

FROM SACRED VESSEL TO SYMBOLIC RELIC: THE LINGUISTIC EVOLUTION OF *ARK* IN MARITIME ENGLISH

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Abstract: *This article explores the term “ark” from a historical-linguistic perspective; the exploration is executed by tracing its evolution from its biblical origins in the King James Version of the Bible (1611) to its limited and largely symbolic role in contemporary English. The approach utilises philological methods, etymological tracing, and componential analysis. The paper investigates how ark, once a historically significant nautical term with rich theological and navigational associations, has gradually become a metaphorical and largely obsolete term in technical maritime communication. The study examines the practical maritime implications of the term together with its continuing symbolic role, especially in religious and literary discourse. The diachronic method used begins with the King James Version of the Bible (1611), continues with historical lexicographical sources, and concludes with the Standard Marine Communication Phrases (2001) in order to trace the semantic path of the term. The fact that ark is excluded from modern standardised communication lexicon such as the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP) is discussed as evidence of its marginalisation in operational discourse. The analysis suggests that the term ark is an example of a trend in which spiritual or mythic terms are excluded from technical vocabularies in favour of precision and functionality. The findings contribute to the broader understanding of the interplay between linguistic evolution, metaphor, and specialised communication in English for Specific Purposes (ESP), particularly within the maritime domain.*

Keywords: *maritime terminology, ark, historical linguistics, Bible, semantic change*

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Introduction

The evolution of maritime terminology is seen as a complex interplay of cultural, religious, and professional influences which are based on practical everyday life. The term *ark* is a great example of how some lexical items move from scriptural texts into secular ones and subsequently fall into disuse within certain professional jargons, in this case, the modern technical lexicon. This article aims to explore the linguistic development of the term *ark*. It traces its journey from biblical scripture to what it represents today as a symbolic relic. The primary aim is to determine how and why *ark*, which was once considered a maritime term, has become non-existent in contemporary maritime English. The analysis draws on historical, etymological, and componential methods to contextualise its semantic trajectory and metaphorical potency. This paper contributes to the broader understanding of language evolution in English for Specific Purposes (ESP), particularly within the domain of maritime terminology. It also seeks to highlight how the demands for precision, unambiguous expression, and standardisation in contemporary technical communication contribute to the exclusion of metaphorically or symbolically charged terms.

Previous Research in the Field

Studies in maritime English have primarily focused on the development and standardisation of communication for safety and operational clarity, where navigational communication “must be precise, simple and unambiguous so as to avoid confusion and error” (International Maritime Organization, 2001, p. 3). As a result, the IMO SMCP manual is deliberately designed to exclude metaphors, idioms, and culturally specific references for safety and intelligibility. However, limited attention has been paid to the historical and cultural layers embedded in older maritime vocabulary. Lexicographical sources such as *The Sailor's Word-Book* (1867), *The Oxford Companion to Ships and the Sea* (1988), and the *Oxford English Dictionary* have documented the shifting meanings of terms like *ark*, yet there has been little philological analysis of its semantic decline within technical registers. Furthermore, metaphor in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has often been viewed as a hindrance to precision thus leading to the marginalisation of spiritually or symbolically charged terms. Genres impose constraints on form and content to fulfil communicative purposes within a discourse community (Swales, 1990, p. 52). The exclusion of such terms from the SMCP reflects this linguistic trend. On the other hand, some scholars suggest that metaphor may offer cognitive and expressive flexibility, allowing speakers to move meaningfully across conceptual fields without strict logical purpose (Markova, 2023, p. 78).

Extra-linguistic factors are involved in changes of the semantic level of words. “History, social structure and human psychology cause changes in the meaning

of the word” (Molhova, 1976, p. 57). Specialisation is relevant to maritime terminology and standardised language and it “is another source of plurality of meaning. A word acquires additional meanings when used as a technical term” (Molhova, 1976, p. 38). This provides a useful framework for examining *ark* as a lexical item and its semantic change. The article hypothesises that it has remained historically restricted in its terminological use, while its biblical and symbolic meanings have remained prominent in contemporary English.

