

Chapter 6

The Language(s) of Sailing

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6.1 Introduction

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Having sailed for many years along the coasts of Italy, Southern France, Eastern United States and the Caribbean, I had to learn the essential sailing terminology in several languages. I am interested in a number of commonalities and differences between these technical languages. Different histories and different styles are, I think, embodied in these words. Noam Chomsky has persuaded me that words do not, as such (let me insist: as such) refer to the outside world. *We* refer to the outside world, by means of words, together with several cognitive processes that we master. The meaning of each word in the language, in all languages, always contains a point of view, a way of looking at the world. In the sciences, by contract (sort of) we do our best to give objective references to the terms we use. Our aim is to “carve nature at its joints” (an expression due to Quine) and construct categories that ideally correspond to mind-independent objects, relations and abstractions. Physicists believe that really there are electrons and quarks “out there”, biologists believe that really there are cells and DNA “out there”. And so on. In the domain of technology the semantics is a bit more complicated. Human *actions* contribute to meaning and reference. And so is, I think, for the core concepts in sailing. Something external (out there), something we do, and a “point of view” on all this. Moreover, there is also a historical heritage from the tall sailing ships. Once the terminology is learned and tested in practice, all proceeds as it should. It is a history of success. But let me

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24 here pause a moment and try to elucidate (a term I am borrowing from my dear late
25 friend Jim Higginbotham) the meaning and reference of the languages of sailing.¹

26 6.2 On Tack

27 The most intriguing of all concepts of sailing is, in my opinion, the meaning and
28 referent of ‘tack’. It is a part of the main-sail: the corner between the mast and the
29 front of the boom. It is the first part of the sail that receives the wind. Ok. But ‘tack’
30 also applies to the allure of the boat and the direction of the wind. Let’s consider, as
31 an example, a *port tack*. Complicated, because the boom is displaced to starboard,
32 not to port, and the bulge of the sail is also to starboard. The boom is displaced to
33 starboard. Why, then, is it said to be a port tack? In French and Italian we have a
34 plural: respectively *amures* and *mure*. Port tack is *Babord amures* in French and
35 *mure a sinistra* (or, more traditionally, *mure a babordo*) in Italian. Why a plural?
36 How is all this compatible with the name of that corner of the sail? Why is it said to
37 be to port, when the tack bulges to starboard? Well, the explanation is that, in the
38 square sails of once, the tacks (indeed a plural also in English) were the two corners
39 of the sail positioned upwind. The two corners positioned downwind were called
40 ‘clews’.

41 Fine. Now, in your imagination, slowly morph a square sail into a triangular
42 Marconi sail. The two tacks merge into one corner only, the tack, indeed. Ditto for
43 the clews: now the posterior corner of the sail, the clew, is the last to get the wind
44 (in Italian *bugna*, in French *point d’écoute*). After we have made this geometric
45 mental transformation, we better understand why a port tack is what it is, and a
46 starboard tack is what it is. No other way to make sense of this curious terminology,
47 unless you learn by brute definition that port tack is when the wind comes from port,
48 starboard tack when the wind comes from starboard.

49 Tacking is, now understandably, the operation of changing the direction of the
50 boat with respect to the wind. It also makes sense that, when beating upwind, one
51 often makes tacks, alternating port tack and starboard tack. In Italian *fare bordi*, in
52 French *louvoyer*.²

53 The reason why starboard tack has right of way over port tack also goes back to
54 the square-rigged tall boats and the mandatory maneuvering. Switching from a star-
55 board tack was more elaborate than switching from a port tack, due to the rigging
56 and the standing structures of a tall sail-ship.

¹A fine list of nautical terms in French and English, alphabetically ordered in French, is to be found here: <https://www.ovniclub.com/navigation/lexique-nautique.html> For three languages (Italian, English and French), see <http://www.xenialab.it/meo/web/doc/dizvela.htm>

²It is common, in French, to use this verb (*louvoyer*) as a metaphor for a tortuous way of proceeding in an enterprise. I doubt that many non-sailing French speakers realize it is borrowed from maritime terminology.

