IDIOMS OF NAUTICAL ORIGIN

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Rezumat

Printre variatele surse ale idiomurilor în limba engleză, viaţa pe mare este una din cele mai bogate. Nici nu este de mirare, luând în considerare lunga istorie maritimă a acestei naţiuni, începând de la înaintaşii lor vikingi. Practica navigării, viaţa de zi cu zi a marinarilor, confruntările cu piraţii sau alţi duşmani, lupta cu valurile furtunoase se reflectă în multe expresii folosite curent cu un înţeles mai larg, figurativ. Prezenta lucrare este o încercare de a dezvălui originea, sursa cît mai exactă a câtorva din aceste expresii.

The English have always been a seafaring people, just like their ancestors. Although the days of sailing ships are over, the language has preserved a whole range of expressions related to various aspects of sailing. These idioms are used in a more general or in a figurative sense, following the usual 'trend' of such structures in time. Since sailing is no longer an everyday practice, the origin of many expressions stemming from it has become less obvious and perhaps it would be interesting, even useful to discover their background stories.

The first thing that comes to mind when thinking about voyages at sea is the vessel itself, most often some kind of ship. The time we refer to in *when somebody's ship comes in/ home* is when somebody suddenly becomes very rich or successful (often said to express the hope that this will happen). It refers to traders waiting for the ships they owned to return with goods that they could sell at great profit.

Two types of attitude stand in opposition when some *go down with the ship* or others behave *like rats leaving the sinking ship*. The former will stay at their post until the *bitter end*. There was a tradition that the captain should go down with his ship. When the Titanic sank (1912), both the captain and the designer did so, although they were offered places in the life-boats. In modern times, the rule has been relaxed, and the captain is expected to be the last to leave the sinking ship. The latter are traitors who desert the losing side in a contest or a failing enterprise – often bearing the connotation that it is scurrilous to leave, even if it is failing. The saying, with its variant *rats abandon the sinking ship,* comes from an old superstition among sailors that if rats were seen leaving a ship before the start of a voyage, the voyage would be ill fated. Rats are said to have a premonition when a ship is about to sink.

Literary sources are not uncommon for idioms, just like references to human relationships. Like *ships that pass in the night* means persons who meet by chance and who are unlikely ever to meet again; casual acquaintances and friendships that last only a very short time. It comes from *Tales of a Wayside Inn* (1863), by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:

> Ships that pass in the night, and speak each other in passing,
> Only a signal shown and a distant voice in the darkness;
> So on the ocean of life we pass and speak one another,
> Only a look and a voice; then darkness again and a silence.

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Some idioms follow a curious route in time from a syntactic, semantic or phonetic point of view. This must have happened to the one in which you might *spoil a ship for a ha' porth of tar*. This you do when you risk ruining or losing something valuable by refusing or being unable to buy a small but necessary article, you lose a great deal for the sake of a small economy, in other words you are *penny wise and pound foolish*. The 'ship' in the idiom is actually 'sheep', the two words being pronounced the same in some parts of England. In former times, sheep were smeared with (halfpenny's worth of) tar to protect them from disease or treat their sores. Thus it basically means to lose a wounded sheep because one refuses to spend a small amount of money on treating its wound.

There are several other vessels present in idioms. When something or somebody is very old, it is or comes *out of the ark*, referring to Noah's ark in the Bible, in which two of every sort of animals were saved from a great flood; therefore the expression means existing from the earliest times.

If you are *(all) in the same boat*, you are in exactly the same situation, sharing the same risks. The literal origin is in the perils faced by people at sea, particularly in small boats during ancient times. To *rock the boat* in a situation like this would have been utterly unwise and highly dangerous, so today it is used when somebody is foolish enough to spoil or trouble a comfortable situation, especially unnecessarily; to hinder the success of a concern in which they themselves are involved.

The respect and possibly even admiration for individualism can be expressed when one is said *to paddle one's own canoe*, that is to control one's own affairs, without help from anyone else; depend on oneself alone, be self-sufficient. The word 'canoe' goes back to the days of Columbus and comes from Haitian (West Indies) 'canoa', originally a small boat hollowed out from a tree trunk, a device requiring skilful individual handling. The phrase goes back to the early 19th century and was popularised by Abraham Lincoln who frequently used it.

