

# THE IMO STANDARD MARINE COMMUNICATION PHRASES

How and why the SMCP was accomplished and introduced;  
the teaching of the SMCP in Vessel Traffic Service context  
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## 1.- INTRODUCTION

The adoption of the IMO standard marine communication phrases (SMCP) as IMO resolution A.918 (22) in 2001 marks the end of a stage that started as far back as 1973, the year that IMCO - as it was then called - decided, through the Maritime Safety Committee at its 27 session, that the common language to be used in the maritime context should be English and that it was necessary to establish the level of knowledge of this language and the vocabulary required to be able to navigate safely.

In the specific context of Vessel Traffic Services, the need to use a standard language is established in a series of regulations of different types, mainly IMO resolutions, IMO instruments and IALA Recommendations and Model Courses. It seems obvious that both the VTS operators currently working and the candidates to this post must have the necessary knowledge to use and understand the IMO standard phrases for marine communications in compliance with international regulations, as, if mariners are obliged to understand and use these phrases, the VTS operators, who have to interact with them, will have to use the same restricted language.

The following pages give a summary of the applicable regulations which may prove useful to set the background to the problem of training mariners and VTS operators in standard technical marine English.

## 2. STANDARD MARINE COMMUNICATION PHRASES (SMCP): ANALYSIS AND STRUCTURE.

Over these last years, safety at sea and the enhancement of measures aimed at protecting the marine and coastal environment has become an issue of ever greater concern for the international maritime community. This special attention to safety has periodically intensified as the inevitable trickle of accidents at sea occurred, with their consequent impact in the media and, therefore, on public opinion and on the politicians with responsibility in this area. The accidents that produce greatest impact are those that involve a significant number of casualties or that cause considerable damage to the environment. In general terms, and from the catastrophe of the "Titanic" up to the most recent accidents, many of the advances achieved in the area of international regulations on safety at sea have originated from an accident that had serious consequences. If we focus on accidents in which the lack of an adequate command of English - the common language adopted by IMO - contributed to increasing the number of lives lost and the damage suffered, we have to refer to two relatively recent catastrophes that illustrate the key importance of certain training deficiencies among crews whose mother tongue is not English. The lack of an adequate level of competence in English among professionals on board these vessels becomes dramatically important in situations of danger, when the problems of communication play a decisive role in magnifying the most negative consequences of the accidents.

Two specific maritime accidents can serve as a reference to accompany these comments. The first was the fire that broke out in the ferry, *Scandinavian Star*, in which 158 people died. The second was the grounding of the "Sea Empress" tanker, which caused considerable damage to the marine and coastal environment around Milford Haven in Wales, UK. In both cases, the lack of an adequate level of knowledge of general English, and particularly of technical-maritime English, played a significant role in the development of the events that led to a tragic result: casualties in one case, and damage to the ecosystem in the other.

### The "Scandinavian Star" case

In the early morning of 7<sup>th</sup> April, 1990, the "Scandinavian Star" ferry was sailing from Oslo to Frederikshavn (Denmark) with 99 crew and 383 passengers on board, when a fire broke out. Most of the passengers were from Norway, although there were some from Denmark and Sweden. The crew, on the other hand, was a typically multinational. 158 people died in the fire. Shortly before 2 o'clock in the morning on 7<sup>th</sup> April, a small fire was discovered in a pile of bedclothes near cabin Nr. 416, located on the port side of deck Nr. 4.

The fire was quickly extinguished but shortly afterwards a second fire broke out in the after part of the gangway on deck Nr. 3, near companionway 2S, in an area that was not commonly used. The fire spread rapidly and the crew were unable to control it; at 02 24 the vessel sent out a distress call, giving her position.

The position given was incorrect and placed the vessel in Norwegian waters, whereas her actual position was 11 miles West of Väderöarna, in Swedish waters.

Later, at 03.20 the captain considered that the fire could no longer be controlled and therefore gave the order to abandon ship. The subsequent investigation concluded that one of the causes that contributed decisively to the large number of casualties was the poor communication between the crew and the passengers, due to the crew's inadequate knowledge of English. This lack of knowledge, together with other factors, enormously increased the difficulty of evacuating the passengers and was another cause of the tragic result of the accident, which could have been far less serious, as the vessel finally did not sink and was later towed to port. As in so many other cases, the accident had its consequences. At IMO meetings held after the accident, the Subcommittee on Safety of Navigation (NAV) agreed that initiatives should be implemented to prevent the possibility of a repetition of a similar situation. Among these initiatives was a thorough revision of the Standard Marine Navigational Vocabulary and the preparation of a corpus of English phrases specific for passenger vessels.

