

# **Maritime Communication in an International and Intercultural Discourse**

by

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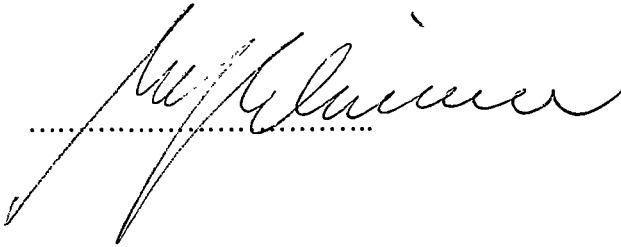
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## **Abstract**

The international maritime industry consists of a global web of shipping that covers the oceans and connects all continents on the earth. It brings together seafarers from a multitude of national, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. The English language has emerged as the lingua franca of the sea. By consensus – and, indeed, by UN resolution – it is the most common means through which communication takes place wherever language barriers exist. This thesis explores the views mariners have on a common language and the English language in that role. It tries to identify non-English speaking background (NESB) people who appear to have greater difficulties in communicating in the tongue, and it investigates the possible existence of cultural, religious, ideological or political reasons for an aversion to English. It also makes an attempt to determine the usefulness of a standard coded language as in the Standard Maritime Communication Phrases (SMCP) and seeks to gain information about incidents in which misunderstanding played a part. It further tries to elicit statements from seafarers about English language proficiency among their colleagues in the industry and about a skill level to be attained by different ranks. The research was carried out using a qualitative and a quantitative approach. Twelve interviews with seafarers and marine pilots were conducted and 132 questionnaires received from members of 17 different nationalities. In addition, four case studies were examined and an observation by the author on a recent voyage from Singapore to Australia was described. The result of the investigation shows the overwhelming acceptance of English as the common means of communication, reveals several language groups which are perceived as hard to communicate with using maritime English, and finds some evidence of a resistance to the language. It also shows that the SMCP is not used to its full potential and that misunderstandings due to verbal and cultural barriers are still firmly in place. The present level of English proficiency is widely considered as wanting, and officers in particular were expected to reach a more advanced level of competence in the language.

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## Chapter 1 – Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

The Sailor-man he said he'd seen that morning on the shore,  
A son of -- something --'twas a name I'd never heard before,  
A little 'gallows-looking chap'--dear me; what could he mean?  
With a 'carpet-swab' and 'muckingtogs,' and a hat turned up with green.

He spoke about his 'precious eyes,' and said he'd seen him 'sheer,'  
-- It's very odd that Sailor-men should talk so very queer --  
And then he hitch'd his trousers up, as is, I'm told, their use,  
-- It's very odd that Sailor-men should wear those things so loose.

From: 'Misadventures at Margate', by the Rev. Richard Harris Barham (1788-1845)

The talk of sailor-men may indeed seem queer to someone not associated with ships and the sea. Sailors – not only English speaking ones, but sailors the world over – have the distinction of using a vernacular of their own.

The first chapter of this thesis deals with the role of language in general, the inception of an international body which guides lawmakers internationally on matters concerned with global shipping, and describes the aims, the significance and the limitations of the work done herein.

Wherever humans interact there exists communication of some form or another, and the ability to communicate is clearly regarded as a cornerstone of a functioning human society. In most cases such communication is accomplished by the spoken word, but understanding may be achieved through other means like writing, sign language or symbols. However, for swift and prompt understanding, for working out problems and planning, speech is the most suitable because it is the medium which allows us to construct word and sentence sequences into which



our thoughts can be organised, formalised and presented. “The formal and functional complexity of language is such a distinctive human trait that many scholars think the designation ‘homo loquens’ (‘speaking man’) to be a better way of identifying the species than any other single criterion that has been suggested” (Chrystal, 1994, p. 398). It is, for supporters of that suggestion, our capacity to use phrases and sentence structures to converse which sets us apart on this earth.

Through language we are able to pass on our thoughts and experiences. It is because of language that no generation has to start at the beginning again because the human race is able to communicate through time what it has learned in the past. We have built up an enormous amount of knowledge, collected through the ages, from which those who come after us will benefit since we have language to teach them. “When the place and the importance of language in human life and in human affairs are properly understood”, said Robins, “there will be no doubt that for as far ahead as anyone can see, language will be one of the greatest of ‘great ideas’ that dominate our thought and our understanding of ourselves and of the world” (Robins, 2003, p. 2).

It is language, written or spoken, which helps us to put into words ideas that lead to innovations and discoveries, which lets us create concepts and ideas, which allows writers and scholars to produce great works. Words can make us laugh and cry, inspire us for some good or instil hatred, make us feel angry and irritated or serene and tender. The gift of language has indeed raised us to where we are in the natural world. It allowed us to live in groups and develop social systems. Later, when mankind progressed to writing, language became even more powerful and far reaching and allowed communities to expand and turn into states and nations founded on clear and defined principles of law and order. Verbal communication made it possible to discuss such principles, alter or revoke them, institute new ones and in this way build more complex and sophisticated systems. It is no wonder that the three great monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam regarded the confusion and bedlam that arose during the building of the tower of Babel as a major calamity: when suddenly humans were incapable of understanding each others’ speech, a major cohesive element was lost. “The Lord said ‘if as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan will be impossible to them. Come let us go down and confuse their languages, so they will not

understand each other.” (The Bible, Genesis 11: 6-7). Chaos ensued and society ceased to function – an inability to communicate with words was the antithesis of progress, of orderly and peaceful development.

As societies advanced the languages grew, and concepts and theories beyond those necessary for the basic operations of a group of humans living together evolved. Independent from one another in many cases, literature was born, functional at first but then branching out into forms of poetry and philosophy. Abstract thoughts could be debated, and language became a vehicle and an integral part of cultural development, of the growth of ethos and religion and the distinctive and peculiar make up of a civilization.

But not all cultures developed independently. There were interactions between them, peaceful or hostile, through which they influenced and affected each other. Nations merged and were divided. Languages spread and changed, sometimes gradually and with the compliance of those who spoke it, sometimes by force. And occasionally languages died because societies themselves died out.

There are today between 6000 and 7000 languages spoken worldwide. The ambiguity in this estimation is caused mostly because some dialects have been and still are diverging, and it is difficult to determine if they have attained the status of a distinctly separate language. The majority of the languages in the world have no written form and many of them are used in small communities and have only a few speakers; in some cases there are merely one or two individuals left who have retained a knowledge of the language. Sadly, almost 50% of the world's languages are no longer spoken by children – a first step in the demise of a language – and there are about 2000 languages which have fewer than a thousand speakers.

Just 200 languages, approximately, are spoken by a million people or more. According to *Ethnologue, Vol. I, Languages of the World* (Gordon, Ed., 2000, p. 14) the language with the most native speakers is Mandarin with 874 million users, followed by Hindi with 366 million speakers. English and Spanish follow with around 340 million people each. In declining order we then have Bengali, Arabic (if the 15 major dialects are regarded as one language), Portuguese, Russian, Japanese, German, Korean and French.

From a perspective of commerce and international trade, languages in use among relatively small groups of people are considered insignificant in the scheme of things globally. Others have reached a prominence which has propelled them far beyond the boundaries within which they originated.

Between members of the same ethnic or cultural group who share a common language communication does not normally present a problem. If ambiguity or misunderstanding in dialogue develops, there is the chance of clarifying an issue because parties are able to use their native lingo competently enough to explain a point.

When groups or individuals from different language backgrounds want to communicate, however, mutual ground has to be found. Where two separate cultures with different languages are territorially adjacent and not kept apart by some impenetrable topographical feature, they generally find some way to coexist. A notable example of circumstances impeding the spread of language is the island of New Guinea where the inaccessibility of the terrain has caused small communities to develop in isolation, leading to an incredible multilingual diversity in which about 600 different languages are spoken by around 7 million people in an area the size of Sweden. The languages of Europe, on the other hand, are far fewer in number and the relationship between them is often quite close. The constant movement of tribes from Scandinavia to North Africa, from the regions north of the Black Sea to Greece, Italy and Spain, and from Germany and France to the British Isles has left its linguistic legacy in every European tongue. In most cases there are geographical belts in which language, custom and conventions are understood – if not practised – by adjoining groups. Some of these neighbouring languages are very closely related and use similar vocabulary and grammatical structure. Examples of this are found in border areas all over the world.

As the distance from the other group increases and the need to converse in another language becomes less acute, such bilingualism gradually becomes less common. It is clearly the interaction with other cultural groups which fosters multilingualism.

## 1.2 The background

'In mare unitas' is the motto of the Australian Merchant Navy Officers Association, 'in the sea lies unity'. But is the sea a dividing or a uniting feature? Both views are equally reasonable. The element of water, particularly when it is rough, can have a worrisome aspect, and for most of the time of human habitation on this planet mankind has pottered around the edges of large bodies of water without venturing too far. Seafaring in the sense of crossing vast expanses of the sea and thereby the encountering of other civilisations and cultures is a phenomenon of the more recent past. Then again, even on sailing ships it was a lot easier to cross 20 nautical miles of the English Channel or the even narrower Strait of Gibraltar than to cover an equal distance in the New Guinea highlands on foot.

In the last few hundred years, shipping has been an important factor in the meeting of societies, cultures and languages. This was not always peaceful – colonisation and occupation were frequently associated with the subjugation of the native population – and resulting trade often benefited one party more than the other. From the perspective of communication it sometimes meant that the less advantaged group had to make an effort to speak the language of the more powerful, an occurrence very common in history.

The global level of interaction between cultures through exploration and trade increased from the 14<sup>th</sup> century in an explosive manner as a result of the renaissance in Europe. While the Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, Vikings, Arabs, Chinese, and South Pacific Islanders had sailed the world's oceans before, covered great distances and made contact with far-off shores, the scale of expansion during the age of exploration reached a different dimension altogether. European countries like Portugal, Spain, England, France, Holland, Germany, Belgium and Italy in turn – or indeed at the same time – extended their spheres of influence by annexation and colonisation. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were few places left on this earth where the colonising nations of Europe had not set foot. Britain, after struggling for control for over 400 years, was the most successful. Helped by the fact that as an island nation it had to rely heavily on shipping, the policies of the country strongly supported a formidable fighting and merchant

navy. In time, and against fierce opposition by other countries, it became the prime naval force in Europe. In terms of acquisition of colonies, it was also leading all other nations.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century these European countries were joined in the practice of laying claim to other lands by the United States of America. Together these states achieved the establishment of a net of trading routes which, for the first time in the history of mankind, encompassed the whole globe, and the merchant fleets of European and North American countries represented the vast bulk of international shipping. The English-speaking contingent in this group was the largest.

The predominance of European and American flagged ships in this network dwindled towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and nations not previously involved in owning international trading vessels established and expanded their presence in world shipping.

The entry of new nations into the international arena had many effects. The obvious ones were of the commercial kind, in that trade volume increased, goods became more varied and freight rates more competitive.

However, this shift also meant that the percentage of seafarers from a non-English speaking background decreased. In fact, the whole demographic picture of world shipping changed in an amazingly short space of time.

Traditionally, seafarers from third-world nations working onboard British or Dutch or French ships and who showed outstanding abilities were promoted on board to rise in the ranks. That meant inevitably that these individuals 'fitted into the system' and – again inevitably – spoke the language of the flag state. The 'system', incidentally, did not vary greatly between ships of different nationalities. Its continued existence was essentially dictated by the situation of people being at sea on a small, manmade island which had to cope with inclement weather, hazardous navigational predicaments, and the social issues which arise from groups of humans having to live together in a confined space. In such surroundings an almost paramilitary milieu had to be cultivated in which discipline and a hierarchical environment were and are taken as fundamental.

This was ubiquitously accepted – the alternative was considered to leave the way open to mutiny and that, in turn, was a capital offence in anybody's language.

Seafarers from these third-world countries were cheaper to keep and were often employed as a token action to show goodwill towards the inhabitants of a region a vessel was trading with. There was most often, however, a glass ceiling for promoting these seafarers: even though advancement was possible for nationals of a foreign country, senior positions were reserved for those who belonged to the nationality of the flag state.

When the shift in trading tonnage from western nations to former third-world countries in the world's trading fleet occurred, the training received by those who had reached positions of responsibility in the service of an established and expert merchant navy enabled them now to fill top-ranking positions on their own countries' vessels when they entered international shipping. The vast majority of masters, chief engineers and chief officers in charge of vessels of the newly emerging shipping nations in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century had been trained on ships which belonged to the previous generation of big players in world trade. By sheer numbers the majority of these had been in the service of 'native' English speaking countries: ships from Great Britain, the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa had presented the majority of world shipping by far. This development and the already considerable spread of the language through the creation of the British Commonwealth helped in English becoming the most widely used language in the international maritime industry.

In today's world, international trade by sea creates a kaleidoscope of interfaces between people from different cultural, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds as a common event every day. Ships are trading between ports around the globe and might visit a number of countries in a matter of weeks or even days. An Italian cargo ship can call into ports in China, Korea, Taiwan and Japan within 6 or 7 days. For a Swedish container vessel to carry out loading and discharge operations in England, Germany, the Netherlands, France and Spain may take not much more than a week. The need for a common means of communication is obvious. Contenders like Spanish and French have lost ground over time, and English has nudged its way into the role of lingua franca of the sea.

### **1.3 A recent history of shipping and the founding of the IMO**

Seafaring has always been a profession in which many skills were important in order to survive and successfully carry goods across the sea. Most of these skills are of a practical nature like seamanship, or require mathematical calculations as in the field of navigation and stability. None of these things demand linguistic dexterity as such. Common sense was probably the most essential characteristic of a sailor's make-up. And it is true to say that, in the face of adversity, skilled seafarers often need few words to communicate if it is a matter of wrestling with the elements to preserve their microcosm. The fact is, however, that the challenges confronting the seafarer of today are different from the ones sailors were faced with 100 years ago. Ships are bigger, safer, faster and more comfortable, and physical strength and toughness are no longer a prime requisite to go to sea. Where one could sail for weeks without sighting another vessel at the end of the 19th century, one finds traffic separation schemes today; where unloading and loading operations took place with the use of dhows and manual labour, portainer cranes and conveyor belts now take care of cargo exchange. The process of position fixing, once the prime task of the navigating officer and one which required time, mathematical skills and an understanding of the motion of celestial bodies, is now carried out with electronic position fixing aids. Procedures are so much more refined in our modern shipping world and the margin for error has become very small.

The increase in world trade and shipping resulted in an increased number of accidents and the need for more regulation at sea became obvious. A body was needed which could authoritatively and independently resolve issues relating to safety in international shipping. An international maritime conference in Washington had recommended the formation of an international organisation to deal with this as early as 1889, but the recommendation was generally rejected. Nations still saw themselves as individual entities rather than as part of a global trading community.

The need to create a safe maritime environment by regulating ship building, traffic rules, buoyage and manning levels grew. Eventually, after WWII, as the number of trading ships increased dramatically, it was time. In 1948 the United Nations, at an international gathering in Geneva, formally approved a convention to establish IMCO, the forerunner of the present

International Maritime Organization (IMO) under the umbrella of the UN. The convention came into force in 1958 and the group met for the first time in 1959.

At this point the function and role of the IMO should be described briefly. The organisation does not have any power of enforcement. Rather, representatives of participating nations take recommendations and binding resolutions back to the law-making bodies of their own nations, and over time they are passed into law through whatever mechanisms are in place in the various member states to bring about changes. This is a time-consuming process and often years pass before action is taken, but the sovereignty and autonomy of each nation is never in doubt.

The body's declared aim was to promote maritime safety and its first task was to adopt a new version of SOLAS (Safety Of Life At Sea – which had originally been conceived in 1914 as a response to the “Titanic” disaster of 1912). Over the next decades many treaties and conventions were adopted which achieved just that. They ranged from formulating rules for the prevention of collisions at sea to setting standards governing the materials used in ship construction, from recommending the number of life-saving appliances to be carried on board a vessel to the amount of cargo allowed to be loaded by a particular ship and the strength of lifting equipment to handle such cargo. Often these recommendations are relatively clear cut and their implementation is easy to control and verify. Others are more problematic.

The changes introduced by the IMO are – generally speaking – reactive in that they are the responses to disasters or mishaps after they have occurred. The groundings of the tankers “Torrey Canyon” and “Amoco Cadiz” brought about changes to the Maritime Pollution Act; the “Exxon Valdez” tanker disaster led to alterations in ship design and tankers having to be built with double hulls; the sinking of the Ro-Ro passenger ferry “Estonia” in the Baltic sea, with the loss of 852 lives, caused helicopter rescue operations to be revised; and the capsizing of the passenger ferry “Herald of Free Enterprise”, in which 197 people died, was the trigger for the introduction of the International Safety Management (ISM) code into shipping.

While one can find many other examples in which a lack of effective communication played a role, it is probably the case of the “Scandinavian Star” which gained most prominence through the media as the one in which the lack of a common language among the people on board contributed to disaster. The “Scandinavian Star”, a passenger ferry on its way from the



Norwegian capital Oslo to Frederikshaven in Denmark, caught fire in 1990 and 158 people perished. It was this tragedy which motivated the IMO to focus on the problem of communication at sea in more detail. As a result, the STCW convention of 1995 stipulated that seafarers had to speak and understand English as a common language. Verbal communication, long accepted as something where one just did one's best, finally came under closer scrutiny.

#### **1.4 Aims of the study**

Communication at sea between speakers of different mother tongues must be facilitated not only between ships or seafarers and people ashore, but in many cases between crew members of the same vessel. The author served many years ago on a medium-sized cargo vessel with a crew of 36 people which was made up of 13 nationalities. The master and the chief officer were Greek, the second officer came from Pakistan, the third officer hailed from Taiwan, the stewards were Indian and Ceylonese, while among the ratings Nigerians rubbed shoulders with German, English, Malaysian, Indonesian, Bangladeshi, Iranian and Somali seafarers. This is a rather extreme example, but a situation in which 4 or 5 languages are spoken on a modern international trading ship is not unusual today.

Opportunities for confusion and misunderstanding between parties clearly abound and, to facilitate understanding within a vessel on international voyages, the common medium had become to a large extent the English language, even before the IMO's resolution came into force. There are exceptions, of course, where one or two individuals are forced by circumstances to adapt to another lingo predominant on a particular ship, but this is not usually the case. In the context of communication one aim in this study became to

- *investigate the perception among seafarers regarding the need for a common language, and how they see the viability of the English language to fulfil that role.*

It has been established that the hegemony of the British empire at sea during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century is an indisputable fact, but that it is equally true that this dominance was lost in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most vessels now sail under flags of countries which are non-English speaking, and the percentage of native English-speaking officers today – again in

tonnage terms – is estimated to be around 10%. In view of this, is English still the best choice of the common language of the sea?

