Learning the Ropes

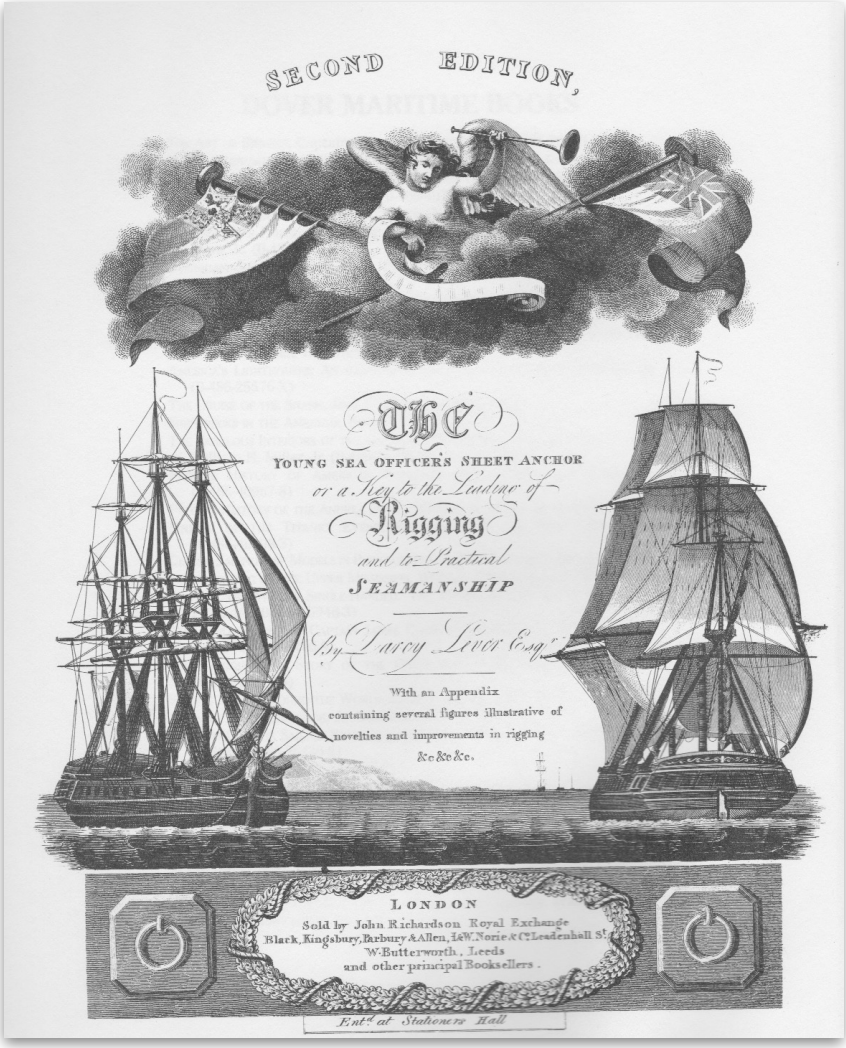
James Parbery

There is something delightful *about the vocabulary of the sea. The language is part of the joy of working in traditional vessels. Those of us with poetic hearts and who care about the history feel a sense of responsibility to preserve it. However, in at least one instance, our zealous guardianship of the vernacular has caused confusion and diluted the meaning of a fundamental word.*

I say 'fundamental' because what could be more elemental to a sailing ship than *rope* or *line*?

My engagement with the subject commenced the first time I stepped up the gangway to the deck of a sailing ship, during the bi-centennial First Fleet Re-enactment voyage in 1987. In great wonderment I exclaimed to a fellow trainee "Look at all the ropes!" I was swiftly corrected by a more experienced crew, who informed me, "Actually, they're not called ropes. They're called lines." Since I was yet to learn the difference between starboard and larboard, I accepted his word and after 'learning the lines' I enjoyed being *in the know* and correcting other trainees who were so ignorant as to call them *ropes*.

Once parbuckled into a career of the sea and after reading a number of old books on ships and rigging, it dawned on me that the old salts from the days of sail never seemed bashful to call the hairy lengths of cordage *rope.* "How could that be?" I thought. "How could they have all been so wrong?!"



Seaman Manuals

It gets worse; every book I have read on ships and rigging, dating from 1616 to 1960, refers to the running rigging of a ship as *rope.* I started to wonder if the language had become confused at some point. Why are we calling it *line*?

