



Say again...?

Can British and American boaters communicate or are they divided by a common language? Roger Hughes explores the muddy waters

I always thought it was Winston Churchill who originated the phrase 'England and America are two nations divided by a common language' in his speech before the American Congress at the height of World War II – but it wasn't. He borrowed it from George Bernard Shaw, who in turn probably borrowed it from Oscar Wilde. But as with many epigrams, there is a grain of truth in it.

I've lived and sailed in America for 30 years and wonder sometimes how our two nations can actually communicate on

the water. Take for instance the word yacht. In Britain this generally means a sailing boat, as opposed to a motor boat. But in America all recreational vessels are 'boats', so it's no good telling an American you own a yacht. At the very least he will ask, 'What sort of boat?' And isn't the American term 'sailboat' more descriptive than the British usage of yacht?

And from now on it gets complicated...

Boat words

Any British sailor arriving in America from across the pond, or even chartering a 20ft

runabout, will be addressed as 'Captain'. The British term 'skipper' is too modest for American tastes: they often like to dress the part with 'Captain' emblazoned on their hats.

Most British yacht owners would be surprised to learn their vessel has a 'bridge'. In America it's the term for the cockpit sill in the companionway, on which the doors or washboards sit.

If you tell an American your boat is on 'Pontoon B' in a marina, he might go looking for a small motorised raft. He'll likely find it easier if you direct him to 'Dock B'.



Captain's hat: most British skippers wouldn't be seen dead in one of these



Cockpit sill: this is called the 'bridge' on an American boat



Pontoon: a vessel to enjoy on the water in America, not stroll along to reach your boat

Transatlantic confusion

The ill-defined distinction between 'boat' and 'ship' also exists in America, except that a vessel over 65ft 6in (20m) – the length at which there's a demarcation in navigational rules in the USA – might be called a 'ship' without the usual raised eyebrows from British purists.

And it's not a jolt of good telling an American sailor that your yacht is 15m long. Most of them haven't a clue about metrics.



Jake Kavanagh

Tool talk

Some frustration can develop between Brits and Americans working together on boats, regarding the terminology of tools. I think some tools are often – but not always – more accurately described in American than British vernacular.



Vice grip

For example British Mole grips are American vice grips, also called locking pliers, which is exactly what they are. The reason they are called Mole grips in Britain is because they were originally made by a Welsh company called M. Mole and Son. Still, if you saw a mole on your boat you could whack it with either type, the effect would be the same.



Adjustable spanner

A British spanner is a wrench in America and an adjustable spanner is a monkey wrench. This spanner is definitely adjustable, but where's the monkey?



Jemmy

A Jemmy is a useful tool to have on a boat, but you won't find one on an American vessel – you'll probably find a pry bar instead.

Jubilee clips

When going into a chandlery don't ask for Jubilee clips, because you might be told they don't sell comic books. Jubilee was a side-kick character in the Captain Marvel comics, similar to Robin with Batman. What you really need are hose clamps.



Spokeshave

An Englishman shaping a piece of teak might use a spokeshave. An American will use a draw-knife. Again, American is more descriptive, because you do draw the knife towards you. But what if you are actually shaving a spoke...?



You say potato...

- If you're working on the boat's plumbing and ask an American to 'Switch the taps on' it might be met with a blank expression. Whereas, if you ask him to 'Open the faucets' you're likely to get an immediate flow of water.
- Do you want to buy an eight by four sheet of teak-faced plywood? In America you better be sure, because if you order eight by four you will get the grain running across the sheet. Four by eight will have it running down the length.
- You can ask for shock-cord in an American chandlery, but be equally prepared for blank expressions. Much better to ask for bungee and you'll be directed to shock-cord.
- Yella Wellies' are rubber boating boots in The States – popularly coloured white.
- Weights are different in both countries. One ton in America is 2,000lb, whereas in England it is 2,240lb. So a boat in England described as displacing 20 tonnes would displace 22.4 tons in America – a big difference.
- A Ground Fault Circuit Interrupter (GFCI) is required on all boats with a shore power circuit in the USA. The nearest equivalent in Britain is a shore power circuit breaker of the mains electricity.