Since the ethnic background of the officers changed so fundamentally, it has become apparent that members of some nationalities have encountered greater problems in learning the English language and coming to terms with the western culture it is seen to represent than others. This led to another goal of the investigation, namely to

- *identify the language groups which appear to experience greater difficulties in communicating in maritime English because of their linguistic background, and reveal any possible opposition for cultural, political, ideological or religious reasons shown by individuals to having the language imposed on them.*

English is a dialect of the Teutonic branch of the Indo-European languages. It is closely related to Dutch and Flemish and similar to German and the Scandinavian languages in its structure, vocabulary and syntax. Native speakers of these latter groups don't generally experience serious difficulties with the learning of English. While the biggest growth in national fleets presently takes place in Asia, other regions such as the Arabian countries are also increasing their merchant navies. Speakers of Semitic or Sino-Tibetan tongues have a much harder task confronting them in learning English than those from a Teutonic background. In addition to the linguistic barrier, there is the challenge of having to learn and use a language which originated with a people who have a very different way of life and whose mores, customs and traditions are quite alien to the traditional lifestyle in China, Vietnam, Somalia or Saudi Arabia.

The booklet entitled 'Standard Marine Communication Phrases' or SMCP has been designed to assist in overcoming language barriers. But accidents due to misunderstanding still occur. A further objective of the study therefore became to

- *determine the efficacy and the limitations of a codified language as in the SMCP and to analyse incidents in the maritime sector where communication was*

*ineffective and led to mishaps or contributed in an adverse way to the outcome of accidents.*

There have been many incidents and accidents at sea in which it was established that misunderstandings caused by the lack of a common language were significant and at times crucial. After the “Scandinavian Star” disaster in 1992, when the IMO took a closer look at the problem of miscommunication among crews with different language backgrounds, the organisation began cautiously to formulate the prescription for a common language. As a result, it promoted as one strategy to help overcome language barriers on ships the consolidation of a codified language which is simple to use. One such tool was the creation of the ‘Standard Maritime Communication Phrases’, a little booklet containing terms, short sentences and orders to be used where mutual understanding caused by language differences proves to be difficult.

For the issue of a certificate of competency as a watch keeping officer, a seafarer has to show knowledge in a wide variety of areas. Language proficiency in English has so far not been part of an international syllabus in the education and training of officers. The fourth aim of the thesis was therefore to

- *examine the status of English language proficiency among seafarers today and seek the seafarer’s opinion on what level of maritime English competence should exist for different ranks on board international trading vessels.*

Much in the area of communication at sea concerns routine tasks. At critical times, such as pilotage or manoeuvring, it consists of orders and the acknowledgement of orders or short sentences in the form of a query or a statement concerning an intention. Such brief interchanges can be effected by phrases which should be part of every seafarer’s vocabulary in international shipping. But is it?

Dialogue in English, be it inter-ship or ship to shore, is carried out by officers. At this level a reasonable command of the language is necessary. A rating, on the other hand, has comparatively little essential verbal exchange other than during pilotage and cargo operations and could ‘get by’ with very basic English skills. Then again, a ship’s master is required to

interact with representatives of the customs department, port authority or the legal system. How do we establish a standard of linguistic proficiency for different ranks?

## **1.5 Significance of the study**

Active seafarers, pilots, maritime authorities, indeed everyone involved with international shipping has in some way or another experienced the problem of miscommunication because of language difficulties. The maritime industry has managed to grow despite of these difficulties. If someone onboard was not so well versed in the lingo, that was 'factored in' by colleagues and, provided the person was performing their duties satisfactorily apart from not always understanding an order or what had been said right away, such a shortcoming was tacitly accepted and one got on with the job.

But the tremendous progress in technology and science has affected the shipping world just like other sectors of modern society, and it has become an area in which time constraints, regulations and financial considerations leave very little room for making mistakes. Ships are not as isolated from the rest of the world and from one another as they were. Blunders, faults and misunderstandings can have catastrophic consequences far beyond what could be imagined a few generations ago. As a consequence, quality assurance systems and safety management systems have been put in place to prevent mistakes from being made.

A number of surveys have been initiated in recent times to determine to what degree an inability of mariners to understand each other is to blame in some mishaps, but far more in-depth research is required to appraise the efficacy of information exchange at sea. Miscommunication is less easy to identify and assess than a mechanical breakdown. This paper attempts to shed some light onto the issue by trying to investigate what those people who are going to guide ships over the world's oceans in the future feel about it – the junior and senior officers who will be directly confronted with the problem in the years to come. Their views, experiences and suggestions are of significant importance in any planned approach to improve understanding on and between ships.

Within this context it became clear that a focus on language alone was far too narrow and could not possibly explain in depth the reasons for miscommunication at all times. Communication between humans is greatly influenced by – and inseparable from – the culture of those involved, and factors like kinesics, social status, mannerism, tone of voice, and loudness of speech all contribute to success in information exchange or a lack thereof. This meant that the survey had to include a number of different linguistic and ethnic perspectives to achieve a degree of relevance.

## **1.6 Limitations of the study**

Initially it was envisaged to have only seafarers from a non-English speaking background participate in the research. That notion was later rejected as a comparison of the views of native and non-native English speakers was considered valuable. It was also considered difficult under the circumstances to find a sufficient number of contributors to make the research valid and reliable.

The study into the topic was done by a single individual over a period of 6 years. The scope of the inquiry is therefore limited in many aspects: even though 132 questionnaires were collected, a greater number would have given a more reliable result. There is also the fact that only a comparatively small number of nationalities was involved and some of these were represented by only 1 or 2 people.

Interviews (apart from those with the pilots) were held only with seafarers from a non-English speaking background who had chosen to study in Australia. This includes many from countries which had in the past been politically associated with Britain and this could be seen as a bias toward that nation. Another point is that the Australian Maritime College accepts only students who are already familiar with the English language. While their opinions, remarks and perspectives were helpful and consequential, their familiarity with English could be construed as a prejudiced stand.

## **1.7 Summary of the chapters**

The thesis contains six chapters. The introduction in chapter 1 is designed to draw a rough sketch of the maritime environment and of the phenomenon of communication in a multilingual

environment by looking at the role of language in general and the position English has arrived at within the world's language community, especially the maritime community.

Chapter 2 presents a literature review of the material relevant to this study. There is relatively little printed matter available dealing with the problem of communication at sea. The predicament of a lack of a common medium to converse in on multiethnic vessels has existed since time immemorial but has never been identified or named as an issue to be addressed as a major difficulty. Only recently has the international shipping community taken steps to look more closely at the cost misunderstandings can cause. The European Union instigated the "Marcom Report" in 1999 and the topic is now firmly on the agenda of the IMO. The International Maritime Lecturers Association (IMLA) has held international maritime English conferences since 1981, and seafarers, linguists, lecturers and legislators have started to collaborate in a more targeted and concerted fashion. There are a few papers which have been written on the subject and some attempts have been made at developing maritime English teaching courses. But even though there has been, according to Pritchard (2004),

a demand and a degree of pressure by the international maritime community and the industry to develop a standard or more or less widely accepted textbooks or other type of material for the learning/teaching of Maritime English this objective has been difficult to achieve for a number of reasons:

- Non existence of standards on Maritime English syllabus,
- Lack of standards on Maritime English course books,
- Unarticulated demand and, consequently, lack of interest on the publisher's side
- Poor supply of textbooks for international use
- Restrictive national legislations and language policies
- Slow adjustment of conventional textbooks to the developments in foreign language teaching and modern teaching technologies. (pp. 4-5)

On the other hand, literature related to the learning of languages in general, and English in particular, is plentiful and easily available, including books on foreign language learning, language and culture, use of a lingua franca, jargon, and, from a more practical view, standards

of English, English for special purposes and attempts to standardise English. Research from that area therefore has been used to see how it can be applied in this particular study.

There are many lines of work in which a special form of vernacular, peculiar to a particular profession, evolved. The medical fraternity, educators, workers in the mining industry and long-distance truck drivers, to name but a few, have created a distinctive patois of their own. Maritime English fits into the category of a special purpose form of English in that it has generated, modified or adopted from other languages many terms and phrases which are not used anywhere but in the shipping context.

The inter-relationship between language and culture grew to be of specific interest as it became apparent that friction and ill feeling was in many cases to blame for the breakdown of communication on board. Ships, more than other work environments in which individuals have the chance to walk away after a day's work, are microcosms in which good inter-human relations are vital. A seafarer is on call 24 hours a day for 7 days a week and lives in close proximity to other crew members who may have quite different concepts of how to relax or what to laugh about, of what eating habits are acceptable or how much personal space to give.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology used in this research. The ethnographic nature of the topic warrants the use of qualitative research methods. For this reason case studies and interviews were employed.

It is a sad fact that financial considerations are mostly the driving force for change when something has gone awry. To be more precise, it is when a financial disadvantage is suffered that businesses and corporations are looking for a way to modify an operation. Too often loss of life has to occur before a practice or an environment is altered. There are a few instances which have occurred in which language problems have led to tragedy, but it needed a major disaster to openly attack the problem of a common language at sea. The maritime industry has instituted in most bona fide shipping nations a system in which incidents and accidents have to be reported, investigated and analysed. These reports are accessible to all stakeholders and the public. To investigate a number of case studies in which it was evident that inadequate communication

caused a mishap or helped to aggravate a situation was considered a worthwhile approach.

The interviews were conducted over a period of 3 years. The selection of individuals was made on the basis of their seetime and experience: there is little point in asking someone's opinion if they personally have not come across events of miscommunication at sea. Most of the participants had spent 6 or more years at sea in positions of responsibility; that is they had served as deck officers in the international merchant navy. The questions were asked in a semi-formal environment in that all interviews contained the same questions though not necessarily in the same sequence, but the atmosphere was more that of a conversation between professional mariners.

The questionnaire was used as a third method. It was the only quantitative strategy used and contained questions similar in content to those asked in the interview. The participants came from 17 different countries. A couple of the questionnaires were received from the Dalian Maritime University in China, where they had been handed out and collected by a colleague at that institution, and 12 came from seafarers who studied at the Elsfleth maritime faculty of the University of Oldenburg in Germany. The bulk of the survey was gathered at the Australian Maritime College in Launceston by the author himself.

Chapter 4 represents the data analysis of the interviews and the case studies. It consists of 2 sub-chapters, each of which pertains to one of the methodologies used. The results of the different research methods are described and presented in a way which allows interpretation and exegesis.

The interviews with the pilots were conducted at sea while the author was serving for a brief period as deck officer during a working holiday. All were Great Barrier Reef Pilots and stayed on board for a number of days. Two of them were native English speakers, while one was Dutch and one came from Germany.

Interviews with the remaining seafarers were conducted at the Australian Maritime College. All talks took place after the students had passed their final exams so as to avoid any perceived threat of intimidation or other impropriety.



The case studies used in this research were in fact paraphrased descriptions of incident and accident reports based on enquiries by marine authorities. These government agencies exist in all bona fide shipping nations, and their reports dealing with mishaps are kept very factual and objective and include much relevant background information.

Chapter 5 deals with the analysis of the quantitative instrument of the study, namely that of the questionnaire. A statistical computer program for social studies (SPSS Version 15.0 for Windows) was used to evaluate the answers. As with the interviews, the questionnaire was for ethical reasons handed to the seafarers after they had finished their final exams. The colleagues who distributed the poll overseas had been briefed on the questions by the author in case any questions from the participants should arise.

In chapter 6 a summary of the results is given to present a holistic overview of the findings, and an attempt is made to put these into some context with the realities of the international maritime environment. Topics for further research are also found in this chapter.

We are in the early stages of defining the level of skill and proficiency in verbal interaction in a truly global industry. No mode of transport can at this stage replace the shipping trade. Activity at sea is likely to grow and so will the expertise and knowledge of the men and women who crew the vessels.

## **1.8 Conclusion**

A study like this can be born out of pure academic interest in language teaching, an interest in social interaction between members of differing cultural groups in confined areas, curiosity about the relationship between language and culture, a desire to learn about correlations between dominant and subordinate languages, speculation on barriers to language learning and any number of other fascinating topics. Indeed, all of these themes were appealing and motivational in the selection of the research thesis.

There was, however, a very practical rationale involved also: the potential for terrible accidents due to misunderstandings caused by language difficulties to take place in the shipping industry must be reduced. It has been said in a cynical way that unless a calamity occurs nothing will

change where the safety of shipping is concerned. Sadly, it must be said, there is some truth to this statement. The prime objective of the ship owner is to make a profit. The author remembers an old captain who was known to remark that “if it were left to the owner, the ship would either not carry any lifeboats at all or fill them with cargo as well”.

There are many responsible ship owners out there who are fully aware that money spent on safety and training does not necessarily mean a loss of profit. We also have statutory authorities who are making sure that international conventions are observed and safety is enhanced. If anything, it is up to the international shipping community and maritime training institutions to further the cause of communication at sea. That this means being able to communicate in a common language may seem obvious to some. That this language will remain English – well, who knows? For the time being at least that is the language designated and every effort should be made to further competency in its use among mariners. Anyone who has tried to convey a message in an unfamiliar lingo knows the frustration of realising that the words spoken are only a poor attempt to communicate exactly what the speaker wants to get across. Imagine the feeling of helplessness and what went on in the mind of the Portuguese seaman who, two hours before the start of the inferno which claimed 158 lives on the “Scandinavian Star”, tried to report an arson attempt but was unable to make himself understood because of language difficulties. How did the Filipino crew member feel when, in a state of deep distress, he reported an accident on the foredeck of the “Matilda Bay” and his account of events given to the British watch keeping officer was interpreted as a ‘man overboard’ situation when in reality the Malaysian chief officer lay dying under the anchor windlass, washed there by a huge wave?

The aims, the significance and the limitations of the study have been described. It is plain that the potential for serious accidents to occur is growing with an increase in size and number of vessels plying the oceans. Effective communication is in the interest of everyone involved in shipping. So, let’s have a closer look at the ‘queer’ jargon that has developed in this peculiar genre.

The next chapter examines some of the literature concerned with language learning and communication at sea.

## **Chapter 2 – Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Literature on language can be found in abundance. Be it language learning, multilingualism, language in a cultural context, language relationships, grammar and syntax in language or any other conceivable aspect of verbal and non-verbal communication, many scholars have contributed to increase knowledge and understanding of the subject.

Texts on the special topic of maritime English are less prolific. In fact, the term ‘maritime English’ has not been used for long to describe what we understand it to be today, that is the English language used in the environment of international shipping with its distinctive vocabulary and characteristic expressions.

In the maritime industry, and generally in an environment in which two speakers of different languages are trying to communicate and where neither one is fluent in the other’s tongue, people will often resort to miming or some sort of body language. If such encounters are repetitive it is likely that both parties learn a few words in the other one’s language. This contextual learning is often the first step for young seafarers on their way to master English.

Functional verbal exchanges of a rudimentary sort are comparatively easy to carry out – even if they are facilitated with the help of an interpreter or a dictionary. But for an effective dialogue to take place, a common language is doubtlessly more practical. Furthermore, to achieve real understanding between people, that is to engage in conversation beyond monosyllables, some empathy, some common bond or connection between people is greatly beneficial.

### **2.2 The dilemma – a common language for different cultures**

A common bond inherently exists among people who have grown up sharing the same values, standards and principles, who have the same religion or culture or who speak the same tongue.

Butler puts this as follows: “Caregivers use language with and in the presence of children,...providing them with cues about what the members of their culture are doing. In this way children acquire the tacit knowledge of, and competence to deal with and understand, the social organisation of activities and events within the framework of their culture.” He then concludes that “acquiring language and becoming a cultural member are intertwined processes that are deeply imbedded within each member” (Butler, 1994, p. 4).

Butler describes the language learning of children and their mother tongue. How about others who gain knowledge of another language later in life? If Butler is right about the relationship of language and culture in the growing-up process of children, the question arises whether or not the adult learner of a new language must become a member of a new culture. If there is this further dimension to a conversation between speakers from separate countries (Capotorti, 1979), it is not only the obvious question of using the correct vocabulary and syntax, but it becomes a problem of recognising and tolerating patterns of communication with which one or the other is unfamiliar (Kramsch, 1993). This is something not normally taught in language courses.

Are language and culture inseparably joined? The semiotician Ruquaia Hasan supports the view that they are when she is quoted by Fawcett as stating that “Different ways of saying are different ways of meaning... How we say is indicative of how we mean. And a culture develops characteristic ways of meaning. These ways of meaning, in their totality, are specific to that culture” (Fawcett, 1984, p. 105). This sentiment is also voiced by the linguist Simeon Potter in his statement that “the worlds in which different social communities live are separate worlds, not just one world with different linguistic labels attached” (Potter, 1968, p. 19). The poet, novelist and philosopher Edouard Glissant dresses it rather succinctly into the following words: “Je te parle dans ta langue et c’est dans mon langage que je te comprends – I speak to you in your language, but it is in my language that I understand you” (Kramsch, 1993, p. 177). The learner of a new language in particular will make a translation into his or her tongue and search for meaning in the cultural and linguistic discourse of that environment.

Since the perception is that language and culture are so intimately linked, it seems necessary to take a closer look at what exactly we mean when we use the latter term. “Culture,” the encyclopedia tells us, is “in sociology and anthropology the way of life of a particular society or

group of people including patterns of thought, beliefs, behaviour, customs, traditions, rituals, dress and language as well as art, music and literature” (Hutchinson Encyclopedia, 1998).

The concept of the close inter-relationship between language and culture is by no means a new one. Edward Sapir proposed in the early 1920s that the two could not be examined separately. Members of a language group are united in accepting underlying suppositions and beliefs which help to shape terms of phrase and choice of terminology. He considers that in every aspect of language behaviour “there are intertwined, in enormously complex patterns, isolable patterns of two distinct orders. These may be roughly defined as patterns of reference and patterns of expression” (Sapir, 1921, p. 11).

That there are patterns or models which underlie our communications is not something we are conscious of in the process of everyday life. Being part of the sociolinguistic and cultural environment in which we have grown up we use many of our communicative tools without being aware of doing so (Clyne, 1994). Body language, eye contact, forms of address, intensity or softness of speech are some of the utensils which we employ – often automatically – when we feel at home in a language. We are in fact more likely to become conscious of such paralanguage if these patterns do not conform to the way in which we normally interact.

Concentrating on the anthropological aspect of culture, the sociolinguist Damen refers to beliefs, cultural values and assumptions which lie beneath language learning and acquisition. She defines beliefs as the intellectual acceptance of the “truth or actuality of something” and says that values attach emotional strength to these beliefs, labelling them as “good, proper and positive, or the opposite” (Damen, 1987, p. 191).

