. P. 168.

⁴ Dictionary of English Language and Culture. London Group UK, 1992. 1528 p. P. 121.

understand a word of it”. But why *Dutch* of all the unclear languages to the British? For other nations gibberish speech is associated with other languages, like Turkish for Ukrainians. The clue lies in history. There were many wars between the English and the Dutch in the seventeenth century, especially in the Thames estuary and very often with the English being defeated. No wonder English seamen hated their enemies and often “coined a wide variety of phrases that depicted the Dutch in a less than flattering manner”⁵, some of many are: “*Dutch bargain*” – a bargain settled over drinks, “*to go Dutch*” – to pay for oneself, etc.

When people use the expression “*to kick the bucket*” the probably would never associate it with its nautical origin but sooner with the American film of the 60ies where one of characters talking about the hidden treasury was dyeing and at last he died while kicking the real bucket with his feet. Some scholars also suggest that the etymology of this expression really is connected with somebody having to literally kick the bucket before hanging oneself. For our research the relevant version of this phrase etymology would be a Nautical one. As we mentioned in our previous article there was always a tradition to keep brooms and buckets always on board because loosing broom or bucket at sea or kicking them overboard was considered very unlucky.⁶ Bucket is very important for the seaman because “it is his bailer when his vessel is taking in water, and it is of great use for catching rainwater when shipboard supplies are low. So practically kicking the bucket overboard was equal to threaten the ships safety in case of emergency or even causing ship’s sinking and hence the death of the crew”.

A “*jackknife*” according to many dictionaries is “a large knife with folding blades”⁷, “a knife with a blade that folds into the handle”⁸, “a large pocketknife”, etc. practically all of us have jackknives at home and they are extremely useful at picnics walking tours and camping trips. This term also owns its nautical etymology. The seamen serving in sail needed a knife that was instantly available and would be used for serving different functions like cutting, fixing, etc. it was carried at the back of a seaman’s belt. “One of the first things the mates did when signing on a new crew in the merchant marine was to break off the points of the men’s knives, so as to reduce the possibility of dangerous wounds among fighting crew members”. It is interesting to mention here that if jackknife “functions as a verb it means “to

⁵ Jeans P.D. An Ocean of Words. A Dictionary of Nautical Words and Phrases. Toronto, Ontario : Carol Publishing Group, 1998. 180 p. P. 41.

⁶ Hornby A.S. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English. Oxford university Press, 2005. 1715 p. P. 87.

⁷ Random House Webster’s College Dictionary. USA, 1995. 1555 p. P. 794.

⁸ Dictionary of English Language and Culture. London Group UK, 1992. 1528 p. P. 700.

form a V-shape””, so when a high diver who touches his feet before hitting the water or a man who folds in a fight are said to jackknife.

Another example of a widely used contemporary expression which dates back to maritime usage is “*mainstream*”. Now it means “a principal or dominant course, tendency or trend”⁹, “the ideas and opinions shared by most people and are most accepted”¹⁰, like mainstream of fashion or in the mainstream of politics. Originally it was a marine term “*to be in the mainstream*” meaning “to be in the main body of water in the tide as it ebbs or flows”^{11; 12}. In nautical language “*stream*” means a steady current in a river or ocean, like Gulf Stream. It didn’t mean that being in the mainstream was always preferable for the ship, because its way may have been dependent on entering or leaving the port, weather conditions, high or low water, etc. The main reason why the phrase entered the everyday English with the positive connotation is the positive load of the two parts of it; “stream” which was always good for sailing ships because together with the wind it assured she would move ahead, and “main” which is central, principle, dominant.

A well-known colloquialism “*to be under the weather*” can be easily decoded as to be under the influence of bad weather, to feel blue, to feel unwell. It is also a colloquialism for being inebriated, drunk. But the phrase is definitely connected with the sea and this is transparent. Usually when the sea is rough and it’s storming even not heavily landsmen may be inclined to seasickness, nausea, which is the visible symptom of being under the influence of the weather. The traditional belief is that seamen do not succumb to seasickness, although “Lord Nelson himself freely admitted to being seasick for a day or two whenever he went to sea”¹³.

The expression “*to come in with flying colors*” while often used colloquially is easily detectable as belonging to marine domain. Colloquially it means to be completely triumphant, to win a hard competition or a business deal. Historically “*colors*” it was the name of the national flag or ensign given to a ship to fly when at sea. By the means of colors, the ships established their nationalities. Such flags were of particular importance to all maritime nations because they not only revealed the country or nation the ship is establishing; these flags were some kind of code language because at

⁹ Dictionary of English Language and Culture. London Group UK, 1992. 1528 p. P. 819.

¹⁰ Hornby A.S. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English. Oxford university Press, 2005. 1715 p. P. 891.

¹¹ Jeans P.D. An Ocean of Words. A Dictionary of Nautical Words and Phrases. Toronto, Ontario : Carol Publishing Group, 1998. 180 p. P. 41.

¹² Jeans P.D. An Ocean of Words. A Dictionary of Nautical Words and Phrases. Toronto, Ontario : Carol Publishing Group, 1998. 180 p. P. 103.

