

LEARNING THE ROPES: A SOFTWARE TOOL FOR CLIL COURSES IN MARITIME SCHOOLS AND INSTITUTIONS

Laura Cignoni, Rita Marinelli

Istituto di Linguistica Computazionale, Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, Pisa (ITALY)
laura.cignoni@ilc.cnr.it, rita.marinelli@ilc.cnr.it

Abstract

This paper outlines a proposal for maritime English language teaching in public and private Nautical Schools and other maritime educational institutions and establishments in Italy, using a content and language integrated learning (CLIL) approach. The courses are addressed in particular to those students who would like to take up a marine career as officers, engineers or other crew members of the Merchant Navy, and thus require an adequate knowledge of seafaring terminology, but can also be interesting for those wishing to explore the origins and development of maritime language. In order to provide a more challenging environment and better opportunity for the learning of seafaring terms and expressions in English, students are supported by *Mariterm*, a lexical database, organized in semantic relations, available at the Institute for Computational Linguistics (ILC) of the National Research Council (CNR) in Pisa. A total of around 3500 headwords pertinent to the nautical subject, with particular regard to the two sub-fields of maritime navigation and transport, have been included in the database and grouped into approximately 2,500 *synsets*, which are sets of one or more synonyms, for example “marinaio”, “marittimo” (*sailor*). Alongside the translation of each Italian word into English, and the definition of each word in both languages, the database is constantly enriched with idiomatic expressions belonging to the maritime field in the two languages, and with explanations of the origins of the most common phrases, for example “tempesta in un bicchier d’acqua” (*storm in a teacup*, lit. *storm in a glass of water*), “prendere un granchio” (*make a mistake*, lit. *to take a crab*), “ultima spiaggia” (*last resort*, lit. *last beach*) in Italian, and *swing the lead, between the devil and the deep blue sea, learn the ropes* in English. While it is easy to detect the meaning of many nautical expressions, for instance “andare col vento in poppa” (*fair winds*, lit. *go with the wind astern*) in Italian, *too close to the wind* in English, non-specialist users would find it extremely difficult to retrace the origins of other expressions, as for example “d’alto bordo” (*of high rank, of high social class*) in Italian, or *at loggerheads* in English. The tool can bring a number of advantages to the students, helping them improve the language, providing a motivating context on which to build their knowledge, and introducing real-life situations into the classroom. The vocabulary learnt by the trainee students using the software tool can be integrated and consolidated by a number of exercises ranging from cloze tests, defining words in a text, matching words with their definitions, true/false answers, completion of mind maps, as well as pair-work, group work and classroom work carried out under the guidance of the teacher. Trainees focus on key vocabulary, explore and experiment the language, deal with topics related to their future work, so as to feel that what they are learning is relevant to their future professional sphere.

Keywords: maritime language, technology-enhanced learning, contrastive phraseology.

1 INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, the rapid growth and widespread use of technology have generated a number of changes in the field of education, with a dramatic impact on teaching, especially considering that only a few decades ago, computers were practically unknown in workplaces and centres of learning. Nowadays, students attending schools in which technology is commonplace and easily accessible have shown growing interest in the classroom activities, and have been able to gain the best possible benefit from the support provided by computers, electronic and digital media, internet, etc. Technology can be integrated in the classroom in a number of ways, and helps to connect the students to the real world, so that they may become independent learners, opening up to opportunities that they do not have in the traditional setting [1]. Students today are faced with a technologically-intense world when they come out of school, and need to become sufficiently competent so as to enhance their academic and professional competence on the one hand, and obtain high levels of effectiveness and proficiency as technology users on the other. Technology into the classroom makes the learning process more engaging and effective, since focus is shifted from

the teacher as presenter of information to the learner who becomes an active participant strongly engaged in the learning process, instead of a passive information receiver. Motivation in particular has been recognized as an important factor for a positive achievement of the foreign language. Using information techniques to access information for learning, research and cooperative work have thus become important tools for expression and communication.

In this context, the software-based tool *Mariterm* available at the Institute for Computational Linguistics (ILC) of the National Research Council (CNR) in Pisa, can be proficiently used for CLIL (Content and language integrated learning) courses addressed to trainees studying Maritime English in nautical education and training institutions for the learning of seafaring words and expressions. The tool can be used in a variety of ways, involving the collaboration between, on the one hand, students and teachers, on the other hand among the students themselves. CLIL, or dual-focussed education approach, fosters and strengthens the interest and motivation of the students to second language learning, helping them achieve higher awareness of the language as a means of communication, and bringing them closer to everyday experiences. The foreign language is used to teach content, helping the learners develop linguistic and communicative competences. CLIL provides the background for a positive learning environment, in which new skills are introduced and previous skills reinforced, getting the students involved in different tasks and activities which lead to positive outcomes [2]. Teachers sometimes have little experience of information technology (IT), but soon familiarize with electronic tools, also thanks to the help of students who seem to encounter few problems when using technology-based equipment. Languages can be learnt through an appropriate use of modern technology, since the computer presents the material on an individual basis, allowing students to proceed at their own pace [3].