### **2.3 English as a lingua franca – a cultural take-over?**

We can see that language is clearly more than just a means of expression and communication. It is a symbol of a person’s cultural and ethnic affiliation and it is therefore understandable that in a multicultural environment it is common for individuals to seek the company of others who come from a background of a similar kind (Allardt, 1992). As a result we find Italian-speaking communities in Australia, Spanish-speaking enclaves in the USA, and suburbs in London in which Chinese, Indians or Jamaicans make up a disproportionately large percentage of the

population. "Language," say Michael Herriman and Barbara Burnaby, "represents the individuals most powerful lien on the group. Language, as much as anything, can capture the essence of group membership. If belonging to a group means sharing its culture, then language is a primary means by which the culture is articulated" (Herriman & Burnaby, 1996, p. 10). People have felt rightly that a popular foreign language, even if it is not enforced but enters everyday life in subtle ways as through music or educational instruction, advertising or the occasional adopted phrase, can become in time a dominant linguistic resource capable of bringing "about the decline of community and indigenous languages more effectively than any form of deliberate linguistic proscription would have" (Herriman & Burnaby, 1996, p. 4).

Crystal sees here a discord in views, a conflict between a desire for intelligibility and the need for identity. On the one hand we wish to communicate intelligibly with one another, but on the other we are reluctant to let go of our very own means of communication, our mother tongue. The dilemma is that "the need for intelligibility and the need for identity often pull people – and countries – in opposing directions" (Crystal, 1997, p. 116).

The question has to be asked here again: if language touches such deep roots in a person's emotional make-up, can a speaker of a second language then ever become a part of a second world? Lewis (1981), who essentially agrees with the ideas of Fawcett and Potter, believes it is not possible to achieve a personal identity or mature satisfactorily unless some core elements of the culture of an ethnic group or nationality are assimilated. After such an assimilation one may be critical of some of these elements and discard others, but one remains inextricably attached to the group and its culture. No one, in his view, can afford to isolate themselves from that tradition since it would mean becoming rootless and defenceless against anarchy. However, Lewis then goes further and adds: "The task of bilingual education is to maintain the traditional cultures, to further the development of the broad national culture as well as our understanding of it, and finally to provide the conditions whereby each type of culture reinforces and supports the other" (Lewis, 1981, pp. 391-393). This last view would suggest that, even if different worlds exist, they should and can do so in a form of harmonic coexistence with the right approach to foreign language teaching. Such teaching does not pit cultures against each other, but rather has them exist side by side.

A somewhat more pragmatic view of the relationship and interdependence between culture and language is expressed in the book *Minority Language and Dominant Culture*: “The claim that language embodies culture is very vague, and the claim that culture can be taught through language is tendentious at best. Culture and life shape language as much as language reshapes life. Language is a tool of social interaction ...it is not merely an artefact, the face of ethnicity, the embodiment of tradition” (Kalantzis, 1989, p. 4).

A further-developed perspective of what culture can be, indeed the concept of something like a new bridging culture, is expressed from another perspective in the same work. The authors propose that in countries like Australia, Canada, USA, UK, South Africa and the Soviet Union a common ‘core culture’ exists which binds and unifies the population from different ethnic backgrounds: the culture of industrialism (Kalantzis, 1989). Nineteen years later one could probably extend the list of nations which have developed this industrial culture, as trade and manufacturing have expanded into hitherto less industrialized regions. If there is indeed such a connecting culture, one could expect that it would facilitate the learning of another language among members of societies which are bound by this uniting thread and, that among them, one language would take on the role of a common means of communication, as has happened in the past.

Many languages have served through the ages to facilitate mutual understanding where cultures and nations met through travel or trade and the means of communication ranged from the most primitive sign language to languages spoken widely in that era. Phoenician, Koine, Latin, Spanish and Malay are some examples of tongues which served the purpose of a lingua franca through time. English is the latest in a long line of such languages and, because of the increasing closeness of humankind through media, technology, international trade and modern means of travel, it has for the first time in our history reached the rank of a worldwide language. “At the present time” states Phillipson (1992) in his book *Linguistic Imperialism*, “English, to a much greater extent than any other language, is the language in which the fate of most of the world’s millions is decided. English has, in the twentieth century, become the international language par excellence” (p. 6).

## 2.4 The spread of English and the power of language

We should at this point take a look at the historical aspect of the pre-eminence of English. “There is” says Chrystal (1997) “the closest of links between language dominance and cultural power...without a strong power-base, whether political, military or economic, no language can make progress as an international medium of communication” (p. 5). This statement about the elevation of one language above others is certainly a fitting explanation for the rapid growth of English. Historically it was British military supremacy at sea which helped to spread the language to the farthest corners of the earth. It eclipsed the successful expansion of other European colonial powers like Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, France and Germany. While this development was initially the result of 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century British successes in conquest, colonisation and trade, it was accelerated unquestionably by the ascendancy of the United States to a major trading and then military power in the world.

“But international language dominance is not solely the result of military might. It might take military might to establish a language, but it takes an economically powerful one to maintain and expand it,” Crystal continues (Crystal, 1997, pp. 7-8). By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the powerhouse of trade and industry in the world became the English-speaking USA. The result of two world wars in which the English-speaking powers gained the upper hand consolidated the primacy of the language. “The process was also greatly abetted by the expenditure of large amounts of government and private funds in the period 1950–1970, perhaps the most ever spent in history in support of the propagation of a language,” we are informed (Troike, 1977, p. 2). A similar view is expressed by other language experts who are talking about a ‘linguistic revolution’ and claim that the end of the second World War brought with it an “age of enormous and unprecedented expansion in scientific, technical and economic activity on an international scale. For various reasons, most notably the economic power of the USA in the post-war world, the role [of international language] fell to English” (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 6).

The emergence of computer technology in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, again predominantly driven by firms in the USA, further established English as the principal means of communication on the planet.



David Crystal has examined the role of English as a global language in some detail and asks another challenging question: “Will those who speak the common language as a mother tongue automatically be in a position of power compared with those who have to learn it as an official or foreign language?” (Crystal, 1997, p. 14).

The capacity to speak an agreed upon lingua franca flawlessly would seem to put a speaker in a superior position compared with others whose command of the lingo is less thorough. Not only will such a person be able to comprehend and interpret printed material in that language faster and more accurately, he or she will also have the real and psychological advantage in a conversation of knowing that he or she has expressed him or herself as was intended (Trudgill, 1995). The spoken or written word, when skilfully used, is convincing and influential, even to the point where this word can be misleading and deceptive. We do not have to look far for orators and demagogues to recognise that eloquence and erudition mean power. It is widely recognised that “language is a powerful instrument of control which can be, and has been, used globally to maintain power relationships, and more rarely to set people free, as in... regions where the speakers’ first language has triumphed over an externally imposed language” (Roberts, 1992, p. 366).

There is also quite often a certain linguistic arrogance (Crystal speaks of linguistic complacency) to be found where native and non-native language speakers meet. “The stereotype of an English tourist repeatedly asking a foreign waiter for tea in a loud ‘read my lips’ voice is too near the reality to be comfortable” (Crystal, 1997, p. 15). The maritime equivalent to this is a situation in which a frustrated native English speaking officer tries to give wheel orders to a non-native English speaking helmsman in ever increasing voice volume in the vain hope that a boost in decibels is going to make the meaning of his words clearer. However, such superciliousness is not restricted to native English speakers. Having sailed under 14 different flags the author has experienced the trait among other nationalities.

## **2.5 The ownership of language and national identity**

While there are clearly many reasons to work towards a human society which is united by one universally understood and spoken language, there are many real and perceived grounds that

tend to divide us on this subject. Growing intercourse between nations and people from dissimilar backgrounds have also highlighted the cultural, religious, political and ethnical differences which make humanity so colourful, and there are many signs of individuals, groups – even nations – which reject the notion of a foreign language being used in their midst (Capotorti, 1979). This in itself is nothing new. Benjamin Franklin had this to say on the influx of German settlers to parts of America: “Why should the Palatine Boors (German immigrants from a district adjacent to the river Rhine near Aachen) be suffered to swarm into our settlements, and by herding together, establish their language and Manners to the Exclusion of ours? Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a colony of Aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanise us instead of our Anglifying them, and will never adopt our Language or Customs, any more than they can acquire our Complexion” (as cited in Herriman & Burnaby, 1996, p. 130). Even though one may wonder how this avowal would be viewed in today’s politically correct society, it reflects the reality that there are many examples to be found in the world which show the use of a ‘foreign’ language within a community to be an unwelcome, even disturbing intrusion (Smolicz, 1994). Franklin’s shoe fits the other foot as well: in a similar way has the widening influence of English been seen as a threat to other groups, representing an attempt to assimilate them into an ethnically defined Anglo-Celtic-ness (Bullivant, 1984) .

The spread and increasing dominance of English has certainly not been received with elation everywhere. Gandhi said in 1908 that “to give millions a knowledge of English is to enslave them... Is it not a painful thing that, if I want to go to a court of justice, I must employ the English language as a medium; that when I became a Barrister, I might not speak my mother-tongue, and that someone else should have to translate to me from my own language? Is this not absolutely absurd? Is it not a sign of slavery?” (as cited in Crystal, 1997, p. 114). In his book *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) the Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o declares that “in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Europe stole art treasures from Africa to decorate their houses and museums; in the twentieth century Europe is stealing the treasures of the mind to enrich their languages and cultures. Africa needs back its economy, its politics, its culture, its languages and all its patriotic writers” (as cited in Crystal, 1997, p. 114). Such arguments have been echoed in other former colonies and in countries where some feel that they are swamped and stifled by the influx of English. Today the so-called Linguistic Invasion of English

(Phillipson, 1992) has been perceived as so dangerous that not only small countries like Slovenia (Paternost, 1985), but major powers like France (Calvet, 1987) have taken steps to halt the onslaught of English, especially in the field of technical language. An official French study regards the global expansion of English as the imposition of a linguistic uniformity which is intellectually and spiritually cramping and a threat to spiritual and cultural values (Haut Conseil de la Francophonie, 1986).

Phillipson is convinced that we live in a world of inequality of gender, nationality, race, class, income and language. He rejects claims that English language teaching is neutral and non-political. He uses the phrase 'English linguistic imperialism' and defines this as "the assertion and maintenance of a dominant English by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages" (Phillipson, 1992, p. 47). He is not alone in regarding the ubiquity of English as a threat. Initiatives were taken to stem the tide of English as a result of concerns by a number of European parliamentarians who were concerned that the preponderance of the English language in economy, science and technology was posing a threat to the languages and cultures of the European Community (European Parliament Working Document 1-83/84/B:27).

It is understandable that there exists the widespread assumption by native English speakers that, in an in-English conducted dialogue, they have to be clearly understood by their conversational partners who come from a different linguistic background. After all, is it not their 'own' language they are speaking in?

But is it? "English is now so widely established that it can no longer be thought of as owned by any single nation" (Crystal, 1997, p. 21). The language has spread to every continent outside Europe either as a first language (as in North America and Australia) or as another official language (as in some Asian and African countries), in which case many residents are multilingual. In addition to this, English is the most frequently taught second language in the world (Gordan, 2005). The emergence of many novel dialects and accents as well as the acceptance and incorporation of local vocabulary, grammar and syntax has led to English becoming more colourful than perhaps any other language in history: the language has been

adopted and adapted by so many countries that one cannot really apportion ownership of it to the British Isles anymore (Norton, 1997).

There are many moderate and judicious views which neither embrace the advent of English nor condemn its influence and invasiveness out of hand. The Indian writer Raja Rao said: “English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up – like Sanskrit and Persian was before – but not of our emotional make up... We cannot write like the English. We should not... Our method of expression has to be a dialect which will some day prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American.” (Rao, 1963). His compatriot Salman Rushdie agrees in his essay “Commonwealth Literature does not exist” when he deliberates on the issue: “I don’t think it is always necessary to take up the anti-colonial – or is post-colonial? – cudgels against English. What seems to me to be happening is that those peoples who were once colonized by the language are now rapidly remaking it, domesticating it... are carving out large territories for themselves within its front... The debate about the appropriateness of English... is a debate which has meaning only for the older generation. The children of independent India... use it as an Indian language, as one of the tools they have on hand” (as cited in Crystal, 1997, p. 136). In another part of the globe the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe in his novel *Morning Yet on Creation Day* postulates:

The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out its his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost... But it will have to be a new English, still in its full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings. (Achebe, 1975)

And on another occasion Achebe says:

For an African writing in English is not without its serious setbacks. He often finds himself describing situations or modes of thought which have no direct equivalent in the English way of life. Caught in that situation he can do one of two things. He can try and contain what he wants to say within the limits of conventional English or he can try to

push back those limits to accommodate his ideas ... I submit that those who can do the work of extending the frontiers of English so as to accommodate African thought-patterns must do it through their mastery of English and not out of innocence. (Achebe, 1975)

## **2.6 English – the future**

We have to return once more to the question of why English in particular has reached the status it has as a common means of communication in general and among seafarers in particular. There is the historical account given previously which described the spread of British trade and colonisation and explained the expansion of the language globally. This development was followed by the fact that after the era of colonisation – from the first World War to the 1970s – the British merchant fleet was by far the biggest in the world and native English speakers represented the largest language group in world shipping. Even when British ratings on these vessels were gradually replaced by non-native-English speakers (in the beginning largely from the Indian subcontinent and China, later from Spain and the Philippines), the language of authority on board remained English. By this time trade had become truly international and it was not surprising that English became the *lingua franca* among mariners on a global scale.

Given that English is the most taught second language in the world and the timing with which the computer revolution, driven by the USA, has entered modern life at the time when English speaking predominance in other areas faded, there was little chance of another language gaining a foothold as a *lingua franca*.

Much conjecture as to the future development of English in its various new ‘homes’ has taken place (Troike, 1977; Chrystal, 1997). It is generally understood that any prediction regarding the future of a language – its form, its spread, its status etc. – is purely speculative. While the prophecy of the German philologist Jacob Grimm in 1851 that English was “destined to reign in future with still more extensive sway over all parts of the globe” (Grimm, 1848) has proved to be true, the forecast by Isaac Pittman in 1873 that there would be almost 2 billion native English speakers in the world by the year 2000 has been shown to be wide of the mark. The difficulty for a sociolinguist becomes in part the complexity of newly formed dialects and creoles where the determination of a boundary separating the new patois from its origins is problematic (Wolfram,

1991). Using formulae based on population projections and assumptions about probable future rates of military and political expansion means building a hypothesis on shaky foundations. "Predicting the linguistic future is always a dangerous activity." (Crystal, 1997, p. 68).

One trend which is likely to continue is the emergence of a number of distinctly different Englishes around the world. The manner in which a gradual transformation will proceed is hard to foretell. All linguistic change is driven by the living and functioning entirety of a society (Labov, 1972, p. VIII). Again, it is difficult to predict to what extent the various offshoots are going to differ from the "Queen's English" or from each other. The prediction by Noah Webster, himself an advocate of idiosyncratic American English, in his *Dissertation* that this change would lead to "a language in North America as different from the future language of England as the modern Dutch, Danish and Swedish are from the German or from one another" (Webster, 1789) has not yet come to pass. Nor was the British philologist Henry Sweet right in 1877 when he foretold that within a hundred years "England, America, and Australia will be speaking mutually unintelligible languages, owing to their independent changes of pronunciation" (Crystal, 1997, p.134).

However, the fact is that there are characteristic English accents and dialects spoken which identify the user as Chinese, American, African or from the Indian subcontinent. In cases where English is the common language among people who may have the same ethnic or national but not the same linguistic background (as in some regions of India and in Nigeria), one can, when listening as an outsider to a dialogue between them, notice how difficult to understand a particular brand of English can become. This vernacular used at home or with members of a neighbouring group of people contains "casual pronunciation, colloquial grammar, and local turns of phrase" (Crystal, 1997, p. 137). English in these cases has been shaped into quite distinctive forms which satisfy the user's requirements as a means of communication because they have been given a structure and melody fitting the temperament and nature of the speakers (Wardhaugh, 1992).

Such a fragmentation of the language would at least support the suggestions of Sweet and Webster in principle, even if their timeframe was wrong. So what will happen to English as the global language that we know today? Will its demise be only a question of time? Crystal thinks

that a breaking up of English would not “necessarily be fatal. A likely scenario is that our current ability to use more than one dialect would simply extend to meet the fresh demands of the international situation. A new form of English – let us think of it as ‘World Standard Spoken English’ (WSSE) – would almost certainly arise. Indeed, the foundation for such a development is already being laid around us” (Crystal, 1997, p. 136-137). A group of people, when away from their familiar community, would use a different English, a “formal variety, full of careful pronunciation, conventional grammar, and standard vocabulary” (Crystal, 1997, p. 137). This already frequently observed phenomenon shows the inroads which the language has made into indigenous methods of communication and to what degree it has been appropriated by some societies.

With the benefit of being able to follow the decline and fall of empires through history we become aware of the transience of power and primacy and thereby of dominant languages. As a result we will probably have to concede that the only certainty about the future of a language is that its status and configuration will change. “The particular origin of this language may well have been an historical accident, and English has no special virtue as a language” (Kalantzis, 1989, p. 194).

## **2.7 English for special purposes – a jargon**

English, as it is used in the maritime industry, has become a language tailored to fulfil special needs and if it was taught as such it would neatly fit into the branch known as English for Specific Purposes (ESP) according to the definitions of that sphere of language teaching: “ESP courses are those where the syllabus and materials are determined in all essentials by the prior analysis of the communication needs of the learner”, says Munby in his book on the analysis of learner’s needs (Munby, 1978, p. 2). Young-Min Kim, in his paper entitled “A Functional-Notional Approach for English for Specific Purposes (ESP) Programs” (Kim, 1992), sees ESP courses as ways to teach the language skills necessary to perform satisfactorily in a given function. Both these views describe the fundamental aim of a language for special purposes: to facilitate communication in surrounds which envelope members of a group brought together by a common work environment or some other form of unifying interest. As such, in learning a language for special purposes, it makes a lot of sense to emphasise authenticity and to immerse

the language in the environment of the occupation it is meant to be used in (Mackay & Mountford, 1978). All practitioners and teachers of ESP agree on some fundamental principles in the area: that the medium has to meet the special needs of the learner, that it is mostly designed for adult learners, and that teaching or training will build on an already existent knowledge of the language system (Dudley-Evans, 1998).

Let us look at practicalities which, it has been said, often prevail over feelings of a national or cultural nature. Seafarers, the pragmatists are going to point out, will have to communicate in a language in their specialised field which enables them to sail the seas efficiently and safely. Their language requirements are not the same as those of a student at high school or of a tourist planning a holiday. Their language requirements, in fact, differ according to the position, role or duty they are assigned to on board a ship or to which corner of the globe they are trading. This has led to a peculiar vocabulary in its own right: a jargon developed.

