

**Ships as vessels of lexical diffusion: 18th century maritime language contact and the role of sailors as importers of vocabulary into the English language.**



# Setting the Scene: the 18th century

- Growth of British imperialism, international trade and exploration
- Diffusion of logbooks, travel accounts, foreign glossaries
- Sailors: from across the UK and social classes
- East India Company: est. 1600 traded for 192 years
- Some sailors stayed in semi-permanent trade towns called factories

# Maritime Language Contact



- Nautical jargon on board ship, interaction with foreign merchants and sailors of other countries
- Multilingualism was common, especially in the East India Company
- Weak social ties and significant needs-based motivation to communicate clearly → accelerated linguistic diffusion
- Extensive short-term dialect and language contact with other UK varieties, foreign languages and slang

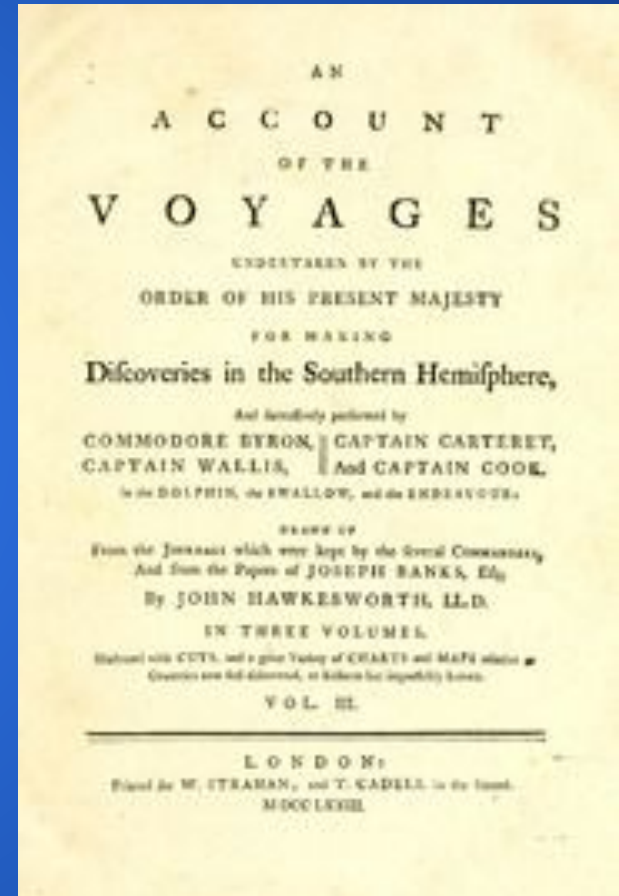
# Outcome of Language Contact 1: Nautical Jargon

- ORIGIN: Specialist vocabulary
- Contact: between sailors and speakers of mainland British English
- Example: *to take aback*

Sources from 1730 - 1779 show it listed in glossaries for nautical terms 'not generally understood'

1830s onwards: Widespread figurative use by British speakers

Why? Social attitudes, Cook's *Voyages*



# Outcome 2: Borrowing from Other Languages



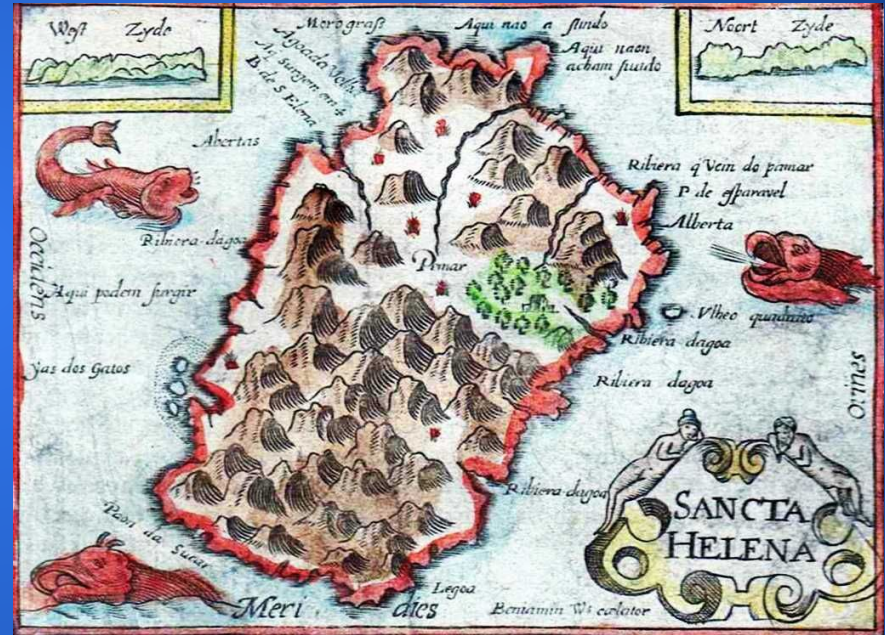
- ORIGIN: East Indian languages, especially Hindi
- Contact: EIC sailors and international merchants
- Example: *teapoy*  
Original Hindi/Persian ‘three-legged table’  
Entered British English to mean ‘table for tea’
- Why? Hobson-Jobson law, trade, semantic shift

# Outcome 3: A Whole New Woord

- ORIGIN: New words for new concepts
- Speakers: Sailors
- Example: *gumwood*

Originally a species to North America.  
Mentioned in documents from St.  
Helena in 1709 for different species

Why? Applying pre-existing conceptual  
framework



# What All This Suggests

- 18th century maritime world left a huge mark on the English lexicon
- Highly multilingual trade industry led to abundance of loanwords and new concepts
- Many of these then entered British English through written texts eagerly consumed by literate and patriotic public
- Sailors were linguistic innovators