This paper is organized as follows: section one focuses on the importance of the adoption and use of technology in school settings, and explores the main features of the content and language integrated learning (CLIL) approach exploiting the software-based tool *Mariterm*. Section two is dedicated to a detailed description of *Mariterm*, with the organization of its database in synsets, and connection with the English WordNet Lexicon; section three presents a sample of maritime terms and expressions extracted from corpora, dictionaries and texts related to the maritime knowledge world. Section four describes activities that can be performed in CLIL classes in order to learn and consolidate the specific maritime terminology. Finally, section five is dedicated to the origins of some Italian and English idiomatic expressions pertinent to the field.

2 THE LEXICAL SEMANTIC DATABASE *MARITERM*

The easy-to-use software tool supporting the CLIL classes is a terminological database named *Mariterm*. The database is of a relational type and the relations connecting the terms are lexical-semantic. According to the EuroWordNet (EWN)/ItalWordNet (IWN) model [4] and in the perspective of the WordNet (WN) philosophy [5], the words which are denotationally equivalent and that can be substituted one with the other in many, but not all contexts, are grouped in sets of synonymous words or “synsets” [6]. Substitution does not change the “truth value” of the proposition in which the word is embedded.

The database includes around 3,500 lemmas drawn from the nautical field, and has been grouped into a total of about 2,500 synsets [7], e.g.: *boa*, *gavitello* (buoy); *folata*, *raffica di vento* (gust); *salpare*, *levare l'ancora* (to weigh anchor). Each synset has a definition and is linked to other synsets by means of semantic relations. There are two different kinds of lexical semantic relations in the database: 1) ‘internal relations’ linking the terms in the database; 2) ‘equivalence relations’, connecting the words to the synsets of the generic English WordNet.

Both the internal and equivalence relations support the students in the study of maritime language, in Italian as well as in English.

2.1 Internal relations

Synonyms are grouped in synsets, with language-internal relations between pairs of synsets. The conceptual structures, organized hierarchically through the ‘vertical’ relations “has_hyponym/has_hyperonym”, provide coherence and consistency:

boa (buoy) has _hyponym *galleggiante* (float) [*qualsiasi corpo che galleggia sia fissato al fondo come boe o gavitelli, sia mobile come vari tipi d'imbarcazione.*]

The linguistic model also includes horizontal lexical-semantic relations such as 'role', 'part_of', 'cause', 'purpose', 'sub_event', 'belong_to_class', etc., which indicate semantic relations between concepts that are neither synonyms nor hierarchically-dependent terms [8]:

timone (helm) has _hyperonym *meccanismo direzionale, organo di governo della nave* (steering mechanism)

timonare (to steer) involved_agent *timoniere* (helmsman)

timoniere (helmsman) role_agent *timonare* (to steer)

The Italian word "timone" has the translation *helm* in English, indicating the wheel used to change the course of a vessel, and also the entire apparatus by which a vessel is steered. However, "timone" is also translated with *tiller*, the horizontal bar fitted directly to the top of the rudder post, used by sailors on older ships. Finally, the term *helm* is also used in the figurative expression "to be at the helm", indicating a position of leadership or control, and in "the big helmsman", (used to indicate Mao Tze Tung). The following figure gives an example of relations for the verb 'salpare':

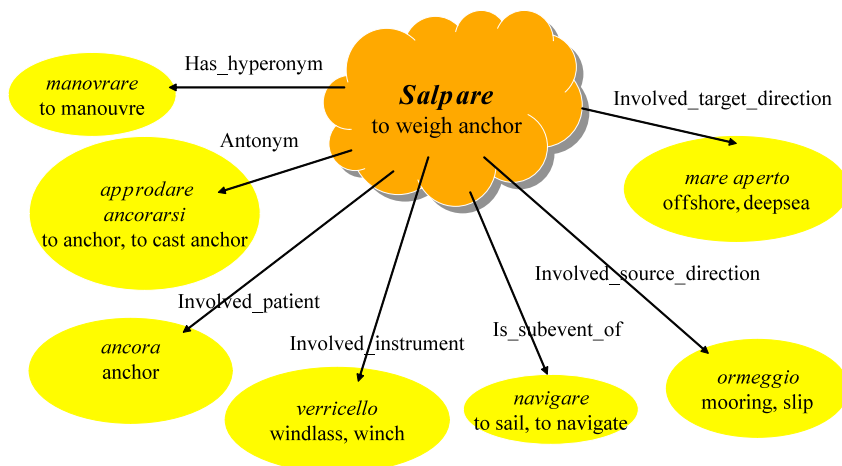


Fig. 1. Some relations for 'salpare' (to weigh anchor).