Whatever the water craft, *plain sailing* would be highly desirable. It means a continuously easy situation without difficulties, something that will progress easily in a straightforward manner. The spelling was originally 'plane' sailing, which was an expression in navigation meaning a simplified method of determining the position of the ship on the assumption that the earth is flat. A chart on a flat level surface was used, on which the lines of longitude and latitude were straight and parallel, thus making no allowance for the curvature of the earth. In the 19th century the expression became used in non-technical context with the present meaning and the established spelling for the figurative use is now 'plain'.

Sailing ships obviously could not exist without sails, lots of them on the larger ones, which required careful and competent handling. When you *trim your sails before the wind* you restrain your desires or energies to suit the present state of affairs or change your views, even withdraw them in the face of opposition. The full phrase originally meant to adjust one's sails when the direction of the wind changed. In politics, a 'trimmer' is somebody who will change his principles under pressure of circumstances.

A ship or boat can sail so close to another one on the windward side (sometimes deliberately, e.g. in a race) that the latter is deprived of wind and lacks the power to move. This would be *to take the wind out of the other's sails*, to frustrate or embarrass someone by unexpectedly anticipating an action or remark; to put a sudden end to somebody's pride, self-confidence or belief in his own abilities, power, etc.; esp. by doing something that places him at a disadvantage.

Distrust can be expressed by saying *I don't like the cut of his jib,* that is, I'm suspicious of a person's general appearance and personality. The 'jib' or foresail of a ship is the triangular sail set forward of a vessel's foremast at the bow. The condition of the jib was believed to show

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whether the ship was good or bad. A seasoned nautical eye would seek to recognise an approaching ship by its jib. Each nationality had its own characteristic and identifiable way of cutting its jib sail. So if the captain didn't like the cut of the jib of an advancing vessel, he would be suspicious and *steer clear of it*, or in other words *give it a wide berth*. Here 'berth' means convenient sea-room for a ship that rides at anchor (as it swings on its chain with the wind and the tides it can take up a lot of space), or a fit distance for ships under sail to keep clear, so as not to fall foul on one another.

The aspect of combat and tactics is also present in sailing. *Colours* mean the particular flag or banner of a regiment or of a ship that belongs to a certain navy or commercial fleet. When you no longer support or defend a course of action, opinion, claim, belief, etc. you *lower your colours* as an army lowers its flags in defeat.

On the other hand, if you continue to support a certain course of action, a particular organisation or party and refuse to change your opinions, you *stick to your colours* or, even more decidedly, *nail your colours to the mast:* you make known your ideas, principles or position and state clearly that you are determined not to change your mind. When a ship's flag (esp. national flag of a warship) was nailed to the mast, it could not easily be lowered (as when a crew were prepared to surrender). The sailors were openly demonstrating their unwavering allegiance, that they would completely support the ship and not give in to an enemy.

When it came to actual fighting, (today disagreeing or quarrelling), the opposing parties were *at loggerheads*. The original loggerheads were long-handled implements that had iron bulbs or balls on the end and were used to melt tar. During medieval times they were used in maritime battles: tar and pitch or some liquid was heated up in the loggerheads and thrown at the enemy ships.

As to the enemy, it can *sail under false colours*, and only *show their true colours* at the decisive moment, usually of some impending altercation or battle. These idioms connected to sailing and trade by sea are probably as old as the 'profession' of piracy itself. It was a trick used by these villains to approach 'under false colours' (pretending to have a certain character or beliefs, principles, etc., which, in reality, they don't have) an unsuspecting trading ship they had spotted. They would raise their real flag, the one to which they were really loyal only when they were close enough to attack and the trader could no longer escape being robbed and possibly even destroyed. The phrase is used today to describe a person who eventually shows his or her true character, who has stopped acting falsely or pretending to be that he/she is not.

Other parts of the 'anatomy' of the ship have their fair share of idioms. In a difficult situation, especially one in which you have no money left to live on, you are *on your beam ends,* which originally referred to a ship about to capsize. The beams were the horizontal timbers of a wooden sailing ship that supported the deck and held the sides in place. So if a ship was on its beam-ends, these timbers would be standing vertically instead of lying in a horizontal position and the ship would be nearly capsizing – in a desperate situation.

A plan, custom, idea, etc. *goes by the board* when it is disregarded; given up, stopped, lost or finished with. The expression refers to a person or thing on a ship that has fallen or has been thrown into the sea (gone by the 'board' – the side of the ship).

