

SKIP NOVAK

DELVING INTO NAUTICAL LINGUISTICS – WHY YACHTS WILL ALWAYS BE ‘SHE’, AND ‘MAN OVERBOARD’ CAN’T BE MEDDLED WITH

I enjoy skating on thin ice. Editor Helen’s leader in the September issue raised the topic of gender sensitive nautical terminology, which to some might be a subject ripe for discussion. In fact, it has already generated – and continues to generate – plenty of feedback, and here’s how I started out thinking about it.

I always consider first principles if at all possible. In many contexts the word ‘man’ – at least for me – doesn’t mean a male, but rather the species. The species that walks on two legs, wears clothing and is a sentient being, willing to readily engage in measured, civilised arguments. And here it seems we have one, which looks set to be a long running debate.

My premise was that when Darwin wrote *The Ascent of Man* I don’t think, even in Victorian times, he was referring to only the male of the species. *Rights of Man* by Thomas Paine is another example that immediately

came to mind. And that is how the conversation on this topic began with my 20-year-old daughter, fresh out of her Day Skipper’s Practical course in the Solent. She then proceeded to tie me up in a macramé of historical facts and logic – a metaphorical *Ashley’s Book of Knots*. I admit I was blown out of the water and a full retraction of my first premise should be noted by all readers.

It is true, however, that ‘man’ found its way into the nautical lexicon because the male of the species did the sailing, right back to the time of Ulysses. If we can accept that ‘man,’ in our modern and enlightened times is now gender neutral, at least in this nautical context, it solves the problem – if in fact there is one.

Having said all this, I admit it might be useful to distinguish a ‘yachtsman’ from a ‘yachtswoman’ in some, but not necessarily all, circumstances, though it’s certainly not universally adopted by female sailors who do not want to be considered anything other than simply sailors or crew.

The all-encompassing solution of ‘yachtsperson’ sounds awkward to my ear and just does not cut it. But any distinction between male and female should end there when actually on board lest we engage in verbal gymnastics that can

actually impact safety, if not operational issues.

The most obvious is the man overboard scenario. I can’t see how that one can be squared and changed. It is an international standard. And how would you change ‘manning?’ I’m not sure. Imagining some attempts at a change of phrase leads to: “We need more ‘person power’, give us a hand!”, “Tell the bow person to come aft,” or even “We need to get a body aloft to sort out that jammed halyard!” The question is can we really get around to achieving this fundamental change of semantics, and all the variations of the same that will come to the fore, superseding a system that is well entrenched? If we have to have a change what will it look like? Who will decide

this? It can’t be left to an evolution, rather it has to be standardised, as it is now, and fit for purpose. There cannot be a possible menu of choice of bow person, bow body or just bow. Even my daughter admits that it’s just not worth the effort to

change any of the terms. More to the point, what matters most are the social dynamics on board between all of us, of all genders.

And now it’s time to take one more step off the ice edge possibly into open water. If man has historically done the sailing that has landed us in this lexicon, what about women? Well, historically they are the object of male desires, at least for this old sailor, and that is why ships, yachts and just about any floating thing is referred to in the feminine – motor or sail.

Of course, history is history and women are now certainly in the mainstream of all things in yachting and no one would gainsay that. But this issue is simply one of semantics and what is easy on the ear. To wit “She has fine classic lines.” “She sails well off the wind.” “She’s the most powerful tug on the Mississippi.” “We love *Pelagic*, we just love her!”

Can this kind of description evolve into the gender neutral? Or would that destroy a sentiment that’s more often than not complimentary, if not thought provoking. For all of the examples above, ‘they’ would simply not work. And ‘it’ would just not sound right. ‘It’ would not be inspiring – rather it might be an insult. ■

“‘Yachtsperson’ sounds awkward to my ear’