2.2 Equivalence relations

The lexical semantic relations do not only allow to connect the terms within the specialized lexicon, but also to link the synsets of the terminological database to the general WordNet lexicon. In particular, the equivalence relations link the terminological synsets to their closest equivalent concepts of the Princeton WN using the Inter Lingual Index (ILI)¹. Therefore, the following types of relations can be obtained:

a) synonymy (or near synonymy) relationship:

alare eq_near synonym *haul, cart, drag* (draw slowly or heavily)

stivatore eq_synonym *stevedore, loader, dockhand* (a labourer who loads and unloads vessels in a port)

b) inclusion of the synsets in a taxonomic chain:

porto di trasbordo (hub port) eq_has_hyperonym *seaport, haven, harbour* (a place where ships can take on or discharge cargo)

c) 'part', 'role', 'means', etc. relations, which allow a more precise definition of the semantic field of each word:

¹ The ILI is an unstructured fund of synsets (mainly taken from WordNet 1.5), the so-called ILI-records.

stivatore (stevedore) eq_role *to stow, to load* (fill by packing tightly)

Each term is connected with the WN (through the ILI) by an equivalence relation: when possible an eq_synonym or eq_near_synonym relation is used; otherwise an eq_has_hyperonym relation is coded.

When the English synonym of the term was not found in the ILI and the term was linked to its hyperonym, the English synonym of the term (suggested from sources other than WN) was codified as a variant of the term itself and other equivalence relations were used which could help describe our synset meaning more precisely, e.g.:

porto eq_synonym *harbour*

carico parziale eq_has_hyperonym *cargo*.

In maritime terminology the English term or multiword (or its acronym) expression is often known and used much more than the Italian one: for instance the abbreviation RO-RO (Roll On/Roll Off) usually indicates *nave traghetto per automezzi* (ferry for vehicle transport) or the term 'yawl', indicating the sailboat described hereafter, is used more than *jolla*. 'Spinnaker' (or even 'spi') is almost always used instead of *fiocco pallone*. In these and many other similar cases, we included in the synset both the English term (or multiword expression) and the Italian one(s) as variants, as we thought it could be useful to professional as well as to non-professional users.

These links to the ILI make it possible to connect the terms to the Top Ontology (TO), which is an abstract, hierarchically-organized and language-independent set of concepts:

timone (helm) → Artifact, Instrument, Object, Purpose

porto di trasbordo → Part, Place, Solid

ormeggio → Agentive, Location, Purpose

2.3 Vocabulary acquisition

The information which follows, presented here in discursive form, is only an example of what has been included in the lexical database *Mariterm*, according to the modes described.

Students may be interested in learning the Italian and corresponding English names of different kinds of sailboats, classified according to their size and the way their sails and masts are rigged, or arranged. The most important kinds of sailboats are: "deriva" (barca leggera con albero ampio) (*catboat*); "imbarcazione da diporto con un solo albero" (*sloop*); "piccolo veliero da diporto cabinato a due alberi" (*yawl*); "imbarcazione da regata e da crociera, a due alberi, con l'albero di prua più alto dell'albero di poppa" (*ketch*); "goletta" (imbarcazione con l'albero di prua più basso dell'albero di poppa) (*schooner*). Catboats and sloops are the most popular sailboats, and are easy to sail and comparatively cheap, while yawls, ketches and schooners are larger and more expensive. The main parts of a sailboat include: a) "scafo" (*hull*); b) "aste" (*spars*); 3) "vele" (*sails*); 4) "attrezzatura marinara" (*rigging*). The hull is the body of the boat, the front of which is called "prua" (*bow*), and the rear is called "poppa" (*stern*). A boat is also provided with a "deriva" (*keel or centerboard*), consisting in flat pieces of metal or wood extending into the water from the bottom of the hull in order to prevent movement on the sides. The "aste" (*spars*) are the poles supporting the sails and include "alberi" (*masts*), "boma" (*booms*) and "mezzo pennone" (*gaffs*). As far as sails are concerned, the "randa" (*mainsail*) is the largest sail on a sailboat, and is fastened to the back of the "albero di maestra" (*mainmast*). A smaller, triangular sail in front of the mainmast is called "fiocco" (*jib*). The spinnaker, a brightly coloured sail, is a large, balloon-shaped sail used for added speed when a boat sails with the wind.