“The language of soldiers and sailors has long been a semi-international one because regiments and crews were so often composed of men from different places” (Burke, 1995 p.16) says Peter Burke in his introduction to *Languages and Jargons* and explains that “the first function (of jargon) is that of practical convenience” (Burke, 1995, p. 13). In today’s linguistic parlance we would say that a Language for Specific Purposes evolved. Even in non-English speaking ships around the world the vocabulary was heavily infused with English. Sometimes this included only a handful of words or phrases which were necessary to accomplish a specific task, while in other cases seafarers became quite proficient English speakers.

The picture in world shipping, it was pointed out, has changed dramatically in the last 30 years. British flagged ships today represent less than 2% of the world’s fleet and the percentage of non-native English speakers among seafarers is estimated to be in excess of 95% (Fairplay, 2006). Yet the IMO requires seafarers to be capable of speaking and understanding English. One could reasonably ask if this places seafarers from an NESB at a disadvantage. Is English still the best choice in the light of the above statistics? Is safety compromised where miscommunication occurs due to the inability of one or more parties to converse fluently and clearly in maritime English?



## **2.8 Maritime English – standards and coded language**

As mentioned, comparatively little research has been done in the field of maritime communication. Seafarers have to acquire skills in many areas to carry out their work. To learn a common language was, until fairly recently, not one of the competencies they were required to possess.

Problem areas in this industry tend to gain prominence only when something spectacular occurs and frequently the wrong reasons have been blamed for accidents taking place. When analysing incidents and accidents their causes are sought to be identified and it is often found that a chain of events – sometimes referred to as a chain of errors – rather than one single issue leads to a fiasco. Something tangible like the failure of a piece of machinery or the structural weakness of a component which caused a steering failure and ultimately a collision is easily seen, understood and verified. But if an ambiguity caused by words, phrases, nuances in speech, pronunciation or body language enters the equation we are sometimes mystified and nonplussed in a pragmatic world. That is not to say that a failure of communication was not recognised in the past, but rather that it was accepted as a *fait accompli*, as something that was inevitable among multinational crews. Consequently, more tangible explanations were found when unfortunate events occurred where in truth miscommunication played a major role. This tendency to look elsewhere is recognised by industrial language trainers: “One key obstacle in the development of contemporary society is not resources or infrastructure but human interaction and communication. Such an obstacle, however, regularly looms less large and is less frequently and systematically addressed than many others, despite its centrality to the organisation and process in the work place. In this underplaying of the importance of communication, of course, the workplace is no different from other social settings” (Roberts, 1992, p. I).

This is an appropriate time to take a momentary detour into the problems of another branch of transport. When the question of communication came up as a safety issue before the IMO, that august body found itself in a similar predicament as the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) had done before. That organisation fulfils a function comparable to that of the IMO in the aviation industry. When confronted with the problem of finding a shared language to be used in international air traffic it discovered that the selection of a common means

of communication can be a touchy issue. It consequently left the choice of common language in the form of a suggestion rather than a binding rule: ICAO's reference to the use of English is couched in caveats. A recommendation in Annex 10 (volume 2) to the Chicago Convention on Civil Aviation (ICAO Annex 10) reads as follows:

5.2.1.1. Language to be used

5.2.1.2. Recommendation.— In general, the air-ground radiotelephony communications should be conducted in the language normally used by the station on the ground.

Note.— The language normally used by the station on the ground may not necessarily be the language of the State in which it is located

5.2.1.3. Pending the development and adoption of a more suitable form of speech for universal use in aeronautical radiotelephony communications, the English language should be used as such and should be available, on request from any aircraft station .....at all stations on the ground serving designated airports and routes used by international air services.....

Note 2.--In certain regions the availability of another language, in addition to English, may be agreed upon regionally as a requirement for stations on the ground in that region.”

Clearly concessions were made to appease national sentiments.

It is interesting to see that a future choice of ‘a more suitable form of speech’ left the options wide open – even to the extent of including the ‘development’ of an (artificial?) language as a medium of communication.

Once a common language has been agreed upon there will obviously emerge a need to set comparative grading criteria for a competency assessment in the field. In fact, recent developments in aviation training are pointing to a direction of firmly determined skill levels in the English language and periodic testing of pilots and traffic controllers in the area.

The breadth and depth of knowledge which those who man their ships have to attain today is determined and taught by autonomous flag states using their own methods and setting their own

benchmarks. While bona fide shipping nations have agreed to standardise the training and thereby the competence of seafarers, these standards have affected mainly the traditional areas of maritime education and instruction (IMO STCW convention of 1995). Emphases in topics and subjects may still vary to some degree, but there is a general consensus as to what a watch keeping officer should know about navigation or stability and to what extent a shipmaster has to be familiar with maritime law or management practices. Nothing concrete has as yet been established in the field of English language competency.

Clearly it would be desirable for a senior officer to have a command of the English language which went beyond that of communicating at a basic level. A rating, on the other hand, who is only required to understand a limited number of commands – when carrying out helmsman’s duties for instance – will be able to carry out the required duties with very low English language skills. There is, so far, very little in the official guidelines which determines a tangible standard of language competency. The “Marcom Report”, a research project undertaken for the European Commission, recognised this in observing that “current standards for maritime communication are considered by most maritime educators to be too vague as currently defined by the International Maritime Organization” (The Marcom Report, 1999, p. 3).

There was found to be a wide spectrum of views gathered from people involved in maritime education as to what the level of English language ability should be. Opinions ranged from “In an emergency situation a second language will be forgotten and sign language is all that is needed” through “Only the master and radio officer need to talk English to talk to the pilot and communicate with shore” to “All crew members in multilingual/multicultural crew environments need to know English to be able to communicate in an emergency situation and have a trusting on-board environment” (The Marcom Report, 1999, p. 6). The same study further found that:

- the syllabi and curricula for the teaching of maritime English varied widely from country to country,
- the language of instruction, language of text books and language of examinations or certifying tests are not always the same and that

- language testing was primarily conducted for reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar and general English. Listening and speaking skills were not tested and, in some cases, not taught. (The Marcom Report, 1999, p. 3).

In contrast to language learning, other areas of competence for seafarers have been very distinctly defined. The contents of subjects like ship management, navigation, carriage of dangerous goods, ship stability or maritime law are laid down in the syllabi of reputable maritime training institutions worldwide and are clearly outlined.

The necessity to publish a standardised work with English terms and phrases for the maritime industry arose as the need for a common language became more pressing with increasing traffic density and the growing of multi-ethnicity of personnel on board ships. By 1999 it was estimated that 80% of the crews in world's maritime fleet had become multilingual and multiethnic (The Marcom Report, 1999). This was a development which had been foreseen in some quarters more than three decades ago.

In recent times the International Maritime Organization (IMO) has made an attempt to standardise communication. In 1977 a booklet of about 50 pages entitled "Standard Marine Navigational Vocabulary" (SMNV) was published which contained English terms, definitions, common orders and short phrases used frequently on board. The booklet was meant to assist in communication between personnel from different language backgrounds at a very basic level in a variety of situations.

The IMO adopted English as the preferred language in its 1978 "Standards of Training and Certification of Watchkeepers". "People must communicate," said Weeks in a paper presented at a Nautical Institute seminar in London, "and there must be a common language for them to do so. This language, fortunately for us, is English." He goes on to explain the reason for this choice as he sees it: "Co-incidentally with the decline in British shipping there has been an enormous expansion in the use of English worldwide, so that there are now more non-native speakers of English than there are native speakers. Thus the adoption of English by the IMO as the language laid down... is not at all surprising" (Weeks, 1983, p.6).

In 1981, a research contract was awarded by the British government and Pergamon Press to a consultancy group called Language Management in England to develop a simplified form of maritime English (Weeks, 1983). This became known as 'Seaspeak'. The program, like the SMNV, endeavoured to simplify the learning and the usage of the English language for mariners.

A far more comprehensive version than the SMNV, known as the "Standard Marine Communication Phrases" (SMCP) was trialled in the shipping industry and replaced the previous publication in the year 2002. The content structure of both these works is similar in that they begin with a brief section on how to distinguish moods of speech (indicative, interrogative and imperative) which contain a potential grammatical difficulty for persons from an NESB. A short glossary of terms is then followed by common phrases used for external and on board communication.

A reference work like the "Standard Marine Communication Phrases" is – like its precursor, the SMNV – part of the standard literature on board every international trading vessel. However, its existence is not going to enable officers to converse freely with their counterparts on other vessels or authorities and agents in port. Nor – and this should be said in fairness to the producers of the book – was it meant to. Its intended purpose, namely to enable two parties to exchange basic information and to thereby enhance an environment of safety, was achieved. The IMO referred to the SMCP when it laid down the standard of training for seafarers in the STCW 95 convention.

Even though some basic tools for communication had been put into place before, it can be said quite objectively that none of the efforts made to standardise communication was particularly successful. In the American publication "Minding the Helm" it is pointed out that the problem is particularly relevant when it comes to pilotage. Often the master of a foreign flag vessel cannot contribute to passage planning or safe navigation due to difficulty in communicating with the pilot because of the lack of a common language. This situation is quite different to the conditions in past years when, as many marine pilots remember, someone on the bridge was usually well versed in English. Today pilots report much greater difficulty in communicating with bridge personnel because of language problems. While the evidence is there to show that marine pilots are capable of conning a ship safely, using commands that traditionally consist of words in the

English language, there is often considerable effort required to avoid misunderstanding and circumlocution is frequently used. Difficulties generally develop when it becomes necessary to communicate in greater detail than basic conning commands. In such circumstances the limited and variable English vocabulary among some masters and mates is often exceeded. But even simple verbal exchanges are not always easy. “‘Seaspeak’, a special purpose, stylised vocabulary based on English, is available but is neither mandatory nor in universal use” (Marine Navigation and Piloting, 1994, p. 48).

One can speculate as to why this is so. A possible answer was given by Kurt Opitz (1987) at an international workshop on maritime English. He points out that by availing ourselves of a stylised form of speech we are ceasing to use social language for communication but are rather employing a code and that, which is generally accepted as ‘maritime English’, has, in his view, become essentially a coded language. He is of the view that such a vehicle is not adequate for communication among and with officers who adopt multiple roles as navigators-engineers-entrepreneurs-administrators between, and in, non-standardised ports and with non-standardised terms of action. For these people “no totally effective voice code can be devised to answer all their needs.” He goes on to say that “Not all communication can be carried out in code, either that of the standard vocabulary, Seaspeak, or any other that might yet be developed. The difference between a natural language and a code is that, from the point of view of conventionality, the latter is a foreign language to any speaker – that there are no native speakers of a code” (Opitz, 1987, p. 5).

The author explains that language and code are somewhat at cross purposes, in that the former is concerned with composing messages in an unlimited number of random and undefined situations, while the latter tries to control the transference of standardised information. “Learning a language thus involves learning the rules for composing and deciphering speech, while code learning is concerned with recognising types of meaningful situations and matching them with fixed code equivalents” (Opitz, 1987, p. 6). The author concludes that code learning and language learning are quite contrary in concept and that they proceed from different assumptions and even move in different directions.

The SMCP is arguably the most constructive and widespread attempt to further understanding between international members in the maritime world. It is kept simple and easy to use. Its

format, a booklet of just over a hundred pages, allows the perusal by everyone familiar with Latin script. It is separated into external and on-board communication phrases, and these two parts are divided again into sections on distress situations, cargo handling, passenger care, safety on board etc. The following passage is quoted from the introduction to the 2002 edition and lays out the context and aim of the publication: “As navigation and safety communications from ship-to-shore and vice versa, from ship-to-ship and on board ship must be precise, simple and unambiguous so as to avoid confusion and error, there is a need to standardize the language used. This is of particular importance in the light of increasing number of internationally trading vessels with crews speaking many different languages, since problems of communication may cause misunderstandings leading to dangers to the vessel, the people on board and the environment” (SMCP, p. iii).

## **2.9 Language classification and the place of English globally**

Linguists have tried to classify languages worldwide using a number of criteria and approaches. It is not within the scope of this paper to delve too deeply into historical linguistics or philology, but it is of interest to investigate at least in part the extent to which some of the more common mother tongues in the international seafaring community differ from English and thereby form an idea of the grade of difficulty which individuals from various language backgrounds encounter when they are learning English.

English belongs to the Teutonic variety of the Indo European language family along with Dutch, German, Norwegian, Swedish, Danish and Yiddish. Speakers of these languages generally find English relatively easy to learn because of the close similarity of syntax, grammar and vocabulary. The lingo is in itself a product of other languages and dialects, having been brought to the British Isles by the Jutes (Denmark), Saxons (Holstein) and Angles (Schleswig) between about 450 and 500 AD. “Doubtless the Angles took their name from that *angle* or corner of land which juts out slightly into the Southern Baltic between the modern towns of Schleswig and Flensburg. In both Latin and Common Germanic their name was *Angli*, and this form became Engle in Old English” (Potter, 1960, p. 17). These tribes arrived in a Celtic speaking land which had been abandoned by the Romans only 30 years previously. Latin had not, unlike in Gaul, taken over from Celtic as the commonly used language but was spoken in cities and among the

elite. From these origins then Old English was born: elements of Latin and Celtic mixed with a predominant component of Old German.

In order to understand which criteria linguistic taxonomists use to fit languages into families, sub-families and phyla, we might be helped by what an academic from a quite different discipline had to say about classification. The biologist E. Mayr expressed it like this: "From the earliest days, organisms were grouped into classes by their outward appearance, into grasses, birds, butterflies, snails and others. Such grouping 'by inspection' is the expressly stated or unspoken starting point of virtually all systems of classification" (Mayr, 1988, p. 268). In that sense, when looking at languages 'by inspection', we compare "words in different languages, or, more precisely, lexical items like 'hand, water, walk' and grammatical items like first person, past tense, and plural. It is the search for words that are similar in sound and meaning that forms the initial step in linguistic classification" (Ruhlen, 1994, p. 39). For such similarities the author goes on to say, "there are essentially three possibilities: convergence, borrowing, and common origin."

There are some words which by convergence are similar even in quite different languages but they are considered "exceptions to the arbitrary nature of the sound/meaning relationship, the most obvious being onomatopoeic words such as 'buzz' and 'murmur'" or in nursery words as in 'mama' and 'papa' where the explanation here is that among the first sounds in child language 'p' and 'm' are found "and hence could naturally come to represent the basic semantic meanings of 'mother' and 'father', which for a child are obviously among its most important concepts". Resemblance by convergence, the author concludes, "is almost always an accident" (Ruhlen, 1994, p. 40).

The next reason for similarity is borrowing. However, for two reasons this source is relatively easily detected by taxonomists: firstly, there are only certain kinds of words which are likely to be borrowed. 'Computer', 'radio' or 'coffee' are examples of accepting the word with the object. Secondly, borrowing occurs nearly always where two languages are in close and frequent contact with each other.

The last cause for semblance is common origin. If words are not related by onomatopoeics and are not borrowed, we can assume that they have a common origin and are *cognates*. The



collection of all related cognates for an individual word in different languages is what we call etymology.

While it may appear that linguistic classification is clear and coherent, it is not without controversy. Some linguists demand more proof to establish a genetic relationship than others: “The ultimate proof... lies in a successful reconstruction of the ancestral forms from which the systematically corresponding cognates can be derived. It is through the procedure of comparative reconstruction, then, that we can establish language families, such as those of Indo-European, Uralic, Dravidian, Altaic, Sino-Tibetan, Malayo-Polynesian, Bantu, Semitic, or Uto-Aztecan” (Hock, 1986, p. 567).

## **2.10 Conclusion**

In a very general sense it can be said that the more distantly related languages are, the more they differ from each other and the less easy it will be for a learner to draw parallels to such a foreign language in word-meaning and sentence structure. Projecting this picture onto the background of international shipping, we find that speakers of a Semitic language from Arabic states in the tanker trade and speakers of Chino-Tibetan language family in container and bulk shipping are communicating with the users of Indo-European language groups in passenger vessels and Uralic and Malayo-Polynesian language families in the offshore industry and the tramp trade. To encounter two or more representatives of these groups on one vessel is a common occurrence. A colourful linguistic picture indeed.

This mixture, combined with cultural, political and religious differences among crews, is a challenging environment in which to communicate and cooperate successfully and safely.

The problematic issues in establishing the English language as a true and accepted maritime lingua franca could arguably be reduced to two main issues: English is seen by some not just as a utilitarian solution for communication difficulties at sea but as an attempt to further extend Anglo-Saxon culture to the detriment of other ethnicities. And, the learning of English presents disproportionate difficulties for different language speakers.

The next chapter will deal with the research methods used in this study and explain why the different strategies were chosen for this particular investigation.

## **Chapter 3 – Research Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

The choice of research methods to use in an investigation is clearly of paramount importance and has to be appropriate for the subject of the study.

The two main streams of research, the quantitative and the qualitative approach, have long been seen as two philosophically opposed methods. In quantitative research the assumptions are that variables can be identified and measured and the purpose is prediction. Qualitative research, on the other hand, assumes that variables are complex, interwoven and difficult to evaluate. While quantitative study seeks the norm, reducing data to numerical indices, qualitative inquiry looks for pluralism and involvement, making little use of numerical measurement. The role of the investigator is also quite different in the two disciplines: where the investigator using a quantitative method remains detached, impartial and attempts to objectively portray, the adherent of the qualitative path gets personally involved and needs to be empathetically understanding. The quantitative stance is often called positivistic whereas the qualitative method is described as interpretive.

The view that never the twain styles shall meet has changed in recent years. Both methods have their strengths and a preference for one or the other depends largely on the field of inquiry.

Although some social science researchers perceive qualitative and quantitative approaches as incompatible, others believe that the skilled researcher can successfully combine approaches. The argument usually becomes muddled because one party argues from the underlying philosophical nature of each paradigm, and the other focuses on the apparent compatibility of the research methods, enjoying the rewards of both numbers and words. Because the positivist and the interpretivist paradigms rest on different assumptions about the nature of the world, they require different instruments and procedures to find the type of data desired. This does not mean, however, that the

positivist never uses interviews nor that the interpretivist never uses a survey. They may, but such methods are supplementary, not dominant... Different approaches allow us to know and understand different things about the world... Nonetheless, people tend to adhere to the methodology that is most consonant with their socialized worldview. (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 9)

In the topic under scrutiny here both qualitative and quantitative tactics were seen as suitable. The theme fitted into an ethnographic mould in that it sought to assess feelings and opinions among a group of humans who were united by their profession and so lent itself to the qualitative line of attack. However, some outcomes are considered to be statistically measurable and a quantitative tactic with statistical and numerical results promised to be of value.

