



Seafarers need to make more use of the international Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP), argues Maritime English expert **Prof Peter Trenkner**...

# The need to mind your language!



Good communications can be a significant challenge among multinational crews  
Picture: Danny Cornilissen

Please, dear expert reader, guess what the Ukrainian watchstanding officer did when he heard the following message on VHF Channel 16:

*'Any ship around Morrison Head hear me — MAYDAY Ranger/WXYZ — two holds blazing furiously — no chance to put fire out — plates already buckling — the machinery let us down — total blackout — please come at once — situation on the brink — she may go down any minute — we can't last much longer — spotting Morrison Lighthouse some three miles or thereabouts norwest — come in.'*

You would not be surprised to learn that he did not do anything. He was not even able to put that message down in his logbook because he could not understand it.

Or read this:  
VTS Station: *'What flag do you fly?'*  
Answer: *'No flag, it's night.'*

Communication problems cause more accidents than investigation reports record: they require root cause analysis to acquire reliable data. Communicatively relevant factors tend to be covered by more striking 'follow-up' events in the chain of causation, so that the consequences are emphasised and recorded rather than the root causes themselves, i.e. communication.

Investigations into the disasters at sea involving the human element revealed that one-third of accidents happen as a result of communication problems, primarily to an insufficient command of what is called Maritime English.

The examples above are only two from a very large number. In VTS controlled areas, for instance, communicatively relevant factors contribute up to 40% of collisions involving the human factor — most of them caused by failures in radio communication even in routine conversations, but quite a few also caused through face-to-face communication deficiencies.

Port state control inspectors, for example, often encounter problems in getting elementary information from ships' officers due to the substandard English of the latter. Pilots voice their concern in this respect, too, and multi-ethnic officer crews occasionally fail to communicate effectively when managing panicking crowds onboard vessels in distress.

The most crucial point regarding verbal communication is that more than 86% of all SOLAS vessels are presently crewed with multilingual personnel who, due to diverse reasons, in frequent cases are not able to render the Maritime English skills required — risking and even causing damage to lives, property and the environment.

One of the worst accidents in this respect hap-

pened on the ferry Scandinavian Star (April 1990) when after a fire (or arson attack?) causing 159 casualties, the crew was not in a position to carry out the emergency evacuation procedures because of language barriers. For the same reason, the officers didn't even perform the decreed general emergency drill with the newly hired staff.

This disaster eventually made the International Maritime Organisation reconsider how to minimise Maritime English communication problems by appropriate means. So in 2001, after nine years' work, IMO adopted the SMCP, and via STCW95 they became a mandatory part of the education of officers at all white-listed training institutions.

The phrases provide a sort of survival kit as they include all essential safety-related events where spoken English is required, both in conversations on radio and face-to-face onboard.

The language used is a simplified, standardised version of Maritime English: grammar, structure and terminology are strictly purposive, and it is not hard to learn them if taught in real-life situational contexts.

Referring to the two examples above, one will immediately realise that if the SMCP were applied as shown below, the message or question, respectively, would have been easily understood or properly answered. The communicative advantage of the standardised versions compared with the 'free' ones is obvious — look at this:

*'MAYDAY — MAYDAY — MAYDAY this is MV Ranger/WXYZ'*

*'Mayday MV Ranger/WXYZ — my position three point five nautical miles southeast from Morrison Lighthouse — I am on fire in holds — fire not under control — I am not under command — I am in critical condition — I require fire-fighting assistance — over.'*

VTS Station: *'Question — what is your flag state?'*  
Vessel: *'Answer — my flag state is Germany.'*

Speaking of VHF communications, we have to state that many officers tend not to take VHF Radio Regulations seriously enough — though they were taught at college how to apply the rules. If at all, they only reluctantly accept that those regulations make sense, some of them admittedly reveal this only at second glance.

However, any non-compliance with the regulations may cause severe communication difficulties and, if overheard by supervisory authorities, may result in a seizure of the radio certificate. The SMCP take compliance with the Radio Regulations for granted and examples of their application are provided there.

The SMCP have been available since 2002. It is therefore understandable that by now only those

generations of officers having graduated after 2002 are familiar with them, and they do not represent the majority of active officers yet — but there is no substantial reason to *a priori* reject them.

Moreover, the IMO strongly recommends using the SMCP in preference to other wordings. Combined with an efficient system of instruction, they will — and have already — become an efficient safety language.

Officers educated at west European or Scandinavian colleges, for instance, have traditionally good Maritime English competence, and they are generally not the focus of the issue in question — although in Canada, for example, maritime educationalists voiced the opinion that native English speakers are as much in need of Maritime English instruction as anyone.

Anyway, fluent or native English speakers should try to reduce their eloquence to the SMCP level when encountering recipients less conversant with this

medium. As a matter of fact, the vast majority of seafarers have a different educational background and face or cause severe language problems, and they do appreciate having a sort of Maritime English communication survival kit available in form of the SMCP.

To sum up: being trained in the use of the SMCP, officers or pilots and shore-based maritime personnel such as VTS staff, will definitely encounter fewer communication difficulties when coping with safety-related situations, performing navigational duties, and organising or supervising cargo operations.

✎ **Professor Peter Trenkner** has some 45 years' teaching experience as a full university professor of Maritime Communication at Wismar University, Germany. He is the principal author of the IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases, and he is also the chairman of the annual International Maritime English Conference.



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