6.3 The Boat

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For a long time, the boat has been conceptualized as having two sides: *port* and *starboard* in English, allegedly deriving from the side of the boat most used to load and unload goods when in a port, versus the side open to the sea and the stars. We have *babord* and *tribord* in French (*babordo* and *tribordo* in Italian). This eliminates possible confusion between commands, if they were given using *right* and *left*, the referent would be different when looking at the stern versus looking at the bow. Fixing the terms for *that* side of the boat creates no confusion. The tradition suggests that the French terms derive from “Batterie” (Ba-tri), the large inscription, clearly visible to the pilot, on top of the entrance to the underneath locals stocking cannon balls and gunpowder. In recent years, *babordo* and *tribordo* have been abandoned in Italy, because believed to engender confusion, and replaced by the flat-footed terms *dritta* and *sinistra*.

French sailors have a nice mnemo-technique: *un tricot noir et deux bas si rouges*. Literally meaning a black sweater and two very red stockings. The nautical keys are: *un* meaning odd numbers, *tri* meaning *tribord*, *noir* meaning black, *co* meaning *cone*. Leave to starboard odd-numbered black conic buoys (in US waters called nuns). *Deux* means even numbers, *ba* means *babord*, *si* means *cylinder* (in US waters called cans), *rouge*, of course, means red. All in all: leave to starboard odd-numbered conic black buoys, leave to port even-numbered cylindrical red buoys. Nice (This would not apply to buoys and beacons in US waters, which follow different conventions).

6.4 Mnemo-techniques

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Mnemo-techniques like this one are cognitively interesting. It’s easy to remember a whole line, especially if it rhymes, not so easy to remember a list of terms, especially when they have to be in a specific association or order. I bet many English-speaking readers remember this one: *Camels ordinarily sit down carefully, perhaps their joints creak*. The geologic eras, in the order, in a somewhat older terminology: Cambrian, Ordovician, Silurian, Devonian, Carbonian, Permian, Cretacean, Jurassic, Criogenian.

In Italian, we have the following mnemo-technique for the name of the successive chains of the Alps (West to East): *ma con gran pena le recan giu’*. Literally “but with great sorrow they bring them down”. Key: Marittime, Cozie, Graie, Pennine, Lepontine, Retiche, Giulie. Concerning the moon, we have *gobba a ponente luna crescente*, *gobba a levante luna calante*. Hump towards sundown: the moon is growing, hump towards sunup, the moon is decreasing. I spare the reader more of these. But, but, some relate to sailing. In US waters it’s crucial to remember “Red, right, return” (RRR): when returning to harbor, leave to your right (to starboard) red

95 buoys, red flashing lights and red beacons. In the Mediterranean, however, entering
 96 into a harbor by night, red faces red, green faces green.

97 For the weather, *red by night, sailor's delight. Red in the morning, sailor keep*
 98 *warning*. In Italian, the equivalent is *Rosso di sera, bel tempo si spera. Rosso di*
 99 *mattina fatti una pensatina*. Rhyme is a powerful aid to memory.

100 6.5 Fore and Aft

101 Then we have the fore and aft parts of the boat. *Bow* and *stern* in English, presum-
 102 ably due to the analogy with a bow (the arrow shooting device) of the profile of the
 103 front in the tall ships and the fact that the back of the boat is the sturdiest part. In
 104 Italian we have *prua* (bow) and *poppa* (stern). There is another meaning to “poppa”:
 105 one of the female breasts. In fact, a breast-fed infant is called a “*poppante*”. God
 106 knows why this is the word for the stern of the boat. Similar in French (*poupe*), but
 107 no breast double-meaning in French.

108 The hull is *chiglia* in Italian, *quille* in French. For small sailboats with a dagger-
 109 board, the latter is called *deriva*, (*derive* in French), a term also applying to the
 110 (usually unwanted) lateral drift of the boat. An ungoverned boat left to itself is said
 111 to go “*alla deriva*” (drifting). For all small sailboats with an extractable center-
 112 board, there is a term in French: *deriveur*. No equivalent in Italian or English.