Maybe the words had became mixed up during the 20th century - and if so, how? I have some thoughts on it and hopefully one of our readers will have a more definitive answer.

Before we go on, though (I hear you ask) why does it even matter?

There are mightier things to worry about but for someone who likes words and, in particular, the language of the sea, I'm probably not the only sea dog that would like to have clarity and see the genuine nomenclature preserved. And it's helpful when us sailors are all speaking the same language.

Some might view this work as a curious study on how language can be corrupted over time. Others will wonder why we're tying ourselves in knots over it. But disagreement or confusion over matters like this can be a distraction from getting on with the job (whether sailor or writer) and it might even be a question of safety during an emergency on board ship. Let's take a journey, back to the *Age of Sail* . We might find some clues to help sheet home an answer to this little puzzle.

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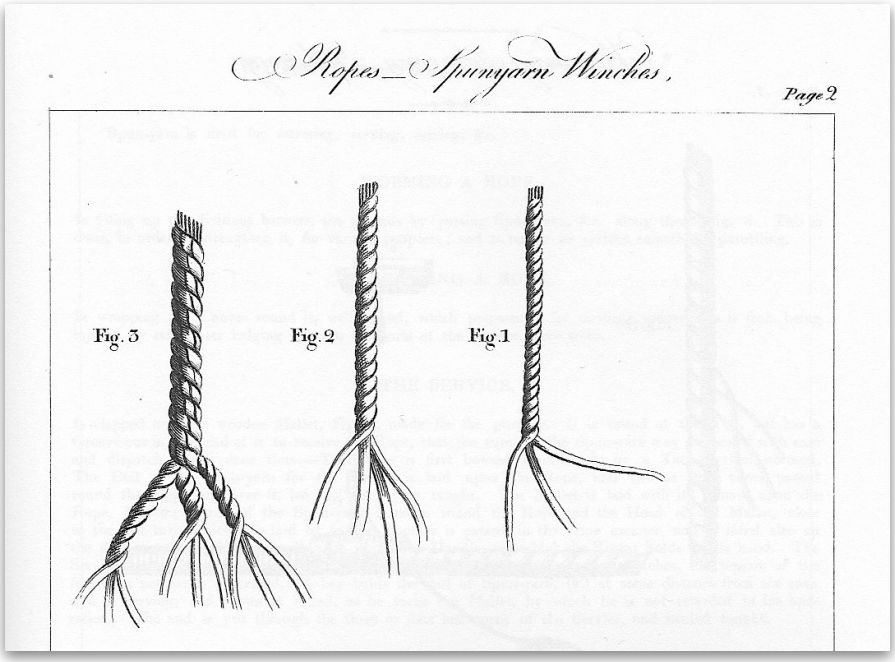


Darcy Lever (1759 - 1839), in his 1808 publication **THE YOUNG OFFICER'S SHEET ANCHOR** writes,

"The rigging of a Ship consists of a quantity of Rope, or Cordage, of various Dimensions…such as Halliards, Braces, Clew-lines, Bunt-lines, &c, &c. These are occasionally hauled upon, or let go, for the purpose of working the Ship."

There appears to be a contradiction here for the sailor; Darcy refers to clewlines and buntlines as *rope*. Was he confused too? Let's ask **Captain George Biddlecombe RN** (1807-1878). He spent all his working life in the British merchant navy *and* the Royal Navy under sail. In his 1848 edition of **THE ART OF RIGGING** Biddlecombe describes *rope* as

"All cordage in general, above one inch in circumference, which bear different names, according to their various uses…."

Captain Biddlecombe describes *line* as

"Cordage, smaller than ropes…used to seize blocks into their straps… Log-line, made of three or more strands, and used for the log, &c. Marline, made of two strands, and used for the same purpose as house-line."

Most clewlines and buntlines these days are larger than one inch circumference (eight millimetres or 5/16 of an inch diameter) but they *are* smaller than halyards, sheets and braces - which might average sixteen or twenty millimetres diameter or more in modern sailing ships (i.e. ships from the 18th-21st centuries). Before the 17th century clewlines and buntlines (and leechlines) were smaller than they are in modern ships; most likely less than an inch circumference. It would have been proper to call them *buntlines* and *clewlines* due to their size. Ships and their rigging have since

grown larger but the specific names have remained - a common phenomena in other branches of etymology.

