

MARINE COMMUNICATIONS



A VTS operator in San Francisco. Language experts want to hear how seafarers respond to local accents

Picture: US Coast Guard

Communications in the multinational shipping industry can be a challenge — and local accents can make things even harder.

NAOYUKI TAKAGI, from Tokyo University of Marine Science and Technology, describes a project to tackle the problems, which needs your support...



‘One common language I’m afraid we’ll never get. Why can’t the English learn to speak?’ deplored Professor Higgins in the famous musical *My Fair Lady*.

Will the shipping industry get one common pronunciation of Maritime English? Never. For a British captain, a buoy is a ‘boy’ not a ‘boo-ey’ and port state control inspectors are proud to speak English with their accents — be it American, Australian, British, or Canadian.

Non-native learners of English have the right to speak English with their own accents, and they almost always do.

Young cadets in their English classes are nowadays most likely to be provided with CDs recorded by professional narrators who speak ‘textbook’ English. These CDs are good in that they can provide a reasonable model for students to follow, and if they speak English like the man/woman on the CD, they have a better chance of being understood.

However, when it comes to real communication at sea, those CDs won’t be of much help as far as listening is concerned because one seldom hears noise-free text-

Accent is on safe speech

book accents of English.

I once had a chance to visit Tokyo Martis (Tokyo Bay Marine Traffic Information Service) and listened to radio communications during their busiest hours (0400-0800 and 1600-2000).

Of all the speakers I overheard, only one was a native speaker of English, who happened to be a navy officer onboard an American warship. The rest were Chinese, Koreans, Indians, Filipinos,

and speakers whose nationality I could not identify just by listening.

Even when you visit a port that is located in an English-speaking country, you may well be challenged by the local accent. Pilots who work in Boston Harbour ‘paak’ their ‘ca’ on the wharf, and when you call the VTS in New Orleans, you may well be greeted by a mixture of Southern drawl and hospitality.

When I moved from sunny Southern California to Alabama (Deep South), I really had a hard time understanding the local accent. I’ve never been to the UK, but it is known for the wide variety of dialects — both social and regional. It is not uncommon for someone from England to find it very hard to understand a Scottish or Irish man.

Yes, mariners at sea must be able to cope with all kinds of English pronunciation including regional variations among native speakers and foreign accents among non-native speakers who speak English with a wide range of proficiency and intelligibility.

How have mariners achieved this goal? Exposure, exposure, exposure. When I sailed, as an observer, on an MOL container ship, the Japanese first engineer had a far better understanding of his Filipino crew’s English than the present author, who is an English teacher. Mariners can often tell the nationality of their party on the VHF radio just by listening to his/her accent.

But should the naturalistic exposure onboard a ship be the only way to get used to the various accents of English to be encountered at sea? If I were to work as an interpreter for a New Zealander, I’d probably want to rehearse a bit by listening to the Kiwi accent, so that I wouldn’t embarrass myself and the speaker by repeatedly asking him/her, ‘What did you say?’ Similarly, if I were a young Filipino officer ready to sign on to his first ship commanded by a Japanese cap-

tain, I would want to familiarise myself with the way Japanese people speak English.

With the modern invention of the multimedia computer and electronic gadgets, recording your own voice and posting the sound file up on the Internet and sharing it with the rest of the world has become easier and cheaper than ever. That’s exactly what we did. Tokyo University of Marine Science and Technology’s Maritime English Speech Corpus (www2.kaiyodai.ac.jp/~takagi/pweb/mesc.htm) now contains seven SMCP phrases recorded by people representing 28 different nationalities.

Part of the above corpus comes from our ‘sea story’ project to collect and share sea stories as told by real mariners with different accents. These stories are meant to have some educational value for cadets, so that they can learn about their business as well as the different ways people speak English.

So if you are a mariner or ex-mariner and have a story to share (I know it is impossible not to have a story once you sail!), just record it using an MP3 recorder or free software that runs on your PC, and send the file to me (takagi@kaiyodai.ac.jp) as an attachment with information on your language background. I’ll post it up.

Another group of people I am eager to reach are VTS folks. If you happen to be a Nautilus Telegraph reader and work or used to work for a VTS station, could you please provide recordings of typical messages you transmit over the radio; for example, ‘What is your ETA at the pilot station?’ ‘Rig the

pilot ladder on the starboard side, 2 metres above water’, etc. You may want to include some hard-to-guess pronunciations of place names in your service area.

No other place in the world is better equipped than VTS stations for making those recordings, and it won’t take much time. By making those recordings available on the Internet, mariners planning to enter your VTS area can be better prepared to understand your speech, be it native or not.

Noam Chomsky, a famous American linguist, was once asked which language is spoken the fastest. His answer was ‘foreign language’. English always sounds ‘fast’ to non-native speakers, and once this speed is combined with some unfamiliar regional accent, the answer could be total radio silence or dangerous misunderstandings. So a project like this has a practical value even for VTS stations operating in English-speaking countries.

Ever since I started teaching Maritime English in 1999, many mariners have helped me. I was an English teacher in distress and upon receiving my Mayday message for their professional assistance, they lent their generous helping hands. It is time to return the favour. I hope our Maritime English Speech Corpus Project will facilitate smooth, successful English communication at sea, thus contributing to safer and cleaner shipping.

Naoyuki Takagi graduated from the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies with an MA in English in 1989 and obtained his PhD in psychology from the University of California at Irvine in 1993. He has published many papers in cross-language speech perception since then and worked on several English-Japanese dictionaries.

Well ‘marinated’ since he started teaching at the TUMSAT, with an estimated total sea time of six months, he has produced an SMCP-based Maritime English textbook for deck cadets and a website for improving Maritime English pronunciation.

He is a full professor in the Faculty of Marine Engineering and serves on the steering committee of the maritime English teachers’ professional body IMLA-IMEC.



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