

“Mr, what’s-his-name, have the goodness to – what-do-ye-call-‘em, – the, – the thingumbob”.

Some Remarks on the Sailors’ Language Terminology and Related Issues in British and American Nautical Fiction

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(Opole)

The writing of this article was – in some measure at least – prompted by Prof. Witold Ostrowski’s remark on sailors’ dialect in England as a noble social phenomenon, comparable to the position of highlanders’ dialect in Poland (letter to the author dated 23 June 2000). Ostrowski differentiates, at the same time, between the terms ‘sailors’ dialect’ and ‘jargon’, the latter reserved for purely technical words and expressions used by members of a given professional group. Lew Lind’s dictionary published in 1982, bears as its title the term ‘sea jargon’ provided in its subtitle with the specification ‘the unwritten language of the sea’. One of the contemporary internet sources, Wikipedia (the free encyclopaedia) draws the little precise distinction, in turn, between ‘sailors’ dialect’, an apparently wider category which took a few centuries to evolve, and the narrower, more specialist and hermetic ‘naval jargon’, a part of what is referred to as ‘military slang’.

The ensuing uncertainty as to the sailor ‘dialect-jargon-slang’ terminology has led me to consult several nautical and literary worthies active on both side of the Atlantic throughout the last few centuries. Among the earliest reporters of actual trans-oceanic voyages appearing in England at the turn of the 17th and 18th century,

the names of Captains William Dampier and Woodes Rogers come into prominence (regretfully enough, the earliest English circumnavigator Sir Francis Drake did not record his memorable voyage). An untiring buccaneer, seafaring entrepreneur and author, William Dampier completed three successful voyages around the world of which he left a few printed accounts. In the Preface to what had originally appeared as volume three of his *Voyages* (1703), the author writes of his dilemma about the use of 'sea phrases' or 'sea terms': "I have frequently, indeed, divested my self of Sea-Phrases, to gratify the Land Reader; for which the Seaman will hardly forgive me; And yet, possibly, I shall not seem Complaisant enough to the other; because I still retain the use of so many Sea-Terms". Confronted with a similar dilemma a decade later, Captain Woodes Rogers (who employed Dampier as his pilot and became famous through his rescue of Alexander Selkirk, the prototype of Robinson Crusoe), gives reasons for his preference of the 'language of the sea': "Tho' others, who give an Account of their Voyages, do generally attempt to imitate the Stile and Method which is u'sd by Authors that write ashore, I rather chuse to keep to the language of the Sea; which is more genuine and natural for a Mariner" (*A Cruising Voyage* 2). Thus, one of the essential dilemmas that was to haunt many later marine writers presented itself – whether, and to what extent, the sea language should be used in both the documentary renderings of actual voyages, that is works falling into the category of literature of fact, and in purely fictitious voyage narratives.

Another closely related problem was the lack of nautical knowledge, and consequently ignorance of the specialist language on the part of writers who – like Jonathan Swift – were not sailors. The author of *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), each of whose four parts bears the word 'voyage' in its title, deals with this deficiency as follows: first, disguised as Capt. Lemuel Gulliver, the Dean of St. Patrick's defends his 'sea-language' against possible criticism as an 'old dialect' in which he was apparently instructed by the oldest mariners. He claims that it is only too obvious that this venerable 'sea-language' or 'dialect' should differ from the speech of the modern 'sea-Yahoos' who have become 'new-fangled in their words' ("A Letter from Capt. Gulliver to his Cousin Sympson" 39). A few pages later, the landlubber of the author disguises himself again, this time as the book's publisher one Richard Sympson (whose name is meant to imply an association with a real contemporary sailor, William Symson, who wrote *A New Voyage to the East-Indies* published in 1715). As such he informs the reader that he has made so bold as "to strike out innumerable passages relating to the wind and tides, [...] together with the minute descriptions of the management of the ship in storms, in the style of sailors [...] to fit

the work as much as possible to the general capacity of readers" ("The Publisher to the Reader" 43-4).

The next interesting case, in terms of chronology, is that of Daniel Defoe who, though not a sailor, had an avid interest – evinced in his numerous writings – in maritime discovery, trade and plunder, and who was personally acquainted with professional seafarers like Dampier or Capt. Thomas Bowrey, the latter being a renowned explorer of the Indian Ocean. In one of his most interesting and original publications, the narrative of an imaginary voyage of circumnavigation made in the easterly direction, that is by a course never sailed before, Defoe occasionally gives samples of what he calls the 'sea language' (e.g. the phrases like 'to bring to', i.e. to stop a ship, or 'to come to an anchor'), claiming at the same time that "a seaman when he comes to the press", that is makes up his mind to publish, "is pretty much out of his element, and a very good sailor may make but a very indifferent author" (Defoe *A New Voyage round the World* 1 and 312; the book was dated 1725 but had actually come out in November 1724). The claim made by the author can be interpreted as criticism of the poorly educated contemporary navigators, and in this context a kind of self-advertisement on the part of the commercial-minded writer, or else as a repetition of the already familiar caution that too much sea language – that could hardly be expected from a land-living author such as Defoe – might make the book readable only to seamen.