Captain Biddlecombe's book was an expanded tome of David Steel's esteemed **ELEMENTS AND PRACTICE OF RIGGING AND SEAMANSHIP,** published in London in 1794 - generally known as 'The Bible' amongst seamen. The volumes are still in print - a handy reference for square rig revivalists.

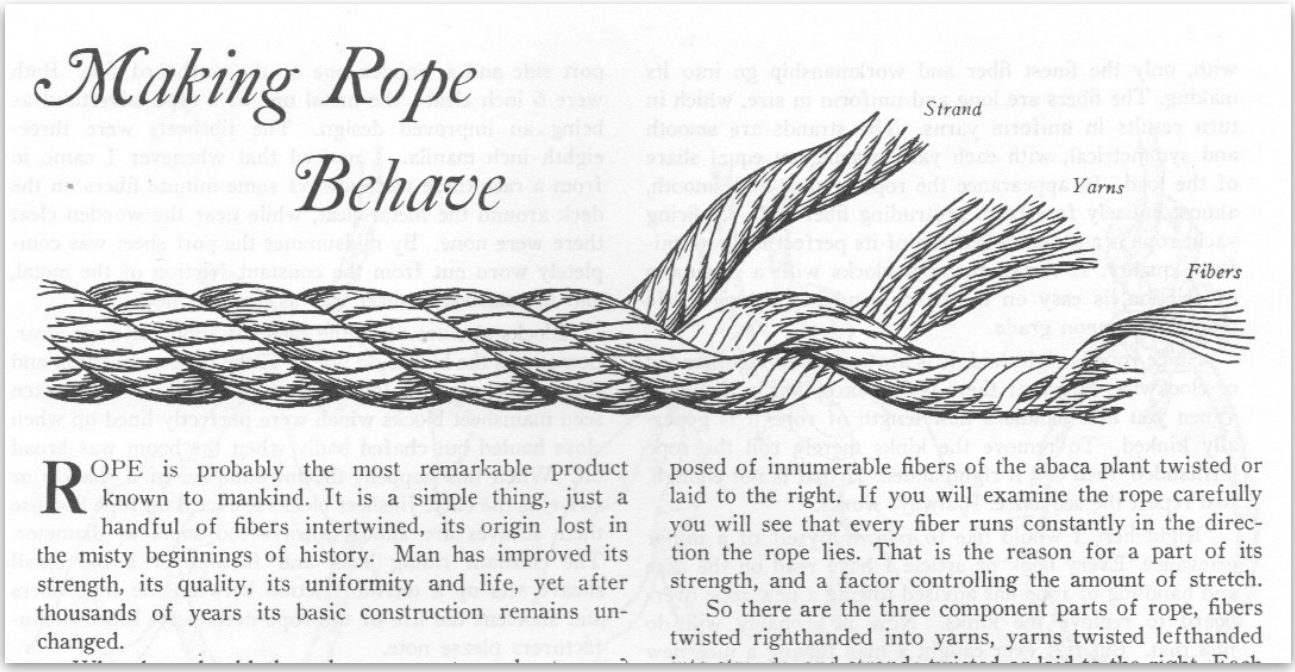
In case we need further convincing, the multi-lingual publication **From Keel to Truck - A Dictionary of Naval Terms** by Captain Paasch (who first went to sea in c.1810 and spent his life in the marine service), describes *rope* as;

"A combination of the fibrous material obtained either from hemp, manilla, coir, etc., spun into threads, called yarns, which are twisted together forming a rope."

Captain Paasch delineates *line* as *"thin cords, [such as] marline, a log-line, lead-line, rat-line, etc., to distinguish them from thicker cordage".*

His dictionary also translates the words into French, German, Spanish and Italian.

A similar multi-lingual tome, **A DICTIONARY OF NAVAL EQUIVALENTS,** published by the British Naval Staff Intelligence Division in 1922, translates the English into French, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Swedish, Danish, Dutch and German. Distinct words are given for *rope* and *line* in most languages (including English) except for the Swedes and Germans who have similar and identical words for both, *as well as* different words for them.