Sager (1990) notes that the development of new technologies and the growth of scientific and technical communication created a need to record, disseminate, and standardise the terminology of specialised subject fields. He points out specifically that “until the nineteenth century [...] the technical language required by craftsmen [...] was passed down mainly in spoken form from generation to generation along with the skills necessary to perform the job” (p. 163). This is relevant to maritime English, where standardised frameworks such as the SMCP prioritise operational clarity over historically or symbolically loaded vocabulary.

This study aims to build upon these references by applying historical-linguistic and componential analysis to the case of *ark* as a terminological relic.

Methodology and Research Question

This study applies a philological and historical-linguistic approach to investigate the semantic development of the term *ark* in English. This approach is suitable because it uncovers semantic shifts in specialised registers over time. Several analytical methods are employed in combination. First, etymological analysis traces the lexical roots of the term through Latin and Old English into modern usage. Second, a diachronic perspective examines how the meaning and function of *ark* have evolved across historical periods, with special attention to biblical and maritime contexts. Third, componential analysis is used to deconstruct the semantic features of *ark* in different temporal frames, thus identifying key conceptual attributes such as size, material, shape, placement and function. This makes it a suitable tool for identifying the semantic narrowing and eventual marginalisation of *ark* in regulated maritime discourse, while also reflecting broader processes of metaphorization and terminological refinement. Nevertheless, some of the limitations of this method have been criticised as oversimplifications of complex meaning, particularly its difficulty in capturing nuance, polysemy, and connotation thus the need for non-binary contrasts (Lyons, 1977, pp. 287-291; Ullmann, 1972, pp. 138-140; Leech, 1974, pp. 95-125). The study also considers collocational and derivational patterns in order to illustrate how the term *ark* interacts with other lexical items in both literal and figurative registers. While the article does not adopt corpus data, it draws from dictionary definitions, historical usage examples, especially the *King*

James Version of the Bible (1611), and specialist nautical references such as *The Sailor's Word-Book* by Admiral W. H. Smyth (1867) and *The Oxford Companion to Ships and the Sea*, edited by Peter Kemp (1988), in order to demonstrate the shifting communicative role of *ark* in English. The primary research question is to assess the factors that led to the term's symbolic retention and its exclusion from modern technical vocabularies, particularly in regulated and standardised frameworks such as the IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP).

The *King James Version of the Bible*, published in 1611, is one of the most influential English-language texts in history and it is known for its literary richness and popularity until the early 20th century, when it “fell into disfavour among many mainstream Protestant churches” (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024). It was commissioned by King James I and it was written in Early Modern English in which it served not only as a theological document but also as a linguistic benchmark during the rise of England as a maritime power. As such, it contains terminology that reflects the material culture and seafaring knowledge of the early 17th century. Its inclusion in this study allows for a diachronic comparison between spiritually embedded maritime terms and their secular evolution or disappearance.

The Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP) were adopted by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) in 2001, constituting a set of standardised English phrases used for safety-related communication “from ship to shore and vice versa, from ship to ship, and on-board ship” (International Maritime Organization, 2001, p. 3). Designed to reduce misunderstanding among multinational crews, they represent the culmination of decades of efforts to codify and simplify maritime language. The SMCP is prescriptive, technical, and safety-oriented, and includes only terms with current operational relevance. Its exclusion of metaphorical or religious terms, such as *ark*, highlights the shift toward linguistic precision and functional neutrality in modern maritime English (International Maritime Organization, 2001).

Analysis and Discussion

Lexicographical and Nautical Status of *Ark*

The definition and categorisation provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, under the label *nautical*, meaning 3, places the term *ark* within the scope of this research paper. The dictionary offers the following definition “Old English – The large covered floating vessel in which Noah was saved at the Deluge; hence figurative a place of refuge” (2023). This distinction, as a nautical term, shows that, indeed, *ark* is viewed as a type of a watercraft associated with what we understand today as sea or river going vessels. The term acquires the meaning of a floating vessel from 1477 onwards, which solidifies its use as a nautical

term in the *King James Version of the Bible*, where the instructions given to Noah specify and describe a floating vessel as a box-shaped and a house-like structure.