In a slightly later publication entitled *The Four Years Voyages of Capt. George Roberts* (1726), allegedly written by himself but generally attributed to Defoe, and dealing with pirates, the author uses the term 'sea language' alternately with the 'sea dialect' and 'sea notion', as well as with the 'pirates' special jargon' (the miscreants, by the way, call themselves 'Gentlemen of Fortune belonging to the Sea' 30). His method is more skilful here than in the previous book, and as the title Capt. Roberts speaking in the first person, he identifies with a professional sailor. Thus, when he makes some observations about the weather, for example "calm, with light Cat-Skins", he adds "as we commonly term them in the Sea Dialect", proceeding to explain that these are "light Airs of Wind, not spreading perhaps above half a Mile, or some of them above the Quantity of an Acre of Ground on the Water" (108). The method seems generally reliable though to my mind the 'Acre of Ground on the Water', together with several other instances, betrays Defoe as a landsman.

The next important writer of the sea was a Scotsman, Tobias George Smollett, a medical student at Glasgow University who came down to London to become one of the literary 'Big Four', a choice company of four prominent novelists active in

the middle and in the latter half of the 18th century (the remaining three being Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding and Laurence Sterne). Owing to his medical studies, which he did not complete, Smollett received a warrant as surgeon's second mate in the Royal Navy, in which capacity he served for a year and a half taking part in the notorious Cartagena expedition (a combined naval and army operation against the Spaniards in the West Indies which ended in a complete fiasco). This experience provided Smollett with some nautical material which he used in the partly-autobiographical *Roderick Random* (1748), and to a lesser extent in *Peregrine Pickle* (1751) and *Sir Launcelot Greaves* (1760-1). In the first of these novels in particular, the author parades his familiarity with what he calls 'seamen's phrases' or 'sea phrases' (407, 430) which he puts mainly in the mouth of the title hero's uncle, Lieutenant Tom Bowling of the Royal Navy, who later on acts as master (i.e. commander, captain) of a slaver. His 'sea phrases' are generally announced as such by the narrator, Roderick Randon, who annotates the text with relevant remarks in brackets, like "finding that (to use the seamen's phrase) we were very much wronged by the ship which had us in chase" (407), the meaning of which is that an enemy ship chasing Tom Bowling's slaver catches her up.

A device more original than the use of several sea phrases scattered in the text of his novel, consists in the employment of seamen's language on dry ground, that is the source of many a humorous confrontation between Smollett's seafaring characters and landsmen. In this context the author refers to the sailors' speech as a 'lingo' (233). For example, when Roderick wants to communicate something extraordinary to his uncle in private, the latter refuses to leave a crowded inn telling his nephew he need not be afraid of being overheard, as none of the patrons can understand their lingo. This is a colloquial term, deriving from the Latin 'lingua' (tongue), designating a foreign language or any other unintelligible speech, especially one typical of members of a particular professional or occupational group. Smollett uses this device on a bigger scale in his second novel, *Peregrine Pickle*, whose central character, a retired naval officer named Commodore Hawser Trunnion, earns the reputation of an eccentric among his farming neighbours, among others because they cannot understand his queer nautical speech. In *Sir Launcelot Greaves* there is one more specimen of 'a sea-faring gentleman', now treading on land, whose peculiar 'stile' (41) bewilders many a countryman. The character in question is Capt. Samuel Crowe, one-time master of a merchant vessel in the Mediterranean, whose most conspicuous feature is what Smollett labels as 'the Captain's dialect' (41 and 133). Here is a sample of it showing its baffling effect on the staff at St. George's Inn where the good officer stops by for refreshment and lodging:

He desired the hostler to take his horse in tow, and bring him to his moorings in a safe riding. He ordered the waiter, who shewed them into a parlour, to bear-a-hand, ship his oars, mind his helm, and bring along-side a short allowance of brandy and grog, that he might cant a slug into his bread-room, for there was such a heaving and pitching, that he believed he should shift his ballast. The fellow understood no part of this address but the word *brandy*, at mention of which he disappeared.

(Smollett *Sir Launcelot Greaves* 177)

Literature of the sea in the Victorian Age is dominated by the nautical novels of Capt. Frederick Marryat which appeared for the first time in print between 1829 and 1849. Marryat was in fact the first professional sailor who became a successful writer, one that can be regarded as a proper father of the sea novel in English literature. He joined the Royal Navy as a volunteer aged 13 (being 2 months short of 14), and continued in the active service for the next 24 years of his life taking part in the Great War at sea against Napoleonic France, then in the naval war against the United States, and later still in the First Burmese War in the East Indies whose theatre was the vast Irrawaddy Delta. In the course of his long and distinguished service Marryat gradually rose from the position of volunteer to that of midshipman, lieutenant, commander and captain, also gaining the British Order of the Bath, fellowship of the Royal Society and the French Legion of Honour. Having retired from the navy in 1830, he embarked on a highly successful career as a nautical writer producing almost 20 novels of the kind, enormously popular in the 19th century and now regarded as classics of the genre.

In his works Capt. Marryat created a huge and very graphic gallery of seafaring characters, in the first place naval, ranging from ship's boys to admirals, as well as comprising merchant sailors, privateers and pirates, smugglers and coastguards, slavers and others. They are beautifully and convincingly differentiated and individualized with a view to nationality, the kind of sea service they represent, their position on board, age, and so on. This diversity also applies to their language which can be generally described as the language of the sea, and subdivided further, for instance into naval and piratical jargon, ordinary seamen's (e.g. Cockney sailors') slang and officers' formal naval commands, as well as into several regional and dialectal varieties of British English – all duly exemplified by the author – like Scots and Irish, Yankee sailors' English, Lascars' Indian-English, African Negro sailors' English, etc.