For a piece of research to be useful it must be both valid and reliable. For this reason it is necessary to adopt a multiple strategy approach. The concept, it might fittingly be said here, is not unlike the one used in navigational position fixing: one position line will not determine an exact location, the crossing of two position lines will result in finding a spot where the ship should be, but only if a third position line passes through the same point will a prudent navigator be satisfied. This 'triangulation' of position lines, be it by terrestrial or celestial means, by radar, by visual bearings or by satellite navigation, is desirable in navigation. The term has entered the parlance of research. Brewer and Hunter use it when they state that "triangulated measurement tries to pinpoint the values of a phenomenon more accurately by sighting in on it from different methodological viewpoints" (Brewer & Hunter, 1989, p. 17).

In this chapter a description is given of the three different strategies employed to investigate a particular and frequently encountered problem at sea: that of miscommunication caused by an inability to effectively communicate in the English language. It seems important here to not only outline the methods but also to explain why these techniques were chosen.

Before embarking on explaining in more detail the selection of the techniques used, it might be helpful to summarise the areas of investigation again.

### **3.2 Research aims and questions**

The research was designed to elicit information from – and views of – seafarers. It was the express intention to seek the perception of seagoing mariners rather than that of maritime educators, shipowners, representatives of maritime authorities or other parties involved in shipping. An extension of the issues targeted here to the groups just mentioned would, however, be an interesting exercise at some future date.

The aims of the survey, as laid out in the introduction, are multiple, but stem essentially from the recognition that too many incidents occur at sea in which communication fails and that such failure subsequently leads to disaster or contributes to it. It was seen as necessary therefore to establish to what extent an inability among seafarers to communicate in English presents a danger in the day-to-day operations of the international maritime industry.

This in itself could, in a more or less meaningful way, be expressed statistically. But what was of particular interest to the researcher were the more deeply rooted questions listed below:

- How necessary is a common language at sea, and do seafarers think that common language should be English?
- How difficult is it for members from various linguistic, cultural, religious and political backgrounds to learn English, and how do they feel about the imposition of that language?
- How effective is the use of a codified language that was designed to be used during critical operations, and how often did mishaps occur because of an inability to communicate effectively in maritime English?
- How proficient are today's seafarers in the use of maritime English, and should there be agreed-upon standards of competency at different levels of responsibility?

There is undeniably a need for more research in this area of seafaring. The general standard of professionalism in the international maritime industry has to match the rising level of ever-increasing technological sophistication of ships, of growing traffic density and of the need to protect the environment from polluting substances humankind was ignorant about only a few

generations ago. The researcher has observed the problem of miscommunication due to language differences first hand on board ship and in the teaching of seafarers from a non-English speaking background at the Australian Maritime College. In this context the study will examine links between the seafarer's ability to communicate in English and the safe and proficient functioning of the ship as a unit.

The investigation centred around the human aspect in shipping, and the fact that the author, in his capacity as a lecturer in navigation, could easily make contact with seafarers while they were studying at the AMC was seen as opportune and therefore influenced the choice of survey techniques. The students at the institution had all been working at sea, some of them for a considerable length of time, and had only interrupted their working lives to attain advanced certification in their profession. Their diverse experiences, knowledge and awareness of problem areas in the industry were of unique value and depth, and their views and perceptions proved of absorbing richness.

A smaller number of participants could be added to the survey population from the Dalian Maritime University and from the maritime faculty of the University of Oldenburg in Elsfleth through the help of colleagues.

The libraries at the Australian Maritime College and of the nearby University of Tasmania are well endowed with literature, both in the maritime area and the domain of communication, education and linguistics. This made it relatively easy in most cases to gain access to printed material relevant to the topic of the study.

The intent was to find out whether accidents could have been prevented or their impact lessened if English had been spoken and understood by those involved. What would the outcome have been if communication had not been a problem? To what degree has English communication ability – or a lack thereof – been to blame for a number of events? Is there evidence that lives were in jeopardy or the environment threatened by an inability to understand each other at sea? Does the colourful linguistic milieu in the shipping industry invite disaster?

Before addressing the issue it was necessary to establish what role exactly the English language assumes in maritime circles. Why English? Are there any objections to using English? Are there

any alternatives to this language? What is the official approach to this? The status of English in today's seafaring circles needed to be defined globally.

Another important aspect appeared to be the perception among seafarers of the issue. Does, in their opinion, a problem exist? Have they seen evidence of communication difficulties with maritime English? The intention became here to determine how those seafarers, who are directly involved and interactive with colleagues who come from different language backgrounds, feel about a situation which is seen as a problem by many people.

Among the number of other questions that arose was also the one which asked how and where seafarers had learned the English language. Do mariners feel that enough is being done to enable them to learn English suited to their environment? Who is teaching them English and how is this competence evaluated? Are there certain nationalities which have greater problems in acquiring proficiency in the declared lingua franca than others? Should there be levels of competence defined which have to be achieved before certificates for maritime officers are issued?

This study may be seen only as an attempt to shed some light on a dilemma in the area of shipping which has existed for centuries and has been dealt with mostly in an ad hoc manner. Seafarers pride themselves on their ability to improvise and adapt to environmental conditions and constraints as they occur in their changeable surroundings and to act upon them. But good seamanship leaves as little to chance as possible. Understanding between the men and women who are crewing the ships which cross the world's oceans should be as clear and unmistakable as possible. It seems incongruous that in an industry which has reduced position fixing accuracy to metres, works with under keel clearances of centimetres, keeps refrigerated cargoes within a decimal of a degree and measures flow rates to millilitres per minute, communication is dealt with in a casual manner. True, language is not as easy to quantify as the contents of a tank or the breaking strain of a wire rope, but it is nonetheless possible to measure a person's linguistic competence. It might be time to make such an appraisal one of the prerequisites for the issue of a certificate of competency. The world of shipping is changing: vessels with large crews who spend their days performing menial tasks like chipping and painting, and in which the officers are parading their uniforms to be greeted with a pink gin by the steward after keeping their four hour watches, are gone. A deck officer today has to be capable of carrying out many tasks which

require technical, electrical, computer or electronic skills. Since most manuals and handbooks are printed in English, an understanding of the language is vital.

### **3.3 Methodology**

Once the multi-method approach had been decided upon to achieve valid and reliable outcomes, the leading question became which research strategies to employ. A combination of the qualitative and the quantitative approach was appealing because results would be more holistic and convincing.

Some of the differences between a quantitative and a qualitative approach have already been pointed out. A little more detail might, however, help to justify the mixed choice of strategies selected.

As mentioned, the traditional approach in research has been the use of quantitative techniques. Because of its attempts to find and formulate underlying rules and precepts, it is known as a nomothetic or lawgiving proceeding. The philosophy is essentially that data, empirically arrived at in a research environment, must produce proof or rejection of a hypothesis. "The main strengths," Burns says, "lie in precision and control." He adds that theories can be tested by deduction and that quantitative data allow statistical analysis. "In total," he concludes, "the method provides answers which have a much firmer basis than the layperson's common sense or intuition or opinion" (Burns, 1994, pp. 10,11).

In the 1960s some social scientists expressed the view that quantitative research methods do not permit the human element to influence findings and conclusions sufficiently. "Its mechanistic ethos tends to exclude notions of freedom, choice and moral responsibility" (Burns, 1994, p. 11). Bryman (1988) sums up the feeling among researchers as follows:

The application of the 'scientific' approach – in the form of surveys and experiments – fails to take into account the difference between people and the objects of the natural sciences. Research methods were required which reflected and capitalised upon the special character of people as objects of inquiry. A qualitative research strategy, in which participant observation and unstructured interviewing were seen as the central data



gathering planks, was proposed since its practitioners would be able to get closer to the people they were investigating and be less inclined to impose inappropriate conceptual frameworks on them. (p.3)

While supporting Bryman's view, a caveat in cross-cultural research, particularly in the qualitative instrument of the interview had to be kept in mind. The dictum that "any theoretical orientation, or any construct, axiom or postulate or corollary in the social and behavioural sciences can be investigated cross-culturally" (Brislin, 1973, p. 143) is accepted per se, but care must be taken recognise the pitfalls of bias in this area (Pareek & Rao, 1980).

The debate about the virtues and shortcomings of qualitative and quantitative method became polarised for a while. But it was soon realised that the two approaches could exist side by side. Indeed, the advantages of integrating them to achieve valid and reliable results became apparent.

In light of the researcher's environment and the opportunities to get close to the phenomenon of lingual and cultural barriers which appear to plague the maritime industry, the strategies of the questionnaire as a quantitative approach and interviews and document research as qualitative tactics were chosen to investigate the issue of communication at sea. The two latter methods addressed all four topics under investigation, while the document research was most useful in the question about accidents connected with miscommunication. However, the case studies do allow some inferences into the other points of interest here.

The next section describes the three selected techniques in more detail.

### **3.3.1 Document research**

Case studies in research can take on a variety of forms. It could be the observation of an African refugee family over a period of years and its success or failure to achieve integration into Western society. It could be the medical observation of a particular patient over time, and his or her response to different treatment or drug therapy. Or it could be the political development of a country's change from a dictatorship to a democracy with all its ups and downs.

In this investigation, case studies were the analyses of documents which contained reports of accidents and disasters at sea published by maritime investigation branches where

miscommunication due to failure or inability to speak maritime English played a role in a calamity. These accounts include the description of the environment in which the accidents took place and, where it was deemed necessary, give some background information which seems pertinent to the case.

The technique of the case study has, like other methods, its advantages and disadvantages. The most serious criticism levelled against it is probably the allegation that the selected case may not be representative and that it would therefore be improper to make conclusions based on the chosen example which are then generally applicable.

To at least partly offset that argument, more than one report has been selected. In addition to this, it has to be pointed out that impressions and observations from a number of people are considered. In defence of the method, Bryman argues that “within a case study a wide range of different people and activities are invariably examined so that the contrast with survey samples is not as acute as it appears at first glance, especially when the widespread tendency of survey researchers to draw samples from localities rather than on a national basis is borne in mind” (Bryman, 1988, p. 90). It should also be added that the nature of the accidents in this paper are quite diverse and that there is hardly a ‘representative’ sample for an accident at sea.

The commonality of the cases represented here lies in the fact that all of them deal with miscommunication between persons from differing language backgrounds. Voyage Data Recorders, the maritime equivalent to aviation’s ‘Black Box’, have only recently made their way onto ships’ bridges and were not or could not be used in the reconstruction of events. The evidence therefore is often sketchy as reports are compiled through hearsay and secondary sources. But while concrete evidence – as in voice recording – has not been available, the method is considered useful nevertheless, as in investigations the perceived meaning of a remark or an order in this context is often as important as the actual verbal constituent itself.

Some maritime disasters capture the media’s headlines, others hardly rate a mention in local papers, and innumerable instances occur which had the potential to lead to tragedy but in which serious consequences were somehow averted through sheer luck or professional skill. Records of such occurrences may or may not be kept in the ship’s logbook but are not likely to come to the attention of the general public. They may, if attention is drawn to them by the vessel’s master, be

looked at by the management of a shipping company but are often forgotten as soon as they take place.

The accidents scrutinised in this paper were chosen because of their differing nature and – in the instance of the “Scandinavia Star” – because of its notoriety. Some cases do not appear spectacular; indeed in one example it is not certain that English language incompetence was a contributory factor at all, but all of them have featured in official inquiries, and in all of them the investigating authority identified a problem with communication based on linguistic obstacles on board the vessel.

### **3.3.2 The interview**

While structured, standardised interviews are used for quantitative analysis, the semi-structured interview used in this research must be considered as a qualitative survey technique. A structured interview, in which every interviewee is asked the same questions, where the respondent has the choice of only a limited number of answers and where a conversational atmosphere is missing, allows little flexibility to the interviewer and the respondent. In such an environment it is impossible for a rapport to develop between the researcher and the participant and the former has little chance of gaining an insight into the latter’s perceptions and beliefs.

The open-ended or unstructured interview on the other side has its setbacks too. Burns sees these as follows: “A major disadvantage is that the researcher is open to the vagaries of the informant’s interpretation and presentation of reality,” and “the researcher is deprived of an ethnographic context in which the informant’s reported perceptions occur, as they are never able to directly observe the informant in their everyday context” (Burns, 1994, p. 280).

Both of these views have some legitimacy, and to achieve the best result interviews became a mixture of the formal, structured and the informal, creative kind in the sense that a set of questions was asked of all interviewees but the opportunity was given – indeed the persons were encouraged – to narrate their own experiences. The interview complemented the rigidity inherent in the questionnaire as a technique in allowing seafarers to elaborate on points which the aforementioned method did not permit.

There were essentially two groups of participants. The first consisted of students/seafarers who came from the student body of the AMC. The other was formed by a group of Great Barrier Reef pilots who were interviewed at sea while the researcher was on a working holiday as a deck officer on an 80,000t bulk carrier.

The interviews were taped and varied in duration from forty minutes to one hour. The questions were preconceived and were asked of every participant, though not necessarily in the same sequence. An attempt was made instead to weave the queries into the conversation as the context allowed. The seafarer interviewees, it might be added, were part of the same population that responded to the questionnaire and had actually taken part in that poll.

The information targeted was essentially the same as that sought in the questionnaire. The objective was to determine whether findings resulting from any one of the survey strategies would either confirm or contest those of the other.

During the interview participants were asked to relate anecdotes which might have a bearing on the issue of miscommunication, and an effort was made to create a relaxed atmosphere. This included the author reiterating some of his own experiences on occasion. Even though the format of the interview was essentially casual and conversational, there were 16 prepared questions which were asked during each of the meetings (see Appendix II).

The first and the fourth questions (“How many nationalities were there on your vessel?” and “Do you use languages other than English to communicate in?”) were designed to give an idea about the internationality of the seafarer’s working background and thereby about the validity of the answers as far as the global maritime industry was concerned. International trading vessels often spend a long time on the coast of their own country and the exposure to ‘foreign’ speaking seafarers is limited. Those participants who were known to have spent extensive time in a more global environment were preferred for the interviews.

Questions 2 and 3 (“Do you feel it is essential that a common language exists in the international maritime industry?” and “Can you suggest a language other than English which might fulfil the role of a lingua franca?”) were aimed directly at the perceived need for a common language and the position of English as that medium in particular.

These first four questions did not really allow the interviewee much room to expand but they were unambiguous and gave the seafarer the opportunity to take a clear stance.

Questions 5, 6 and 7 went to the heart of the matter of acceptance of the English language as far as cultural and ethnic sensitivities were concerned. The participants were asked here to give an answer based on sentiments rather than rational or practical considerations, and the responses to this issue were expected to be not as definite and unequivocal as in the first questions. The fact of the matter is that English has generally been accepted to such a degree as a working language that to suggest another lingo would for some people amount to sacrilege. Questions 5 and 6 were rather blunt (“How do you feel about the English language being forced upon you in your work environment?” and “Some people have felt that having to speak English relegated their own language to a second rate language. Explain how you feel about this.”), but the author felt that the direct approach was the most effective one: in an environment where lives may depend on clear communication a more subtle line of questioning seemed somewhat inadequate.

Question 6 and, to a greater extent, question 7 (“Do you experience any cultural problems with speaking English, i.e. does speaking English give you the feeling of losing your national or ethnic identity or does it cause you to let go of traditional values (i.e. less respect for elders, diminished ties to extended family, loss of traditional customs or music etc”) induced the seafarer to search for a response coming from a level which lay deeper than the professional veneer that all participants displayed to a certain degree: it provoked their reaction as a Muslim or a black African or as the native of a former British colony to the use of a means of communication essentially alien to them. The boundaries here were expected to become rather blurred as language and culture cannot really be separated.

Question 8 (“In your opinion and in your experience, is there any nationality or ethnic group which is particularly difficult to communicate with in English? What exactly makes communication with this group(s) difficult?”) was asked to identify the nationalities which were seen as problematic to communicate with using English. Given that there was a number of linguistically quite diverse backgrounds among the survey population, this query was thought to give a fair and realistic insight into the landscape of communication at sea.

Questions 9, 10 and 11 (“In your experience, is the SMCP used extensively where language barriers exist?”; “To what extent do you find that such a codified language is useful?”; “What is your opinion of the scope of the SMCP (too limited, too extensive)?”) were unambiguous and were expected to give a clear picture as to how the publication is judged by seafarers.

Question 12 (“Have you ever experienced occasions where the lack of ability to speak English caused friction among crewmembers? Please elaborate”) paved the way for looking into a possible correlation between poor communication and accidents. There have been other investigations in industry which showed a direct link between friction in the work place and a lack of co-operation resulting in a less safe environment. The query can, but does not have to, be related to question 13 in which the issue of English language comprehension and its connection to accidents is addressed directly: “Have you ever experienced occasions where the lack of proficiency in English endangered an operation?” Here the author was looking for anecdotal evidence of misunderstandings in different circumstances such as communication between ships, with a pilot, among crewmembers and the like which did in fact create a dangerous situation.

To gauge the view of seafarers themselves on the level of English-speaking competence rather than that of outsiders question 14 (“What is your view on the ability of seafarers to speak English when seen in the context of a safe working environment?”) was put to those who are dealing with the matter on an everyday basis. Do they feel that there is a lack of competency amid their colleagues when it comes to understanding each other where linguistic differences exist and safety is at stake?

One of the issues debated at a number of symposia on maritime English has been the level of expertise in English which seafarers in different positions should possess. This is clearly a thorny topic and led to question 15 (“Do you have any suggestions as to what level of proficiency in English a rating/ a junior officer/ a senior officer should have? Express your answer on a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 denoting a nonexistent English knowledge and 10 describing a fully accomplished English speaker.”).

Foreign language skills, it has been pointed out before, have never been a precondition to becoming a seafarer. Could or should those who have little or no penchant for language learning, but clearly show an aptitude for the other aspects of seafaring, be barred from going to sea? The

IMO has so far shown an unpreparedness to lay down guidelines in this matter. This is understandable under the circumstances as the topic touches not only on national sentiments but could also disadvantage members of some nationalities.

Beyond that problem, however, and from a more practical aspect, the question arises of how much English knowledge seafarers of different ranks need to carry out the duties and responsibilities in their respective areas of operation. It seems reasonable that the less contact a person will have with speakers of other languages, the less requirement there should be for this person to be able to speak English.

The last question in the interviews with seafarers (Q 16: “How do you feel about English being taught as a formal subject during a course such as the one you are attending now?”) was meant to give an indication to maritime educational institutions if in the opinion of mariners maritime English warranted the status of a subject per se rather than remain a skill picked up here and there, possibly on the back of a knowledge of general English.

A brief description of the second group which was interviewed, that of the pilots, needs to be given here.

