English Is Awash In Sailor’s Jargon

You might be able to guess that the phrase "**batten down the hatches**" came from the world of sailing. To prepare for an incoming storm, sailors would secure the hatches on the deck with strips of wood known as battens.

If you're familiar with boats, you might know that a jib is a triangular sail near the front of a ship. Hence, **liking the cut of one's jib** alludes to a captain gathering information about a distant ship by the shape of its sails.

Perhaps you even know that keeling over or being on an even keel referred to the long spine on the underside of a boat, or that trying a different tack refers to the tacking maneuver that boats use to sail into the wind, or that berth, as in giving a wide berth, is a slot for a ship at dock.

But this is only scratching the surface of words and sayings in English that come from sailor's jargon. There are so many, it's almost overwhelming.

Ah, there's another one. We won't make any headway if I can't get my bearings.

Two more. Please don't **cut and run**. If you stay **to the bitter end,** we'll try to **fathom** why English is awash in nautical terms.

I'm Dr. Erica Brozovsky, and this is "Otherwords."

A jargon is a specialized vocabulary used within a specific community or profession. From Scientology to the service industry, jargons serve two purposes, to streamline communication and to foster a sense of community and bonding. These would both have been very important on perilous sea journeys where your lives are in your crewmates hands, and poor communication can get you killed.

Sailors live and work for long stretches of time in isolation and close quarters, there's another one. So it makes sense that their jargon would be as broad and deep as the ocean. Presumably,

once their seafaring days were over, they took this jargon ashore and started using it in everyday landlubber situations.

Eventually, certain words and phrases became so commonplace that most English speakers have no inkling of their nautical origins.

We have so many to cover that I should **go ahead** and **get underway**. There's two already. Ahead originally meant towards the front or head of a ship, the opposite of astern. Underway comes from the Dutch sailing term “onderweg”, which meant **on the way.**

If you're **taken aback** by this, you might be emulating the sails that get flattened against the mast by a sudden wind. Or maybe it doesn't impress you much because you're so **aloof**, which comes from the Dutch “loef”, which meant the windward side, probably referencing a ship that was keeping its distance.

Smug ship thinks it's so cool. Fathom is a unit of distance about six feet that originated from the old English **fathom**, which could mean to embrace or outstretched arms, hence six feet. It was primarily used by sailors to measure the depth of water by casting a weighted rope into the water and counting the six foot markings once it hit the bottom.

Today we use **fathom** as a figurative verb, meaning to understand or get to the bottom of something.

These posts, used to wind rope or cable, are known as bitts. When you have no rope left to unwind, you've reached **the bitter end**. Ropes play a pretty important role on ships. For instance, if you need to **beat a hasty retreat**, you can **cut and run** by severing the anchor line. And new sailors have to quickly **learn the ropes** so that there won't be any **loose ends.** Bits of rope that were left over were known as j**unk**, which now just refers to anything worthless.

A ship can either sail by the wind or large of the wind, and if it needs to constantly alternate between the two, it is sailing **by and large**. If there's no wind at all, it might need to just drift with the tide, otherwise known as tiding over. But if the tide leaves a boat stranded on a shoal, it might be **high and dry**.

Under the weather is almost certainly of nautical origins, but the specific references under debate. Some think it refers to seasick crew members resting below decks, but that seemed almost too literal to be true. Perhaps it refers to the weather side of a boat, the side that receives the most punishment from the elements. In a storm, you'd much prefer to be under the lee than under the weather.

If the storm turns the ship over, it's been **overwhelmed**. And if the waves rise high enough to flow over the tall **poop deck**, you might say the ship is **pooped**. If the ship sinks, the last thing to go down might be the sail at the top of the tallest mast known as the **skyscraper.**

Life on a boat can be pretty strict. The boatswain might use a pipe to signal the sailors to quiet down and head below decks for bedtime, hence, **pipe down**. If the sailors didn't **toe the line**, they might be **forced over a barrel** and receive a lashing from a brutal whip known as the **cat o' nine tails**. This had to be done on deck, of course, because below there's **not enough room to swing a cat.** After all, it's probably filled with all the crew's **duffle bags,** which comes from the rough cloth made in the town of Duffel.