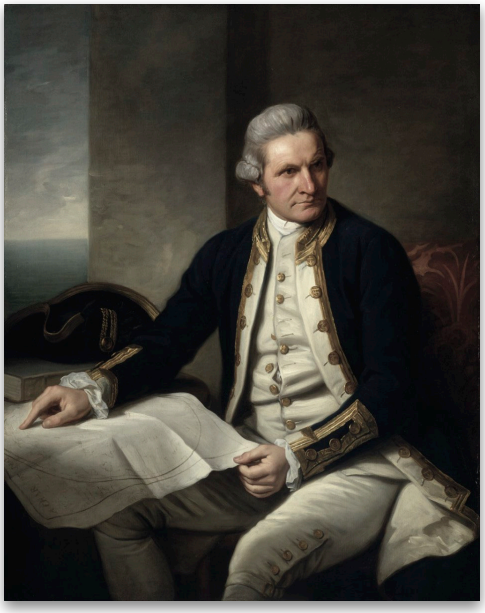


For the mid 20th century we have consistent references to *rope* in Captain Sam Svensson's 1940 publication **HANDBOOK OF SEAMAN'S ROPEWORK** and Hervey Garrett Smith's **THE MARLINE SPIKE SAILOR,** first published in 1960.

Great writers of the sea, who served before the mast, include the American Herman Melville (**Moby Dick** 1851), the Polish-born Joseph Conrad (**Heart of Darkness** 1899) and the Australian Alan Villiers (**The War with Cape Horn**, **The Set of the Sails)**. In his 1849 novel **Redburn** Herman Melville describes the sailors "*singing out at the ropes*" (i.e. singing shanties as they hauled on sheets and halyards) and in the great classic **Moby Dick** he dedicates a chapter to the monkey-rope; *"The monkey-rope is found in all whalers; but it was only in the Pequod that the monkey and his holder were tied together…".*

Robert Louis Stevenson (**Treasure Island** 1883) and John Masefield (**Sea Fever** 1902) were never shy to mention the word *rope*. A line from R. L. Stevenson's poem **Christmas at Sea** (1888) reads; *"And O the wicked fool I seemed, in every kind of way, to be here and hauling frozen ropes on blessed Christmas Day."*

Captain James Cook, made casual mention of the word in his journals. During the Antarctic exploration 1772-1775 he wrote, for example,
"Sleet and Snow froze to the Rigging as it fell and decorated the whole with icicles. Our ropes were like wires, Sails like board…"



More than a hundred years before Cook was born we find a reference to *rope,* dating to the time of William Shakespeare and the King James Bible; **Sir Henry Mainwaring** was a dashing, young sea captain who drifted into the game of piracy during the early 17th Century. He was spared the hangman's noose and offered a full pardon by King James I on proviso he renounce his calling and restore himself to the Crown. In gratitude Mainwaring wrote a comprehensive treatise on sailing in 1616 and presented it to the King as a gift, which was later published. It's more than likely that James Cook read those pages while still a bare footed sailor.

Mainwaring's book includes chapters "Of the Beginnings, Practices, and Suppression of Pirates" and "The Seaman's Dictionary". Sir Henry later rose to the rank of vice admiral in the Royal Navy.

Sir Henry Mainwaring

"Braces. These ropes do belong to all the yards…"
"Breast-ropes are the ropes which make fast the parrel to the yard
"Brails are small ropes reeved through blocks…"
"Clew-garnet is a rope which is made fast to the clew of the sail…"
"Clew-line. This is the same to topsails, topgallant sails and spritsails that the clew-garnet is to the mainsail and hath the very same use…."
"Leech-lines are small ropes which are fastened to the leech of the topsails…"
"Ropes. Generally all the cordage belonging to a ship is called by the name of rope…".

If modern mariners are to be confused over a simple word like *rope* what chance do we have of preserving the sophisticated language, skills and knowledge from the Age of Sail? For those of us interested in conserving and reviving what we can from that epoch it would make sense to trust the technical and linguistic masters of the period - even a reformed pirate.

Sailors are a practical race of people. The safety of their ship and crew depends on clear and precise communication. If I was asked to grab some *line* from the bosun's store it might be for lashing two parts of a lanyard together or to mouse a hook. If you were asked to grab a length of *rope* it might be to lash down a loose cannon or to reeve a new tops'l sheet. It turns out that the ancient mariners have left us in no doubt that *rope* and *line* are specifically different materials for distinctly different jobs.