¹³ Jeans P.D. An Ocean of Words. A Dictionary of Nautical Words and Phrases. Toronto, Ontario : Carol Publishing Group, 1998. 180 p. P. 175.

those times there was no radio to transmit the signals so the seaman relied only on the visual signs that they could see in the distance. “In battle a ship signified surrender by lowering its colors; a ship or fleet that had been victorious would sail into port with all flags flying at the mastheads”¹⁴. Hence in contemporary colloquial English there are many expressions containing the word *flag*, like: true colors – genuine authentic, false color – fake wrong, show your (true) colors – to reveal one’s true character, go down with colors flying – to suffer defeat, come off with flying colors – to reach the end of something successfully, etc.

Another example of a widely used expression today with the word “*flag*” is “*to show the white flag*”. The phrase is notorious for its transparent meaning – “to surrender”, and it may be used not only in the context of military operations or battlefield activities. If one party to the dispute wishes to say that they surrender and accept another party’s decision they also say that the party “showed the white flag”. Originally the white flag was used when prisoners were being exchanged by special vessels that carried out the exchange between the opposing sides these vessels were called “cartel ships” and they displayed a white flag, “and this became internationally recognized as the sign of temporary truce, or cessation of hostilities”¹⁵.

The phrase “*to break the ice*” is well known to all English speakers in its contemporary colloquial meaning – “to say or do something that makes people feel more relaxed”¹⁶, “to overcome initial social awkwardness or formality”¹⁷. With many people the expression is associated with ice breaker that literally breaks the ice in Polar navigation basin. Icebreakers are often used to prepare the way for other vessels that cannot force their path themselves in extreme northern latitudes. Colloquially “*an ice-breaker* is anything that breaks down reserve or reticence, such as in one’s first meeting with a stranger, or in preparing the scene so that unpleasant or unwelcome news can be imparted”¹⁸.

All people speaking English know that “*SOS*” is an internationally recognized radiotelegraphic distress signal. But definitely not all people know about the origin of the acronym. It was adopted in 1908 in Morse Code for ships requiring help in emergency situations; they were easy to read: three dots, three dashes, three dots. “these letters, contrary to popular

¹⁴ Jeans P.D. An Ocean of Words. A Dictionary of Nautical Words and Phrases. Toronto, Ontario : Carol Publishing Group, 1998. 180 p. P. 175.

¹⁵ Ibid. P. 56.

¹⁶ Hornby A.S. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English. Oxford university Press, 2005. 1715 p. P. 735.

¹⁷ Dictionary of English Language and Culture. London Group UK, 1992. 1528 p. P. 666.

¹⁸ Jeans P.D. An Ocean of Words. A Dictionary of Nautical Words and Phrases. Toronto, Ontario : Carol Publishing Group, 1998. 180 p. P. 76.

belief, do not stand for “save our souls” or “save our ship”¹⁹, they were just chosen for easy recognizing while receiving the telegraph message, – there are no other so drastically different signs in Morse Code. Now in the contemporary colloquial English the expression means any call for help.

The examples that were displayed in the previous group, “*Originally nautical terms but now everyday English colloquialisms but still can be recognized as phrases connected with marine sphere*” show that although the dominant, prevailing meaning that most of contemporary English dictionaries suggest is *colloquial*, still the original nautical etymology can be easily traced. These expressions are used not only by landsmen but by mariners also but mostly in colloquial sense because they originated in the historically different epoch and nowadays the seamen rely rather on their navigational aids, tools and instruments than on saving their buckets or having their jackknives ready to defend them. Of course this group is not limited by the examples that we mentioned here in the frame of the article genre, but so far we can say that all the studied examples present 25% frequency of the total sampling.

2. Group 2. Terms that no longer are used by mariners but well known to native speakers

This group is functionally pretty close to the first one because predominant meaning of such phrases will also be *colloquial*, but although they are of marine/nautical origin, they cannot be read so transparently as marine terms as the expressions from the first group and with people who are not connected with work at sea they will not be associated with the sea at all. Here as well as in the first group the expressions are presented in an alphabetic order and not according to their value of frequency of usage. This group is not limited by the examples that we mentioned here in the frame of the article genre, but so far we can say that all the studied examples present 55% frequency of the total sampling

It the late 90’s and the beginning of 2000’s it was extremely stylish with young people to wear colorful “*bandanas*” on their heads, but it highly unlikely that anybody would connect this big cotton neckerchief or scarf of brightly printed colors with maritime origin. Bandanas were worn by seamen in the 19th century as a head covering head band or neck cloth, sometimes also as a waist band.²⁰ The origin of the word is Hindu and it means the way of dyeing fabrics. It was introduced to English by British seamen who came from India.

When people talk about “*barbecue*” now the usually mean cooking food outdoors and making it a social event, a party. These are extremely popular in Australia, America and New Zealand. But this a kind of metonymy, because

¹⁹ Jeans P.D. An Ocean of Words. A Dictionary of Nautical Words and Phrases. Toronto, Ontario : Carol Publishing Group, 1998. 180 p. P. 156.

²⁰ Ibid. P. 9.

the first meaning of barbecue is a metal grill arranged for cooking meat above an open fire of coals, wood, etc. the connection with maritime usage dates back to the early days of piracy in the Pacific and the Caribbean when Spanish pirates (the word “*barbecue*” comes from the Spanish “*barboka*”, grill or the cooking of dried meat over the open fire. The pirates were called “*buccaneers*” from the French “*boucan*” meaning the same grill or cooking on a grill. *Buccaneers* became closely involved with the illegal trading of such meat in the Caribbean basin.²¹ Who would ever now connect the pleasant and innocent barbecue party with the bloody history of Spanish pirates?