The author took the opportunity during a break from lecturing to work for seven weeks as a deck officer on an Australian flagged bulk carrier in North Queensland waters. The passage of vessels through the approximately 600 miles of the Australian Great Barrier Reef which the vessel had to traverse has been under compulsory pilotage since 1991 for vessels over 70 metres in length and loaded chemical tankers and oil tankers. The reason for this is the environmentally sensitive nature of the coastline which is fringed by coral reefs and inhabited by rare and endangered marine life. The passage can be described as a difficult navigational task in some places and, after a number of potentially disastrous incidents, the Australian government decided on legislation which required vessels transiting the region between Cairns and the Torres Strait to engage pilots.

The chance to interview marine pilots while on the job was seen as a most opportune and valuable contribution to this thesis. These members of the seagoing fraternity experience more

than any other the spectrum of communication skills that exists on international trading vessels today.

The questions asked of these men were only slightly different to the ones put to the students. Since two of the three spoke only English there was no point in asking if they ever used another language to communicate in. Similarly there was no point in asking about the number of nationalities working on their last vessel.

Questions 5, 6 and 7 of the seafarer interview were contained in one question in the interview with the pilots (“Have you ever felt that seafarers showed a reluctance to use English for cultural, political, religious or nationalistic reasons?”).

### **3.3.3 The questionnaire**

The questionnaire is a commonly used tool in quantitative research and has many merits provided that the questions asked are easily understandable and the intent of the poll is clear. The cost factor of sending a set of questions is comparatively low in the first place. In cases where the expense of trained and paid interviewers is not within the budget range this may be a very important consideration. It is also possible to achieve a high level of standardisation because all parties are asked exactly the same questions. Furthermore, no demand characteristics or other variables, which can be provoked by the presence of an interviewer or any other research team member, have to be considered: sex, mannerisms, appearance etc. can affect the response in an interview, whereas in a questionnaire the danger of intimidation, which a personal presence may incorporate, is avoided by protective anonymity.

However, to design a questionnaire in a way that is unambiguous and intelligible to the reader and useful to the researcher requires discernment and thought. “In the past, social researchers have typically assumed that their questions would be understood by respondents as they are intended to be understood. But, just as it is often doubtful that researchers always have a clear idea of the information that should be collected, it is doubtful that respondents always understand what information the researcher wants” (Foddy, 1993, p. 38).



When formulating the questions, it is important to avoid some commonly made mistakes. Among these are the asking of two questions as one, or including qualifying phrases. Questions should not present multiple ideas or subjects, nor should they contain unfamiliar words. There ought to be no further instructions given after a question is asked, and difficult phrases are not conducive to eliciting information. For instance, a complex question as in “based on past experience – your own as well as that of your fellow seafarers – how would you rate the likelihood of such an incident to occur within the confines of your peer group during the next six months, keeping in mind that the issue has now been brought into the open and crew as well as office staff are cognisant of the situation in the past?” it is likely that a respondent, especially one from an NESB, is going to be confused and bewildered and unable to give a valid answer simply because the query is too long and intricate.

Questions should not be hypothetical or dependent in meaning on a previous one and must not contain negative elements (e.g. “Are you not going to try to avoid contact with those who show bias?”).

Generally speaking, a questionnaire should not be too long, use simple terminology and contain questions which can be answered easily.

To avoid mistakes like the ones pointed out above, a pilot questionnaire was prepared and circulated among colleagues at the Australian Maritime College. Some questions had to be changed or reworded for the sake of clarity until a revised version met with approval.

A questionnaire, if passed to a candidate without further comment, may create confusion. If the opportunity exists, as it did in this case, it is advisable to talk to participants about the questions. Topics may be multi-dimensional. Does the term crewmember pertain only to ratings or does it include deck and engine room officers? Does it include the captain? Can you regard yourself as an Indian if your parents came from India but you were born and brought up in England? To be regarded as competent in a language, is it enough to converse colloquially or does one have to be able to write and be proficient in the grammar as well? It might be necessary to explain the questionnaire to participants to clarify such issues.

It is necessary at this point to enlarge briefly on the background of this study as far as the survey population of the questionnaire was concerned.

At the Australian Maritime College seafarers are trained to fill positions as navigating officers in the international maritime industry. Many students who are trying to obtain their certificates are from a non-English speaking background. Typically there are candidates from India, Pakistan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, Fiji, Samoa, Nigeria and other countries joining their Australian counterparts in class. Depending on their previous experience and existing qualifications, students are enrolled in about a dozen subjects including topics like navigation, ship's stability, maritime law, climatology and others. Since lectures are held in English, a knowledge of that language at an IELTS level of 5.5 is a prerequisite for enrolment at the institution.

All participants in the survey had spent time at sea on international trading vessels in the merchant navy. In some cases they had served as apprentice deck officers (cadets) or even as uncertificated officers, in others they had been sailing as 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> or chief officers. The areas of expertise were as varied as the nationalities and included the tanker trade, container ships, bulk carriers, passenger liners, salvage vessels, car carriers, general cargo ships and vessels in the offshore industry.

Questionnaires were given to students trying to gain their deck watch keeping tickets and to those who were studying for the chief mate and masters certificates of competency. The survey population was enhanced and widened through the help of colleagues in China and Germany who handed out and collected questionnaires at the Dalian Maritime University in China and at the University of Oldenburg's campus in Elsfleth, Germany. While the two largest national groups thus came from Australia, India and Germany, there were smaller numbers from a variety of countries. Altogether there were participants from 17 countries involved in the study.

In the first 9 questions in the poll (see Appendix II) respondents were asked to supply some personal data so that their national and professional background could be ascertained. The questions were also designed to gain information about the experience the respondent had had and therefore give the researcher an idea of the degree of authority with which the answers were given. Someone who had worked at sea for many years would obviously have faced communication problems first hand more often than a cadet who had just embarked on a seagoing career.

In questions 10 to 17 the participants were asked about their own language, their working relationship with English and how they saw the role of English as the language of the sea. It also required them to single out particular nationalities which in their perception were consistently and habitually difficult to communicate with using maritime English.

Questions 18 to 33 were laid out in the form of a five-point Likert scale. The term 'maritime English' is used in every question except Q 18 and Q 33. The former query was meant to lead into the subsequent questions and the last inquiry related to the IMO publication "Standard Marine Communication Phrases", which has arguably been the most successful attempt in international shipping to enhance communication in the international shipping industry.

In total, the questionnaire covered five A4-sized pages and about 12 minutes were required to complete it. One major drawback of this survey method, that is the fact that often only a small percentage of the polls will be returned, was overcome by handing the papers to students at the end of the semester (in the case of the paper handed out in Australia) and asking them to respond then and there and return the sheet. This had the added advantage that any queries in regard to meaning could be answered on the spot. The issue of intimidation by the presence of the investigator was considered negligible because anonymity was assured and the questions were felt not to include any information which could be incriminatory in any way. The questionnaire was furthermore handed out after the lecturer-student relationship had ceased – that is after exams had been completed.

In the case of the surveys from China and Germany, the author had explained the purpose of the research to his colleagues overseas, and the papers were handed out and collected in the controlled environment of the classroom in a similar manner to the survey collated in Australia.

Apart from gaining some background information, questions 1 to 4 were designed to put the respondent at ease in case they were worried about the interrogation being too difficult. Questions 5 ("How long have you served at sea?"), 6 ("Which sea-going qualifications do you currently hold?") and 7 ("Which sea-going qualifications are you currently trying to obtain?") were asked in order to establish how much experience the seafarer could look back upon to give an idea of the breadth of the person's practical knowledge and hence the credibility of the answers. It was known that all participants had spent at least one and a half years on board large

trading vessels, but there was an opportunity here to find out whether those who had had a longer involvement with the industry would give significantly different answers.

In questions 8 (“Under which flag did you serve most of your time?”) and 9 (“How was most of your sea time spent: international or coastal trade?”) the aim was to find out how truly ‘international’ the seafarer’s working life had been. Even though a ship is classed as an international trading vessel it may sail for a long period of time only between ports in the same country where there are fewer opportunities for communication problems to arise. In a similar way was question 15 (“Please list the languages in which you can communicate proficiently”) intended to gain information about the extent of cosmopolitanism of the participant. The linguistic dexterity of seafarers is quite astonishing in some cases.

The above questions then formed a kind of background against which the validity and reliability of the responses could be judged.

The queries pertaining to the four research themes in this thesis were in some cases overlapping in that they were used to probe more than one issue of the investigation. They were also designed in such a way that further suppositions could be made.

The first matter (“Investigate the perception among seafarers for the need of a common language and how they saw the viability of the English language to fulfil that role”) was explored by questions 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18 and 19, all of which were in some way alluding to the substance of the objective.

To look at the second objective (“Identify the varying degrees of difficulty experienced by learners of English depending on their linguistic background and any possible opposition for cultural, political or religious reasons shown by individuals to having a language imposed on them”) questions 10, 17, 27, 31 and 32 were used.

The third aim (“Determine the efficacy and the limitations of a codified language as in the SMCP and analyse incidents in the maritime sector where communication was ineffective and led to mishaps or contributed in an adverse way to the outcome of accidents”) was addressed by questions 28, 29, 30 and 33.

In the endeavour to find out about the fourth issue – levels of linguistic competence among seafarers (“Examine the status of English language proficiency among seafarers today and look at ways to establish levels of competence in maritime English for different ranks on board international trading vessels”) – queries 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17 and 26 were used.

### **3.3.4 Observation**

This technique has deliberately not been included as a formal stratagem, as the author had only one opportunity to watch and scrutinize seafarers from an NESB in recent times. While there were occasions when he went to sea as instructor or master on the college training ship “Wyuna” with student-seafarers, there was little time to indulge in the study topic as other duties were more pressing. However, before setting out on this inquisition there were many occasions where verbal interchange in a multilingual environment onboard ship was witnessed. But since a conscious decision had not been made to ‘formally’ investigate the phenomenon at the time, such observation could, in the view of the researcher, not be regarded as scientific enough to be termed ‘observation’ in the sense of a survey technique. Nevertheless, memory glimpses in the form of anecdotal evidence are occasionally coming to the fore.

However, the researcher’s impressions gained during a recent 6 week voyage from Singapore to Australia and subsequent work on the Australian coast as Australian chief officer on a vessel under the Dutch flag seemed worth mentioning and is related in the way of a reflection after the case studies have been described.

## **3.4 Conclusion**

The third chapter dealt with methodologies used to carry out this research. The reasons for the choice of techniques was given. The college’s library facilities and the researcher’s own experiences at sea and as a maritime lecturer proved valuable in the review of documents and the interaction with the respondents. Conversations with former seamen and language teachers outside the confines of the official inquiry added depth to the study. Indeed, it was the human aspect which unfolded in chats where the experiences lay far behind and the person had had time to ponder, assimilate and absorb past encounters, from which numerous tales emerged – many of them humorous – where language differences had played a role. On this note the author

remembers an occasion as a young sailor in Singapore – a town far different from the metropolis it is today – when he was looking through a pile of old “National Geographic”, out of date periodicals like “Time” and other much used literature in English at a street corner bookstand. For someone wanting to improve his English such publications with pictures and short stories are a great help. So, when asked if he wanted to buy some dirty magazines he happily agreed, assuming that, even though used and possibly slightly grubby, they would be cheap. It was after being led through a couple of dark alleyways and up some flights of stairs into a book-filled room under the roof that he learned about a whole new meaning of the term ‘dirty’ book...

Having described the methods of the questionnaire, the case studies and the interview, the next chapter deals with the implementation of the strategies and the results which were obtained. The chapter also contains an interpretation of the findings.

## **Chapter 4 – The Questionnaire – Data Analysis**

### **4.1 Introduction**

The questionnaire was the one quantitative strategy used in this research. In its aim, that is to support or refute the results of the techniques of the interviews and the case studies, it therefore contains the essence of those questions which were also asked in the interview.

The tool used for the statistical analysis was version 15 of the 'SPSS Program For Windows'.

The questions which pertained to the individual issues of the research were studied in isolation. The sequence in which they were asked in the survey paper was not in the order of the four topics to be surveyed. It was instead designed so that the independent queries were contained in the first 15 questions and the dependent ones, which appeared – apart from Q 16 and 17 – in the form of a 5-point Likert scale in the remaining part.

In this chapter, however, the specific results of the questionnaire were arranged in the order in which the four topics of the thesis were laid out in chapter 1.

For the sake of clarity, the result of frequencies was depicted in the form of coloured pie charts. With some of the questions it became apparent that further scrutiny could provide interesting aspects when seen in association with other information like nationality or experience or age. Here crosstabs were used to give a deeper insight in terms of varying views.

The data entry was arranged in groupings to fit in with the statistical computer program. For instance, the original question in the poll had asked for the age or sea-time experience of participants but the answers had to be adjusted so that a reply of, say, 16 years of sea experience fitted into the 15 to 20 year category. The answers to the question of age were treated in a similar way. Since the questionnaires were distributed and collected in the controlled environment of the place of study, all questionnaires were returned.

4.2 The four topics

4.2.1.1 The importance of a lingua franca and the choice of English

The first issue concerned the perception of mariners regarding the need for a common language and the viability of the English language to fulfil that role. Question 18 of the questionnaire (“Given the multinational and multiethnic nature of the international shipping industry it is imperative that a common language exists at sea”) went directly to the core of this first issue of the investigation.

There was overwhelming support for the existence of a common language. A total of 97.7% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that this was an important matter. Only 2.3% of the participants were not sure or felt that there was no need for a lingua franca (see Fig. 4.1).

The question was then asked if students could suggest another language which might supplant English. (Q 16 “Is there a language other than English which in your view could realistically be

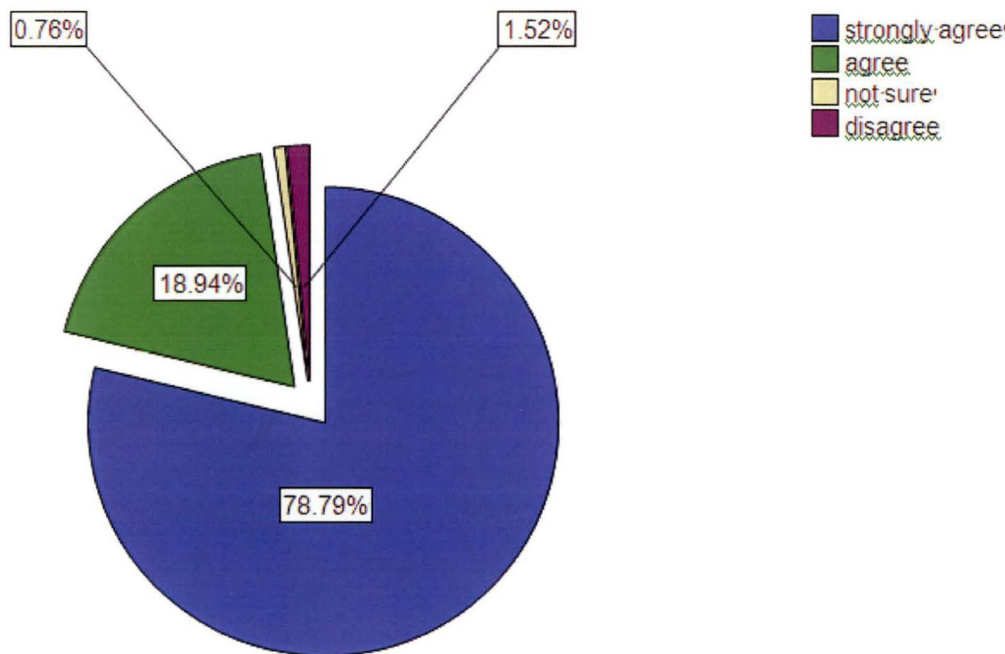
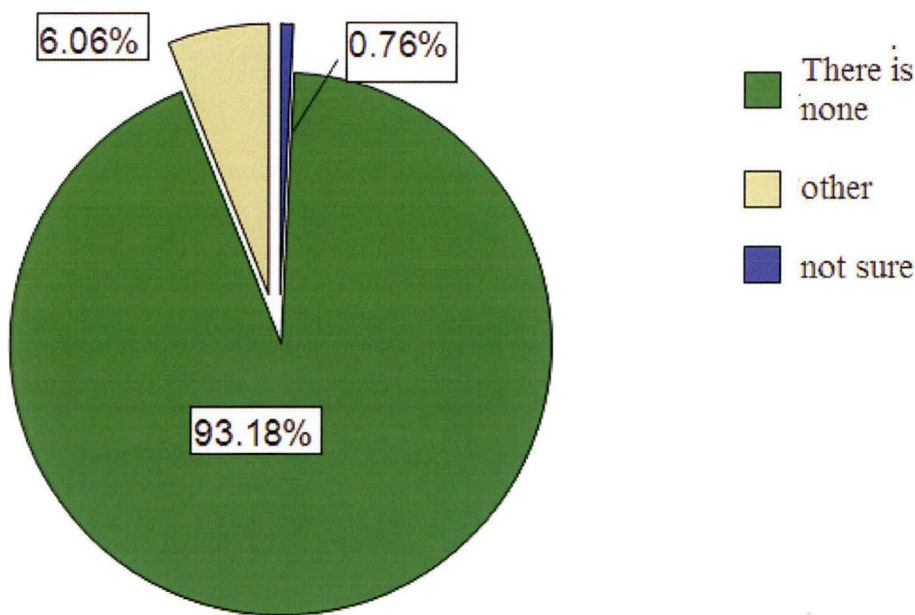


Fig. 4.1 A common language at sea is important



used as the common language at sea?”) (see Fig. 4.2). With one abstention, 93.2% declared that they felt English was the best choice as a lingua franca at sea.



**Fig. 4.2 Alternatives to English as a lingua franca at sea**

It was of interest at this point to investigate if there was a difference of opinion on this issue between native English speakers and those who had to learn English as a second language.

As a comparative answer the percentage of non-native English speakers showed 88.1% with the view that English was the only choice was balanced, against 91.5% who felt the same among the native English speakers (see Table 4.1). This appears an insignificant difference and the results show that, as far as this survey population is concerned, maritime English has been firmly accepted as the common lingo.

There is also no clearly discernible trend among the different language speakers in as much as one particular group was seen as being biased against English.

