

TROUBLES AND PERILS AT SEA, ELF COMMUNICATION AND INTERACTION ONBOARD

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RESEARCH AIMS

Manoeuvring a tanker to berth can be challenging because the local pilot has to instruct and lead the multinational Captain and crew into an unfamiliar port. Often few crewmembers share the same mother tongue. This work will analyse a series of recordings made at the moment of berthing involving both European and non-European participants to investigate job-related discourse and social interaction. It will look at variants in the technical language and assess to what extent penetration of accents and unfamiliar uses of English are more important than a grasp of the technical jargon for successful communication.

BACKGROUND

HIGHLIGHTING THE IMPORTANCE OF RESEARCH INTO THE SHIPPING INDUSTRY MORE IMPORTANTLY, THE LANGUAGE USED TO AID COMMUNICATION.

<<Shipping is perhaps the most international of the world's industries, serving more than 90 per cent of global trade by carrying huge quantities of cargo cost-effectively, cleanly and safely>>

International Maritime Organization "IMO"

<<The globalization of the seafarers' labour market has had major implications for world shipping and seafaring and there have been particular concerns expressed relating to safety at sea>>

H. & Zhao, M. (2003, p22)

<<...[that the 'human element'] was found to be present in over 75 per cent of incidents involving collisions and grounds and in over 75 per cent of those involving contacts and fire/explosions>>

Maritime Directorate, Department of Transport -UK (1991)

METHODOLOGY
A corpus of sixteen 10-minute recordings collected over a 24-month period (2008-2010).

The collection of data proved extremely taxing due to certain constraints surrounding permission and breaches of maritime law. The recordings were all obtained on-board vessels: petrol and gas tankers, berthing and unberthing at an industrial port in the south of Sardinia during between 2008-2010. Not being allowed to board vessels under any circumstances owing to safety issues, the inclusion of a "third party" to collect the recordings was warranted. The port pilots carried the recording device on board on my behalf.

Furthermore, permission to record the manoeuvre had to be granted to all participants involved in the process. This was accomplished prior to the pilot embarking on the vessel by radio communication. This, at times, proved difficult as certain participants, not able to fully understand the aim of the study, felt they were being assessed and refused to participate. Additionally on busier days the pilots involved simply did not have enough time to organise the process, covering all legalities in time to perform the manoeuvre in the allotted berthing time allocated by the shore personnel. Weather conditions and excessive noise also rendered many of our recordings void. In the case of extreme wind or very rough sea, the recording would be halted as the manoeuvre would be either ceased or the anchor dropped. If there were circumstances of high winds or excessive noise, perhaps caused by engine difficulties at the manoeuvre being conducted on the wings of the bridge, the voices of the participants were too difficult to hear and this caused the recordings to be nullified.

All of which are tantamount to our data collection becoming somewhat piecemeal and limiting our final corpus.

Due to certain limitations in our corpus length, it was of significant importance that we were able to accumulate as much variety as possible to our content. Therefore we included:

- 13 recordings with two main participants 'The pilot and captain' and some background participants 'officers and sailors'
- 3 recordings with 3 main participants '2 pilots' and captain' and some background participants 'officers and sailors'
- 4 port pilots participated in the recordings. All with various levels of English 'although all above the standard set by IMO', ranging from high B1 to C2 levels according to the CEF 'Common European Framework'. All pilots have a good knowledge of the SMCP 'Standard Marine Communication Phrases' and are well versed in technical jargon.
- With the exception of the 4 port pilots, there were no repeat onboard participants. Although many of the vessels, captains and crew had previously visited the port and therefore knew something about the process or the pilots, each person featured only once in the corpus of recordings.
- 19 nationalities, of various on board positions, took part in the study.

The agreement to record only the first 10 minutes of on-board discourse was a decision reached mutually between the author and the port pilots. It was felt that this is the most crucial moment in the manoeuvre, a time when the most job-related instructions and social interaction takes place. Although nearer to the end of the manoeuvre more detailed instructions may come into play, the beginning of the process was the time when the best combination of the two types of discourse 'work and social' would occur. A berthing manoeuvre 'depending on the port' can take up to two hours in length, while an un-berthing manoeuvre can last up to one hour. Long periods of this time can be in silence with just the basic instruction of 'straight ahead' being repeated. This would certainly be time consuming to record and process yet would probably yield unprofitable results. Furthermore, unauthorised participants, not present at the start of the manoeuvre, may enter at the latter stages, which would render the recording void.