The meaning of the word “*beachcomber*” is pretty transparent and decipherable from the semantical point of view – person who is combing the beach, since the suffix –er points at the doer of the action. Nowadays the word describes any loafer around the waterfront or beaches looking idly for any easy prey like a watch or a mobile left by the holiday makers while they are swimming at sea. Historically the word used by mariners “became a metaphor for seamen who preferred to hang around ports and harbors looking for flotsam and jetsam that might prove saleable”²². originally the word described not a person but a strong destroying wave that crashes into the shore and pools away carrying sand and pebbles with itself as if it was combing the beach. Later this word became a metaphor and travelled into the colloquial English.

Like “bandana” “*bell-bottomed trousers*” were the fashion hit at the 70ies when practically all musicians used to wear them. The name speaks for itself – they are wide and flaring at the bottoms of the legs trousers. But again, they will not be spoken of here if the phrase were not connected with marine use. In 1857 a standard uniform for sailors was established; it was of dark blue or navy blue color and made of blue serge. The seamen were allowed to have their own best shore-going clothes. Since they bought the serge themselves they wanted to use the fabrics at maximum, avoiding waste so not to lose extra money. So the style of “bell-bottomed trousers” appeared as the tailors used the fabric at full at the bottom of the leg. Now not only in English speaking countries but all over Europe the typical image of a sailor is clad in bell-bottomed trousers.

The expression “*black list*” is very frequent in contemporary colloquial English and means “a list of the names of people, companies, products or countries that are considered unacceptable and must be avoided”²³, “a list of persons under suspicion”²⁴. The origin of the phrase owes to nautical English. Originally it was a list of sailors undergoing punishment, “probably deriving from the term *black books*, which, because of their close association

²¹ Jeans P.D. *An Ocean of Words. A Dictionary of Nautical Words and Phrases.* Toronto, Ontario : Carol Publishing Group, 1998. 180 p. P. 9.

²² *Ibid.* P. 10.

²³ Hornby A.S. *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English.* Oxford university Press, 2005. 1715 p. P. 141.

²⁴ *Dictionary of English Language and Culture.* London Group UK, 1992. 1528 p. P. 142.

with the laws, customs, and usages of the sea, came to be associated with the awarding of punishment”.²⁵ Definitely no one would love to be entered to the black list now. It is interesting, but the true opposition – “a white list” appeared in the English language meaning “a list of persons or things that are approved or considered acceptable”.²⁶ We have not traced the connection of this expression to nautical English and it’s interesting that only one of the respectable dictionaries contains the entry “white list”.

The word “*booby*” is known in colloquial language as “a foolish, stupid person”, the origin of the word is connected with marine English. Booby is a well-known tropical seabird who prefers to rest out of water at night, often perching on the yards and masts of ships. The name is from the Spanish “*bob*”, fool. The bird was considered stupid because it allowed itself to be caught easily by the seamen.

The phrase “*between the devil and the deep blue sea*” in metaphorical sense is used in contemporary English in the meaning of “facing two choices, both of which are unpleasant”²⁷. The marine origin of the expression is easily detectable. The devil on board ship was the outermost seam on the deck, it was called so because it was practically impossible to hammer the caulking in to make the seam watertight. It is also the name of garboard seam between the keel and the first plant which was also difficult to caulk. For the sailor all that lay between disaster and his present position was the thickness of the planking that stood between the devil on the deck and the sea around the ship. “The “deep blue sea” was the inevitable dire result if the sailor neglected to carry out the necessary and always difficult task of keeping the devils in good order”.²⁸ That’s how the metaphor appeared, – to be placed between two alternatives each of which is equally precarious or hazardous.

Another interesting expression which is used by English speakers is “*no room to swing a cat*”. It means a confined space, a room, a house or any other area which is too small to do something special in it. The only question is, why would anyone use a cat to swing and to check whether the space is sufficient enough. Why a cat? Why not other animal? The answer lies in the nautical origin of this expression. “Cat” is the sailors’ abbreviation for the *cat-o’-nine-tails*, a nine-lashed whip to punish sailors for any guilt of fault. The punishment was conducted on deck in the space between the poop and the deck, quite a restricted area, so the boatswain who conducted the

²⁵ Jeans P.D. An Ocean of Words. A Dictionary of Nautical Words and Phrases. Toronto, Ontario : Carol Publishing Group, 1998. 180 p. P. 15.

²⁶ Dictionary of English Language and Culture. London Group UK, 1992. 1528 p. P. 1520.

²⁷ Hornby A.S. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English. Oxford university Press, 2005. 1715 p. P. 348.

²⁸ Jeans P.D. An Ocean of Words. A Dictionary of Nautical Words and Phrases. Toronto, Ontario : Carol Publishing Group, 1998. 180 p. P. 36.

punishment should have got enough skill to perform the execution.²⁹ In contemporary English the word is used like a metaphor and has nothing to do with punishment.

