Ahoy Matey: A Few Notes on Pirate Lingo

1. Where did the “ahoy matey” lingo come from? Can you speculate?

Pirate dialect is an odd one on the horizons of language variation. Here “pirate dialect” only refers to the heavily stylized lingo that shows up in movies today. There are probably a number of different influences. Let’s run down the major players.

**Time**: Because pirate dialect is focused on large sailing ships in the past, it is frozen in time. There are features that reach back to conventions of the period between 1600 and 1800. In the pirate dictionary (<http://www.the-pirate-ship.com/piratedictionary.html)> a term like *privateer* is a historical term, more commonly used in the 1800s than the 2000s. Same goes for a term like *hornswoggle*. Consider a phrase like *Yer a scurvy bilge rat*: The term *scurvy* peaked in usage between 1750 and 1800, and rats who live in the bilge of a boat would not be a common experience today (except in pirate tales). Of note, the term *bilge rat* did not appear in writing before the early 1900s. Vikings, who were much earlier pirates, had a different lingo tied to their dealings.

**Region:** For English speaking pirates, the shipping economy probably leads the guess about regional dialect to West Country English. Bristol, England was a major shipping port during the major days of piracy and one of the largest cities in England. Despite the small geographic size of England (comparatively), this distance from London puts it far enough away that anyone growing up in that area would not have been speaking any kind of geographically posh variety of English during the heyday of piracy.

**Social class:** The majority of people who would have become pirates were not coming from the literate classes. Perhaps a few of the leaders, like Blackbeard, were literate, but not most of the pirates. The industrial revolution kicked in heavily in 1830, but up until that point, the open sea provided at least the allure of opportunity. Former farm workers (or industrial laborers) could find a new life on the sea. These speakers would have brought stigmatized social class dialects with them.

**Jargon:** The specific set of words associated with a profession or hobby is called jargon. There is jargon for chess, mountain climbing, and computer geeks. There is also jargon for sailing, and a quick look at a pirate dictionary reveals many nautical terms for sail ships. Pirate dialect is heavily based on nautical jargon.

**Literary stylization:** From Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* (early 1880s) forward, most of our pirate dialect comes from literary representations of it. All the abbreviations and apostrophes that litter written pirate dialogue come from literary representations. There is now a specific stylized genre of pirate dialect with certain conventions (see <http://www.wikihow.com/Talk-Like-a-Pirate> ). In terms of quantity, the peak usage of the term “pirate” was in 1900, but its usage today is higher than it was in when *Treasure Island* was published. There is more written pirate lingo today than there was when sail-ship pirates were actually active. Genre conventions characterizing their speech have been passed on from one writer to the next.

Here is a reliable site (as far as I can tell) with real pirate quotes: <http://latinamericanhistory.about.com/od/Pirates/a/Real-Pirate-Quotes.htm>

They are not unusual for the time period (early 1700s). But when given 300 years out of context, they sound unusual.

1. Do we have any idea how pirates talked or if there was a common argot?

Shorter on this one:

There were most likely coded terms to disguise illegal activities, and these certainly existed within the jargon of sailing between 1700 and 1830ish. There are specific dictionaries of criminal argot.

1. Why would a group of bandits have a special way of talking? Is there a nugget of history in it, or is it all Hollywood? (More Disney than Blackbeard?)

There is a definite history behind “thieves cant,” lingo used by thieves and hustlers, but pirate speech has been heavily stylized within genre conventions. Even their likeability has been greatly stylized; In no rational way should we admire thieves and murderers. Imagine how “Speak Like a Thief Day” would work out. But “rational” has little to do with things like “Speak Like a Pirate Day”. The idea of pirates in modern times is, for the most part, a sincerely whimsical notion.