So, for a language that has barely changed in at least four centuries, how has it become fashionable, in recent years, to call rope *line*? I'm happy to offer some theories and would be interested to know if any reader can throw further light on it…

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Theory One - Foreign Ships

The last sailing ships to carry cargos between Europe and Australia were the German, Swedish and Finnish square riggers of the 1920s-1940s such as the Laeisz company's *Flying P-liners* - the Pamir, *Passat, Padua, Peking* and Gustaf Erikson's Åland fleet; *Pommern, Mushulu, Viking* (to name a few). They carried international crews, including young Australian, New Zealand, British and American cadets who would, naturally, have learned something of the native language of the ships. While most languages have distinctly different names for *rope* and *line* the Germans use the word *leine* interchangeably for both *rope* and *line* (they also use the word *tau* for rope and *linie* for *line).* The Swedes, close neighbours to the country of Åland, have several words for rope, including tåg and *lina.* It is possible that some of the English speaking sailors carried the German and Scandinavian lingo across to English-speaking ships during and after this period.

I sailed with three of the men who were in those ships; the late **Capt Bruce Hitchman** who sailed in *Pamir* 1943-47, the late **Captain Adrian Small** who was in *Passat* 1946-48 and sailmaker **Brian Peters** who rounded Cape Horn three times during *the last great grain races* of 1948-49.

Brian learnt sailmaking aboard *Passat* and is still making and mending sails for square rigged ships in Sydney today - seventy years on, at age eighty-nine.

Contrary to *Theory One,* Brian agrees that the running rigging in a ship is called *rope* while the smaller stuff is called *line* - "nothing bigger than a heaving line" he says.

Pamir was seized by the New Zealanders in 1941 as a war prize and continued to operate with almost entirely Australian and New Zealand crew - so it's not so likely that her young cadets were influenced by foreign tongues. I was privileged to sail under Captain Adrian Small's command while he was master of HMAV *Bounty* in 1987-88 and with Captain Bruce Hitchman while he was mate and relief master of the barque *James Craig* in the mid 2000s. I don't remember either of these venerable masters being hung up on using the word *rope* - but I do remember that Captain Hitchman liked to hitch them.

Theory Two - The Yachtsman

It is a favourite amongst yachtsmen to ask the smart-alec rhetoric of their freshly joined crew “how many ropes are ‘on’ this yacht?” The young yachtsman would look aloft and count the spaghetti around him and give a number. “Sixteen ropes? Maybe Twenty?” “No.” says the old salt. “There is only one - the bell rope”. In this case, the veteran yachtsman might be correct, as the running rigging in a small yacht could be less than 8 or 10mm diameter and is therefore correctly called *line.* The bell rope is usually a decent fist-full and can properly be called *rope* (although, somewhat ironically, the *rope* is likely made up of braided *line*).

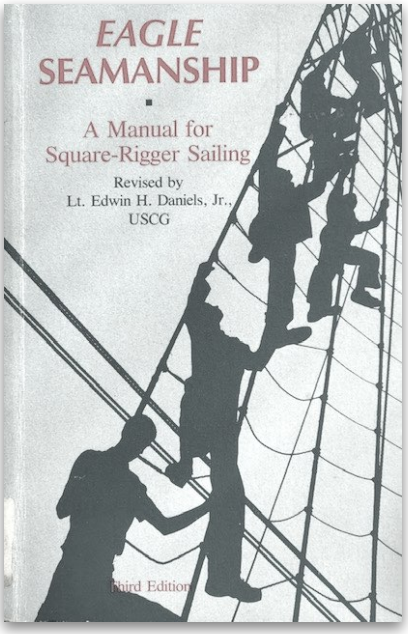
The young yachtsman has then grown up thinking that all rope is called *line* (except the bell rope) and has gone on to spread this gospel to his shipmates. Some of those yachtsmen grew up to become captains of square rigged sailing ships during the revival of sail, as was the case during the US Bicentennial (1976) and the Australian First Fleet Re-enactment (1987-88). Now, with weathered faces and red or salty beards, truly the masters of their profession, and recalling the early lessons of their youth, those skippers have impressed upon their young crew that all ropes are called *lines*. However, unlike a yacht, most of the running rigging in a sailing ship is more than an inch circumference. It might now make them shudder to think that calling rope *line* is almost equivalent to calling a ship a *boat.*

I can imagine how further embellishments of the yachtsman’s tale might have been invented. Noting that the coils of rope on the wharf, wrapped in jute and waiting to be shipped aboard are clearly marked *ROPE 12mm*, the young greenhorn has dared to challenge the bo’su’n’s assertion that it should be called *line.* The quick-thinking bo’su’n has come up with the idea that “Once the rope is rigged it is *then* called line*”.* The naïve young sailor has accepted this explanation, despite its lack of logic; it is not normal to change the name of a material simply because it is put to use.