These two initiatives took shape in the following documents:

- MSC/Circ 673: "On board Communications for Passenger Care"
- MSC/Circ 794: "IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases"

These two circulars of the Maritime Safety Committee were accompanied with the corresponding Annexes containing the standard phrases. Thus the "Scandinavian Star" accident may be considered as the origin of the Standard Marine Communication Phrases. As so often happens in the field of marine regulations, the high number of casualties acted, in this case, as a catalyst, triggering a positive reaction that led to the adoption of reforms designed to improve maritime safety.

### **The "Sea Empress" case**

The "Sea Empress" oil tanker grounded due to human error as it approached the port of Milford Haven, in Wales. As the result of the tanker's grounding, subsequent being re-floated and grounding again, a large amount of crude was spilt, causing significant damage to the environment in the coastal area around the port. 71,800 tonnes were spilt between the first time it grounded on 16<sup>th</sup> February 1996 and the second time on 17<sup>th</sup> February. The vessel was not successfully re-floated and towed away until 21<sup>st</sup> February and all that time it posed a constant threat of an ecological catastrophe. Without going into the details of the vessel salvage and re-floating operations, one significant fact must, nevertheless, be considered. In the initial phase of the accident, the ocean-going Chinese tug "De Yue" arrived on the scene of the accident only a few hours after the vessel stranded and took part in the first attempts to re-float and hold her in position. As Lord Donaldson declared, the problems of communication arising from the lack of knowledge of nautical English among the tug's crew contributed to the confusion surrounding the initial phase of the emergency, precisely at the time when the only means of minimizing the consequences of the accident lay in a swift and efficient response. The fact that it was necessary to have recourse to a Chinese cook from a Cantonese restaurant in Milford Haven as an interpreter during the operation led to the salvage operation acquiring, at certain moments, tragicomic tones and to the sensationalist press finding a fertile ground for its scandalous headlines.

Taking into account that after the first grounding, the initial spill amounted to only 2,500 tonnes of crude, and that the greater part of the oil escaped during the successive low tides following the second grounding, bringing the total to 71,800 tonnes, it could be concluded that the final consequences of the accident would have been considerably lessened if the vessel had been correctly re-floated and the second grounding had been avoided. Finally, although it is impossible to estimate the degree to which the difficulties in communication affected the final result of the accident, it seems obvious that if these difficulties had not existed, the intervention of the tug might have helped more efficiently to prevent the vessel grounding again, which led to the formation of the oil slick.

Referring to this accident on the occasion of a conference at the Wakefield Memorial in Southampton, Lord Donaldson declared:

*"There can be no more visible demonstration of the need for a common language than the spectacle of a huge Chinese salvage tug which could not be used because none of the crew spoke English"*

### **ANALYSIS AND STRUCTURE**

After the "Scandinavian Star" accident, the IMO envisaged the revision of and extension to the SMNV (Standard Marine Navigational Vocabulary) so as to make it more useful and able to offer a considerably wider and updated range of phrases.

The German Federal Government accepted the challenge to give form to this ambitious project and create a new

corpus of phrases that was to serve as a reference in the teaching and use of technical-maritime English, for the large group of professionals that use English as a common language all over the world, on board vessels of any flag, in coastal stations, in VTS centres, in pilot stations, in the offices of the port authorities, etc.

Professor Peter Trenkner was appointed to co-ordinate the project. From the start, he tried to involve the organizations representing the professional groups that would use the book in the future. Thus, he managed to obtain the collaboration and participation of the following organizations, companies and associations:

12 international shipping companies

British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)

Danish State Railways (Ferry Line Division)

German Association of Maritime English.

German Federal Chamber of Maritime Pilots

German Federal Navy (SAR Command)

German Shipowners Association

IMO (Various Subcommittees)

INMARSAT

Institute for Shiphandling and Simulation (ISUS)

International Association of Lighthouses and Marine Aids to Navigation (IALA, VTS Committee).