It was a popular form of execution among pirates at sea, particularly during the 17th century, to make their victim *walk the plank*. A plank was put out from the deck, rather like a diving board, and the captive or the untrustworthy associate was made to walk to the end and keep going. From this practice it became to mean today to go to one's doom; be fired from one's job or ousted from a group.

Davy Jones's locker would receive these hapless victims, i.e. the sea itself, esp. the bottom of the sea when regarded as the grave of those drowned or buried at sea. 'Davy Jones' has been part of sailor slang for over 200 years, it is a 18th century sailor's term for the evil spirit of the

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sea or a personification of the devil who rules over the evil spirits of the sea. Of the many conjectures as to its derivation the most plausible are that Davy is a corruption of the West Indian 'duppy' (devil or malevolent ghost) and that Jones is a corruption of the biblical Jonah, thrown overboard from a ship and swallowed by a great fish. The name Davy is also said to have been added by Welsh sailors, David being the patron saint of Wales. Another explanation is that Davy Jones was a pirate. Still others hold that Davy Jones was originally the owner of a 16th century London public house that was popular with sailors. The pub is said to have also served as a place for press-ganging unwary seamen into service: Davy Jones was thought to store more than just ale in the lockers at the back of the pub. The sailors would be drugged, transferred to a ship, to awaken only when the ship had put to sea. Thus his locker came to be feared.

Life on the sailing ships might have been adventurous sometimes, but it must have been difficult most of the time. To endure an affliction or adversity throughout its course, to the very last, to the point where something violent, some great misfortune takes place and nothing further can be done – until death or ultimate defeat – would be *to the bitter end*. The anchor ropes and cables on early sailing-ships were wound round a stout post, called the bitt, on the deck. The parts of the ropes nearest to the bitts were the bitter ends. If the rope were unwound to the bitter end, to the final part of the rope, a ship would be much more likely to suffer shipwreck or some other calamity. Thus, the grim meaning of the expression.

He/she/that was my sheet anchor suggests a desperate and hopeless situation, the loss of your best hope, last refuge, usually a person, a supply of money, etc., that gave firm and continuous help and support. The sheet anchor, once the heaviest anchor carried, is a spare bower anchor available for use in emergency when the ship is moored. (Sheet is probably a corruption of 'shoot' or 'shot', from the fact that it was shot, or let go, from the ship when needed.)

When you have to leave hastily; escape or run away; get out of a difficult situation quickly, perhaps giving up something valuable in the process, you just *cut and run*. The saying evokes the picture of a sailing ship that is cut loose from the anchor (the cable used to be made of hemp) in order to sail away quickly before the wind or some enemy, with no time left to weigh anchor.

Old sailing ships had a vast number of ropes to control their sails, and a crewman could not be very effective until he knew which rope did what, since their expert handling was vital in an emergency. You had to *know the ropes,* which came to mean today to be familiar with the details of a task or a situation; to be up to all the tricks and dodges involved.

A 'painter' is a rope used to fasten a boat to another or to a fixed point on land. Thus, to *cut the painter* means to cause a separation, as between two people or countries who have had a close and friendly relationship.

More cheerful to *splice the mainbrace,* to drink alcoholic drinks, esp. in a free and enjoyable manner (usually imperative and used as a drinking toast). The expression compares the strengthening effect of alcohol on a person to the repairing or strengthening of a mainbrace, the rope used for holding or turning one of the sails of a ship. If heavy drinking is going on, you might end up with *three sheets in/to the wind (and tilting)*. The 'sheet' is the rope attached to the clew of a sail used for trimming sail. If the sheet is quite free, leaving the sail to flap without restrain, it is said to be 'in the wind', and *a sheet in the wind* was originally a colloquial phrase used in the navy for being tipsy. With three sheets in the same sorry state, you must be very drunk indeed.

Hardships, however, come often and in many forms at sea. Privation was not foreign to sailors, who were often *on hard tack*, a type of food eaten on a ship when there is no other kind of food to be had. Nowadays it means the state of being poor; without money.

Conditions on ships of those early times is illustrated in some respect in the expression used when a particular space is very small, crammed, or crowded: there's *no room to swing a cat.*

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The 'cat' in this phrase may well be the cat-o'-nine tails, the whip used to flog disobedient sailors. Below deck, conditions were so cramped that there was not enough room to swing the whip, so the punishment was carried out on deck. Other authorities suggest that the 'cat' was originally a sailor's hammock or cot.