The usage of nautical language in Capt. Marryat's novels is varied, and he also uses different terms for its varieties. In some individual cases, like Smollett, he prepares the reader for such linguistic encounters with remarks: 'to use a sea phrase' (*The Naval Officer* 17), 'to use a nautical phrase' or 'nautical term' (*Newton For-*

ster 15, 129 and 354), or else 'as seamen term it' (*Newton Forster* 357), or 'as we use the term at sea' (*Percival Keene* 108). The terms themselves – like 'heave-to', 'gut the neutral', 'a regular ship husband' – are often put in inverted commas, or in italics, and their meaning is explained by the traditional 1st or 3rd-person omniscient narrator. Occasionally the narrator makes additional comments on the nautical phrase used in the text, in a relevant footnote at the bottom of a page. This happens in *The King's Own* where, in one of such footnotes, the author complains that what he calls 'the phraseology of sailors' has recently been grossly caricatured (176).

Most often, however, sailors' speech in Capt. Marryat's novels becomes intelligible to the landlubber of an average reader in a wider context. This is actually the way suggested by the author. In *Jacob Faithful* one of the sailor characters (old Tom Beazeley) 'spins a yarn' in which he uses the nautical expression 'things that come athwart one's hawse', the meaning of which is missed by one of the listeners who happens to be a landsman (Domine Dobiensis). The latter interrupts the story to be informed that what he has heard is a 'nautical figure of speech' implying a meeting, encounter. He is rebuked at the same time for the interruption, and advised to "hear the story first, and understand it afterwards"; this he promises to do, saying "I will endeavour to comprehend by the context" (*Jacob Faithful* 104). Indeed, following this advice, the reader need not be pedantically explained the meaning of naval commands, the manner of navigation in a storm or fighting an enemy at sea, or of the habits of the ship's company. All of such things, expressed in a language that is strictly professional on the one hand and very informal on the other, generally become clear in an appropriate context. One simple example of the first is the departure of H. M. S. the 'Aspasia' from port, following the hoisting of the 'blue-peter', that is a blue flag showing a white square in the middle, indicating in the Code the letter 'P' – the signal of leaving port: "[t]he frigate was unmoored, the blue-peter hoisted, [...] Captain M – came on board, the anchor was run up to the bows, and once more the frigate started" (*The King's Own* 127). Thus, even without knowing what the blue-peter looks like, the reader gathers it must be some kind of a flag (it is 'hoisted') connected with the manoeuvre of sailing out. The other simple example illustrates the meaning of the slangy 'powder-monkey' on board a man-of-war: Capt. M – who enlists the ship's boy Willy on the 'Aspasia' frigate in the same novel, tells him "you must be a powder-monkey with me; you can hand powder up" (81), that is deliver gunpowder from the ship's magazine to the guns on her deck, as it soon becomes clear in battle.

Apart from the above-mentioned formal 'sea' or 'nautical phrases/terms', Capt. Marryat uses other labels for the informal nautical speech of his characters, such as 'slang', 'cant', 'jargon' and 'dialect'. He practically makes no distinction between the first two, treating them as very informal forms of the sailors' technical language, the language of the forecabin, that is one basically used by common seamen, something like the workmen's lingo of the workshop, or soldiers' lingo of the barracks. One interesting observation concerning the use of slang in the discussed novels is its range, or the fact that it is also used by some of Capt. Marryat's officers. Examples include Mr. Phillott, first officer on the 'Sanglier' frigate in *Peter Simple*, who "prided himself upon his slang" (240), and Mr. Bullock, master's mate on the 'Aspasia' whose "greatest pride and his constant study was 'slang' in which he was no mean proficient" (*The King's Own* 53); in *Newton Forster* we are also informed of "the cant phrase of the officers" circulating on Capt. Carrington's frigate (155). By the way, the use of 'slang' or 'cant' by these officers does not at all suggest that it was spoken by the majority of them, or that its use among either commissioned or warrant officers was approved of by the discussed author. Indeed, Capt. Marryat makes critical remarks on such officers – typified by the said Lieutenant Phillott and Master's Mate Bullock – who are "coarse and vulgar in their manners and language", thus contributing to "lower the respect due to them" (*Peter Simple* 240). On the other hand, as one of the warrant officers (Boatswain Chucks) in the same novel explains, the use of such lingo – forcible and rude, resorting to execrations – may be necessary to maintain discipline among, and to effectively communicate orders to common seamen:

There is one language for the pulpit and another for on board ship, and, in either situation, a man must make use of those terms most likely to produce the necessary effect upon his listeners. Whether it is from long custom of the service, or from indifference of a sailor to all common things and language (I can't exactly explain it myself, Mr. Simple, but I know what I mean), perhaps constant excitement may do, and therefore he requires more 'stimilis', as they call it, to make him move. Certain it is, that common parlance won't do with a common seaman.