The noun *ark* originates from Latin *arca* meaning “large box” or “chest”, then became *earc* in Old English, and *arke* in Middle English. By the late 15th century, it was also used to describe a type of ship or boat. In 19th-century America, it specifically referred to large, flat-bottomed riverboats used to transport goods, livestock, and other produce, most probably agricultural and farm products, to market (Harper, 2001-2025). The original meaning of the word emphasises its function as a container rather than a navigational vessel. This distinction sets it apart from other maritime terms like *ship* or *vessel*, which retained most of their original properties and evolved to denote more functional and versatile forms of watercraft.

Biblical Usage

The term *ark* holds a prominent place in early religious and cultural texts. It appears in one hundred and ninety-nine verses of the *King James Version of the Bible* (MasonSoft Technology Ltd., 2011-2026). Its most notable use in the Bible is where Noah’s Ark serves as a vessel of salvation during the Flood. This usage makes the term a valid candidate for inclusion in this paper as it acquires the qualities and practicalities of a craft built with the sole purpose of floating on water while carrying various types of objects. The dimensions described in Gen 6:15 below suggest a flat-bottomed, rectangular construction lacking a keel or bow thus making it akin to a barge rather than a ship. The structure is not presented as a navigable vessel but as a floating container built solely for buoyancy and capacity. This architectural profile reinforces the semantic emphasis on refuge and preservation, rather than transport or navigation. Here are some of the verses to illustrate the use in question:

“Make thee an *ark* of gopher wood; rooms shalt thou make in the *ark*, and shalt pitch it within and without with pitch.” (Gen 6:14)

“And this is the fashion which thou shalt make it of: The length of the *ark* shall be three hundred cubits, the breadth of it fifty cubits, and the height of it thirty cubits.” (Gen 6:15)

“But with thee will I establish my covenant; and thou shalt come into the *ark*, thou, and thy sons, and thy wife, and thy sons’ wives with thee.” (Gen 6:18)

“And of every living thing of all flesh, two of every sort shalt thou bring into the *ark*, to keep them alive with thee; they shall be male and female.” (Gen 6:19)

“And the flood was forty days upon the earth; and the waters increased, and bare up the *ark*, and it was lift up above the earth.” (Gen 7:17)

“And God remembered Noah, and every living thing, and all the cattle that was with him in the *ark*: and God made a wind to pass over the earth, and the waters asswaged;” (Gen 8:1) (Project Gutenberg, 2024)

In addition to the use discussed above, and apart from its nautical depiction, the word *ark* also appears in *Ark of the Covenant* (Numbers 10:33), *Ark of the Testimony* (Exodus 30:6), *Ark of the Lord* (Joshua 4:11), and *Ark of God* (1 Samuel 3:3), where the noun is primarily used to denote a box.

The term *ark* carries immense symbolic weight due to its usage being largely confined to religious and metaphorical contexts. Unlike terms such as *anchor*, which seamlessly transitioned from antiquity to modern maritime practice and beyond (John, Brooks & Schriever, 2017), *ark* remains static, rooted in its scriptural associations. This linguistic immobility underscores a broader trend: as maritime terminology evolved to meet practical needs, terms with purely symbolic or religious significance were often left behind or entered into minimal use, as they no longer aligned with the technical language required for navigation and shipbuilding.

Derivatives, Compounds and Metaphorical Extensions

Apart from its biblical connotation and principal collocations in that particular context, the word *ark* exhibits more linguistic properties. It collocates with other lexical items, thus creating compounds and derivatives functioning as nouns, adjectives and verbs. Here are some examples from its collocational and derivational behaviour from 1611 onwards:

- *Meal ark* – “A large wooden bin for storing meal.” (Oxford University Press, 2024). This use of the noun dates back to the middle of the sixteenth century; it is still in use in British English, but with a very low frequency.
- *Inark* – “*transitive*. To put or enclose in an ark” (Oxford University Press, 2023). This usage reflects the nautical meaning of the word and its connotation to the biblical *ark*. Its use is now obsolete or rare. *Oxford English Dictionary* has evidence of its use between 1595 and 1647. Similar meaning is attributed to the verb *ark* which is now obsolete and was in use between 1644 and 1845 according to the same source.
- *Unark* – or its variant *vn-arke* is used in the poetic line “Till thou be left vpon Th’ Armenian mount of safety, ioy and rest; Where when thou art thou maist thyselfe vn-arke¹” (Davies, 1611). There are two