International Hydrographic Office (IHO)

International Maritime Lecturers Association (IMLA) (Marine English Committee)

International Maritime Pilots Association

International Telecommunications Union

Japanese Shipowners Association

Norwegian Shipowners Association

United States Coast Guard

World Meteorological Office

The following people also participated in the project: Captain F.F. Weeks, Doctor of Applied Linguistics, around 60 VTS operators in Germany, 35 pilots and many captains, most of them with crews of diverse nationalities under their command.

As regards the methodological aspect, the method used for teaching technical English to air traffic controllers was taken as a reference and, in this area, the recommendations of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the International Aviation English Association and the Swedish Air Traffic Control Academy were followed.

A draft version of the Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP) was circulated among various groups of professionals linked to maritime activities. After this trial period, the professionals consulted gave their comments

and suggestions for modifications and the team editing the final version drew up the final text to be published by IMO.

The SMCP comply with the guidelines laid down in the STCW-95 and have recently been published as an independent document by IMO, after they were adopted by the 22 Assembly, in November last year. This text will be the key reference document for teaching technical-maritime English during the next few years.

Here it should be mentioned the lack of discipline and professional rigor frequently shown in marine communications in English. The implementation of the standard language is minimal, not only among crews but also among professionals in shore stations, whose obligation to comply with the applicable international conventions is even stronger, as they represent the appropriate authorities, as in the case of the VTS operators.

The SEASPEAK project, co-ordinated by Fred Weeks, ship's master and doctor of applied linguistics, undertook the task of drawing up a communication manual, with the participation of a group of professionals in the maritime field, on the one hand, and of experts in applied linguistics, on the other. However, the circulation achieved by the SEASPEAK system and its application to the every day reality of marine communications have been very limited. This in no way detracts from the final result of the project, as the SEASPEAK Training Manual is probably the best manual on marine communications published to date.

Not only mariners, but also pilots and VTS operators, the latter representing the appropriate competent authority, are even more strongly obliged than the users of the service officers and masters to maintain maximum levels of discipline and professional behaviour in VHF communication and to comply with the international conventions (STCW-95) and with the IMO resolutions (A.857 (20) and A.918 (22)), which clearly recommend the use of the SMCP in preference to other expressions of similar meaning.

Moreover, the legal responsibility aspect should not be forgotten. In the VTS context, both port and coastal, all VHF communications are recorded and placed at the disposal of the legal authorities in case of an accident. If a ship grounds, there is a collision or any other accident, in which a prior exchange of information between the vessel and the VTS took place, and that exchange of messages was confused or misinterpreted at some moment and, therefore, may have contributed to the accident, the party that deviated most from standard English and consequently the one that least respected the international conventions, will be in a weaker position with respect to involvement and responsibility.

The SMCP represent a significant advance on the Standard Marine Navigational Vocabulary (SMNV). The Vocabulary had not been revised since 1985, the year of the last publication of the text by IMO. Over these last 16 years, the reality of maritime transport has changed radically, with the appearance of new technologies and systems: the Global Maritime Distress and Safety System (GMDSS), electronic charts (ECDIS), differential GPS, automatic identification systems (AIS), high speed craft (HSC), the exponential development of the VTS and many more aspects have, for some time now, made it absolutely essential to update the vocabulary and marine terminology offered by the SMNV. To give an idea of the great advance and changes included in the SMCP, it is sufficient to note that, whereas in the SMNV no reference whatsoever was made to the VTS, in the SMCP several chapters are dedicated to VTS communications:

Application of Message Markers

Phrases for acquiring and providing data for a traffic image

Phrases for providing VTS services

Phrases between adjacent VTS

Phrases for communication with emergency services and allied services.

The future of the SMCP was not clarified at the IMO 21 Assembly, as it had been foreseen; in fact, it was not until the 22 Assembly held in November 2001 that they were finally adopted, as Resolution A.918 (22) *IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases*.

A fundamental aspect of the Standard Phrases is that they represent an attempt to choose the simplest, clearest wording and the easiest to memorize from among the innumerable possible or existing combinations to express a given action, question, recommendation, intention, etc. In short, the aim has been to make the phrases as simple

as possible; they never include complex subordinated clauses, difficult morphological structures, or sophisticated vocabulary other than the terms proper to the maritime context.