The expression **“to let the cat out of the bag”** is a widely used colloquial one and means “to tell a secret carelessly or by mistake”³⁰. This metaphor also takes its roots in nautical slang. ““To let the cat out of the bag” was to put an unpleasant state of affairs into motion”³¹. The point is that the *cat-o'-nine-tails*’ was traditionally kept in a bag made of baize, and when this “cat” was taken out of the sack it definitely meant the punishment was to arrive. The seamen had a specific ironic humor, so they compared the punishment tool with a purring domestic cat. Luckily, this colloquial expression of marine origin is not connected with punishment today.

Today the word *“kid”* in colloquial English is more frequent than the word “children”; primarily it became popular in American, and then in British English. The word entered the expression **“to kidnap”** and owes its origin to nautical slang. Contemporary dictionaries explain the phrase like taking away someone illegally and by force to demand ransom for their safe return. The term “kidnapping” originated in the 17th century when “it referred to the “nabbing” of a kid” or child for sale to sea captains, who then transported that unfortunate person to the plantations in the American colonies”³². The origin of the expression was essentially maritime although now the phrase extrapolated from marine to everyday use, and not only children are captured and being held now for ransom.

The next two expressions: **“take it easy”** and **“fair and square”** are known to people who have just started learning English because they are popular and extremely frequent in everyday speech. All the readers should guess by now that the phrases are connected with marine background but not all know what is the origin of the two, what they used to mean in nautical environment. The expression **“take it easy”** in colloquial meaning is don’t be worried or angry, take it in a comfortable manner, remain calm. The marine interpretation of the phrase comes from the order *“Easy!”* meaning to “lessen the effort being put into a particular action”. By the way the word alone is used colloquially now like *“easy, easy”* meaning slowly, without panic, everything is going to be all right. The essential element of *“easy”* in marine usage is “to relax without actually abandoning one’s duty or

²⁹ Jeans P.D. *An Ocean of Words. A Dictionary of Nautical Words and Phrases.* Toronto, Ontario : Carol Publishing Group, 1998. 180 p. P. 24.

³⁰ Hornby A.S. *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English.* Oxford university Press, 2005. 1715 p. P. 220.

³¹ Jeans P.D. *An Ocean of Words. A Dictionary of Nautical Words and Phrases.* Toronto, Ontario : Carol Publishing Group, 1998. 180 p. P. 24.

³² *Ibid.* P. 85.

position”.³³. That’s why in the Royal Navy a short break during working hours is called a “*stand easy*”.

The expression “*fair and square*” in modern colloquial English may mean either honestly justly, straightforwardly and according to the rules or in a direct way that is easy to understand. In nautical slang “*fair*”, “which is to adjust and adapt something until it exactly suits the intended purpose; and “*square*” – to adjust it so that it lies at right angles to the fore-and-aft line of the ship”³⁴. From this marine use the word “*fair*” travelled into colloquial English in another phrase – “fair enough” and the word “*square*” – in expressions “to square off”, “square away” meaning to make everything tidy.

Another expression which people are unlikely to associate with marine origin is “*headway*” or “*make headway*” although the marine meaning is easily predictable. In everyday speech the phrase means “to make progress, especially when this is slow or difficult”, “forward movement, progress in a forward direction”. In marine usage it is practically the same idea as suggested by Random House Webster’s College Dictionary, USA i.e. “forward movement of the vessel through the water and “is a contraction of *ahead-way*, that is progress forward””.³⁵ The phrase is similar to a very typically marine expression “*making leeway*” which in colloquial English is to struggle effectively against odds of some kind like in an argument or while performing some effort requiring task, e.g. Are you making any leeway? Marine expression “*to make up leeway*” means “to make up or recover the ground or distance lost by the action of leeway caused by wind or tide”³⁶. As a metaphor the phrase is used in spoken English addressing to the effort exerted to make up distance or advantage lost.

Another interesting expression which is now a metaphorical colloquialism is “*to flog a dead horse*”. Literally it means a useless enterprise because even if you beat a dead horse severely with a whip for a punishment (flog) it will never stand up and come back to life. So why flogging it? Metaphorically the phrase means “to waste time or effort by returning to a subject or arrangement which has already been settled”. It is a widely used colloquial taken from the language of the sea. The “*dead horse*” is the term used by the seamen to describe the period of work on board ship for which they have been paid in advance when signing on. “There was a custom in merchant ships where the seamen celebrated having “worked off the dead horse” (i.e., having completed the duties covered by their pay in advance) by parading a stuffed straw horse around the decks, hanging it from the yardarm, and then heaving it overboard”³⁷. To “*flog a*

³³ Jeans P.D. An Ocean of Words. A Dictionary of Nautical Words and Phrases. Toronto, Ontario : Carol Publishing Group, 1998. 180 p. P. 1, 42.

³⁴ Ibid. P. 46.

³⁵ Ibid. P. 73.

³⁶ Ibid. P. 95.

³⁷ Dictionary of English Language and Culture. London Group UK, 1992. 1528 p. P. 491.

dead horse” is to expect in vain to get extra work out of a ship’s crew while they are still working off the “dead horse”. So the expression “*to flog a dead horse*” now means it’s useless to interest somebody in a subject that provokes no more interest.