(*Peter Simple* 93)

At the opposite extreme, in a sense, there is His Lordship the Captain of the title hero's frigate on the North American station in *The Naval Officer*, who is entirely ignorant of naval affairs, including both the formal naval vocabulary in which commands are given on board His Majesty's man-of-war, and the informal forms of sailors' speech. This aristocratic officer has "a curious way of forgetting, or pretending to forget, the names of men and things, I presume, because they were so

much beneath him; and in their stead, substituted the elegant phrases of 'What's-his-name', 'What-do-ye-call-'em', and 'thingumbob'" (280). One of his ridiculous orders, given in this substitute sailors' newspeak, forms a part of this paper's title. That such officers could actually be found in the contemporary navy is a fact supported by the law of primogeniture on the one hand, the result of which was that younger male offspring of the contemporary nobility were obliged to carve out a career in the church, or in the army/navy. On the other hand, as Capt. Marryat writes in the same novel, following the glorious Battle of Trafalgar, "the navy became popular, and the aristocracy crowded into it" (213).

As regards the remaining two terms, that is 'jargon' and 'dialect', the discussed writer uses them only in one novel in reference to the speech of a black sailor called Mesty. He is an African Negro who was brought to America as a slave, to flee from his Irish-American master to England on learning about the abolishment of slavery there. He next joined the Royal Navy to become a British naval sailor, his speech being as a result a strange mixture of nautical English "with the strong brogue [...] dashed with a little Yankeeism" (*Midshipman Easy* 55). This is exactly what the author refers to later in the novel as his 'mixed jargon' and 'peculiar dialect' (109), apparently treating the first term as characteristic of his profession, and the other as some kind of a regional variety of English.

To conclude the discussion of nautical language in Capt. Marryat's novels, the reader will note that it is – especially in its colloquial and slangy versions – the source of numerous humorous situations. It can puzzle and scare, as the example quoted below shows, many a greenhorn reefer (i.e. young and inexperienced midshipman) on their first appearance on deck:

'Now my lads', said the first lieutenant, 'we must slue (the part the breeches cover) more forward'. As I never heard of a gun having breeches, I was very anxious to see what was going on, and went up close to the first lieutenant, who said to me, 'Youngster, hand me that *monkey's tail*'. I saw nothing like a *monkey's tail*; but I was so frightened that I snatched up the first thing that I saw, which was a short bar of iron, and it so happened that it was the very article which he wanted. When I gave it to him, the first lieutenant looked at me, and said, 'So you know what a monkey's tail is already, do you? Now, don't you ever sham stupid after that'.

Thought I to myself, I'm very lucky; but if that's a monkey's tail it's a very stiff one!

(*Peter Simple* 29)

Obviously, this kind of language will baffle any landsman if they happen to find themselves on board Capt. Marryat's vessels. The already referred to Domine Dobiensis who takes a passage along the Thames in old Tom Beazeley's lighter, gets a bit of a scare when the crew tell him "we must shoot the bridge", the 'shooting' me-

aning here merely passing under one of the London bridges (*Jacob Faithful* 97). The wittiest and most original usage of the sailors' jargon occurs on dry ground, for example when Marryat's heroes describe their sweethearts in terms of sailing craft. Thus, Ben Leader's wife named Polly is "a pretty sort of craft in her way, neat in her rigging, swelling bows, taking sort of figure-head, and devilish well-rounded in the counter" (*Jacob Faithful* 103). Similar register is used to describe preparations for a voyage of matrimony in *The Naval Officer*, or a country dance (poussette) in *The King's Own* in which the sailor hero (Seymour) performs complicated manoeuvres of 'tacking' and 'wearing'.

On the other side of the Atlantic, almost simultaneously with Capt. Marryat in England, James Fenimore Cooper fathered the sea novel in American literature. He joined the merchant marine as a teenager (in 1806), serving before the mast in the 'Sterling' in which he made some exciting voyages to Europe during the French Wars. He then spent 3 years in the U. S. Navy in the capacity of a midshipman, to be discharged in 1811, a year before the outbreak of the war with Britain. At the age of 22 Cooper married a rich heiress and spent the rest of his life as a landowner, however, he preserved a lifelong interest in maritime affairs. The literary effect of the latter were sea novels, starting with *The Pilot* published in 1824 and concluding with *The Sea Lions* of 1849. As the author himself explains, *The Pilot* was written with the intention of presenting a true picture of the ocean and ships (Cooper's Preface to *The Pilot* VIII), and of the seamen "acting and talking as such" (Susan Fenimore Cooper's Introduction XV). Although only 10 chapters of the novel – out of 35 altogether – are actually set at sea, the author's seamanship is convincing in depicting such scenes as the piloting of a frigate through shoals in an increasing gale, a fierce fight between the American 'Ariel' schooner and the British 'Alacrity' cutter, or the wreck of the 'Ariel' on the coastal rocks of eastern Britain. At the same time, there is nothing peculiar in the speech of Cooper's sailors, except perhaps the nasal accent of the title pilot (cf. ch. III), or Long Tom Coffin's frequent repetition that a genuine seaman does not need land to be happy.

In the Preface to his second nautical novel, *The Red Rover* (1827), Cooper complains that American history has very few nautical occurrences to interest a writer of fiction, therefore in the present story of the high-principled, patriotic-minded and Romantic-inspired pirate, the author "found it necessary to invent his legend without looking for the smallest aid from traditions or facts" (III). As a result, the title hero disappoints as a nominal pirate – together with his standard literary speech. Fortunately, among the secondary characters there are a couple of solid seafaring figures, like old Bor'us, otherwise Jack Nightingale, boatswain of the mysterious

slaver which turns out to be the notorious pirate, and Dick Fid who is soon berthed in the same ship. The first relates his exploits on the coast of Guinea to a crowd of gaping auditors gathered in a Newport tavern, garnishing his story with nautical phrases, some of which are put in inverted commas and explained to the reader by the 3rd-person narrator. An example includes 'to freshen one's nip' which the author-narrator explains as the "quaintly styled swallowing a pint of rum and water" (Cooper *The Red Rover* 36). The other 'son of the ocean' uses sailors' jargon in a land context, which creates the desired humorous effect; for example, on the sudden disappearance of a stranger in green, Dick says: "He made a slant on the wind until he had weathered yonder bit of a barn, and then he tacked and stretched away off here to the east-and-by-south, going large, with studding-sails alow and aloft" (58).