The Standard Marine Communication Phrases constitute a significant advance on their predecessor, the Standard Marine Navigational Vocabulary. The advance is appreciable in terms of both quality and quantity, although it is the second aspect that is most noticeable, as Annex I to Resolution A.918(22), which includes the phrases, has no fewer than 100 pages. Clearly, the number of phrases has been considerably increased.

The SMCP structure has not greatly changed from that of the SMNV. The phrases are organized as shown below:

Foreword

Introduction

General

Glossary

Part A: EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION PHRASES (Phraseology for communications between the vessel and the exterior)

A1: EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION PHRASES

A2: ON-BOARD COMMUNICATION PHRASES

Part B: ON-BOARD COMMUNICATION PHRASES

In part I, General, some changes are introduced, such as the incorporation of new sections that did not figure in the Vocabulary, namely:

Spelling

Message markers

Standard organizational phrases

Repetition

Readiness

Ambiguous words

Moreover, some of the sections previously included have been suppressed:

Standard verbs

Miscellaneous phrases

A considerable number of new terms have been included in the Glossary, although the criteria applied for their selection continues to be at least debatable.

Substantial changes are to be found in parts A, External Communication Phrases, and B, On-board Communication Phrases, which have been considerably extended, with the main aim of complying with the requirements established in the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers, 1978, as amended in 1995, with regard to the knowledge of maritime English.

The Phrases are organized in a more complete and logical number of chapters than the SMNV. Part A1, External Communication Phrases, includes the following sections:

1. Distress traffic
2. Urgency traffic
3. Safety Communications
4. Pilotage
5. Specials
6. Vessel Traffic Services (VTS) Standard Phrases

Another important contribution offered by the phrases is the chapter dedicated to VTS communications. The widespread implantation and continuous growth of Vessel Traffic Services all over the world highlighted the lack of phrases for this type of communications in the previous standard Vocabulary.

Chapter A1/6, Vessel Traffic Services (VTS) Standard Phrases, amply covers the needs of this emerging field in the maritime transport area and is organized in the following subsections:

- A1/6.1 Phrases for acquiring and providing data for a traffic image
- A1/6.2 Phrases for providing VTS services
- A1/6.3 Handing over to another VTS
- A1/6.4 Phrases for communication with emergency services and allied services

Another chapter that has undergone modification and been considerably extended is the one dedicated to pilotage, which, from having only 23 phrases in the standard Vocabulary, comprises 3 sections in the new document:

- A1/4.1 Pilot request.
- A1/4.2 Embarking/disembarking pilot.
- A1/4.3 Tug request.

Finally, significant changes have also be made to part A2, On-Board Communication Phrases.

In the SMNV, part IV comprised the following 10 sections:

1. Standard wheel orders
2. Standard engine orders
3. Pilotage
4. Manoeuvring
5. Propulsion Systems
6. Anchoring
7. Berthing/unberthing
8. Radar

9. Tugs

10 Draught and air draught

In the phrases, the structure of the part corresponding to on-board communications has changed completely, as 4 independent chapters have been introduced:

B1 Operative Shiphandling

B2 Safety on Board

B3 Cargo and Cargo Handling

B4 Passenger Care

Another aspect to be noted is the incorporation of the phrases required for passenger care, following the line initiated after the Scandinavian Star accident with the issue of the MSC/Circ 673 circular: "On board Communications for Passenger Care".

### **3 TEACHING IMO SMCP IN A VTS CONTEXT**

As was mentioned in the Analysis and Structure section, the SMCP are divided into two main groups: Part A and Part B, External Communications and On-board Communications, respectively. This division is not arbitrary but responds to the stipulations of the Convention on Training and SOLAS (STCW 95 Table A-II/I and Rule 14(4) in Chapter V, respectively). Thus the use and comprehension of the phrases contained in the External Communications part are required in two IMO instruments to which the Spanish State is a signatory, i.e., the use of these phrases is of a compulsory nature, as derives from the mentioned instruments and to which reference is made in the Introduction:

*....Use of the IMO SMCP should be made as often as possible in preference to other wording of similar meaning; as a minimum requirement, users should adhere as closely as possible to them in relevant situations*