In many languages different nationalities are given a mocking or sometimes offensive and derogative metaphoric nicknames, like “frog eaters” – for French, “Yankee” – for Americans by British, and “*limey*” – for British by Americans. Definitely “*limey*” comes from “*lime*” which is a fruit similar to lemon, but why English people are associated with this fruit in particular? The explanation can be found in history which is closely connected with marine domain. Nowadays “*limey*” is associated not only with a Briton but with a British sailor or a British ship³⁸. The name derives from the practice of using lime juice to British crews to combat scurvy. Vessels that introduced such practice were called “*lime-juicers*” by American sailors. Then as a metonymy the word entered the language in the meaning of “a Briton”. The expression was placed and described in this group because although it originated in marine sphere it is no longer used by mariners all over the world, just by Americans.

“*To cross the line*” may literally mean crossing a line between two places or locations, but there is also colloquial meaning to it. When a person “*crosses the line*” it means that he has gone too far from where usually there’s never a way back, like¹ breaking a law, going beyond one’s commission or losing trust and this person usually exposes his/her to serious criticism or danger. In this case the phrase has negative connotation. As for nautical application, the phrase is rather of positive connotation, because *the Line* for seamen means equator. The long established custom at sea is to be summoned to “King Neptune’s court”³⁹ to encourage the seamen who cross the equator for the first time to be initiated to the Neptune’s kingdom by being soundly ducked in a bale of water by Neptune’s attendants – nymphs and bears. After this the first-timer is awarded a certificate stating that he has crossed the Line (equator) and is released from this ritual on any future crossing the equator.

When people talk about “*mayonnaise*” no doubt they mean a creamy sauce, a thick dressing of eggs, lemon juice, oil and seasonings, used in cooking. But a few people know that this French word has something to do if not with nautical slang but certainly with marine history. This word is believed to be coined by the French officer Duc de Richelieu who led a successful attack on the British navy base of Port Mahon in Minorca in 1756. When he entered the base and found that the storehouses were set fire to by the British so that not to leave any food for the French victors, Richelieu improvised a meal from remnants, comprising eggs, vinegar, oil,

³⁸ Ibid. P. 787.

³⁹ Jeans P.D. An Ocean of Words. A Dictionary of Nautical Words and Phrases. Toronto, Ontario : Carol Publishing Group, 1998. 180 p. P. 96.

pepper, salt and mustard. That's how the French seamen were saved from starvation. They were delighted by the 'dish' and named it after their victory – *Mahonnaise*, that later became "*mayonnaise*".

The well-known phrase "***point blank***" in contemporary colloquial English means "direct, to the point, straightforward". But not all the contemporary English dictionaries are unanimous in explaining the shaded of the phrase meaning. Compare: "very definite and direct and *not very polite(!)*" [2, p. 1119]⁴⁰; "straightforward, plain, explicit" [4, p. 1043]⁴¹; "forceful(!) and direct" [3, p. 1013]. At least all the three cited dictionaries agree upon "direct". The expression was born when on board battleships there were guns to fire the enemy. The phrase comes from the French "point blanc", "white point" in English, meaning the white disk that marks the bull's-eye of a target. When a ship's gun is fired "point blank", it is fired at a quite short distance so the object is hit at the point of aim [1, p. 124]⁴². Hence the contemporary meaning of the expression. It is interesting to mention here that some dictionaries do give this meaning of "hitting", compare: "(fired) from a very close position" [3, p. 1013]⁴³; "aimed or fired straight at the mark, esp. from close range" [4, p. 1043]⁴⁴; "fired with a gun touching or very close to the person or thing it is aimed at". We presume the "shooting" can explain the idea of "forcefulness".

We entered this expression in the second group because although the dictionaries give the meaning of "shooting" it's not connected with nautical slang any more, the phrase has entered the general English language.

Another very well-known word that roots back in marine English is "***posh***" which is interpreted by many dictionaries as elegant, expensive, fashionable, stylish, luxurious. Needless to say it also grates its origin to marine usage history, and the story behind this expression is a fascinating one. It dates back to the days of the heyday of the British Empire when the steamship travel from Britain to India and Australia through the Suez Canal and back was very popular. The passage down the Red Sea and across the Indian Ocean north of the equator was unbearably hot, so the passengers travelling from Britain to the colonies would prefer the cabins on the port side of the vessel, i.e. left – hand side. This side of the ship will be cooler, while travelling home to Britain the passengers would rather pick up a cabin on the starboard side, i.e. right side of the ship for the same reason of temperature comfort. The acronym "POSH" appeared for "Port Out, Starboard Home". Naturally these cabins were more expensive and only

⁴⁰ Hornby A.S. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English. Oxford university Press, 2005. 1715 p. P. 1119.

⁴¹ Dictionary of English Language and Culture. London Group UK, 1992. 1528 p. P. 1043.

⁴² Jeans P.D. An Ocean of Words. A Dictionary of Nautical Words and Phrases. Toronto, Ontario : Carol Publishing Group, 1998. 180 p. P. 124.

⁴³ Dictionary of English Language and Culture. London Group UK, 1992. 1528 p. P. 1013.

⁴⁴ Ibid. P. 1043.

those people of high society, rich people could afford them. That's how the metonymy "*posh*" entered the English language in the meaning of "rich, stylish, of high class".

We are gradually coming to the conclusion that many contemporary English colloquialisms oblige their origin to nautical sphere, but still it is so much to investigate and explain. Take the word "*salary*"; definitely everybody will associate it with monthly payment, fixed compensation paid periodically for regular work or services, etc. Again, the origin of the word is connected with maritime business. It goes back to the Roman custom of paying soldiers and sailors a quantity of salt as a part of their wages. Salt was not considered very precious by Northern European sailors, but in the early days of sail it was used to preserve meat and even as a crude antiseptic.