In terms of direction, a boat can travel "sottovento" (*downwind*), or "sopravento" in the direction towards which the wind is blowing. The rudder is fundamental in controlling a boat, in pointing the bow in the desired direction. There are three basic sailing manoeuvres: "orzare" namely sailing into the wind, also called tacking to windward; "poggiare", i.e. sailing on the wind, or beating to windward; "andare al traverso", i.e. sailing across the wind (or with the wind abeam, or reaching); "andare col vento in poppa", i.e. sailing before the wind, or running. Two important skills that sailors must learn to control their boats are "aggiustare le vele" (*trimming*), namely adjusting the sails to obtain the full advantage of the available wind, while "virare" (*tacking*) involves turning the boat so that the wind comes at it from the opposite side.

A set of terms belonging to the meteorology knowledge field were also codified in the database *Mariterm* [9]. Winds, for instance, are classified according to the direction and to their strength, on the basis of the values of Beaufort's scale, as can be seen in Figures 2 and 3 respectively.

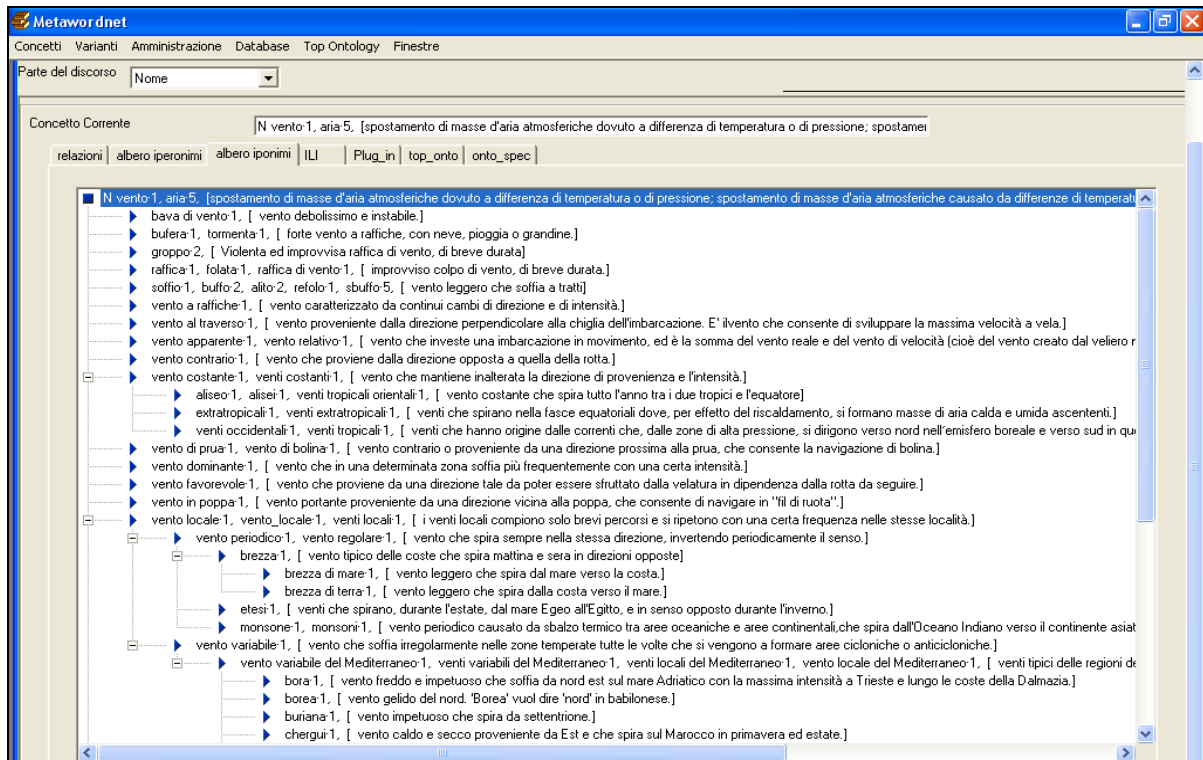


Fig. 2 Some hyponyms of 'vento' (wind).