			Alternative Lingua Franca			Total
			00	There is none	Other	.00
Mother tongue	English	Count	1	86	3	90
		% of Total	8%	65.2%	2.3%	68.2%
	Chinese	Count	0	1	1	2
		% of Total	0%	8%	8%	1.5%
	German	Count	0	10	2	12
		% of Total	0%	7.6%	1.5%	9.1%
	Indian, Pakistani, Middle Eastern language	Count	0	18	1	19
		% of Total	0%	13.6%	.8%	14.4%
	Other	Count	0	8	1	9
% of Total		0%	6.1%	8%	6.8%	
Total	Count	1	123	8	132	
	% of Total	.8%	93.2%	6.1%	100.0%	

**Table 4.1 A cross-tabulation of native and non-native English speakers and their stance on English as the common language at sea**

At this stage the question arose as to whether the view on English as the lingua franca had any link to the degree of experience the various seafarers had in the maritime industry. Consequently the length of sea service of the participating mariners was weighed against their opinion of whether or not another language was considered feasible (Table 4.2):

		Alternative Lingua Franca			Total
		.00	There is none	Other	.00
Length of sea service	Under 4 years	0	42	5	47
	5-10 years	0	40	3	43
	11-15 years	1	14	0	15
	Over 15 years	0	27	0	27
Total		1	123	8	132

**Table 4.2 A cross-tabulation of sea experience and the stance on English as lingua franca**

The result showed that just over 6% of seafarers who had worked on ships for less than 10 years felt that there was another choice, while none of the more experienced ones shared that opinion. This trend, while really too small to be conclusive, could be interpreted in two ways: one could argue that with increasing familiarity and knowledge of the industry the acceptance of English is greater, or one could form the opinion that in the future, when the junior officers rise to higher ranks, there may be more deck officers who would opt for an alternative to English.

No tendency, however, could be detected when comparing the seafarers going for senior grade certificates with the junior ones: there was only a small number of participants, fairly evenly spread from the seekers of the lowest to the most senior certificate who would suggest an alternative to English.

One of the questions sought to ascertain how most of the sea time of the participants had been spent. The researcher wanted to find out if this had any bearing on their opinion of what the common language should be (Q 9 “How was most of your sea time spent? a) In the coastal trade, b) In the international trade”). The outcome was somewhat surprising (see Table 4.3).

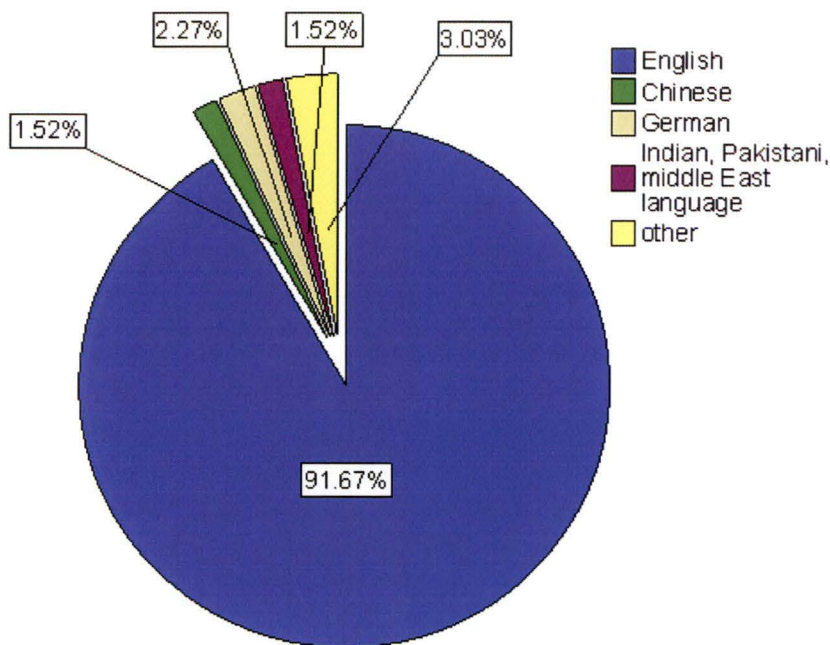
Noteworthy is the fact that less than 2% of those who had worked in the coastal trade, that is those who had less ‘international’ exposure, could think of a substitute for English while close on 10% involved in trading in global, worldwide trade did have a suggestion for change. A possible explanation is that a large number of seafarers are employed on ‘liner trades’, that is they work on vessels which regularly trade to the same countries. The interview showed that in cases like

Area of trading	Alternative Lingua Franca			Total
	0 0	There is none	Other	Not sure
Coastal	0	54	1	55
International	1	69	7	77
Total	1	123	8	132

**Table 4.3 A cross-tabulation of seafarers on coastal and international voyages and their view on English as the lingua franca**

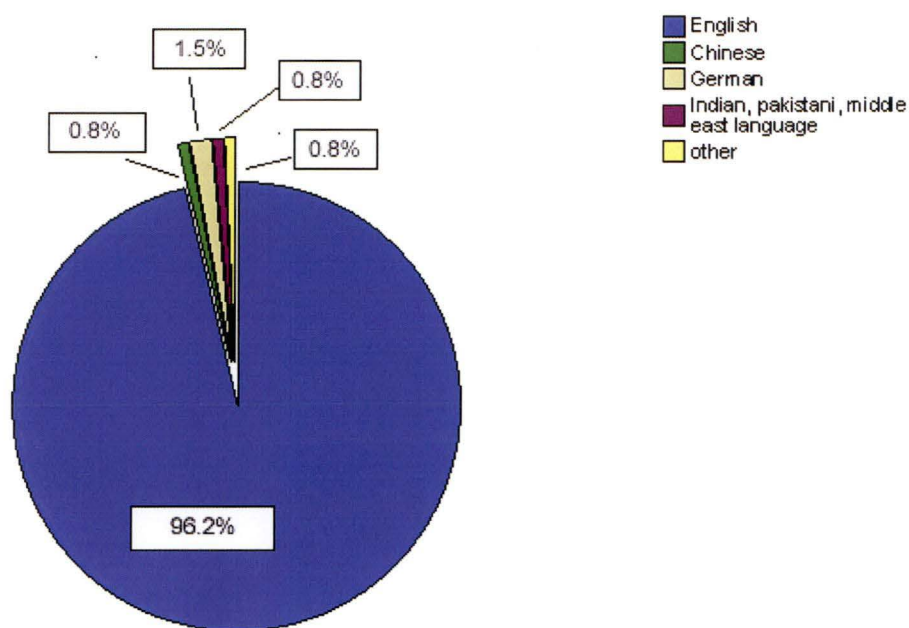
that the native language of the country habitually visited is often used as the medium of communication in preference to English.

Another issue worth investigating was the question of the language which was spoken among the sailors when off duty (Q 11 “Which language was used when communicating with your fellow seafarers on board on a social basis?”). The result is shown in Figure 4.3.

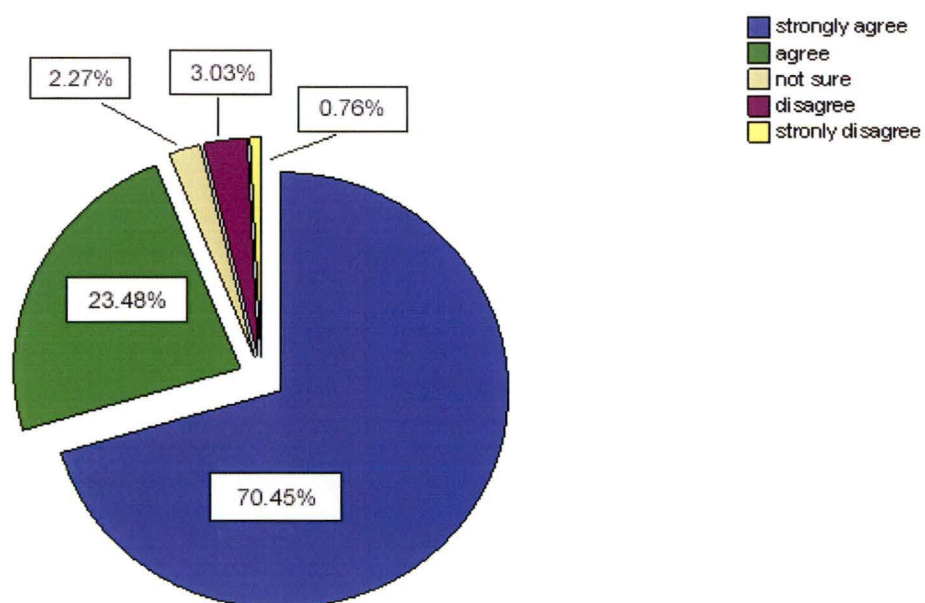


**Fig. 4.3 The social language spoken on board**

Given that it is more common than not to find a mixture of nationalities on international trading vessels, the overwhelming majority of 91.7% shown to be using English to overcome the communication gap is not surprising. However, of the remaining 8.3% of seafarers who stated that they used another language when interacting socially, more than half switched to English when on duty (Q 12 “In which language were commands issued?”). See Figure 4.4.



**Fig. 4.4 The working language on board**



**Fig. 4.5 English is the most suitable lingua franca for the maritime industry**

It is reasonable to assume that the remaining 3.8% sailed on vessels of a country’s national line which sometimes have a policy of only employing crew from their own countries.

The most unambiguous statement on this issue was given to Question 19. Less than 4% disagreed with the statement that English was the most suitable language at sea (see Fig. 4.5). Seen in connection with the other questions asked on this topic, the result of the first theme of the investigation was quite plain.

**4.2.2.1 Nationalities perceived as being difficult to communicate with using English**

The second area of the investigation pertained to nationalities which appear to have more difficulties with communication using the English language than others. The theme extended beyond that, though, in as much as the researcher was trying to find whether or not there was a possible opposition to English as such.

Question 17 (“Seafarers from which nationality or nationalities would you single out as being particularly difficult to communicate with in English?”) allowed the participants to put down more than one answer. While 17.4% of those asked did not name any language group, the most recurrent among the remaining seafarers’ answers, in descending frequency, were as follows:

Chinese	32.6%
Filipino	14.4%
Indian	9.8%
Korean	5.3%
Ukrainian/Russian	3.8%

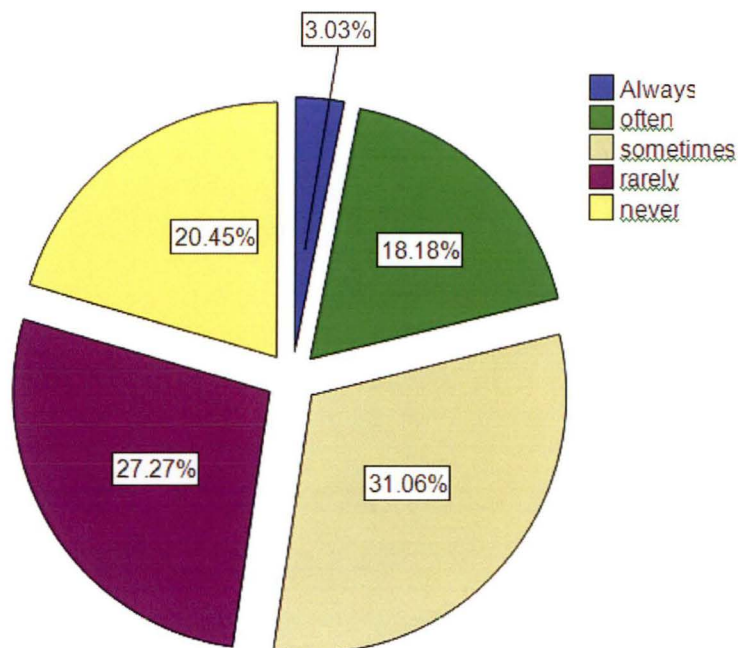
In addition, about 12 other groups were named, some answers being not particularly helpful. ‘Japanese’, ‘Turkish’ and ‘Scottish’ were put forward as well as ‘Asian’, ‘non-English speaking countries’, or ‘ones who have no interest in learning English’.

This result was not unexpected. The linguistic distance between Chinese, a Sino-Tibetan language and Teutonic English is vast in almost all respects. The written language, the vocabulary, the sentence structure, pronunciation, voice inflection and other speech nuances are about as dissimilar as two languages can get. The Korean tongue falls into a category akin to Chinese. Tagalog and Indian languages like Hindi or Urdu are not as far removed linguistically from English but still quite dissimilar, while the Slavic tongues of Russian and Ukrainian, although closer to English, still differ in their written form, their vocabulary and general elocution markedly from the Teutonic languages.

There is another interpretation which is worth mentioning, however. All the ethnic groups mentioned in the above list present a significant proportion of the world's seafaring population. We all know that certain language groups have developed quite distinctive accents when using English. Comedians worldwide have almost made a living thanks to this phenomenon. Where a seafarer was exposed mainly to conversations with mostly Russian, Indian or Filipino partners in conversation but not Chinese or, say, Japanese he would obviously select members of the former group as being hard to communicate with. In other words, the above list is likely to be distorted by the frequent and disproportionate exposure of individual mariners to a particular language group.

#### **4.2.2.2 Opposition to English as a common language**

Question 31 tried to shed light on a possible disinclination by seafarers to use the English language as common ground, and Question 32 referred to shore staff who may have felt a similar way (Q 31 "Have you ever experienced an unwillingness among other seafarers to use English as a common language?"). There was no question in this survey which sought to identify more closely the reason for such an attitude. The result of Q 31 is shown below (see Fig. 4.6):



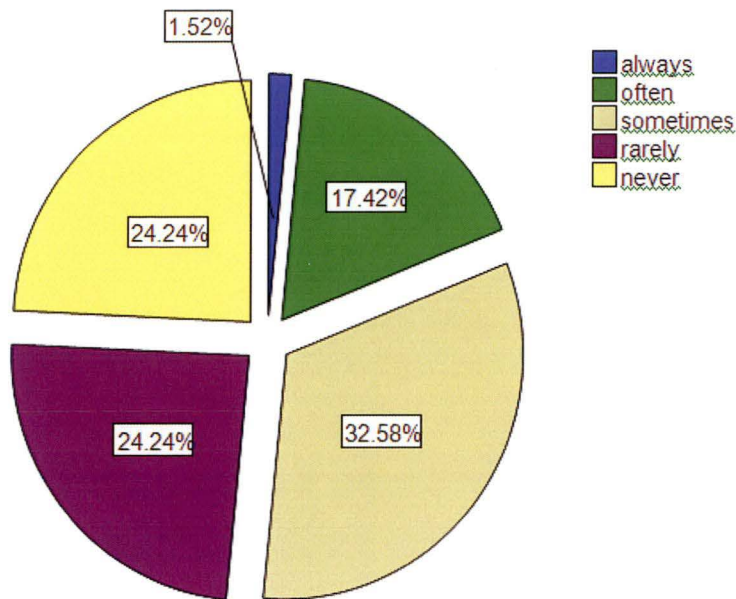
**Fig. 4.6 Frequencies of encountering an unwillingness to speak English by other seafarers**

The result shows that over 21.2 percent had experienced an unwillingness on the part of fellow seafarers to use English to converse, 31.1% had experienced some opposition to using the language at some time and 47.8% had rarely or never found that other seafarers were reluctant to speak English.

In view of previous findings regarding the use of English, this appears to be a surprisingly high proportion of participants who had encountered an aversion to the language.

The same sentiment, that is a reluctance to use English, occurred in the experience of the participants with almost identical frequency in their dealings with shore staff: 18.9% of those asked had met a disinclination by the ones who are engaging with the vessel from ashore, 32.6% had come across such an attitude at some time, and 48.4% had rarely or never experienced these sentiments. Q 32 (“Have you ever experienced an unwillingness among shore staff to use English as a common language?”) yielded the following result shown in Fig. 4.7:



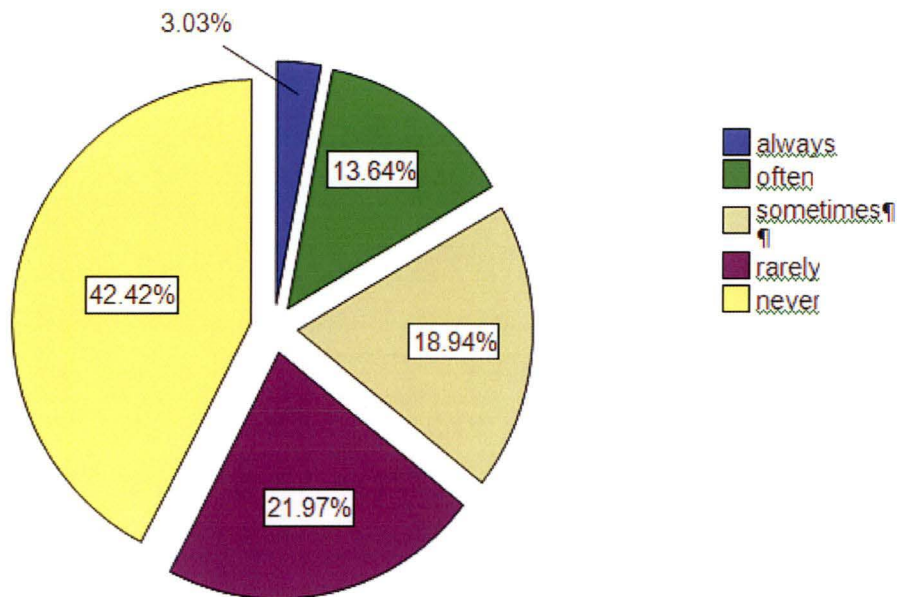


**Fig. 4.7 Frequencies of encountering an unwillingness by shore staff to speak English**

#### **4.2.3.1 The role of the SMCP**

The third purpose of the investigation regarded the role of the SMCP and was meant to determine if and how often incidents occurred in the experience of the participating seafarers where communication was ineffective. Question 33 came directly to the point of the former issue: “How often was the IMO publication ‘Standard Maritime Communication Phrases’ used at sea?” (see Figure 4.8)

The SMCP was previously described as the most prolific tool currently used in the attempt to establish common linguistic ground at sea. However, almost two thirds (64.2%) claimed that they never or rarely made use of the publication. This seems a remarkably high figure and the author feels that the reason for this lies partly with the teaching and training institutions which are given the task of educating future officers.



**Fig. 4.8 The frequency with which the SMCP was used on board**

However, it was apt at this juncture again to break up the answer to this question along the lines of native and non-native English speakers. This was the finding (see Table 4.4):

		Usefulness of the SMCP					Total
		Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	
Mother tongue	English	1	8	15	22	44	90
	Chinese	0	2	0	0	0	2
	German	0	1	2	2	7	12
	Indian, Pakistani, Middle Eastern language	2	6	5	3	3	19
	Other	1	1	3	2	2	9
Total		4	18	25	29	56	132

**Table 4.4 A cross-tabulation of native and non-native English speakers on the usefulness of the SMCP**

The split shows that 73.3% of native English speakers never or rarely used the SMCP, while only 45% of non-native English speakers said they made use of it never or rarely. Or, to put a positive slant on it and disregarding the participants who answered the question with ‘sometimes’ (19% overall) there were only 10% of native English speakers who always or often used the coded language as opposed to 3 times that many (31%) non-native English speakers.

The explanation for the above result may at first glance be surprising. Native English speakers should after all be in their element: the SMCP is compiled in the English language and speaking that lingo as a mother tongue would, on the face of it, make it comparatively easy for a native speaker of English to use the terms and phrases from the publication.