113 I can think of no Italian or French equivalent of the beautiful English term
 114 “sheer” for the overall design of a boat, when looked at from one side. It has, in
 115 naval architecture, a rather precise meaning,³ but I have heard it used generically, in
 116 admiration, for the elegant profile of a boat.

117 *Gunwale*, once a technical term for gunboats (gun wale), now simply refers to
 118 the low parapet delimiting the deck on both sides.

119 6.6 Structures on Deck (French *acastillage de pont*, 120 Italian *armature*)

121 Mast, in French *mât*, in Italian *albero*, meaning tree. In fact, tradition wants that,
 122 once upon a time, when the boat needed a new mast, the captains went into tall
 123 forests and did choose the ideal tree, out of which the new mast was to be built. The
 124 deep receptacle into which the base of the mast is inserted is called, in Italian,
 125 *scassa d'albero*. The spreaders are called *crocette* (small crosses) in Italian and

³ Wikipedia tells us: “The **sheer** is a measure of longitudinal main [deck](#) curvature, in [naval archi-
 tecture](#). The sheer forward is usually twice that of sheer aft. Increases in the rise of the sheer for-
 ward and aft build volume into the hull, and in turn increase its buoyancy forward and aft, thereby
 keeping the ends from diving into an oncoming wave and slowing the ship. In the early days of sail,
 one discussed a hull's sheer in terms of how much “Hang” it had.”

barres de flèche in French. The taller the mast, the more there are, ranging from one to four. English stresses the spreading function, Italian the shape, French the derivation from the bar for a top sail (*flèche*). The shrouds are in French *haubans*, in Italian *sartie*, but the one at the stern, the backstay, is in French *pataras*, in Italian *patarazzo*. Its tension is easily adjustable in some sailboats. The one at the bow, the stay (onto which the jib is fastened) is *strallo* in Italian, *etai* in French.

The boom vang is in French *hale-bas*, in Italian *caricabasso* (charge low). The English term *vang* is of Scandinavian origin. The Italian and French terms stress the forced-lowering action of the device. The topping lift is in French *balancine*, in Italian *amantiglio*, a rather curious term, allegedly derived from *amante*, once used to designate the free end of a rope (see also below). The English term is self-explanatory. The French term stresses the balancing role of the device, keeping the boom suitably high.

6.7 No Ropes on a Boat!

The novice is fast reprimanded by the consummate sailor for using the word *rope* (*corda* in Italian, *corde* in French). There are no ropes on a boat, but rather lines (*cime* in Italian, *bouts* in French – pronounced boo). It is a sort of snobbery, unjustified technically or lexically, but vibrantly recommended. In the tall ships, long before radars, there was a bell in the aft and it was sounded regularly in case of fog (near the bow there was a gong). The only “rope” on a boat, at the time, was the short stretch of rope used to ring the bell.

I will now continue to select nautical terms that show a difference in the “point of view” adopted in the three languages.

6.8 The Sails

The head of a sail is in Italian “*penna*” (feather, also pen-to-write-with, as historically derived). *Impennarsi*, *impennata* is what a horse does when raising the front legs, or a motorcyclist raising the front wheel. In French *tetière*, like in English, because *tête* means head.

The leech is in Italian *balùmina*, in French *chute*. Different points of view in these names. The bloodsucking worm in English (for some reason, maybe because it is the part of the sail that sucks the wind out). This is explicit in French, because “*chute*” means a fall. The Italian “*balùmina*” seem to be derived from latin *volumeninis*, roll of tissue.

The foot of the sail is *bordure* in French, *base* in Italian.

Reducing sail is reefing in English, *ariser* in French and *prendere una mano di terzaroli* or *terzarolare* in Italian. The origin of the Italian expression is to be found in ancient multi-sail vessels, where the main mast supported three sails, the topmost

163 one being the *terzarolo*, the smallest, which, in case of strong winds, could replace
 164 a larger lower sail. The word appears in Dante *Chi terzeruolo e artimon rintoppa*
 165 (Dante, *Inferno*, xxi, 7–15). The short reefing lines inserted into the mainsail in rows
 166 parallel to the boom in order to keep the folded part of the sail snug are called *mata-*
 167 *fionì*, origin unspecified.