I will only briefly deal with Richard Henry Dana who, like his father and namesake, trained for the law and who became a merchant seaman by coincidence. Threatened with the problem of deteriorating eyesight, he interrupted his studies at Harvard and went to sea for a little more than 2 years, serving in the American merchant fleet (between 1834 and 1836) as a hand before the mast, that is a common seaman (he writes about it, as well as of his love of adventure, in *An Autobiographical Sketch* 64-5). Dana's literary reputation as a nautical writer depends on *Two Years Before the Mast. A Personal Narrative of Life at Sea*, published in 1840 and based on his own experience. In his Preface to the first edition of the book, the author calls it "a voice from the forecastle", emphasizing its authenticity also on the linguistic plane. He thus promises to use "strong and coarse expressions" whenever they are essential to giving the true character of a scene laid at sea. It is interesting to note that Dana is not afraid of the lack of "technical knowledge" on the part of his landsmen readers, claiming that their imagination should successfully fill in possible gaps. This idea works out in the text of the narrative, so that the narrator need not halt it over and over again to explain what he refers to as "choice extracts from the sailor's vocabulary" (Dana *Two Years Before the Mast* 18). However, some more confusing terms like 'hurrah's nest' in chapter II, are put in inverted commas or italicized, provided with a remark 'as sailors say', and explained by the 1st-person narrator. Similar explanations occasionally appear in footnotes to clear up the meaning of a 'soger', 'Cape Cod boy' or 'doctor' (not the ship's surgeon but the cook). I will add that a year after the publication of this narrative, Dana drew up "A Dictionary of Sea Terms" which he included in *The Seaman's Friend* (1841), a miscellany of some practical materials relative to the merchant marine.

As he himself admitted, Herman Melville went to sea owing to "the united influences of Captain Marryat and hard times" (qtd. by his biographer Leon Howard 41). In June 1839 he signed as a cabin-boy, aged 19, on the packet-ship 'St. Lawrence' in which he made a voyage from New York to Liverpool, to return home in October. This experience provided him with the material for the largely autobiographical *Redburn. His First Voyage. Being the Sailor-boy Confessions and Reminiscences of the Son-of-a-Gentleman, in the Merchant Service*, a book which came out a decade later. In January 1841 Melville, now aged 21, shipped on a whaler called 'Acushnet' which was bound for the Pacific. However, next year he deserted this ship in the Marquesas, from where he got to Tahiti in the French Polynesia, and thence to Hawaii. In 1843 Melville signed on a U. S. frigate (called 'The United States') in which he sailed from Honolulu to Boston where he was discharged in October 1844. Those experiences were soon utilized by the writer in his two Robinsonade novels, *Typee* and *Omoo* (1846 and 1847 respectively), and in his nautical works, such as *White Jacket, or the World in a Man-of-War* (1849) and *Billy Budd, Foretopman* (comp. 1891, publ. 1924), as well as in that great epic of whaling *Moby Dick, or the Whale* (1851).

Now to turn to Melville's sailors' language and his terminology for it, in his first nautical novel, that is *Redburn*, the author adopts the method familiar to the readers of both Capt. Marryat and R. H. Dana. Humorous linguistic misunderstandings to which Melville's greenhorn sailor of the title hero falls victim, recall those of Capt. Marryat's Peter Simple when he first steps onto the deck of his frigate. For example, the moment he embarks his ship, an old tar asks Wellingborough Redburn if he has got his traps aboard, to which the latter answers he "didn't know there were any rats in the ship, and hadn't brought any trap" (Melville *Redburn* 68). The discussed writer brings Dana to mind, in turn, through his methodical explanation of nautical terms, italicized in the text and cleared up right away by the narrator-hero. Thus, ordered by the mate to draw some water, Redburn asks for a 'pail', which throws the officer into a fit of passion, upon which the narrator proceeds to explain that "sailors have their own names, even for things that are familiar on shore", and a 'pail' at sea is always called a 'bucket' (117).

As regards Melville's terminology for the sea language, he refers to it as 'the nautical dialect' (*Redburn* 117, 203). The term has some obvious associations with a language or manner of speaking peculiar to a region, and as such becomes comprehensible in and justified by the wider context in which it appears. Thus, the narrator-hero claims that on his first going to sea, he felt as if he found himself in "a barbarous country" whose inhabitants live in "strange houses", dress in "strange

clothes”, and consequently speak “a strange dialect” (117). The second time that Melville uses the term ‘dialect’ for the sailors’ speech, he wants to emphasize, I think, its deep-rooted, centuries-old tradition and resistance to change – that is something in it equivalent to that part of early and venerable literature that had been composed in dialect. The context in which ‘the nautical dialect’ appears, is that in which the author speaks of old ships that are no more, and of numerous other changes, adding that “notwithstanding all these things, and many more, the relative condition of the great bulk of sailors to the rest of mankind, seems to remain pretty much where it was, a century ago” (203).