Weather has always been an important element in sailing, whether benevolent or destructive. Sailors always had to *keep a weather eye open,* looking in the direction from which the wind is blowing and watching for changes in the weather, i.e. keep a steady and careful watch for somebody or something, esp. so that one may be ready in case of an emergency.

We still call the deceptive calm when somewhere hidden trouble is brewing *the quiet before the storm.* It is quiet in the eye of a hurricane, which will soon be upon you as a storm, and it is also often quiet just before a thunderstorm. When you deal successfully with or escape unharmed from a situation it means you have *weathered/ridden out the storm*. Otherwise you will find yourself *on the rocks,* in danger of being destroyed or ruined, suffering physical, mental or financial troubles, just as a ship that has run on the rocks will quickly break up unless it is pulled or floated *off the rocks.*

Other idioms taken from naval sources to suggest difficult or helpless situations would be *high and dry,* like ships that were cast by storms or pulled onto shore or were put in dry dock. When faced with the choice of two equally dangerous or unpleasant alternatives you are *between the devil and the deep blue sea.* The 'devil' here is not Satan but the seam on the hull of a ship or the heavy plank (the gunwale or gunnel) on a ship's side that was used to support the guns. If a sailor was caught between the gunwale and the waterline of a ship, he was in a very precarious position. The same 'devil' occurs when trouble is to be expected as a result of some action: *the devil to pay (and no hot pitch)*. When this happens, a task needs to be undertaken but resources for it are not available – so one is obviously in difficulty. The seam between the outboard plank by the waterways of a ship and the side of the vessel was wider than the others and difficult to access. It consequently needed more pitch when caulking or paying. This 'pay' comes from Old French 'peier', to cover with hot pitch.

To (be) hit or shot *between wind and water,* i.e. at a vulnerable point, refers to that part of a ship's side near the waterline that is sometimes above the water and sometimes submerged; damage to the ship at this level is particularly dangerous.

In preparation for trouble (originally a storm or attack) you *batten down the hatches.* A hatch provides the entry to a hold where cargo is stored on a ship; at the approach of a storm at sea the order is given to make the hatches secure. 'Batten' has several meanings, among them a strip of wood nailed to the cover of a hatch to help hold it firmly in place. At the same time you would also *clear the decks,* making everything ready, esp. before great activity or a fight. Getting a ship ready for a naval battle meant removing from the usually cluttered decks everything that was in the way of firing the guns mounted there. The figurative meaning is to remove impediments or to deal with minor problems in order to focus on a major undertaking. When a difficult situation arises and a lot of work is needed so everyone must make a special effort, you order *all hands to the pumps!*, originally the pumps that were used to remove water from a ship in danger of sinking. *Action stations!* is another command, originally naval or military, ordering the men to their prepared positions when fighting is expected to begin, used today when something expected and prepared for is actually about to happen and everybody should get ready for what's coming.

Like all things, ships worked best when they were clean, neat, tidy, possibly *spick and span* new. The phrase comes ultimately from Old Norse 'spannyr', absolutely new ('spann', a chip of wood and 'nyr' new), referring to the newness of a chip of wood that had been freshly shaved. The word 'spick', spike or nail, was added to the expression in the 16th century to give 'spick and span new', which in time became shortened, with the meaning 'trim or neat' in the mid-19th

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century. A synonymous expression, more closely connected to English, is *all shipshape and Bristol fashion*, that is, very neat, tidy, and organised efficiently. It originally referred to a ship on which everything is in good order, which is properly prepared for sea, for a possibly risky voyage. The port of Bristol (at one time the largest and most important trading port for sailing ships in Britain) had a reputation for efficiency of the highest order.

Hoping that this sampling from among the numerous English nautical idioms proves to be at least to some degree illuminating for those interested in these aspect of the language, let me conclude be acknowledging that idioms are one of the most difficult parts of the vocabulary of any language because they have unpredictable meanings or collocations and grammar. Nevertheless, idioms are, at the same time, one of the most interesting parts of the vocabulary. They are interesting because they are colourful and lively, and because they are linguistic curiosities. They tell us not only about mythology, history, tradition, beliefs and customs; but more important, about the way of thinking and the outlook upon life of the people who speak the language that has produced them.

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