168 The spinnaker (and Genoa) pole is in Italian *tangone*, from the French *tangon*,
 169 probably derived from the older term *tange* (modern *tenaille*) meaning pliers.
 170 Stressing the action of catching.

171 6.9 Maneuvering

172 We have seen tacking already. *Gybing* (also spelled *jibing*) is in French *empanner*
 173 (also *virev lof-pour-lof*), in Italian *strambare*. The English word conveys the mean-
 174 ing of being in accord, but also of deriding or teasing with taunting words. In strong
 175 winds, it is a delicate maneuver, which, unlike tacking, requires precision and per-
 176 fect timing, lest serious damage might be caused to the mainsail, the boom and even
 177 the mast. Decidedly a teasing operation. The French term, derived from *panne*, con-
 178 veys the meaning of lining (as for garments) including extra fat in pigs. A different
 179 way to point out the character of the operation. *Lof* is the upwind side of the boat.
 180 Something that should never happen is the derogatory *empannade chinoise* (the
 181 Chinese jibe), whereby the mainsail and the boom slam suddenly, violently and
 182 uncontrollably to the opposite side wreaking havoc. No equivalent that I know of in
 183 French or Italian.

184 The Italian word *strambare* derives from the adjective *strambo*, meaning bizarre,
 185 pointing to the exceptionality of the maneuver.

186 One only dares imagine what jibing must have been in many-masted vessels,
 187 with dozens of sails that had to be operated together. I suppose it was only done
 188 when there was no other solution and the crew was well trained. The way to avoid
 189 “real” jibing is the “chicken jibe”, that is, turning all the way upwind, tacking and
 190 then falling off. It is verbally deprecated as a cowardly operation (chicken), but in
 191 strong winds, if several sails are up and there is enough space, it is prudent, not
 192 cowardly. I do not know any translation of this expression into French or Italian.

193 Close-hauled is in Italian *bolina stretta*, in French *près serrè*. The Italian word
 194 derives from the English bowline, lines at the bow, the ones which, in vessels with
 195 square sails, helped to keep the boat close to the wind. The French stresses strict
 196 closeness to the wind.

197 Beam reach is in Italian *traverso* and in French *travers*. The English term stresses
 198 that the wind is coming at the beam. French and Italian stress that it is coming across.

199 Broad reach is in Italian *lasco*, in French *largue*. Very similar meaning, though
 200 there are associated meanings in ordinary discourse. *Lasco* is said of a relaxed
 201 morality, the French *larguer* is said for abandoning something (or someone) or for
 202 tossing money to someone.

Running is in French *vent arrière*, in Italian *andatura di poppa*. English stresses the speed and the going away, French the coming from behind, Italian the coming from the stern.

Coming upwind, luffing up is in Italian *orzare*, in French *lofer*, probably derived from English. Bearing away is in Italian *puggiare* denoting the action of leaning over (*appoggiare, appoggiarsi*)

Tightening a line is in Italian *cazzare*, in French *border*. The etymology of the Italian is a bit embarrassing, because *cazzo* is the vulgar term for the male sex organ, extending to the colloquial reflexive verb *incazzarsi* (becoming very angry, even furious) and the adjective *incazzato*. Application to the effort of tightening a line is straightforward. French stresses the resultant closing of the line to the body of the boat.

The loosening of a line is in Italian *filare*, in French *larger*. English stresses the reverse of a force, Italian the slipping through the fist (but *filare* is also the weaving of wool or silk), French the widening of the movement, producing greater *largesse*.

Lowering a sail is in French *affaler*, in Italian *ammainare*. English is straightforward. French and Italian use the same word as for lowering a flag.