It's really hard to find a person wherever he lives in this big world who wouldn't know what "*skyscraper*" means. Of course it is a very tall building "of many stories in the city, that is literally "*scraping the sky*" with its height. But again the word is of nautical origin. Long before the word came to mean a high building it was the name given to the highest sail in the tall-ship. "Sometimes a square sail was set in the same place and this was called a *moonraker*. Both *skyscraper* and *moonraker* were carried above the skysails. Occasionally they would run up even higher one known as, *stargazer*. After that they ran out of names".⁴⁵

Who would ever associate an everyday phrase "*so long!*" with marine field, but it is really of nautical origin and comes from East Indian word "*salaam*" which used to be a seamen's farewell.

Another well-known contemporary English colloquial phrase is "*ship-shape*", which means "clean and neat; in good condition and ready to use", "in good order", "trim or tidy". But where does the word come from and what's its connection with the marine domain? Since the word "*ship*" is present in the phrase the connection with the vessel should be obvious. The expression does not mean "in the shape of the ship" by no means, it refers to perfectly organized, proper order as it should be on board ship. i.e. well rigged, well equipped, well handled. The time came when it became vital to work out a standardized system of organization of all the works maintained on board ship, because seamen and the officers served on a variety of vessels, in war and in trade, in bad and good weather, so the necessity came to develop the rules and regulations which should be adhered to by all ships and crews. "*Bristol fashion*" refers to the days when Bristol was England's major west coast port, and its shipping had to be maintained in proper good order because the city had no docks and ships were thus left high and dry at low tide. Vessels using the port, therefore, had to be well built and properly maintained to withstand the stresses of taking the ground.⁴⁶ That's why the

⁴⁵ Dictionary of English Language and Culture. London Group UK, 1992. 1528 p. P. 1013.

⁴⁶ Jeans P.D. An Ocean of Words. A Dictionary of Nautical Words and Phrases., Toronto, Ontario : Carol Publishing Group, 1998. 180 p. P. 148.

full expression which originated from nautical English was “*All shipshape and Bristol fashion*” of which only the first part entered the contemporary colloquial English.

Another interesting expression which profoundly took its place in contemporary English colloquialisms is “to *tell off*”, which means “to rebuke severely, scold”, “to talk angrily, to reprimand”. Although the phrase is of nautical origin it does not contain the negative connotation that it has today in its colloquial version. To “tell off” of board ship meant to detail each man on watch to some particular duty or position in the ship. The essential thing was to instruct the watchman, to tell his what he is assigned to in a particular job. “When the watch was mastered, each man would be “*told off*” by the officer of the watch”⁴⁷ i.e. the seaman was given assessment of his work done and maybe some criticism was allowed hence the contemporary meaning of “reprimanding and scolding” owes to the expression “*to be told off*” rather than “*to tell off*”.

“*Tidy*” in everyday English means “arranged neatly and with everything in order”, “neat, orderly, trim”⁴⁸. The connection with the nautical term “*tide*” is if not obvious but easily traced. But what is common between the ocean “*tide*” low and high, when the sea waters arrive deep into shore or run off back and “a tidy room of dress”? “*To be in tide*” means to do things at their proper time or season, to ensure that they are done in an orderly manner, “in the same way that the tides ebb and flow in a regular rhythm”⁴⁹. The colloquial “*tidy*” is an adverbial formation from the noun “*tide*” and is used now in association with methodical, regular, like the periods of the tide.

The phrase “*touch-and-go*” is colloquial nowadays and means “narrow escape, risky, of uncertain result”, “precarious or delicate state of affairs”⁵⁰. “*Touch and go*” being originally a nautical term, means “to run a vessel aground but to refloat her almost immediately”, “it is to graze the bottom very slightly, in such a way as not to cause any serious damage or even check the vessel’s progress through the water”⁵¹. That’s why metaphorically now the phrase means “a narrow escape”.

When people open the “*Vogue*” magazine they know that the issue will be about fashion. Indeed, the present day English word “*vogue*” means “the popular fashion or custom”, “the prevailing fashion at a particular time, mode”. The word originates from French “*voguer*”, it was a nautical term and meant “to be carried forward on the water by oar or by sail, or to move with the tide or the

⁴⁷ Ibid. P. 164.

⁴⁸ Dictionary of English Language and Culture. London Group UK, 1992. 1528 p. P. 1394.

⁴⁹ Jeans P.D. An Ocean of Words. A Dictionary of Nautical Words and Phrases. Toronto, Ontario : Carol Publishing Group, 1998. 180 p. P. 165.

⁵⁰ Dictionary of English Language and Culture. London Group UK, 1992. 1528 p. P. 1410.

⁵¹ Jeans P.D. An Ocean of Words. A Dictionary of Nautical Words and Phrases. Toronto, Ontario : Carol Publishing Group, 1998. 180 p. P. 167.

current”.⁵² When something is *“in vogue”* it is copied by those who wish to be thought up-to-date. The phrase is no longer used by seamen today.