Finally, weather and noise interference was expected to hinder the recording at the later stages. The pilots involved were also extremely eager to aid in an in-port study and wish was to keep any disruption or inconvenience to a minimum, therefore our recordings were limited to the first 10 minutes of manoeuvre only.



ISSUES TO INVESTIGATE FURTHER

Following Jenkins J. (2007) we can question if we chose what we understood based on our own prejudices. Her extensive research shows that lower-level accent speakers understand higher-level accent speakers but not vice versa. With the exception of interrogative forms which seemed problematic for all participants regardless of country of origin or position on board, through this research it was noted and verified that intelligibility of accents was for the most part one sided. We observed many instances of higher-level accent speakers asking for repetition of instructions or information, yet relatively few of lower-level accent speakers asking for further clarification. This raises a couple of doubts, firstly when considering that in the majority of cases the lower-level accent speakers tend to occupy the lower ranking positions on-board, this could be a reluctance to 'speak up', show weakness or disrespect to the authoritarian position rather than complete ease of comprehension. However, if this is the case, many concerns surrounding the education of maritime English need to be addressed.

Widely acknowledged by scholars in the field of maritime English and following extensive research by Zhao M. of the Greenwich Maritime University is that more focus in maritime English is given to written rather than oral study and practice. Furthermore it is felt that more focus is given to technical rather than social discourse. Important to remember is these crewmembers have to live as well as work along side people from various countries and that equal priority should be given to ease them in to both situations. However, of the utmost importance here and something, which possibly explains the above doubts and findings, is the lack of material exposing learners to authentic ELF. While certainly not encouraging the teaching of ELF per se, I do advocate for more exposure to ELF 'speakers in the listening materials provided. One extension of this study is to look into the materials presently used in and outside Europe and review and cross-reference the content, especially considering the audio material. Initial findings have hinted at Standard English being the accent of choice in the listening materials in both Europe and Asia. While this may benefit the lower-level accent speakers in port, it hinders the higher-level accent speakers and inadequately prepares them for life on board. Within the maritime industry this may provide one plausible reason for more difficulties in penetrating accents for higher-level accent speakers.

VESSEL	DATE TAKEN	NAT. OF CAPTAIN	OF CREW	NATIONALITY	PILOT
A	March 23 rd 2009 16.31	Ukrainian	Ukrainian	Latvian	Italian
B	April 3 rd 2009 23.30	German	German	Filipino	Italian
C	February 20 th 2009	Libyan	Libyan	Libyan	Italian
D	Time Unknown April 17 th 2009 18.36	Norwegian	Norwegian	Indian	Italian
E	April 20 th 2009 22.29	Greek	Greek	Filipino	Italian
F	April 24 th 2009 18.03	Chinese	Chinese	Chinese	Italian
G	January 20 th 2010 13.26	Croatian	Croatian	Italian	Italian
H	February 17 th 2010 13.08	Russian	Russian	Russian	Italian
I	March 9 th 2010 04.04	Indian	Indian	Indian	Italian
J	March 10 th 2010 11.52	Indian	Indian	Indian	Italian
K	March 23 rd 2009 16.38	Romanian	Romanian	Romanian	Italian
L	May 3 rd 2009 11.32	Korean	Filipino	Thai	Italian
M	January 3 rd 2010 09.40	Russian	Slovenian	Azerbaijani	Italian
N	January 29 th 2010 11.32	Spanish	Spanish	Russian	Italian
O	February 4 th 2010 14.54	Indian	Indian	Indian	Italian
P	February 14 th 2010 07.16	Greek	Pakistani	Filipino	Italian

QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

Tokens: 7281
Types: 779

Type/Tokens Ratio: 0.14
Standardized Type/Tokens Ratio: 27.06

Average Word Length: 3.89
Sentences: 179

Standardized Sentence Length: 17.97

What is immediately apparent from our findings is the low number of tokens considering the amount and length of recordings obtained. Furthermore, there appears to be a definite lack of density in the types compared to everyday language. While these findings may initially seem surprising, when considering the Standard Marine Communication Phrases 'SMCP' and Maritime English practice, it seems fairly logical. On investigating the SMCP, which has been adopted, in order to 'circuit round' the problem of language barriers at sea and avoid misunderstandings, which can cause accidents - (IMO), it is evident that simplicity and conciseness are paramount. Thus we can fathom that in the first 10 minutes of discourse when the most crucial instructions are given, the choice of simple and clear language is what is required to gauge what needs to happen over the manoeuvre period. Moreover, repetition is common throughout the process even when all participants share the same L1. This is somewhat military in practice in that the superior 'pilot/captain' gives the instruction and it is repeated to ascertain if it was fully comprehended. From this we can understand why the type of word used is limited compared to everyday discourse. The standard word length is also indicative that shorter and simpler words are being used throughout the procedure, which is, again, in line with what is expected in Maritime English and the SMCP.

