



Call for Papers

Workshop: Sailing through Words.

Maritime Technical Terminology from Antiquity to the Middle Ages

TRANSMARE Institute, Trier University

Overview

Date: 10–11 December 2026

Location: Trier University, Universitätsring 15, 54296 Trier, Germany

Abstract submission deadline: 10 October 2026

Notification of outcome: 20 October 2026

Organisers: Eleonora Selvi (Trier), Afnen Habibi (Trier)

Scientific committee: Prof. Patrick Reinard, Dr. Eleonora Selvi, Dr. Afnen Habibi

Contacts: sailingwords.trier@gmail.com.

The workshop examines the formation and usage of naval terminology and technical language connected to maritime activities across time and between different regions of the Ancient and Medieval world.

Maritime specialised languages are integral to seafaring practice. Today, Maritime English is regulated by international organisations to prevent accidents and ensure clear, fast communication. In the ancient and medieval world, communities of seafarers faced an analogous need for a technical language, both to communicate at sea and to develop and transmit their maritime knowledge. Maritime languages are thus shaped, in different ways and contexts, by the naval technology available to seafarers, by the institutional and administrative settings in which this technology operates, and by the values and beliefs of the seafaring community of practice itself; in turn, they contribute to stabilise and transmit technical knowledge.

Specialised languages, or 'technolects', or 'specialised discourses' in Gotti's (2003) terms, have been recognised as integral to technical knowledge since the seminal work of Mauss (1936) and Leroi-Gourhan (1964–65); studies of their specific features have shown that their formation follows particular lexical, morphosyntactic, and discourse patterns (Gotti 2003; Čulić-Viskota & Kalebota 2013). Scholarship on ancient technical lexica has identified three main strategies through which specialised terminologies are created (Schironi 2014): the adaptation of existing terms from the common lexicon; the coining of new terms; and the borrowing of terms from other specialised fields or languages. Syntax and discourse tend to be organised around the avoidance of ambiguity, thus generating patterns that depart from everyday language (Bocanegra-Valle 2011). The supra-local circulation of such languages, especially military and maritime ones, can generate extensive chains of borrowing and adaptation, and can even drive broader linguistic change (Huitink & Rood 2024). Finally, technical languages could function as a marker of social belonging when carried over into different contexts, or contribute, through their acquisition, to transmitting the values and knowledge distinctive of the community of practice that employed them (Lave & Wenger 1991; Eckert 2000). To study these languages in the ancient world is no easy task, as they are often preserved only in documentary texts such as papyri and inscriptions, or at best in manuals that are frequently overlooked and obscure, and their study requires a good understanding of both linguistic phenomena and the relevant technological, societal, and administrative contexts.

Our workshop thus seeks to compare the specialised languages of seafaring, shipbuilding, naval administration, warfare, and commerce across periods and regions, from the Aegean Bronze Age to the medieval Baltic and beyond. We aim to ask which processes govern the formation and transmission of these languages, and what role they played for the communities that developed them, offering, in doing so, the first systematic, comparative typology of maritime technical languages, and bringing papyrology, epigraphy, linguistics, philology, and the history of technology into a dialogue that has so far remained fragmented across disciplinary and period-specific boundaries.

Themes and Questions

We welcome proposals on any region of the ancient and medieval world, spanning from prehistory (including reconstructed languages, e.g., Proto-Indo-European) to the end of the 15th century AD. Submissions should address one or more of the following areas:

(a) Linguistic structures and features. How do naval technical languages form and develop over time? What are their defining lexical, morphosyntactic, and discourse features, and how do they differ from general language?

(b) Sources for reconstruction. How can epigraphic and papyrological sources help trace these processes? What is the role of manuals and other normative texts in stabilising and transmitting technical language (and its technical knowledge)?

(c) Technical language and naval technology. Which technological and administrative developments trigger linguistic innovation? How do linguistic structures encode technological knowledge, and to what extent can each illuminate the other?

(d) Transmission and continuity. How were technical terms transmitted across periods of political, social, and religious transformation? What mechanisms (translation, transliteration, borrowing, etc.) govern this transmission? Does terminological continuity reflect continuity in professional or institutional structures?

(e) Expansion and sociolinguistic impact. How do technical languages help form communities of experts? Which elements enter general language, and how? To what extent do shifts in political or cultural power shape the diffusion and transformation of technical lexica?

Submission

- Please submit an abstract of around 250 words (excluding bibliography) to sailingwords.trier@gmail.com, no later than **10 October 2026**.
- Please include in a separate page of the same document your name, affiliation, and contact details.
- Proposals will be evaluated by the Scientific Committee, and notification of the outcome will be sent no later than **20 October 2026**.
- Please note that accommodation for participants will be covered by the organisers; travel costs are to be borne by each speaker.

References

Bocanegra-Valle, A. (2011). The Language of Seafaring: Standardised Conventions and Discursive Features in Speech Communications. *International Journal of English Studies* 11: 35–53.

- Čulić-Viskota, A. & Kalebota, S. (2013). Maritime English – What Does It Communicate? *Transactions On Maritime Science* 2: 109–114.
- Eckert, P. (2000). *Linguistic Variation as Social Practice: The Linguistic Construction of Identity in Belten High*. Oxford.
- Gotti, M. (2003). *Specialised Discourse: Linguistic Features and Changing Conventions*. Bern.
- Huitink, L. & Rood, T. (2024). Xenophon, Professional Military Vocabulary, and the Formation of the Literary Koine, in C. Monaco, R. Machado, & E. Bozia (eds.), *Redefining the Standards in Attic, Koine, and Atticism* (Euhormos 6), Leiden, pp. 148–170.
- Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge.
- Leroi-Gourhan, A. (1964–1965). *Le geste et la parole* (2 vols.). Paris.
- Mauss, M. (1936). Les techniques du corps. *Journal de Psychologie* 32(3–4): 271–293.
- Schironi, F. (2014). Technical Languages: Science and Medicine, in E. J. Bakker (ed.), *A Companion to the Ancient Greek Language*, New York, pp. 338–353.