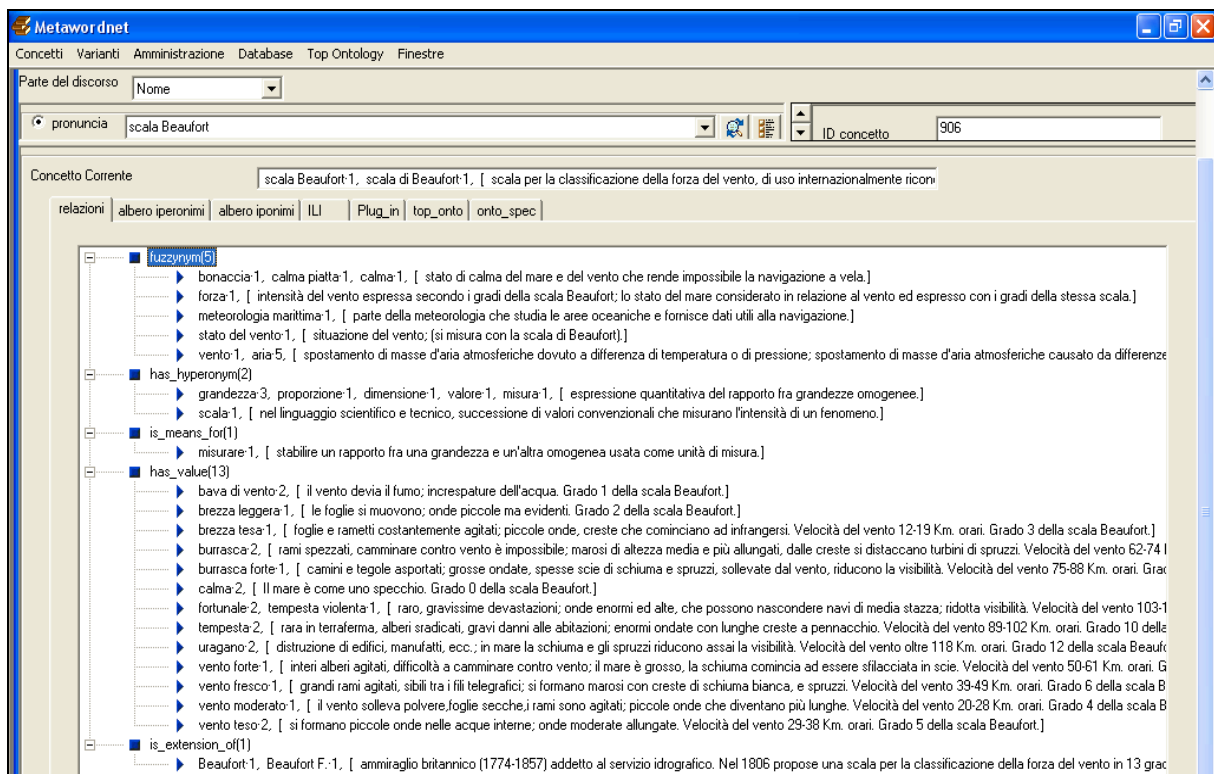


Fig. 3 The synset 'scala Beaufort' (Beaufort scale).

Therefore, students learn terms like "folata, raffica di vento" (*gust*), and can be interested in learning about the directions of the winds, whether they are travelling from "tramontana" that is from north to

south (and in such case they are northerly winds), or from “ponente” that is from west to east (and in such cases they are westerly winds).

3 ACTIVITIES

The lessons are designed to get the students more and more involved in the activities, without the teacher transmitting the information to the students, but with the trainees interacting with one another, in order to achieve and complete specific information, or to express their opinion about particular aspects of the nautical field. Presentation of the material is generally supported by visual aids, including powerpoint presentations, videos, overhead projectors, etc. In an active and learner-centred environment of this type, the students are engaged in a range of tasks, working collaboratively in small groups, according to modes that best fit the needs of the classroom [10]. During the course, students use different types of vocabulary learning strategies and focus their attention on specialised subject-specific maritime vocabulary which is integrated into their existing knowledge of the English language, with the assistance of the teacher. The students can be divided into different groups, promoting two-way instead of one-way tasks. There is no longer the teacher passing on information to the other participants for completion of the tasks, but the trainees sharing different portions of information. Classes in which communication is meaningful produces effective learning: the students forget they are speaking in a language other than their own, and become strongly involved in the learning process, gaining growing interest in the subject matter. The possibility of comparing two languages allows students to develop metalinguistic awareness, as well as better understanding of the target language. Students also develop a range of social and organizational skills, that help them consolidate their awareness in both languages. There is no doubt that repeated exposure to the same material is essential and beneficial to learning [11].

It is important for trainees to learn how to define words, and to use appropriate terminology for a rigorous description of a particular word or concept, using the formula “A (noun) is a (noun) that (verb)”. With the aid of texts and other specific maritime sources used during the lessons in the classroom, they may have to provide words with their definitions, for example:

Ufficiale di coperta (mate): licensed officer on deck whose jobs include standing watch, supervising cargo, and navigation.

