# MARITIME ENGLISH IDIOMS

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*Abstract:First, the importance of Maritime English in nowadays shipping industry, involving the MET (Maritime Education and Training) institutions contribution, will be emphasised. Having in view the IMO and STCW`98 requirements, this paper proposes to show how Maritime English idioms could be used in ME classes for enhancing the acquiring of the specific field terminology. There will be an overview of the literature covering the notions of jargon and idiom. Then, illustrative examples will be provided. Next, ways of including idioms in teaching Maritime English will be suggested.Finally, conclusions will be drawn on the possible implementation of this approach.*

*Keywords: idiom jargon Maritime English terminology*

## 1. Introduction

> "…a ship may be financed by Swiss and German banks, built by a Japanese yard for a company registered in Monrovia yet with the principal living in New York. The ship may be commercially traded from London, technically managed from Hong Kong, manned by a Filipino crew supplied through a crewing agent and fly the Liberian flag. Most important of all, the principals and all the parties hardly know each other, nor the senior officers in the ship; the parties use different languages, hold different values and have no common loyalty." (David H. Morby)

This quotation very well illustrates the shipping industry development and tendencies in a world dominated by the globalization phenomenon. Moreover, the shortage of professional seafarers as well as economic reasons determined most shipping companies to resort to employing low-cost men-power from Eastern Europe and Asia. As a result, nowadays most ships are manned by multinational crews. So, the need for a common working language on board ship has become imperative. By consensus, it has been decided that the *lingua franca* should be English. Therefore, studies have been carried out with a view to simplify the specialist English used on board ships, so that all seafarers, irrespective of nationality, could easily use it. The outcome of these studies was the compilation of the SMCP (Standard Marine Communication Phrases) by a group of experts and approved by the IMO Sub-Committee on Safety of Navigation in 2000. Since then, it has become a compulsory topic in the Maritime English syllabus taught in MET institutions. The SMCP meets the requirements of the STCW (Standards of Training Certification and Watch-keeping) Convention, 1978, as revised, and of SOLAS (Safety of Life at Sea) Convention, 1974, as revised, regarding verbal communications. These standard phrases have been compiled to assist in ensuring the safety of navigation and to standardize the language used for on board communications involving various ship handling operations, as well as for external communications involving ship-to-ship, ship-to-shore, or emergency situations. The



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SMCP relies on a basic knowledge of the English language. It is a simplified version of Maritime English meant to reduce grammatical, lexical and idiomatic varieties to a minimum, in order to diminish misunderstandings, ambiguity or confusion in decoding a precise message.

## 2. Jargon, slang and idiom

According to the Oxford dictionary slang is a type of language consisting of words and phrases that are regarded as very informal. They are more commonly used in speech rather than writing, and are typically restricted to a particular context or group of people. For example in army slang '' the grass'' is slang for marijuana. Some slang is confined to small groups who use it to exclude outsiders. In other words Slang is the use of informal words and expressions that are not considered standard language or dialect. However, they may be acceptable in certain social contexts. Slang expressions may act as euphemisms and may be used as a means of identifying with one`s peers. They may be newly coined words the reflect new realities or old ones used with a new meaning e.g. words like "cool" and "hot" used to mean "very good," "impressive," or "good-looking" . Coleman, J. suggests that slang is differentiated within more general semantic change in that it typically has to do with a certain degree of "playfulness". The development of slang is considered to be a largely "spontaneous, lively, and creative" speech process.

Jargon is defined by the Oxford dictionary as the language, especially the vocabulary, which is specific for a particular trade, profession, or group e.g. the medical jargon. Another meaning of jargon would be `unintelligible or meaningless talk or writing, gibberish` or `any talk or writing that one does not understand`. A language that is characterized by uncommon or pretentious vocabulary and convoluted syntax which is often vague in meaning is also considered as jargon.In other words, this term covers the language used by people who work in a particular area or who have a common interest.′ Much like slang, it can develop as a kind of shorthand, to express ideas that are frequently discussed between members of a group, though it can also be developed deliberately using chosen terms.′ A standard term may be given a more precise or unique usage among practitioners of a field. Here are some examples of jargons from different fields: medical, e.g. BP for blood pressure, military e.g. TD for temporary duty, business e.g. Due diligence - Putting effort into research before making a business decision, police, e.g.Suspect - A person whom the police think may have committed a crime, law, e.g. to convict-to send to prison, maritime, e.g. I am brought up- I am riding at anchor, etc.