1. The word *vn-arke* (or *unark*) appears to be a poetic neologism created by John Davies in *The Scourge of Folly* (1611).

noteworthy items here. The first one is *Th' Armenian mount of safety*, which directly references Mount Ararat, traditionally associated with the resting place of Noah's Ark after the Flood. It symbolises a place of divine providence, peace, and renewal after a period of trial or hardship. The second item is *thou maist thyselfe vn-arke*, which suggests coming out or emerging from the ark. As a poet, Davies uses a creative linguistic style characteristic of the period and creates this new word. The passage can be interpreted in a metaphorical sense where *ark* carries the themes of salvation, transformation, and the transition from adversity to peace. The *Oxford English Dictionary* has labelled this as *nautical*, which affirms its connotation to the biblical vessel of salvation (2024). This example shows how the term was extended linguistically in Early Modern English literature, enhancing its rich symbolic properties and metaphorical potential.

- *Arkite* – adj. “Of or pertaining to Noah's ark” (Oxford University Press, 2024), and *arkite* – n. “An inmate of the ark” (Oxford University Press, 2024) are both classified as nautical terms by the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The adjective appears from 1774 onwards, while the noun is recorded from 1804. The semantic domains occupied are religious and literary and refer to the maritime symbolism either related to Noah's ark as a vessel or to its passengers. The noun appears to remain in use in British English, but no evidence of usage was found in American English.

Nineteenth-Century Nautical and American River Ark Usage

The term *ark* retained its biblical connotations and nautical usage well into the 19th century. In *The Sailor's Word-Book*, Admiral Smyth defines it as “the sacred and capacious vessel built by Noah,” providing not only precise measurements but also describing it as being “pitched over or pay'd with bitumen” (1867, p. 52). He also adds another meaning to the term and its use to describe “a mare's-tail cloud, or cirrus, when it forms a streak across the sky”², indicating a semantic extension of the term based on form, probably because of its long shape.

In *The Oxford Companion to Ships and the Sea* (1988), Peter Kemp describes the term *ark* as “in a maritime sense used to describe the vessel said to have been constructed by *Noah” (p. 37). He questions whether the reality of the *ark* was possible in the given historical context and materials available, such as wood, referring to historians who argue “that the ark of Noah could not have had a wooden hull at all, but could only have been a large raft” (p. 37), adding

2. The verb *to pay* in nautical usage means to coat a ship's surface with tar or pitch for waterproofing. This term is rare or rather obsolete today. The cloud meaning of *ark* (also spelt *cirrus*) likely refers to its long, streak-like shape. These clouds were considered natural meteorological phenomena, often associated with changes in weather (Oxford University Press, 2024).

a description of the construction and information on the historical reality of such vessels. The entry also notes that in American English the term has come to denote “large flat-bottomed vessels used for carriage of produce down the major rivers” (p. 37). These river arks were also known as *flatboats*, *Kentucky boats*, *broadhorns*, *New Orleans boats*, and *flats*. They were widely used on the big southeastern rivers of the United States such as the Mississippi, its tributary Ohio, and the Tennessee rivers from the late 18th to mid-19th centuries. Built commercially from the 1780s, they were rectangular, flat-bottomed wooden craft designed for one-way downstream travel. These *arks* were powered by long oars called *sweeps* and were occasionally fitted with sails. They were used to transport agricultural produce and passengers and played a significant role in the displacement of Native American peoples during the expansion of the United States. Some of these boats had cabins for protection and onboard cooking. The developments in the transportation field in the 1800s made these boats redundant (National Park Service, 2021). This functional profile aligns more closely with the biblical ark’s semantics than with modern, engineered ships which further explains why *ark* did not survive in the technical maritime lexicon. The absence of *ark* in contemporary resources like the SMCP highlights its divergence from the functional language of the sea. This omission reflects the shift from a mythic and symbolic lexicon to one prioritizing clarity, utility, and universality in maritime communication. Thus, *ark* serves as a linguistic artifact – a reminder of the historical and cultural origins of maritime language, even as it finds no place in the standardised operational lexicon of modern seafaring.