In his two naval works – the novel *White Jacket* and the novella *Billy Budd*, Melville gives abundant samples of what he calls ‘the naval parlance’ (*Billy Budd* 87). The word ‘parlance’ derives from the French ‘parler’ which means to speak, and so ‘parlance’ basically denotes a conversation, that is a spoken and rather informal form of a language, at the same time one that a particular professional group of people would use. Examples of this kind of vocabulary used on board Melville’s men-of-war include ‘middies’, ‘gunner’s daughter’, ‘king’s bargain’, and dozens of others. Each time they appear in the text, these specimens are put in inverted commas or italicized, provided with the already standard remark like “what sailors call”, and elucidated by the omniscient narrator who may proceed with such items like this: “by that expression meaning that [...]” (cf. *Billy Budd* 24 and 69). In *White Jacket* the author also uses the term ‘sailor lingo’, implying a more colloquial variety of the ‘naval parlance’ spoken by the common seamen. He suggests, at the same time, that “in vessels of all kinds, the men who talk the most sailor lingo are the least sailor-like in reality. [...] you may put that man down for what man-of-war’s men call a ‘damn-my-eyes tar’. that is, a humbug” (675). Indeed, Capt. Vere of the U. S. S. ‘Indomitable’ in *Billy Budd*, an officer “thoroughly versed in the science of his profession, [...] never garnished unprofessional talk with nautical terms” (36).

In *Moby Dick*, Melville’s masterpiece, the narrator Ishmael tells Capt. Peleg about his voyages in the merchant service, to which the latter replies: “Merchant service be damned. Talk not that lingo to me” (84). The whaling captain’s answer shows both that it would be possible to distinguish several different ‘sailor lingoes’, depending on the kind of nautical service, and that there was a good deal of rivalry and even aversion for one another, among seamen and officers who belonged to the navy and the merchant marine, or the merchant marine and the whaling fleet, and so on. One more interesting term that appears in *Moby Dick*, is used by the said Capt. Peleg who expresses his distrust of Ishmael’s seafaring competence,

telling him: "Look ye now, young man, thy lungs are a sort of soft, d'ye see; thou dost not talk shark a bit. Sure, you've been to sea before now; sure of that?" (85). The expression 'to talk shark' seems very original to me, more like the case of literary nautical slang invented by the writer rather than the expression actually used by the contemporary Nantucket sailors.

A movement away from romanticism typified by Cooper and effected by Dana in his documentary narrative, and in his own way by Melville's realistic sea fictions, reached its culmination in the first years of the 20th century in the works of Jack London which – showing realistic characters and settings – propagate the philosophy of naturalism. To begin with, London's nautical experience involves his early days on the waterfront of San Francisco, his hometown, first as an oyster poacher and then as a fishing patrolman. The former was transformed a decade later into *The Cruise of the 'Dazzler'* (1902, an account of oyster piracy titled after the name of his sloop the 'Razzle Dazzle'), while the latter experience yielded *Tales of the Fish Patrol* (1905). London's best-known sea novel, *The Sea Wolf* (1904), is based in turn on his participation as a 17-year-old deckhand on the 'Sophie Sutherland' in a seal-hunting expedition to the coast of Japan and the cold Bering Sea. Already as an acknowledged man-of-letters, in 1907 Jack London set out in a small yacht called the 'Snark' on a voyage round the globe which brought him across the Pacific to Hawaii, the Marquesas, Tahiti, Bora Bora, Fiji and Solomon Islands, where the ambitious project had to be abandoned in September 1908. The literary crop of this unfinished circumnavigation was *The Cruise of the 'Snark'* and a volume of 30 short stories published under the title of *South Sea Tales* (both 1911).

Now to concentrate on Jack London's nautical language, it is best documented in *The Sea Wolf* where the author presents an odd assortment of rough sailors and harpooners on board the 'Ghost' schooner commanded by the demonic Capt. Wolf Larsen. Among the crewmen there is one Thomas Mugridge, a Cockney who "has absorbed the sound of Bow Bells [in London's Cheapside] with his mother's milk" and whose speech is adequately slangy. His 'polite' question – "An' 'ow yer feelin' now" – is probably the most comprehensible specimen of the kind in the novel (London *The Sea Wolf* 10). Another crewman is George Leach, an Irish-American runaway inmate of Hill's penitentiary in Frisco (i.e. San Francisco) who shows himself to be proficient in what the author calls "his Telegraph Hill billingsgate" (70), a strange combination of San Francisco criminal argot (this is clear through the reference to the young offenders' institution located there), and of the slang originally used at London's Billingsgate fish market, synonymous with a vulgar language of the gutter. Some of the sailors berthed on the 'Ghost' are Scandinavian,

like Johnson whose name is corrupted to 'Yonson', and who "grope[s] in his vocabulary", though his English is generally very good "with no more than a shade of accent to it" (10-11).