In battle, if the captain wanted to fire at a distant ship, it was called **a long shot.** The blast from the gun could be so powerful that it could slip its bindings and roll across the deck becoming a **loose cannon.**

If one of the sails gets damaged, the crew might have to **jury rig** a new one, which comes from the middle English “jory sale”, which meant improvised sale. Incidentally, this saying sometimes gets contaminated by another unrelated saying, **jerry-built**, which was 19th century Liverpool slang for something constructed hastily out of cheap materials.

At the end of a long day, the crew might eat **a square meal** named after the shape of the wooden plates that keeps them from rolling out of their racks. Perhaps it'd even get a ration of water-downed rum, known as **grog**. But if you drink too much, you might be **three sheets to the wind,** a euphemism for drunkenness that evokes the flapping of loose sails and wake up feeling groggy.

While at port, the ship's cook might scrape the fat and grease out of the cauldron and sell it to create **a slush fund** for the crew.

Scuttlebutt, which today means a juicy bit of news, originally referred to the barrel where crew would get their drinking water, the forerunner of today's water cooler as the place to swap workplace gossip.

To record the speed of a ship, sailors would tie a hunk of tree log to a line, known as a log line, and let it float behind them as a line reeled out. The results were recorded in a **logbook**, which would eventually come to mean any kind of written record.

That means that **blog** and **vlog** are also terms with nautical origins. When a ship returned from a successful voyage, they would fly their colors, which means they would have their flags hoisted up high. This is why today you might pass a test **with flying colors**. Since it was common practice for a ship to disguise itself by flying false colors, today we use the term **true colors** to refer to one's actual identity.

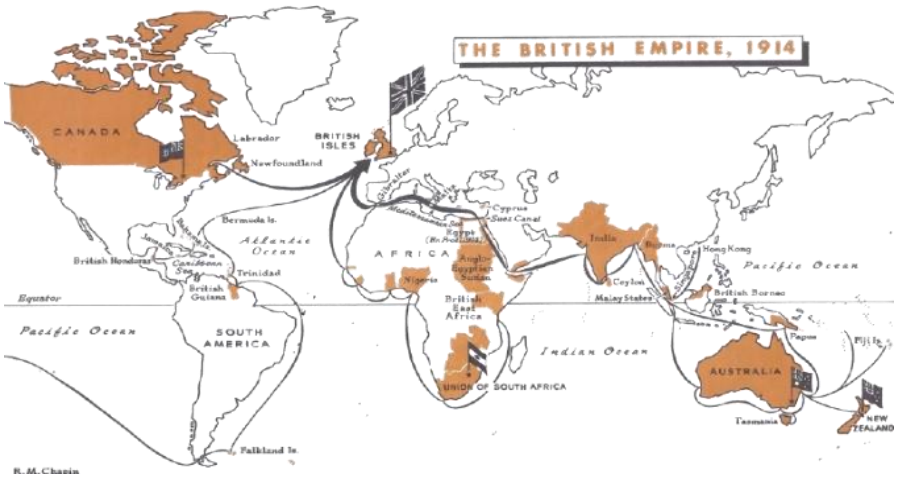
You might think this voyage is over, but there's even more we don't have time to explain.

Groundswell, **mainstay, figurehead, first rate, hot pursuit, hand over fist,** the list is seemingly as endless as the deep blue sea. But why are there so many nautical terms in English? Why does the seafaring profession have such an outsized influence on the language?

Well just look at a map of the country where the language came from. As an island, England has always had a special reliance on boats for trade, warfare and exploration.

Many of these nautical terms originated in the 18th and 19th centuries, a time when Britain was a massive naval and colonial power.

Seafaring was at the heart of the British Empire's business and politics, and it was sailors who brought English to practically every corner of the globe, whether or not the locals wanted it.



Furthermore, seafaring became a popular subject of romantic adventure novels at the time, further cementing its importance in the English speaker's mind.

As weird as it may seem for a vocabulary to be filled with nautical terms, it's actually very normal for a language to reflect the priorities of a culture, even after those priorities shift or fade away.