3. Group 3. Terms that still refer to maritime sphere

This group contains the words and expressions which predominant meaning is contemporary marine, i.e. they are used by seafarers and people of marine business nowadays although they are clear to the speakers of English. Here as well as in the first and second group the expressions are presented in an alphabetic order and not according to their value of frequency of usage. This group is not limited by the examples that we mentioned here in the frame of the article genre, but so far we can say that all the studied examples present 20% frequency of the total sampling

A.B. (seaman) is a typically nautical term that is widely used now in the maritime business. It is interesting to mention here that only one dictionary Random House Webster’s College Dictionary, USA mentioned this abbreviation in a nautical sense; *“able-bodied seaman”*⁵³, others do not mention the term at all. It is often thought that the abbreviation stands for the term *“able-bodied”*, but originally in nautical slang it was just the first two letters of the word *“able”*. To be qualified as able-bodied in the old sailing days “a man had to be able to hand, reef, and steer”⁵⁴; that is, he had to have enough skills to handle sails and to steer in any weather. There used to be three rates of sailors in the old days: A.B., Ordinary Seaman and Landsman. Today there are only two positions: A.B. and Ordinary Seaman, the latter is the rank lower than A.B.

The word *“caboose”* is recognizable now in the general English as “ship’s galley or storeroom”⁵⁵ which in reality it is in the nautical sense, “a galley or cook house”, it was usually located on deck on small ships and between decks on large vessels. *“Caboose”* was borrowed from German *“kabuse”* which means a small hut or dwelling that’s why the usage of the word in the United States may also mean “the last wagon on a goods train, which accommodated the guard and the breaksman”⁵⁶.

The word *“hand”* which is an old nautical term, metonymy, and is still used by the seamen means “a member of a ship’s crew” like in the saying “All hands on deck!” or “All hands to the pumps!”. Another expression with this word we can find in *“to be an old hand”*, which is “to be experienced and skilled seaman”. Quite popular this nautical term is today in general English since it entered such colloquial phrases as *“give/lend a hand”*, meaning help.

⁵² Ibid. P. 173.

⁵³ Dictionary of English Language and Culture. London Group UK, 1992. 1528 p. P. 1.

⁵⁴ Jeans P.D. An Ocean of Words. A Dictionary of Nautical Words and Phrases. Toronto, Ontario : Carol Publishing Group, 1998. 180 p. P. 3.

⁵⁵ Random House Webster’s College Dictionary. USA, 1995, 1555 p. P. 190.

⁵⁶ Jeans P.D. An Ocean of Words. A Dictionary of Nautical Words and Phrases. Toronto, Ontario : Carol Publishing Group, 1998. 180 p. P. 21.

The expression *“high and dry”* is often used in contemporary colloquial English in the meaning of “in a helpless situation, in a difficult situation without help or money” in British English and “deserted, stranded” in American English. As a nautical term it was said of a ship that has run aground so that the tide gradually exposes the keel. If this happens at high water the situation is pretty tragic, because there is no higher tide expected so the ship is bound to remain on ground until some extra help come to rescue it. This phrase gave the origin to the colloquial interpretation of “someone being left stranded, helpless, in a difficult position, unable to continue normally”.⁵⁷

Another term which is still used by seafarers is *“knot”*. The word is used in general English in the meaning of a join made by tying together two ends of a rope, and also the word is registered in contemporary English dictionaries as “speed equal to one nautical mile per hour”⁵⁸. In contemporary maritime English the word expresses the idea of rate at which the ship proceeds along the sea surface. A knot is the nautical measure of speed, the product of one nautical mile per hour, usually a ship is said to do several knots, but never several knots per hour.

The nautical term *“log”* is used in contemporary general English in the meaning of “an official record of events during a particular period of time, especially a journey on a ship or plane”⁵⁹, “any of various detailed, usu. sequential records”⁶⁰. It is interesting that originally a *log* on a ship was a speed-measuring device. Whenever the speed was measured the log of the watch was entered into special journal. Gradually by metonymy this journal was called the *“log book”*, which was used not only to record the speed parameters but also the general shipboard proceedings at the bridge, and later in the engine room. Nowadays it’s hard to imagine someone not using the P.C. and definitely all of us know that to be registered at a website or internet platform we need to enter our *“log-in”* as a registration sign. That is a good example of how a word travels through time and its semantic changes.

Another nautical term that is still in use by mariners and known to the majority of people speaking English is *“Mayday”*. In general English it is interpreted as “an international radio signal used by ships and aircraft needing help when they are in danger”⁶¹, and it has nothing in common with the month of May. The origin of this radio-telephonic distress signal was a voice signal in the opposition to the telegraphic or Morse signals “SOS” (save our ship) and “CQD” (come quickly, danger) and it was first pronounced in French *“m’aidez”*, meaning “I need help”. Later it was transformed into English sounding *“Mayday”* which is close to French pronunciation.

⁵⁷ Ibid. P. 74.

⁵⁸ Dictionary of English Language and Culture. London Group UK, 1992. 1528 p. P. 749.

⁵⁹ Hornby A.S. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English. Oxford university Press, 2005. 1715 p. P. 869.

⁶⁰ Dictionary of English Language and Culture. London Group UK, 1992. 1528 p. P. 798.

⁶¹ Random House Webster’s College Dictionary. USA, 1995. 1555 p. P. 912.