As regards the simple seamen's professional talk, Jack London uses for it the term 'vernacular' (*The Sea Wolf* 15) which implies both an informal, colloquial speech and one that is peculiar to a given profession or trade. The reader learns at the same time that Capt. Larsen of the 'Ghost' schooner, like most of Marryat's commanders and at least one of Melville's, shows that "his language was excellent, marred with an occasional slight inaccuracy. Of course, in common speech with sailors and hunters, it sometimes fairly bristled with errors, which was due to the vernacular itself" (38). Unlike most of the earlier nautical writers, especially his own countrymen, London leaves the 'vernacular' of his uncouth seamen without any authorial explanation, so that the reader is obliged to cope with it one way or another.

Proceeding chronologically, it is quite natural to move in the present examination from North America to Britain again. The passage from Jack London to Joseph Conrad is, in a sense, justified by the former writer's enthusiastic reading of *Typhoon* and *Youth* (cf. Stone 264), and by his "mad appreciation" of the latter writer's work (cf. London's letter to Conrad dated June 1915 in London *No Mentor but Myself. A Collection* 158). As regards Conrad's sea service and his nautical competence, he came to Marseilles in the autumn of 1874 at the age of 16, and made his first cruises in the Gulf of Lyons soon to set out to the West Indies. In the spring of 1878 he transferred to the British merchant marine, confessing later: "I had thought to myself that if I was to be a seaman then I would be a British seaman and no other. It was a matter of deliberate choice" (Conrad *A Personal Record* 149). He plied in the merchant service as a common seaman (then able seaman) along the eastern coast of Britain, to the Antipodes and in the Mediterranean again. During the next decade he duly passed his examinations before the Marine Board in London, successively for the 3rd mate, 2nd mate and master, going in the meantime on distant voyages to Sydney, Bangkok and Singapore, Bombay and Madras, as well as acquiring British citizenship. He obtained his first command (of the 'Otago' barque) in the Far East where he continued to cruise until 1893. In the next year he ended his seafaring career, as he had begun it, in the French service, taking the 'Adowa' steamer across the English Channel.

By his own admission, Conrad's life both as a sailor and writer was "shaped" by the example of Captain Marryat and J. F. Cooper (cf. Conrad "Tales of the Sea" 50). His literary output – generally known – can only partly be classified as nautical; as

he himself stated, his true aim as a writer was "the unappeasable ocean of human life" (Conrad's Preface to *The Shorter Tales* 234). Thus, to the "more specially maritime part of my [his] writings" Conrad included only two "Storm-pieces": *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, 1897, and *Typhoon*, 1902, and two "Calm-pieces": *The Secret Sharer*, 1912, and *The Shadow-Line*, 1917 (Conrad's Preface to *Twixt Land and Sea* 206).

The following remarks on Conrad's use of the nautical language and his terminology for it, made by the writer himself, come from the volume of his "Memories and Impressions" – a kind of encyclopaedia of seafaring life – published under the title *The Mirror of the Sea* (1906). To begin with, Conrad's sort of neutral term for the language used by sailors, both afloat and ashore, is 'the sea language', while its individual specimens are referred to as 'sea-phrases' or 'sailor's phrases', or else as 'sailor's sayings' (Conrad *The Mirror of the Sea* 21, 23, 29, 88). The author treats the 'sea language' as a 'technical language' at the same time (21 and 29), pointing to its clearness and precision. As in the case of work on board ship that must be done fast and in a very exact way, there is no room in this language for a shadow of a doubt, latitude in its interpretation, and consequently uncertainty of the sailor's reaction. For this very reason, the genuine sea language is liable so much to corruption when used by landlubbers, that means people from outside the profession. Conrad gives the example of a ship's anchor that can only be 'let go' and never 'cast', the latter phrase not only betraying a nautical dilettante, but also being a 'crime' – because, according to the discussed author, "to take a liberty with technical language is a crime against the clearness, precision, and beauty of perfected speech" (21). He further claims that the 'cast-anchor' expression sounds affected, mannered, and as such "intolerably odious to a sailor's ear"; besides, if accepted, the 'cast-anchor' trick might just as well be substituted for with 'throw anchor', 'fling anchor' or 'shy anchor', thus contributing to create general confusion on board any vessel.

Conrad also praises the sea or technical language for its brevity, force and vividness; for instance, he can hardly find a better sentence for its conciseness and "seamanlike ring" than "the fleet anchored at Spithead". He claims the act of anchoring can well be visualized through this verb, and it has also got "resolute sound" (23). As for the force and vividness of the language under examination, Conrad attributes these qualities to the simplicity of seamen who have "keen eyes for the real aspect of the things they see in their trade", and who are brilliantly capable in their register of "seizing upon the essential, which is the ambition of the artist in words". A good example of the above is the shipmaster's hail addressed to the chief mate –

“How does the cable grow” – asked on the occasion of the ship’s anchor coming up, together with its long twisting cable. The writer calls the growth of the cable both “a fit sailor’s phrase” and an “impressionistic” one, that is one capable of evoking images and feelings (29). There is also the matter of “beauty” and of “the picturesque character” of the sea language, as demonstrated by the following order that Conrad once received from his skipper on a windy day in the Atlantic “we’ll take that foresail off her [i.e. off the ship] and put her head under her wing for the night” (100).

When the accent shifts from the purely professional aspect of sailors’ speech, that is concerned with navigation or duties on board, to a more informal, but still nautical, context, Conrad replaces the terms ‘sea language’ and ‘technical language’ with the ‘seamen’s parlance’, or ‘marine talk’ and ‘sea-talk’ (144, 145 and 146). This happens for instance when crewmen gossip about the reputation of their ship. At one point in the text the author also uses the term ‘jargon’ in reference to the colloquial speech of naval sailors, differentiating it from ‘the modern naval book-jargon’ which is merely a form of ‘lubberly book-jargon’; thus, modern battleships are transformed – or rather distorted – in it into something as entirely un-seamanlike as ‘capital units’ (163).