Once a word or phrase has a specific connotation, no one really cares where it came from. That's why we still call them podcasts, even though the last iPod was manufactured years ago.

Perhaps far in the future after the collapse of civilization, nomadic bans of primitive people will use today's terminology without any clue of the cultural era from which the terms originated.

Nautical And Sailor/Sailing Vocabulary In English

1. Batten Down the Hatches: Used to prepare for a storm or any difficult upcoming situation.

2. Aye Aye Captain: A respectful acknowledgment of an order from a superior.

3. Fair Winds and Following Seas: A way to wish someone luck on their journey.

4. Sheet Happens: A humorous phrase for when things go awry on a sailing trip.

5. Ship-shape and Bristol Fashion: This means something is well-organized or in excellent condition.

6. All Hands on Deck: An order for everyone to help during a crisis.

7. Shiver Me Timbers: An exclamation of surprise or excitement.

8. Walk the Plank: A metaphor for facing an uncontrollable situation.

9. Keel Over: Describes a boat capsizing, or someone falling over.

10. Even Keel: Refers to a calm, stable state of mind or balance.

11. Taken Aback: To be astonished by an unwelcome occurrence.

12. Three Sheets to the Wind: A term used to describe someone who drank too much. Perhaps they got into the captain's rum!

13. Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Describes a difficult situation with no good options.

14. Let the Cat Out of the Bag: To expose a hidden truth or secret.

15. Scuttlebutt: Gossip or rumors.

16. Anchors Aweigh: Denotes the beginning of a journey.

17. A Bone in Her Teeth: Describes a boat moving fast.

18. Tide Over: Refers to getting through a difficult period.

19. Sailing Close to the Wind: On the verge of doing something illegal or improper.

20. Cast Off: To release a mooring line or anchor so a vessel can set sail

21. Dead Reckoning: A method of navigation based on estimated speed and direction of travel and using the points of a sail.

22. Helm's Alee: A command used when tacking.

23. Square-rigged and Squared Away: A ship that has things in order.

24. A Shot Across the Bow: A warning or threat.

25. Crow's Nest A lookout point high on a mast.

26. Jibe Ho: A command spoken when jibing.

27. Lower the Boom: To put a stop to, chastise, or rebuke. In other words, to criticize someone when they did something personal to you.

28. Headwinds: Resistance or opposition to a plan.

29. Sea Legs: The ability to maintain balance or adjust to a new situation.

30. Run Aground; or High and Dry: A boat hits the sea floor and stops. Or a person stuck in an unfavorable situation.

31. Dead in the Water: A situation with zero chance of success.

32. Fathom: A nautical unit of measurement for depth or understanding (comprehension).

33. Gunwale: The upper edge of the side of a boat.

34. In Irons: When a sailing vessel is trapped and unable to move.

35. Kedge: A smaller anchor that is used to move the ship slowly in the desired direction.

36. The Cut of One's Jib: The way one looks or conducts themselves.

37. Cup of Joe: A cup of coffee.

38. Groundswell: Describes a widespread surge of public opinion.

39. It's an Ill Wind That Blows No Good: A phrase meaning that bad for one can be good for another.

40. Know the Ropes: To be well versed and familiar with something.

41. Bail Out: To remove water from a boat, or to abandon a difficult situation.

42. Loose Canon: Refers to someone who is unpredictable or uncontrollable.

43. Rudderless: Describes a person or situation lacking direction or control.

44. Man Overboard: An urgent call indicating someone has fallen off the vessel. Also used metaphorically for unexpected crises.

45. Trim The Sails: To adjust the sails for optimal performance. Often used to mean adjusting plans to improve results.

46. Chart A Course: To plan a route or direction, used metaphorically for setting a plan.

47. High Seas: Refers to international waters, often used to describe a risky or lawless situation.

48. Set Sail: To begin a journey or venture.

49. Broadside: Refers to the side of a ship. Also used metaphorically to mean a strong verbal attack.

50. Overhaul: To inspect and repair. Also used in a broader sense to mean making comprehensive changes or improvements.