The originally nautical term **“overboard”** in general English has the meaning of “to be too excited or enthusiastic”, “to go to extremes”. These are the idiomatic expressions in the contemporary language. The nautical meaning was “beyond the board”, i.e. beyond the sides of the ship, in the water. *“To go overboard”* meant that something had fallen over the side, and if a man happened to fall overboard there was a cry: “Man overboard!” which now is one of the emergency situations on board. Now when used figuratively, the phrase means “to harbor an excess of feeling about something, to lose one’s emotional footing, and plunge into a wave of unbridled enthusiasm”.⁶²

One more typically nautical term is; **overhaul** “which in contemporary general English means practically the same” an examination of a machine or system, including doing repairs⁶³. The expression is widely used in the maritime business nowadays, but originally it meant “to increase the instance between two sets of block in a tackle system.

The word **“rate”** is well frequent in general English meaning “measurement of how good, popular, important somebody is”⁶⁴. In the maritime history the phrase “How does it rate? “Derived from the” way in which fighting ships took precedence when getting into the line of battle”⁶⁵. Nowadays “ratings” is a nautical phrase for “position below officers” in the deck department or engine room department.

An interesting example suggests here the expression **“the Rock of Gibraltar”**. Historically it is a British possession although geographically it is the Spanish coast. So far it is the subject of disagreement between the two countries. In colloquial contemporary English the expression means “support, stronghold, bastion”, the one you can rely upon in any circumstances. For the majority of seamen nowadays it is the South coast of Spain, the shortest straight, from where one can see both continents – Europe and Africa.

This group of words and phrases contains the expressions which are still used in marine business, but are understood and used by many English speakers.

CONCLUSIONS

British people are islanders, their life depended on the sea generosity – fishing, trading, discovering new lands and establishing colonies. No wonder that nautical/marine language influenced the contemporary English language a lot, suggesting many cute and subtle comparisons, idioms, slang words and colloquialisms. Not many languages in the world can gratify marine

⁶² Jeans P.D. An Ocean of Words. A Dictionary of Nautical Words and Phrases. Toronto, Ontario : Carol Publishing Group, 1998. 180 p. P. 115.

⁶³ Hornby A.S. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English. Oxford university Press, 2005. 1715 p. P. 1040.

⁶⁴ Ibid. P. 1203.

⁶⁵ Jeans P.D. An Ocean of Words. A Dictionary of Nautical Words and Phrases. Toronto, Ontario : Carol Publishing Group, 1998. 180 p. P. 131.

terminology for entering the body of general language spoken by everybody in the society. The aim of this article was to study and describe the contemporary English colloquialisms that have nautical/marine origin. Altogether fifty-three entries taken from reliable contemporary dictionaries fundamental resources and marine publications were studied and described. The bulk of studied words and phrases were organized in three groups depending upon their function and usage. The results were thoroughly analyzed and we have come to the conclusion that theoretically all the studied terms may be divided into three groups:

1. Originally nautical terms but now everyday English colloquialisms that still can be recognized as phrases connected with marine sphere.

2. Terms that no longer are used by mariners but well known to native speakers.

3. Terms that still refer to maritime sphere.

The next stage of our research was to compare the percentage of the studied expressions to identify which of them are more frequently used and which are not. As a result, we received the following frequency percentage in the three groups mentioned. Group one – 25%, group two – 55%, group three – 20%. As we can see the biggest group is the second, “Terms that no longer are used by mariners but well known to native speakers” (e.g. *bandana*, *barbeque*, *beachcomber*, etc.); it constitutes 55% frequency of the total sampling. This can be explained by the fact, that most of marine terminology, like other professional terminology becomes historically outdated sometimes even obsolete, because maritime business is developing constantly, the ships are no longer sailing vessels, but modern A1 class, the navigation equipment is not primitive, but elaborate, the crews working on modern vessels have profound knowledge, experience and skills necessary to operate complicated equipment and modern automatic machines on board. That is why many words and phrases that were used by mariners three or four centuries ago are no longer relevant, they are no longer used in the profession, but once they entered the colloquial English they became popular with the speakers and people use them often having no idea about their marine origin.

Group one – “Originally nautical terms but now everyday English colloquialisms that still can be recognized as phrases connected with marine sphere” (e.g. *double Dutch*, *to kick the bucket*, *blue ribbon*, etc.). This group it constitutes 25% frequency of the total sampling. Group one is very close to the second one as they both are of nautical origin, but group of words is still used in maritime business.

The last of the analyzed group is “Terms that still refer to maritime sphere” (e.g. *log*, *Mayday*, *overhaul*, etc.). It constitutes 20% frequency of the total sampling. This group contains words and phrases that are still used by seafarers, so for sure the entries here are of nautical/marine origin. Needless to say that not only mariners use these expressions, they are known to the majority of English speakers.

In the suggested article we made the first attempt in Ukraine to study, describe and systematize the words and of phrases that function now in contemporary colloquial English but which are of nautical/marine origin.

SUMMARY

The object of the article is the bulk words and phrases in contemporary colloquial English which are of nautical/marine origin. The result of the research is as such; three functional groups were singled out. All the three have one and the same characteristic feature or peculiarity – all the expressions are of nautical/marine origin. The difference in the three groups lies in the application of the expressions in different styles of the language – purely colloquial, purely marine and the combination of both.

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