

# Nautical Jargon

Many commonplace expressions in English are relics from the days of sailing ships, but have passed into common usage in ways that cause us to forget their origins.

For instance, when someone says “I can’t fathom what she’s speaking about”, we understand that he’s saying he can’t gauge her meaning. The expression derives from nautical days of yore, where “fathom” is utilised as a maritime measurement equivalent to six feet. The term “to fathom” started on sailing ships to signify “measuring using a sounding line”. You drop a line from the side of the ship to estimate the distance it goes, and gauge the depth of the sea. In other words, to “fathom” something was to get to the bottom of something, and that’s why it was extended figuratively to come to mean “understanding something in depth”.

Amusingly enough, the term is rooted in Old English, from the root words *faedm* or *faethm*, signifying “embracing arms or outstretched arms”. To fathom someone originally meant to embrace or encircle the individual with your arms. That was because “fathom” initially represented the distance from the middle fingertip of one hand to the middle fingertip of the other hand of a tall individual with arms fully extended. So its historical definition was “the length of a man’s arms around the object of his affections”. Why sailors chose to convert this charming word into a nautical measurement one will never know - but I can’t fathom why we can’t fathom a loved one in the old sense anymore!

When a superior is angry with you and takes stern disciplinary action, whether a tongue-lashing or worse, he is said to have “keelhailed” you. That’s another sailing term. “Keelhauling”, a disciplinary measure once employed by the Dutch and English navies in the seventeenth century, constituted a severe form of punishment for sailors found guilty of grave violations of the ship’s code of conduct. The term “keelhaul” is derived from the Dutch word *kielhalen*. In this punishment, crew members were thrown overboard from one side of the ship, often with attached lead or iron weights on their legs, and then drawn beneath the ship’s keel either across its width or along its entire

length. This perilous practice, which was not just horrible to endure but posed a significant threat to the sailor’s life, was officially abolished in 1853.

The word “scuttlebutt” is synonymous with “gossip” – “the scuttlebutt is that the boss is going to resign.” Fresh water for immediate consumption on a sailing vessel was traditionally kept in a scuttled butt – a barrel or cask with a hole to facilitate drawing water. Sailors would gather at the scuttlebutt for a drink and chat; over time, the term “scuttlebutt” evolved into slang for exchanging rumors or gossip. As technology advanced, steam replaced sails, and pipes replaced wooden casks, rendering the literal scuttlebutt obsolete. However, the term persisted, now referring to the conversations and rumours that had originally occurred around the sailors’ water source.

Why does someone wanting you to shut up tell you to “pipe down”? It goes back to sailing ships too. The tasks of setting sails, heaving lines, and raising anchors demanded a well-coordinated group effort, and boatswains, who led the deck teams, employed whistle signals to command these synchronised actions. Onboard a vessel, the boatswain’s pipe was used to assemble the crew or convey orders. When it was time to dismiss the crew, the boatswain’s pipe was again sounded, accompanied by the command “pipe down”. As the noise level decreased significantly after the dismissal, the phrase became associated with quieting down, reducing noise – or shutting up!

Sailors onboard ships frequently found themselves occupied in mending ropes which held the sails up. This laborious activity included intertwining fibres, a process commonly known as “spinning yarn”. It required only the use of hands, enabling sailors to gather and engage in storytelling or gossip while working. Consequently, narratives, jokes, and anecdotes derived from this practice came to be referred to as “yarns”.

Now it’s time for me to stop “spinning yarns” and “swallow the anchor” – which means to retire from life at sea and adopt a normal lifestyle on land! **W**

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