

NAUTICAL WEATHER VOCABULARIES IN THE 18TH & 19TH CENTURIES



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The Mariner's Language

More so than most specialists, the officers of 18th and 19th century sailing vessels had their own vocabulary, using terms that baffled most landsmen – and continue to do so today. This distinctiveness extended to the means by which the mariners described the weather that they encountered. This was nowhere more the case than in regard to the terms used to describe wind force. Francis Beaufort drew heavily on the vocabulary of his age when preparing his wind force scale, but it was not widely adopted until 1838. Before that time English Royal Navy officers had been free to describe the weather using any terms at their disposal. This liberty notwithstanding, there was remarkable consistency in their use, and an unofficial and limited vocabulary enjoyed near-universal popularity. Some of these terms are familiar today, but many have passed into disuse. One of the tasks of the CLIWOC project was to examine their use and to determine their meanings. The multilingual dictionary (see adjacent poster) was one of the outcomes of these activities, but the story ranges more widely over the mariner's language.

Changed Meanings - the Case of a Gale?

Few terms exemplify the pitfalls and problems of interpreting archaic weather terms better than 'gale'. Today its use prompts concern among mariners, yet in the eighteenth century no such alarm was provoked, and the word gale was used to describe all wind strengths between calm and storm, the distinction being provided by a range of adjectival qualifiers most of which are no longer in use, such as 'soft', 'easy' and 'light'. Beaufort's proposal from 1806 put an end to this use of the term, and replaced the lower ranges of the gale range with 'breezes'.

Most logbook weather descriptions were terse, professional accounts bereft of literary style. Occasionally captains would be more lyrical – even Francis Beaufort, proposer of the wind force scale:

"A most charming trade – indeed I never experienced such heavenly weather as for this past fortnight – The thermometer never changing more than one degree from midday to midnight – the air clear and fresh – kind enough to soften the action of the Sun, favourable to our voyage, and not enough to disturb the tranquil surface of the deep."

Francis Beaufort at 2°S 50°E
(15th June, 1806)



Beaufort's original wind force proposal
(January 1806)



A ship of the line of 1800
under full sail

A Plethora of Terms

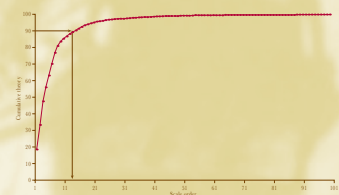
Searching through logbooks from the age of sail, be they Dutch, French, Spanish or English, makes it immediately obvious that weather was, not surprisingly, of prime concern to the officers of the day. General descriptions of the weather are abundant, but generally understandable even to 21st century readers. 'Heavy rain', 'snow', 'fog', 'showers', carry a meaning known to us all. But what is one to make of 'easy gales', 'stiff gales' or 'topgallant gale'? Nearly one hundred such terms exist in English alone, and only when their meanings are clearly understood can the vast supply of logbook data be put to scientific use.

New English Weather Terms

All languages evolve, and as far travelled people, mariners transmitted many weather words across the world on their journeys. Terms such as 'hurricane', 'typhoon', 'monsoon' and 'breeze' all came into the English weather vocabulary from foreign languages.

Pre-Beaufort Wind Force Vocabularies

Although mariners used an astonishingly wide range of terms to describe wind force, the 'core' vocabulary embraced only around twelve terms and was, in that sense, similar to Beaufort's Scale. The English case is typical. A sample of over 20,000 wind force entries yielded 99 different expressions, but of these the twelve most popular represented 90 per cent of all such entries: a sure indication of a widely-adopted convention on wind force descriptors.



Cumulative frequency plot of wind force term usage (English)

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