Comandante (master): Merchant Navy Officer in command of ship, or holding a certificate of competency entitling him to do so. The name was formerly given to a navigating lieutenant of the Royal Navy.

Ufficiale di macchina (marine engineer): licensed officer in the engine room whose job includes maintaining and operating the ship’s engines.

Primo ufficiale (chief mate): senior officer, who can substitute the master. He is responsible for management of the ship, of navigation and to all related issues.

Direttore di macchina (chief engineer): the person supervising those working in the engine room.

Marinaio scelto (able bodied seaman or ‘ab’): worker on a commercial vessel who is familiar with the basic seafaring skills on deck.

Timoniere (helmsman): person who steers the ship, and more precisely stands at wheel.

Marinaio (deckhand, or ordinary seaman or ‘os’): unlicensed person who works on deck.

Cameriere (steward): unlicensed person who works in the kitchen or laundry, and cleans rooms.

Commissario di bordo (purser): a person who keeps the written accounts on a ship.

Respect of word order is also important, (time) + subject + verb + object + place + (time), and is a way of building self-confidence in the students, facilitating speaking and communication with their peers. Exercises can consist in using prompts to write a few lines about a particular phenomenon or concept, or in filling in tables or fact-files concerning the subject, doing crosswords, or completing cloze tests (in which the students are asked to re-insert words which have been removed from a portion of text). Students may be given a number of words in bold, and asked to match these words with their definitions, for example:

- | | |
|------------------------------|---|
| 1. Poppa (stern) | the left-hand side of the boat when you are facing the bow |
| 2. Dritta (starboard) | the back of a ship |
| 3. Sinistra (port) | the front of a ship |
| 4. Prua (bow) | the right-hand side of the boat when you are facing the bow |

True/False answers, in which students must say whether a statement is or is not correct can also be exploited to revise and reinforce the different areas of maritime knowledge. Another task consists in

asking a third student to repeat what two previous students have said, and possibly to provide additional information on a particular topic. Alongside the traditional written and oral exercises, it is important to revise briefly the subject of the previous lessons before starting with new material. Activities such as multiple choice tests, in which the students must choose the correct answer out of a number of options, and open activities, in which students must express their opinion about something, are also useful to reinforce the language. In order to acquire maritime vocabulary successfully, students need as much as possible to be exposed to the language [12].

Mind maps and organisational charts can be completed with information deriving from *Mariterm*; for instance a mind map can be organized taking into account the different ways of sailing and a chart can be prepared to indicate the different types of winds, or the different types of ships and parts of a ship. An exercise can consist in looking at the mind map, and then reading a text to complete it, or in reading a text and answering questions like *What type of ship is this?*, *Can you name any other type of ship?* *Which are the main parts of the ship?*

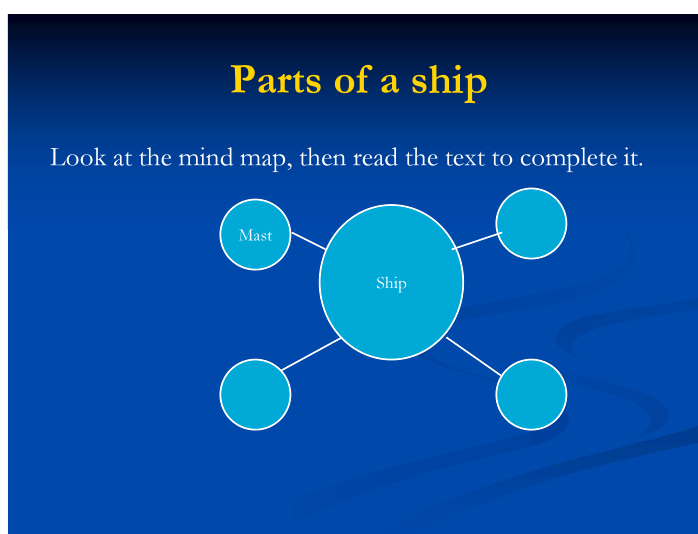


Fig. 4. Mind map for parts of a ship.

Mariterm offers a number of advantages, including the possibility of storing large quantities of terms, with their respective information, as well as images and graphics, which allow the learners to visualize what they are studying: they learn about the different parts of a ship or of a boat: the hull (It. *scafo*), or the deck (It. *ponte*), from which a number of idiomatic expressions [13], [14], [15] are derived, for example “all hands on deck!”, by which the crew are ordered to go on deck, and is the equivalent of the Italian “equipaggio in coperta!”, “to clear the decks”, ordering the crew members to finish the current work and be prepared for the next job; or “hitting the deck”, in Italian “buttarsi per terra”, like the others an informal expression used in days of danger.