Arguably the most famous knot is the bowline, in Italian *gassa d'amante*, in French *noeud de chaise*. The English word comes from the age of square sails, when a line was set to keep the foremost square sail as much into the wind as possible, by tying a line from the lower clew to the front spar. The Italian word comes from the obsolete word *amante* for the free end of a rope. No one uses the whole expression, one only says *gassa*, origin uncertain, referring to a loop formed by a line. The French word literally means chair knot. Applied to the elementary "chair" used to hoist a member of the crew up a mast for some repair. The so-called bosun's chair has morphed into Italian as *banzigo* (accent on the *i*). Sounding rather peculiar, because its derivation from English is lost.

The bowline is also called the King's knot, because it is the most elegant and the most important of all knots, to be used whenever possible. It does not choke (*si strozza* in Italian, *se souque* in French) and can, therefore, be easily undone. The only limitation is that it cannot be tied if the line is under tension. In that case, a clove hitch will do (Italian *nodo parlato* -spoken knot - French *demi-clè* – half key).

Properly coiling a line is in Italian *adugliare*, a nice word derived from the Genovese dialect *dugia*, itself from the Latin *duplus* (double), stressing the doubling of the loops, one next to the other. The French *lover* appears to stress the pleasure of a well coiled line, something we "love".

The luffing or flapping of a sail is in Italian *sbattere*, in French *fasseyer*. The French verb is derived from the Dutch *faselen* (stir, flap). The Italian is a current, not especially maritime word, for slamming. It applies to the slamming of a door or a window. Figuratively, the expression *sbattere in faccia*, (slamming to the face) is used when an unpleasant situation, an insult, an unwelcome fact is bluntly hurled at someone.

Heaving to is in Italian *mettersi alla cappa*, French *prendre la cape*. The English expression stresses the effort and the direction, since this boat-stopping maneuver is usually done in a storm, keeping the boat into the wind. Italian and French stress the

248 protective nature of the maneuver, since *cappa* and *cape* refer to a wide protective
 249 garment. In Italian, nineteenth century adventurous fiction narratives, such as The
 250 Three Musketeers, are labeled *cappa e spada*, cape and sword.

251 The unfortunate event of capsizing is in French *chavirer*, in Italian *far scuffia*.
 252 French synonyms of *chavirer* are *bousculer*, *boulverser*, indeed denoting loss of
 253 equilibrium, going upside-down. The Italian expression is derived from *cuffia* (bon-
 254 net), suggesting the idea that the capsizing yanks your bonnet off your head. *Scuffia*
 255 is also used to mean bad luck.

256 6.10 When in the Harbor

257 Mooring is in French *mouillage*, also *amarrage*, in Italian *ancoraggio*. The English
 258 word conveys the meaning of lassoing, tethering, tying. The French literally means
 259 wetting, plunging the anchor into the water and making it wet. The alternative word
 260 refers to the *marres* (in Italian *marre*), the flukes of the anchor. In Italian, the focus
 261 is on the anchor.

262 When securing the boat with a line to another anchored boat, the Italian expres-
 263 sion is *alla ruota* (at the wheel), stressing that the boat is free to rotate 360 degrees.

264 6.11 Conclusion (Sort of)

265 I hope to have shown that the lexical mini-world of the language of sailing exempli-
 266 fies the more general issue of the meaning and reference of words and simple
 267 expressions. We manage to refer to external objects and actions by means of all sorts
 268 of cognitive capacities we possess. But, as Chomsky has rightly stressed, words as
 269 such (let me again insist: as such) do not refer. The meaning, the intension, always
 270 depends on a “point of view” (Chomsky’s expression) with an amalgam of histori-
 271 cal derivations and hints to actions. Etymology (historical sources) is forgotten by
 272 the overwhelming majority of contemporary users, but the different points of view
 273 manifested in the three languages are sufficiently clear. This, of course, applies to
 274 the translations of almost any lexical item across languages. Even the best, the per-
 275 fect translation, is compatible with the presence of differences in points of view.

276 A last example in the present sailing context. In a small sailing boat the rudder is
 277 removable, one puts it back by inserting the spigots, the pintles, into the gudgeons,
 278 the small sockets. In French, the first are called *aguillots* (big needles), from which
 279 the Italian *agugliotti* (where the needle meaning is lost). The second are called
 280 *femminelle* (small females) with the similar French *fémelots*. Different points
 281 of view.