Example of Standard Marine Communication Phrases 'SMCP'

SMCP	English "Translation"
Q. What is damage?	Q. What is the damage?
A. No damage.	A. There is no damage.
Q. Are fenders on berth?	Q. Are there fenders on the berth?
A. Yes, fenders on berth.	A. Yes, there are fenders on the berth.

As quoted in Multilingual crews: communication and the operation of ships by Helen Sampson and Stephen Zhao (2003):

The above table clearly shows the encouraged elimination of the definite article in SMCP practice. It is taught in many maritime colleges around the world and seems to have been adopted by the seafarers used in our study. Although further research would strengthen our findings and ascertain to what level it has been affirmed, it is not pre-emptuous to question if the elimination or reduction of the definite article in on-board dialogue can be considered standard maritime practice or English being used as a lingua franca 'ELF'? Moreover we can question, if the two are mutually exclusive?

The SMCP tends to advocate the practice of deletion. The utterances are kept as simple as possible adding nothing to complicate or cause confusion. Thus, it can perhaps be assumed that the definite article is seen and considered more as a hindrance to comprehension rather than an aid. If this is the case then the participants in our study are following logical practice that they have either studied or required from their work experience, perhaps indicating some general accommodation of standardized maritime norms. This furthermore raises another question, which goes beyond the realm of this study, if seafarers tend to be 'sticking' to this generalized norm of deletion and this appears to be taken from the practice of the SMCP, then can the SMCP be considered a standardized written form of ELF?



EXAMPLES FROM CORPUS

Example 1: Social Interaction, INCLUSION.
VESSEL B, April 3rd 2009, 23.30, German-Italian.

P: ... so, how long on board Captain?
C: 4 months.
P: 4 months, as you are near the end?
C: No.
P: So what is the contract?

Example 2: Work-related discourse, DELETION.
VESSEL M, January 9th 2010, 09.40, Russian-Italian.

P: What is (the) heading?
C: 42 exactly.
I: |
O: I don't understand (the) chart Captain.
C: OK, I see it.
I: |
U: What about (the) AIS?

Example 3: Work-related discourse.
VESSEL B, April 3rd 2009, 23.30, German-Italian.

P: It's fixed propeller?
C: It's fixed.
JA, P: It's right or left hand?
C: It's right.
P: The ship is fitted with bow thruster?
C: Yes.

Example 4: Work-related discourse.
VESSEL H, February 17th 2010, 13.08, Russian-Italian.

P: Where you load from?
C: Same.
P: Where?
C: No.
A, P: From where you load?
C: No.
P: From Spain?
C: Yes.

From these and other examples, actually codifying what is happening is not as straightforward. While in example 3 it could seem that the affirmative structure is used to check knowledge the pilot has, in example 4A the pilot seems to ask a 'real' yet grammatically incorrect question. Such structure leads us to wonder if this is an adoption of norms from Italian 'La nave e' destreata o sinistra?' where the affirmative is used with intention. In example 4A it seems the pilot tries to rephrase his initial question after doubting before finally guessing the answer. In other examples from our corpus we find that rephrasing tends to occur before deletion whereas here we see the opposite. Can we suppose that the participants involved abandon any kind of norms imposed on them depending on the task and linguistic limitations at hand?

CONCLUSION

The results lead us to understand that function and reciprocal intelligibility win over accuracy and redundant features of the language. Accommodation certainly takes place throughout but is more prominent in interrogative structure. Non-natives norms, although under-investigated at this stage, seem to be present at least considering the Italian participants. Once again, this is most evident in the interrogative use. Social interaction is limited to those confident enough to penetrate the accent of the participants. Each participant tends to adapt to the less linguistically superior in order to get the job done efficiently and effectively. However, when considering the motivation for less miscomprehension between lower-level accent speakers compared to higher-level accent speakers the reason is not, as yet, entirely clear. We can question: when the dialogue, vocabulary and phrases are so standard, even in the social interaction, why are certain accents harder to understand. Possibilities could be linked to fear of authority or education ambiguities however it is, as yet, intangible. Prejudices play a significant role in comprehension, Jenkins J. (2007), on-board hierarchy and certain nationalities still tend to hold the lower level positions, so, can we suppose that intercultural prejudices play a major role in ELF communication at sea?

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