4 ORIGINS OF SINGLE AND MULTIWORD EXPRESSIONS

For centuries ships of all types and sizes have sailed across the oceans, exploring the coasts of different countries, attracting the attention of the people and inspiring painters, novelists and poets. Language has always been the most important means of human intercourse for the transmission of content and culture in different multilingual contexts. The number of potential users in the maritime language field has grown rapidly over the years, and the study of nautical lexicology has become extremely important for these users. Learning about the origins of particular expressions dating back to older times [16] can raise students’ language awareness and motivation, and help them memorize single and multiword seafaring words in Italian and English alike. English is the language of the sea at an international level and is used in seafaring situations, and for this reason maritime English teachers should address user needs with appropriate learning tools and activities to be carried out in different institutions. All the data contained in *Mariterm* are managed by a tool that allows visualization and updating of the database and inclusion of a set of idiomatic expressions and sayings, as well as information of a historical type. In this work we have observed that many English idiomatic expressions coming from the maritime domain do not have an Italian corresponding expression. As the terminology contained in *Mariterm* is constantly connected to the English language, we thought it

was worth emphasizing on the English idiomatic expression with its translation into Italian, even if the latter does not belong to the nautical field. Both the Italian and translated English words and idiomatic expressions are defined and enriched with information relative to the origins of the words, which reflect the culture lying behind the origins of the sayings. The single or multiword expressions can be equivalent and idiomatic in both languages, or can be idiomatic in one of the two languages but not in the other. Moon has used the term “opaque” to denote those expressions not easily retraceable to their maritime origin, while the term “transparent” is referred to expressions that users would easily assign to the nautical field. For example the expression “learning/knowing/teaching the ropes”, dates back to the times in which new sailors had to learn about the layout and function of the rigging, lines and sheets referred to as ropes. In its figurative sense, the same expression refers to knowing how to do something or being fully knowledgeable or experienced (Italian: *sapere il fatto suo*).

Another expression is “to go by the board” (It. *cadere in mare*). In the old wooden ships, the board was the side of the vessel and any object falling off the ship would go past the “board of the ship”. What follows is an example of how the idiomatic expression “d’alto bordo” (*of high rank, of high social class*) is represented in the database *Mariterm*.

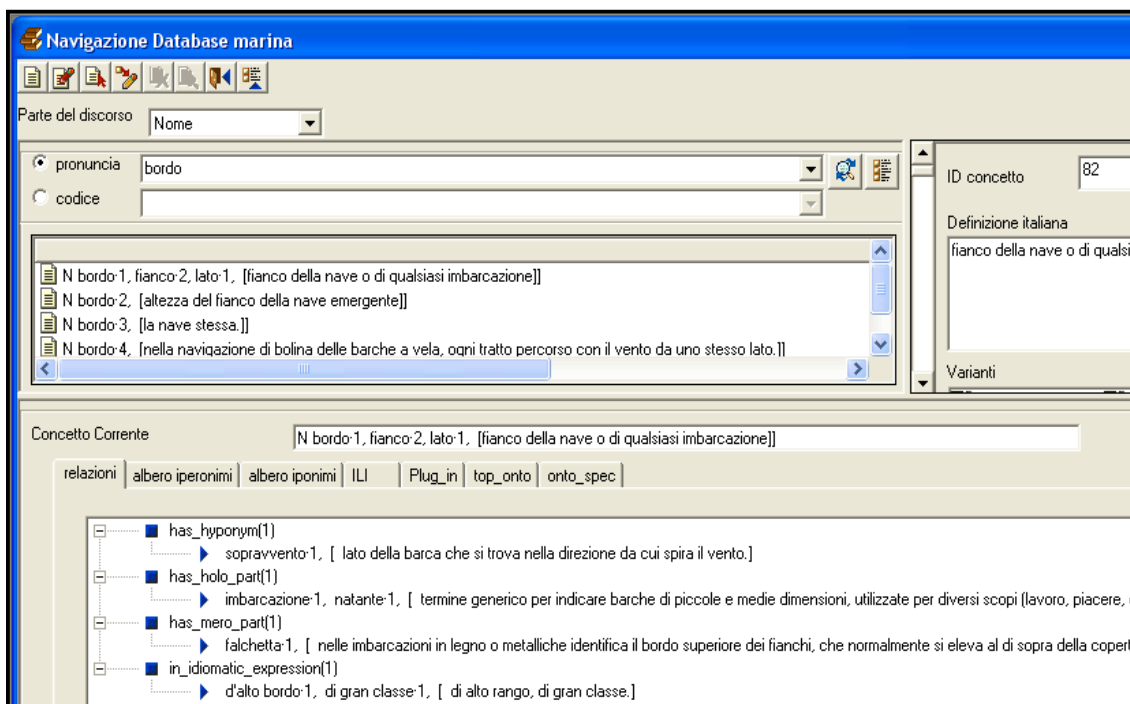


Fig. 5. The synset 'bordo' (side).