Or the bosun has side-stepped that question by pointing out that, actually, once rigged they all have individual names - sheets, halyards, braces, etc. (and in this he is correct). There may also be exceptions, such as bowlines, nave lines and flag halyards, all being of a smaller diameter.

The standing rigging (shrouds, backstays etc), whether made of wire rope, natural or synthetic cordage, is also classified as *rope.* However, the yachtsman’s yarn of calling rope *line* seems to have stuck and the myth is now being passed on to Millennials and Generation Z.

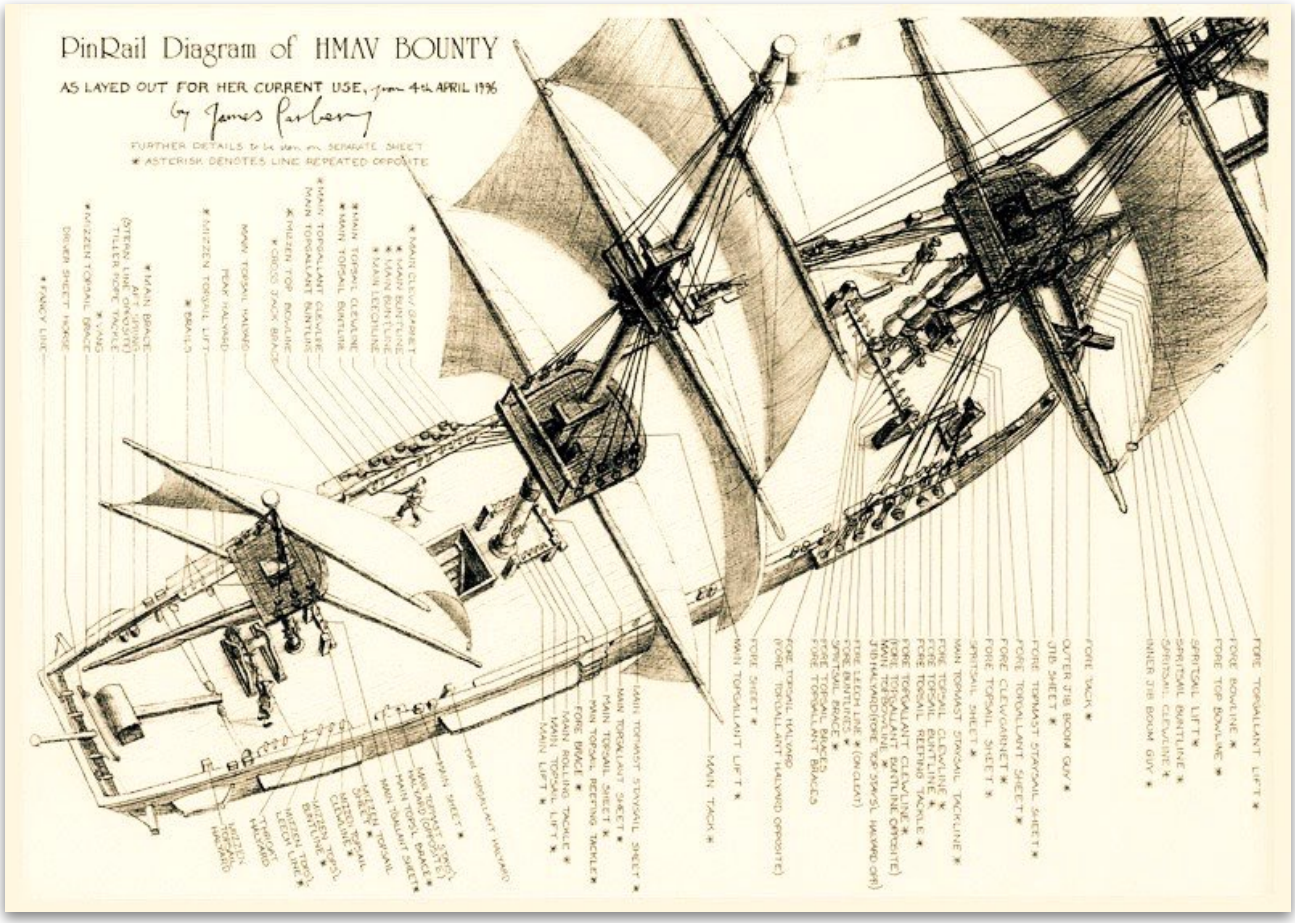
The earliest use I have found of the word *line* in this context is from an amateur American film made aboard a sailing ship in the 1930s - although the commentary may have been added to the silent film some time later. The 1930s happens to coincide with the rise of pleasure sailing (racing and cruising yachts) and the demise of commercial sailing ships.