Componential Analysis of *Ark*

In order to contextualise the semantic development of the term *ark*, a componential analysis was conducted. The aim was to trace its evolution from a literal vessel of salvation to a largely metaphorical and symbolic concept. This method allows us to systematically compare semantic features such as material, size, shape, placement, and function, across different historical periods. Binary oppositions are used where possible.

Biblical Reference

- Material: +wood, -metal
- Size: +large
- Shape: +box, +flat-bottomed
- Placement: +flood (biblical), -sea, -river
- Function: +salvation, -transport, +nautical

19th Century

- Material: +wood, -metal
- Size: +medium, -large
- Shape: +rectangular, +flat-bottomed
- Placement: +river, -sea, +flood (biblical)
- Function: +salvation (biblical), +transport, +nautical

20th Century

- Material: +wood, -steel
- Size: +large (symbolic)
- Shape: +rectangular, +flat-bottomed (biblical)
- Placement: -river, -sea, +flood (biblical)
- Function: +salvation (biblical), -transport, -nautical

21st Century

- Material: +wood (biblical)
- Size: +large (biblical)
- Shape: +box, +flat-bottomed (biblical)
- Placement: +flood (biblical), -river, -sea
- Function: +salvation (biblical), -transport, -nautical

Modern Technical Exclusion and Symbolic Survival

The results of the diachronic componential analysis demonstrate that, unlike *anchor*, which evolved into a technically precise maritime term (John, Brooks & Schriever, 2017), *ark* retained its religious and cultural weight and connotation without integrating into functional standardised seafaring vocabulary. This semantic stability further explains its absence from modern maritime standards like the SMCP and highlights its symbolic power in literature, religion, and culture.

The analysis also reveals that, although the physical referent has disappeared, the conceptual features associated with *ark*, particularly its shape, material association and function related to salvation, have remained remarkably stable. Its semantic features span from the biblical *ark* of Genesis, commonly understood as a large wooden flat-bottomed container of safety, through the nineteenth-century American river *ark* functioning as a real transport vessel, and finally to

the metaphorical *ark* in present-day discourse, where the term retains a semantic core focused on refuge and containment, rather than navigation or transport. This continuity of essential semantic features helps to explain the continued metaphorical viability of *ark* and its survival as a cultural and symbolic relic despite its marginalisation in modern technical maritime vocabulary.

Conclusion

This article has examined the semantic evolution and symbolic persistence of the term *ark* within the domain of maritime English. By tracing its etymology, biblical usage, and subsequent marginalisation in modern technical vocabulary, the study has shown that *ark* exemplifies a term whose metaphorical and salvific connotations have endured, whereas its practical nautical relevance has diminished. The componential analysis suggests that the material and functional referents of the term have shifted or disappeared while certain core semantic features, e.g., its association with refuge, containment, and symbolic meaning, have remained remarkably stable.

The exclusion of *ark* from language frameworks such as the Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP) by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) highlights a noticeable linguistic tendency in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to favour clarity and precision over language that is rooted in historical, religious, or cultural tradition. It is safe to conclude that the interplay of certain historical events such as the invention of the steam engine, the development of the rail and road systems, and the standardisation of the language of the seas has influenced significantly the semantic path of the term *ark*. The narrowing of its semantic range has maintained its metaphorical and religious associations but eliminated its role in the technical maritime lexicon. Future research might extend this approach to other archaic or symbolically charged maritime terms in order to explore patterns of lexical survival, loss, or transformation within technical language communities.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

The author declares that no Generative AI was used to produce any of the research, analysis, or conclusions presented in this work. ChatGPT was used to polish occasional slips of expression. After using the tool, the author reviewed and edited all suggestions and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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