Among the prominent and more recent nautical writers, there is Nicholas John Monsarrat, an experienced yachtsman with a distinguished service record in the Royal Navy during World War II, and the author of the widely recognized classic of naval warfare on the cold and stormy North Atlantic convoy routes, infested with German U-Boats, published in 1951 as *The Cruel Sea*. The term that he uses for his seamen’s lingo, unintelligible to an outsider, is ‘the Navy slang’, exemplified by ‘Number One’, that is the warships’ first lieutenant and not its commander, as the landlubberly reader would probably assume (Monsarrat *The Ship that Died of Shame* 10). There is another yachtsman turned into a naval officer by the outbreak of the same war, and a recognized writer, critic and editor of literature of the sea. This is Captain John Coote, a retired submariner, who describes his colleagues at sea as “eccentric characters with a jargon and discipline of their own” (Coote *The Faber Book of the Sea* 348). It is characteristic, at the same time, that Cecil Scott Forester who was no sailor though the creator of an immensely popular eleven-book Hornblower series set in the times of the Great French Wars at sea (whose title hero owes his name and character to Capt. Marryat’s swashbuckling naval servicemen), should use the neutral and formal term ‘the language of the sea’ when explaining the meaning of his characters’ peculiar nautical phrases (e.g. ‘handsomely’ for just slowly, cf. Forester *Lieutenant Hornblower* 174).

Concluding the article, I would like to emphasize that all the principal writers of the sea – British and American – made their seafaring characters, to a certain extent at least, adopt the diction and syntax typical of the profession (or trade, as Conrad calls it) they represent, and even of its particular branch (e.g. naval, merchant, whaling, etc.). This is something natural because adequate use of the sea language constitutes one of the vital determinants of the sea or nautical novel (cf. Philbrick 165). The examination of methods worked out by different writers shows that sailors' speech in their works could be actually limited to a couple of 'nautical phrases/terms/sayings', explained to the land reader by the narrator, or extended to more complete forms of utterance whose meaning must be interpreted by the reader himself, depending on the context, frequency of occurrence, and own imagination. Sometimes the use of nautical speech extends to the 3rd-person narrator, identifiable as the author, who, like Captain Marryat, must often "heave-to" in his narrative (*Newton Forster* 15), or goes on with it "beating against wind and tide" (*The King's Own* 334). Writers who tried their hand at nautical or quasi-nautical fiction, but were not sailors, tried different tricks in this respect. Jonathan Swift stated he was obliged to leave out all the sea phrases in *Gulliver's Travels* as incomprehensible to his readers, Defoe devised them generally with a poor result (as when Robinson Crusoe, introduced as a "mariner", describes mountain-high waves as delivering "the coup de grace" to his boat, 64), the Anglo-Italian Rafael Sabatini simply avoided such a language in his stories of Captain Blood published in the interwar period, while C. S. Forester learned it from nautical works of the established authorities.

The use of sailors' language, together with their appearance and character, serves to qualify sailors as a peculiar species of humans, very distinct from the land-living ones. Apart from achieving realism in their portraits of seafaring men, marine writers employed nautical lingo also to distort and caricature their aquatic creations (e.g. in their relations with landsmen), as in the case of Tobias Smollett, or to strike a humorous note in order to relieve tension (e.g. in the midst of naval battle), or to break monotony of service on board, as in the case of Frederick Marryat and Herman Melville, or else to expose impostors in the fleet ("humbugs" as Melville calls them), and particularly incompetent officers. Finally, the examination reveals a variety of terms, sometimes used by the same writer, to denote sailors' speech which range from the formal and un-tinged 'language of the sea' (or 'sea language') and 'marine talk', through the informal, unofficial 'sailors' parlance' and 'vernacular', as well as 'dialect' which may be also regional-coloured and old-fashioned, to the more colloquial and unintelligible 'nautical jargon' and 'lingo', and the most vigorous and often offensive 'seamen's cant' or 'slang'. What all these

terms have in common is that they are more or less technical and hermetic or closed, that means peculiar to the seafaring professionals and as such difficult to comprehend for the landlubberly outsiders.

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Some Remarks on the Sailors' Language Terminology and Related Issues in British and American Nautical Fiction

The article follows the rise and development of the sea novel on both sides of the Atlantic, and in this context the sailors' language terminology used by prominent nautical writers, among others Capt. Frederick Marryat, J. F. Cooper, Herman Melville, Jack London, Joseph Conrad and Nicholas Monsarrat. Among the terms used for the said language by these writers there are 'sea language', 'marine talk', 'sailors' parlance', 'vernacular', 'dialect', 'nautical jargon', 'lingo', 'seamen's cant' and 'slang'. The article also surveys problems connected with the use of such a language in works of literary fiction addressed to readers 'ashore' who are not familiar with specialized maritime dictionary.

Key words: *British and American nautical fiction; T. G. Smollett, Capt. Frederick Marryat, J. F. Cooper, R. H. Dana, Herman Melville, Jack London, Joseph Conrad, N. Monsarrat and others; sea language terminology and problems related to the use of sailors' jargon in literary fiction.*