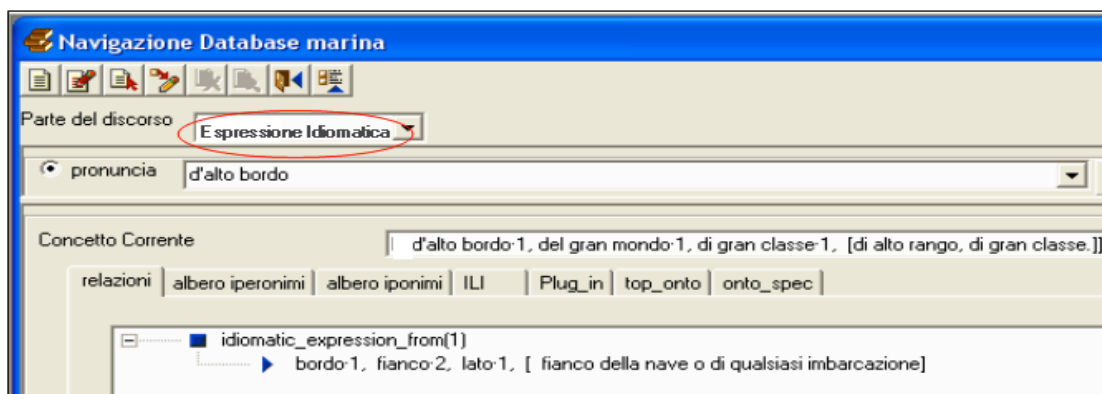


Fig. 6. The idiomatic expression 'd'alto bordo' (of high class).

The expression “d’alto bordo” (of high rank, of high social class) comes from ancient nautical language and was referred to high-sided ships which were the largest and therefore the richest. The importance

of a ship was in direct proportion to the height of the ship's side, the part of the vessel emerging from the water. "D'alto bordo" can be considered equivalent to the English "posh", the acronym of "port out starboard home" and dates back to the times in which ships sailed from England to India via the Suez Canal. On the outward journey, the rich passengers would occupy the cabins located on the left (port) side of the ship to avoid the sun, while they would occupy the right (starboard) side cabins on their journey back to England, for the same reason.

"Prendere un granchio" (literally *to take a crab*), derives from the language of fishing, and has the meaning of "making a mistake, making a blunder". It expresses a fisherman's disappointment when he realizes that a crab and not a large fish has taken the bait.

In English, the expression "swinging the lead" (It. *dondolare lo scandaglio*) is referred to a person who pretends to be ill or to be working. In the early days of sailing ships, seamen would drop a lead weight attached to a thin marked rope into the water to check its depth. Lazy sailors wanting to waste time would make the lead swing several times instead of dropping it immediately to the bottom of a waterway.

"Going on strike" dates back to the eighteenth century when life at sea was lonely and cruel, and offenders were punished harshly. For these reasons the seamen would often get together to fight the bad conditions in which they lived. As a form of protest, they would lower, or *strike* (It. *ammainare di colpo*) the sails of their ships, so that their complaints could be settled before the ship sailed out of port.

In the expression "Not enough room to swing a cat", to be intended as "a small, tight space", the "cat" is surprisingly not an animal but the "cat o' nine tails", a multi-tailed whip with tiny pieces of metal or bone at the end of each strand. In the 17th century the cat o' nine tails was used to punish sailors on the deck of a ship, and not below deck, where there was "not enough room to swing a cat".

The Italian term "nodo" and English term *knot* both go back to the days in which sailors measured the speed of a ship by throwing a log attached to a rope into the water. The rope was tied into knots at intervals of six feet.

The phrase "on your beam ends" has its roots in old nautical times, and is said of a person who is unfortunate and in adverse economic conditions. The beams (It. *bagli*) were the timbers running across the ships, holding the sides in place and supporting the deck. Wooden ships relied on their beams for stability, and therefore, when damaged or wrecked, they would be found lying on their sides, in other words, on their beam ends. The beam, also called "gunwhale" (*delfiniera*), or "the devil", was a very difficult part of the ship to be reached by the sailors who often risked falling into the water, finding themselves "between the devil and the deep blue sea"!

As we have seen, the original meanings of many nautical terms and expressions used in everyday language may have changed and been adopted by different semantic fields. By knowing the origins of a word or expression, one can remember and memorize it more easily.

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