The U.S. Coast Guard publication **EAGLE SEAMANSHIP - A Manual for Square-Rigger Sailing**, published in 1979, refers almost exclusively to rope as *line*. With America’s economic ascendancy after the First World War the *nouveau riche* led the Western trend in pleasure yachting, so perhaps the Americans led the trend away from using the word *rope*. **Eagle Seamanship** also contains the idiom, *sailing on a vessel* (rather than the seamanlike *in* a vessel) and the American *douse* a sail (in lieu of the English *haul in, take in, run down, clew up or clew down,* depending on the type of sail). There has been a tendency for the Americans to change English words and spellings - perhaps in defiance of their old masters.

Theory Three - Specific Names

The rigging in a ship is rarely referred to as *rope* in practice because sailors mostly use the ropes' specific names; fore sheet, upper tops'l brace, main topmast staysail halyard, spanker sheet, etc. The only time you might refer to something as *rope* is when ordering a new recruit (who doesn't yet know the names) to "haul on that rope" or when asking the bo's'un to grab a coil of it from the rope locker. It could be this that gave rise to the phenomena that the hairy cordage is only called *rope* when it is still in its coil; once rigged it is usually referred to by its particular name.



The French took this rule to the extreme, possibly dating back to Napoleonic times; it has been forbidden aboard French ships, since at least the turn of the nineteenth century, to call rope *cordage* (rope) OR *ligne* (line) - it must be always called by its specific name (such as whatever the French word is for *fore topmast stays'l downhaul*. In fact, it is terribly bad luck to call rope *rope*; it's as serious as whistling in the wind or finding yourself to leeward of a British frigate or uttering the word *Macbeth* in a theatre. The French also have that old chestnut about the bell rope and if someone dares to call a rope *cordage* they are swiftly told that *une corde est utilisée pour se pendre au bras de la cour* ("a rope is used to hang you from the yardarm").

As we have seen in the numerous sailors' treatises from the previous centuries, the British never adopted the French superstition about rope - in fact a British tar would probably have preferred to swallow hot pitch than adopt a French tradition. But what about the Americans? Britain was their common enemy from 1776 to 1815 and the French later gave the Americans a nice statue to express their *fraternité.* So perhaps the Americans got the rope/line idea from the French and thought it would be an excellent way to confound the English (and their allies) for the next couple of hundred years.

Theory Four - Buntlines, Clewlines

We mentioned the anomaly with these words earlier in the piece. When described collectively the clewlines, buntlines and leechlines are referred to as *the gear* and when the sails are unfurled and hanging from them (clewed up) they are hanging *in the gear*. The gear might also be referred collectively by some mariners as *the lines,* due to their common name, size and purpose. One can see how this might have led to confusion amongst novice sailors, thinking perhaps other groups of ropes were also called *lines.*

Theory Five - Playing with Language

Some people like to fiddle around with language. They enjoy mixing it up because it helps keep life interesting or because it's fashionable. It's used in poetry, prose and songwriting to add interest or simply to help it rhyme. On deck one might call "Pull on this bit of string will ye" or "haul on this line" instead of "haul on the rope" just for the sake of messing with words. Combined with the other theories, above, this might have contributed to the confusion.

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Common Expressions Give us a Clue

There are a great number of expressions that we use in every-day life that have come from the sea. When we start a new job we're told to *learn the ropes.* That expression comes from the days of sail when a new recruit was expected to learn the name, function and position of each and every one of them. A sailing ship is likely to have at least a hundred ropes, secured to specific cleats and belaying pins. If a sailor is to be of any use he needs to learn them. *Learning the lines* is an expression used in the theatre for actors learning their parts and, presumably, for yachtsmen to learn their rig. The irony is that it tends to be the modern sailor that gets 'hung up' on the word *rope* while those on shore have no qualms in using the word freely.

There are other idioms that have entered the common vernacular;

Give him enough rope and he'll hang himself (referring to a noose)

Money for old rope Selling old rope for money is and was a rare occurrence and something to be rather chuffed about (I admit that I have done it!). The expression has come to mean easily earned or easily obtained money from any means.