In conclusion we can say that slang suggests escaping from the established routine of everyday life. Also people use slang in order to sound modern and `up-to-date.′ But unfortunately jargon, which has been created to promote professional codes in order to keep outsiders in the dark, has lost its specialty quality because, nowadays, it, more often than not, has become part of all social groups so, easily understood by most of people.

So it is hard to draw a line between slang and jargon because when jargon becomes common it has passed on a higher step on a ladder of word groups and becomes slang or colloquial. That is why a lot of words can be confused.

The Cambridge English Dictionary defines the idiom like a group of words in a fixed order that have a particular meaning that is different from the meanings of each word on its own: e.g. To "have bitten off more than you can chew" is an idiom that means you have tried to do something which is too difficult for you.



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In the next chapter we will analyze some idioms which have nautical origins. We will also make some suggestions about the way they could be used when teaching Maritime English terminology.

## 3. Nautical Idioms

Great Britain boasts of an old maritime tradition. Most nautical terms, idioms and phrases date back from the age of the sailing ships. The great majority of the seafaring phrases have acquired new meanings nowadays the original ones having been forgotten. Here are some well known nautical and quite frequently used seafaring idioms.

When teaching mooring operations, which involve rope handling, we can introduce two expressions containing the term rope:

**-To know the ropes**

**Original meaning**: During the age of sailing ships, it was vital for sailors to know how to hoist the sails and secure them, using ropes and knots. An inexperienced sailor was someone who did not know the ropes.

**Modern meaning:** Understand how to do something.
e.g. When he started his new job, he barely knew the ropes.

**- Show someone the ropes**

**Original meaning:** If an inexperienced sailor did not know the ropes, a more experienced sailor had to show him how the ropes should be handled.

**Modern meaning:** To show someone how to do the things necessary for a certain job.
e.g. She spent her day showing a new colleague the ropes. (note: this means that she spent the day showing her new colleague how to do the things that were necessary for the job)

When teaching Standard Marine Communication Phrases related to anchoring, we can explain the metaphorical meaning of anchors aweigh.

**-Anchors aweigh**

**Original meaning:** The word 'aweigh' or, as it was often spelled in early citations, 'a-weigh', is now only used in this little phrase. An anchor that is aweigh is one that has just begun to put weight onto the rope or chain by which it is being hauled up.

**Modern meaning:** To prepare to get underway or leave somewhere.
e.g. “Are you ready to get underway?” “ Yes, anchors aweigh!”
**- Take the wind out of someone’s sails**

**Original meaning:** In the age of the sailing ships, the wind force and direction were very important for the ship maintain her power and push forward.



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**Modern meaning:** If someone takes the wind out of your sails, they say or do something that makes you feel less confident, motivated or determined, and therefore less able to move forward.
e.g. He was very confident before his performance, but Jim really took the wind out of his sails when he told him he needed a lot more practice.

**- A loose cannon**

**Original meaning:** Cannons are the big, metal guns with wheels that were used on battle ships. They are extremely heavy, and if a cannon was not securely fixed, it would roll around the deck and cause a lot of damage.

**Modern meaning:** These days, if someone is unpredictable and likely to say or do something that will cause problems, we say they are a loose cannon.
e.g. I don't think we should include George in the project team – he's a bit of a loose cannon and we need things to go as smoothly as possible.

**- A shot across the bows**

**Original meaning:** The bow of a ship is its foremost part. If the captain of the ship wanted to send a warning to another ship, without actuallycausing any damage, he would order the sailors to shoot a cannon at the ship so that the cannon ball just missed the bows.

**Modern meaning:** Warning
e.g. The metro workers gave a shot across the bows to their boss by threatening to go on strike if their demands were not met.

## 4. Conclusions

We think that introducing nautical idioms and expressions when teaching maritime terminology as well as Standard Marine Communication Phrases is beneficial for knowledge consolidation. The students could also be asked to do their own research into the array of nautical idioms and then present their findings to the class. That would be a very good speaking practice.

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