The experience acquired in Centro Jovellanos in teaching and divulgating these phrases since the issue of the Maritime Safety Committee circular MSC/Circ794 in June 1997, allows us to establish some conclusions based more on our experience in teaching the SMCP and on the observation of the students reactions over the last five years, than on a statistical or sociological scientific method:

The intensity of the initial rejection by mariners and other professionals of the use of the standard phrases in the sector is usually directly proportional to their years of experience in the use of English as just another tool in the maritime transport field and to the level of linguistic competence of the seafarer / VTS operator / pilot. This means that if a mariner has been sailing all over the world for the past fifteen years and using English in his daily work with no great problem and if, further, his level of knowledge and use of English is high, the rejection to limiting himself to the discipline of the standard phrases and to making the effort required to familiarize himself with them and learn them can almost be guaranteed. On the other hand, merchant navy students and the younger officers seem to have a more receptive attitude to the use of standard maritime English.

The lack of knowledge of both the SNMV and of the SMCP is worrying. The students in courses such as MRCC/VTS operator; Initiation to pilotage; Advanced course in ship handling and navigation, all professionals of more or less experience, have serious difficulties when they try to handle such elementary aspects of standard technical English, as, for example, wheel orders, establishing a position by bearing and distance or the construction of simple navigational warning messages. The same occurred with students from the final years of Maritime Schools, attending basic ship handling and navigation courses.

The applicable international regulation (STCW-95, SOLAS, IMO Resolution A.857(20), IMO Resolution A.918(22), IALA V-103 Recommendation, etc.) do not appear to have had much influence on maritime and academic authorities when it comes to requiring that both employed professionals and future mariners learn and be able to use standard marine English, as stipulated in the STCW-95, for the certification of officers in charge of a navigational watch. The same applies to the VTS operators.

From all the foregoing, it can be deduced that the attempt to develop a standard marine language, mainly the Standard Marine Navigational Vocabulary and the IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases, and to extend its use, have not had the desired success. Although the approach was correct on paper, the final result of the implantation of the standard language was not as expected.

The large number of the IMO SMCP - a document of 104 pages in its original version - has given rise to a variety of criticisms and strong opposition from some countries with great influence in IMO. This rejection was responsible for delaying the adoption of the Phrases for several years, until the IMO 22 Assembly, and for modifying the initial status of the phrases.

Among the possible measures that can be suggested to change this situation of both lack of knowledge of the SMCP and the unwillingness to use them in the professional context, we would select the following:

Courses in SMCP, both for mariners and VTS operators, must be preceded or accompanied by an awareness of the importance of their use and of the framework of international regulations governing the knowledge and use of these phrases.

The responsibilities that a professional on board a vessel or in a shore station like a VTS Centre may face if his messages transmitted by radio in English are not understood and, as a consequence of this confusion, a serious accident occurs, must be highlighted. The recording of the communications and their transcription are pieces of evidence demanded by the judges when the case is taken to court.

As regards the teaching of standard maritime English, the teaching programs in the maritime training centres should be suitably adapted, as should the number of credits assigned to marine English and the levels of competence required from the students to enable them to comply successfully with the requirements of STCW and the other international regulations mentioned.

In addition to the proper training of future mariners, the training of those in service must not be forgotten. One only has to recall that the United States Coast Guard has, for some time, been inspecting merchant vessels berthing in American ports and examining, among other things, the officers competence in technical marine English, or that the UK Maritime and Coast Guard Agency requires mariners who wish to sail on British registered vessels to pass an examination in technical English.

The maritime and academic administrations in the various countries should make an effort to understand that the success of their mariners in an ever more demanding and competitive labour market depends also on their linguistic competence in English in general and on their knowledge of marine English, in particular, especially in its standard version, as required by the current international regulations.

The use of complementary tools, in this case a VTS simulator or a ship handling and navigation simulator, can significantly enhance the standard phrase learning process by contextualizing their use and contributing to reinforce the communicative approach.

Finally, the scarcity of modern didactic material for teaching technical-maritime English and standard marine English must be mentioned. New materials - preferable on interactive media - are of fundamental importance to be able to cope efficiently with the new knowledge requirements established in the international conventions and regulations.