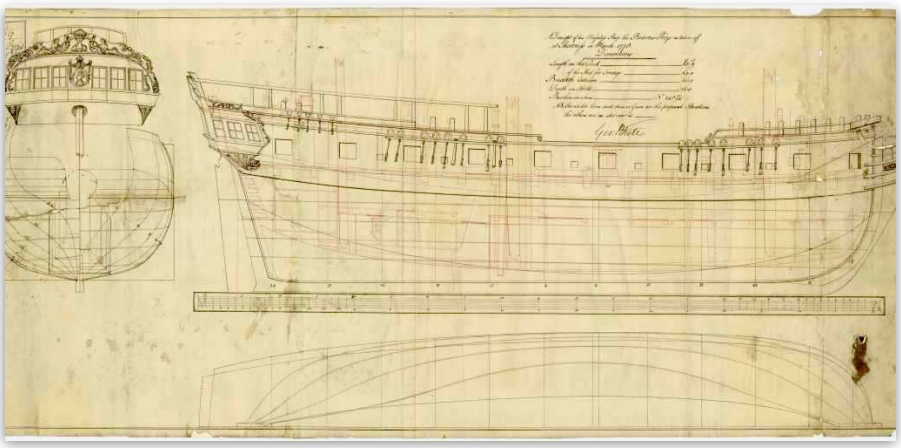
Rope in; to haul someone or something in (either figuratively or physically) with a lasso rope**.**

Ropeable (*Australia*, *New Zealand*); Angry to the point of needing to be restrained with a rope.

On the ropes - when a boxer is near exhaustion and defeat, languishing against the ropes of the boxing ring.

And here are some nautical uses and derivations of the word *line*;
The Line is a sailor's term for the equator.

A **ship's lines** are the two dimensional drawings of a ship's hull. The lines describe the complex three dimensional shape of a hull for shipwrights to work from. They are pencil lines or inked lines.



Toe the line; when barefooted naval crew were *lined up* for inspection they were ordered to have their big toes against a line in the pitch (between the planks of the deck). The expression was “toe the line” not “tow the line”.

Liner; a passenger ship that follows a regular route or *line* (e.g. from Belfast to New York and return).

Berthing and Mooring Ropes

Mooring warps (for mooring and berthing) are commonly called mooring *lines* these days but, following on from our research, it’s safe to assume this to be modern debasement. In English-speaking ships the expression ‘get your lines ashore’ would have been in reference to the heaving lines, which are the light messengers thrown from the ship to tow the heavier warps across to the wharf or jetty, as mentioned by sailmaker Brian Peters. If we are to bring back the original language and the distinct meaning of the words we would revert to the old practice of calling a ship’s warps *head ropes* and *stern ropes.*

A small yacht might still refer to them as stern lines or head lines, depending on their size - or *stern fast f*or a dinghy’s stern and a *painter f*or the head. That seemingly odd-placed word at the bow probably derives from the Old French/Late Middle English word *penteur/paynter*, meaning ’hanger’ - referenced from a seven-hundred-year-old shipyard account and quoted in N. H. Nicholas’ 1847 tome ‘A History of the Royal Navy’.

Hierarchy of Cordage

A hierarchy of cordage might be listed in this order; **thread,** for sewing on buttons, **string,** for tying up parcels or balloons; **twine,** for sewing sails or bolt-rope and for whipping rope-ends; **line,** such as fishing line, marline, painter, lead line and for abstract delineations, **rope,** such as the running rigging in a ship, the bolt rope of a sail, a hangman’s noose or the cords of a boxing ring and **hawser, warp** and **cable** which are large ropes for mooring, berthing, warping, towing and anchoring.

Keeping the Language

Sailors are generally keen to preserve the language and traditions of the sea. In these two four-letter words, however, it seems we have been deceived and confused for a number of decades. Restoring the words ***rope*** and ***line*** to their original use and meaning would help bring clarity and consistency, give us all a common language, help preserve the fundamentals of hundreds of years of maritime tradition …and vindicate my opening remark from that moment I first stepped aboard ship.

James Parbery has worked in sailing ships for over thirty years and is master of the Sydney based barquentine, Southern Swan*. He is also a folk musician, songwriter and marine artist. He recalls that when he was nine years old his school teacher declared that it was possible to write a story on any subject under the sun - even a piece of string.*

If readers have anything to contribute to this subject please contact the writer at parberymaritime@gmail.com