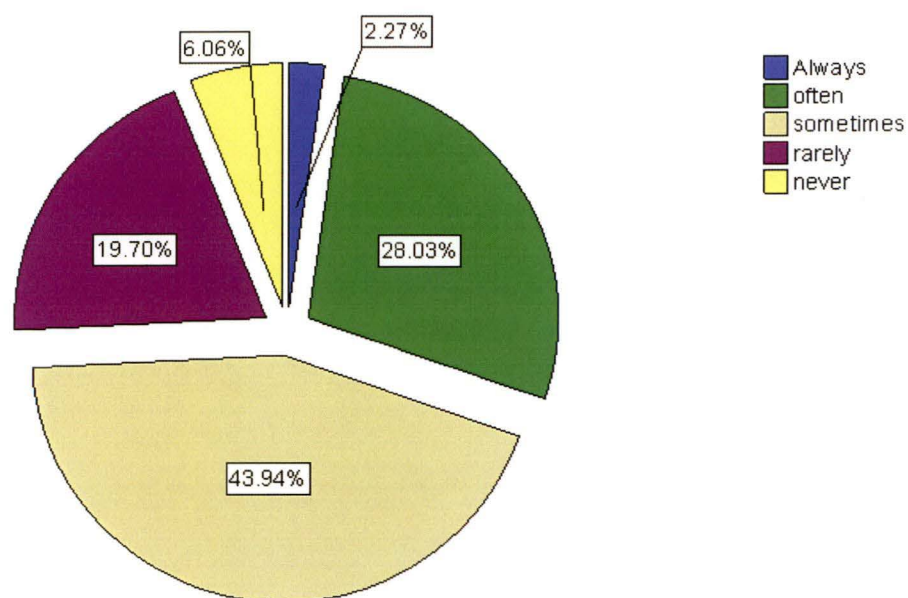
It is the author’s view that in fact the very competence of native speakers of English is the reason for a reluctance to condescend to a much simplified form of verbal expression in their ‘own’ language. In other words: ‘there is no need for me to use some stunted and simplified code of a language which I can speak perfectly well’.

#### **4.2.3.2 Miscommunication due to a lack of maritime English skill**

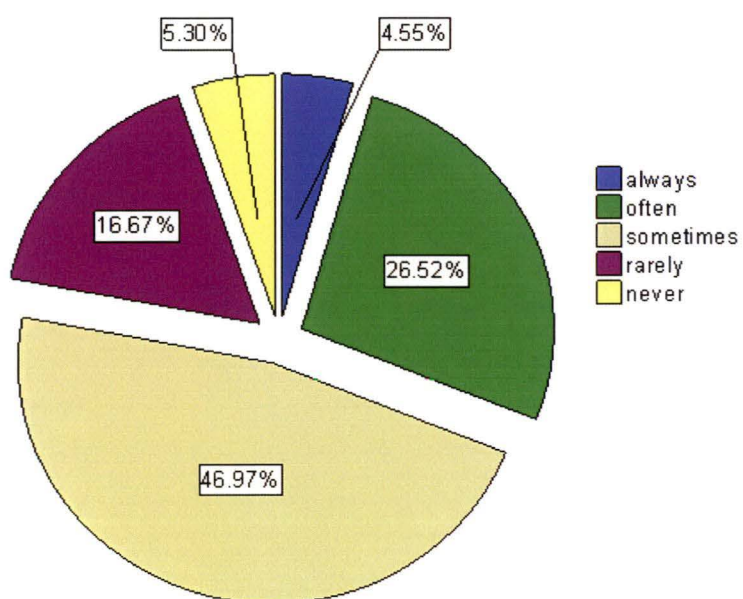
Included in the third topic under investigation was the question of whether an incapacity to communicate in maritime English ever caused problems on board ship (Q 28 “How often did an inability to communicate competently in maritime English competently create misunderstandings among crew members on board?”). The outcome is shown in Fig. 4.9.

Results showed that 30.3% had experienced misunderstandings with other crew members because of inadequate English skills always or often, 25.8 % said misunderstandings occurred rarely or never, and 43.9% stated that the problem arose sometimes. It should be mentioned here that there has been little attempt globally to formalise English language teaching to non-officers.

There is, of course, always on board the opportunity to explain, show or clarify some other, non-verbal way to get an order or an idea across to another person if words fail, as, for instance, by demonstration. If a message can be successfully conveyed in that way there may be some who will feel that communication has been adequate.



**Fig. 4.9** Frequencies of misunderstandings on board due to a lack of English speaking ability

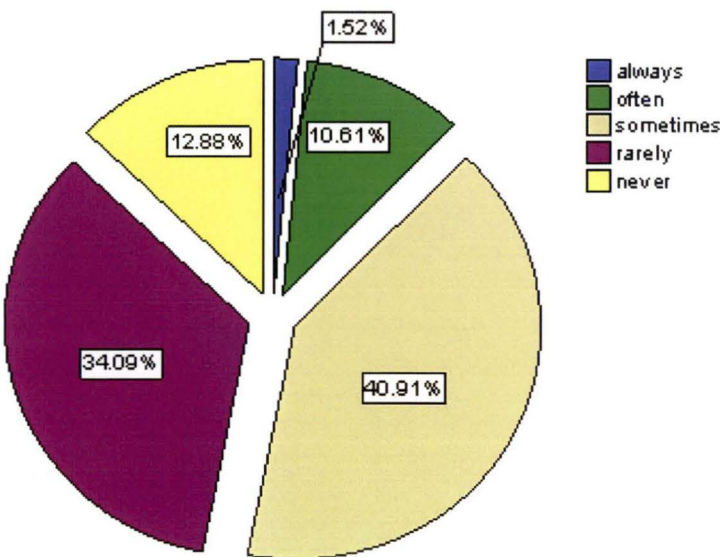


**Fig. 4.10** Frequencies of misunderstandings between ships due to a lack of English speaking ability

The next question delved into miscommunication between ships and shore stations, which is almost wholly effected by radio communication. This is carried out exclusively by officers. The result of question 29 (“How often did an inability to speak maritime English competently create misunderstandings between your vessel and another vessel or shore station?”) was as shown in Fig. 4.10.

Again, almost a third of students (31%) had faced misunderstandings when communicating with other vessels. The outcome is very similar to the previous question in percentage terms. One aspect worth mentioning here is the aforementioned notion that face-to-face communication may be more comprehensible because conversational partners are able to observe the body language and facial expressions of each other, and therefore understanding between speakers of different languages is assisted by this paralinguage. For supporters of this view that would mean the linguistic capacity in English of crewmembers on a multiethnic ship is actually poorer than the statistics suggest and it is paralinguage that bridges the gap.

One question pertained to difficulties during pilotage operations, arguably one of the most tense times of a voyage. Question 30 (“How often did an inability to speak maritime English



**Fig. 4.11** Frequencies of misunderstandings during pilotage due to a lack of English speaking ability

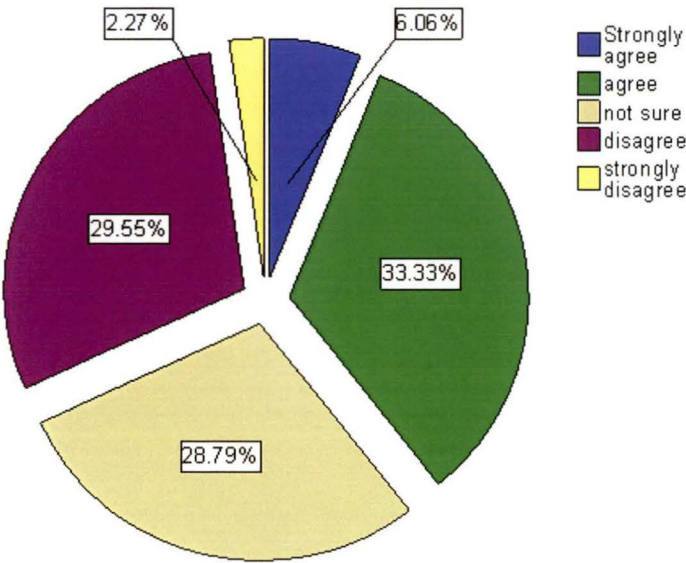


competently create misunderstandings on board during pilotage operations?”). The answers yielded the outcome shown in see Fig. 4.11).

Here the frequency of miscommunication, while still concerning, was a lot lower at 12.1%. The reason for this can most likely be found in the composition of the bridge team at such times. Present in the wheelhouse during pilotage are normally the captain, the watch keeping deck officer, the helmsman, the pilot and possibly an additional lookout. The helmsman is generally handpicked for his experience and ability to steer a given course and for his capacity to understand and correctly execute helm orders. During these times the procedures on a ship’s bridge become quite formal, follow a well known pattern, and the need for constant alertness is greater than normal while the ship is in confined waters. In other words, everybody is at his best and the dialogue between helmsman and pilot follow a prescribed, often performed pattern.

**4.2.4.1 The standard of maritime English at sea**

Lastly, the status of English language proficiency in the maritime industry was examined. Seafarers were asked how they saw the competency of English among their colleagues in the



**Fig. 4.12 Seafarers are sufficiently competent in maritime English**

international arena (Q 26 “International seafarers are by and large competent enough in the use of maritime English”) (see Fig. 4.12).

The outcome showed that a slightly higher number of participants felt that seafarers were by and large competent enough in their communication skills using maritime English than those who believed they were not (39.4% agreed or strongly agreed that the communicating ability was sufficient, 31.8% disagreed or strongly disagreed that this was the case).

Here again a breakdown of the different language groups seemed to be indicated. Comparing these the results showed the following (see Table 4.5):

		Seafarers are Competent in English					Total
		Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree	
Mother tongue	English	5	22	27	34	2	90
	Chinese	0	2	0	0	0	2
	German	0	1	6	4	1	12
	Indian, Pakistani, Middle Eastern language	2	14	3	0	0	19
	Other	1	5	2	1	0	9
Total		8	44	38	39	3	132

**Table 4.5 A cross-tabulation on the perceived competency in maritime English by nationality**

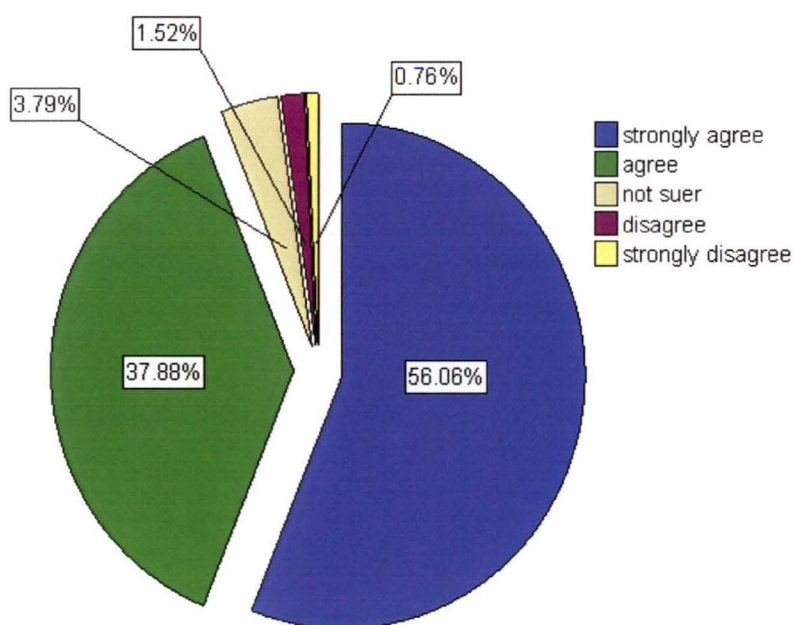
Only 30% of native English speakers believed that the communication ability of international seafarers in English was sufficiently good, while twice that percentage (59.5%) of speakers of other languages felt that that was so.

It is difficult to interpret this result. One possible explanation is that the use of the coded language of the SMCP, less practised by native English speakers as we have seen, is used by non-native English speakers to a larger extent and creates problems for those whose mother tongue is English. However, this seems a less likely explanation than the following rationalisation:

The vast majority of native English speakers in the maritime industry comes from the USA, Canada, Britain, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. While there are distinct dialects which set the clusters apart, speakers from these countries have arguably maintained a close relationship to the ‘Queen’s English’ – the American English being probably more idiosyncratic than that of the other nations mentioned. Non-native English speakers have adapted English to their voice pattern and vernacular, have developed an enunciation, pronunciation and in some cases syntax and idiolect which fits their linguistic and cultural background. This is often hard to understand by native English speakers.

#### 4.2.4.2 Levels of maritime English proficiency

Ratings and cadets are not normally called upon to communicate with other vessels. They may, however, have to interact with shore labour during cargo operations. The question as to whether



**Fig. 4.13 A competence in maritime English is important for a cadet or rating**

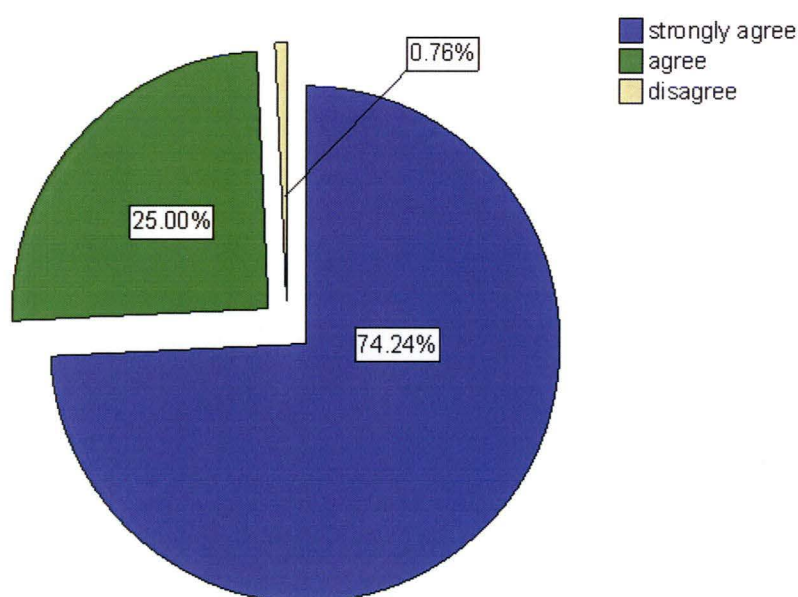
a more elevated position in the hierarchy on board warranted better maritime English communication skills was addressed first by question 22 (“A competence in maritime English is



important to carry out the job of a rating/cadet on an international merchant vessel”). The answers were distributed as seen in Fig. 4.13.

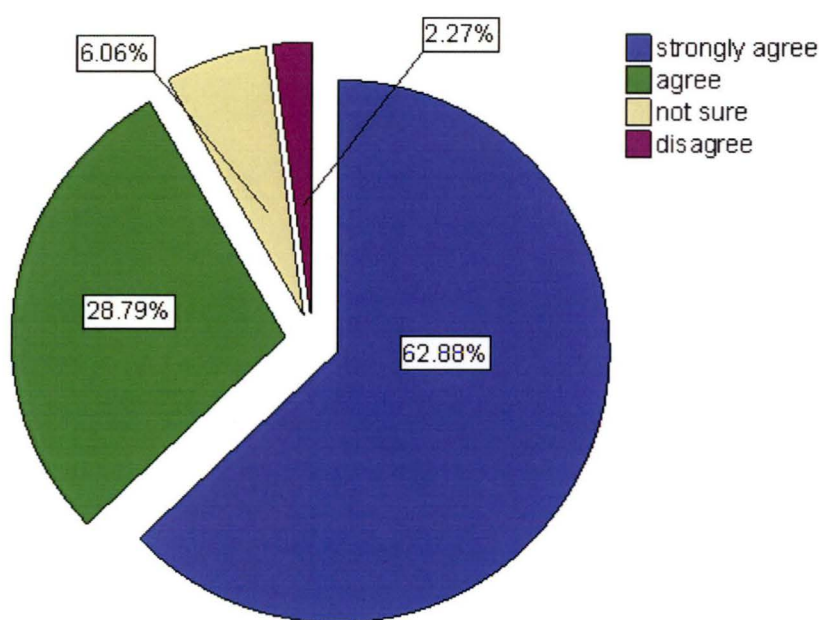
Ratings, also known as ABs (for ‘able bodied’ seamen) or IRs (integrated ratings) are seafarers who are not officers. Most of them have in the past not been required to learn English unless a particular company insisted that they acquire some knowledge in it. Cadets, usually young people who are signed on as apprentice officers, are generally taught English. Most bona fide companies send one or two cadets on board their vessels where the young people are trained in the various aspects of seamanship.

The next question was selected to find out if seafarers felt that the English communication skills were seen as more important among deck officers than ratings and cadets. The result is shown below:



**Fig. 4.14 A competence in maritime English is important for a deck officer**

The outcome shows that it was seen as more important for deck officers to be competent in English than it was for lower ranks. There was in fact a strong perception that an ability to speak maritime English at an acceptable level should be a prerequisite for a certificate of competency for a deck officer (Q 24 “The ability to speak maritime English at an acceptable level should be a prerequisite for a deck watch keeping certificate”) (see Fig. 4.15).



**Fig. 4.15 Maritime English should be a pre-requisite for a deck watch keeping certificate**

Of participating seafarers, 91.7% backed the suggestion, 6% were not sure and only 2.3% opposed the idea. This outcome shows a very solid endorsement for the English language by the survey population.

### 4.3 Summary

The questionnaire showed a strong support for the need for a common language at sea and for this language to be English. One reason for this is partly without a doubt the fact that the British

merchant fleet has played a most prominent role for centuries on the world scene. British colonisation and the establishment of trading posts on an unprecedented global scale ensured that the language was spread far and wide. While other countries attempted similar goals, they could not match the influence and sway of the British merchants and expansionists which brought trade, perceived progress and business – and some less desirable consequences – to the indigenous people at the four corners of the earth.

Another explanation for the still-continuing increase of the English speaking sphere is the ever growing influence of the computer world. While there is no real monopoly on Information Technology today, it had its roots in the English-speaking world, and much of the terminology remained and is now accepted and used globally.

A further reason for the acceptance of English is the fact that it is the most taught second language in the world. Educational institutions in Europe, South America, Africa and Asia have simply accepted as a *fait accompli* that the language has cut a wide swathe in international communication; they are – for very practical reasons – promoting it.

When looking at the taxonomy of language groups and language families it is evident that some languages have very close relationships and others differ markedly from each other. In our world we have the opportunity to take note and listen to the speakers of languages foreign to us, be it through the media, the cinema or actual contact with people from other lands. Most of us, having heard unknown tongues, will try to make some sense of what reaches our ears and – if the language is not too far removed from our own mother tongue – we might be able to discern a meaning or recognise a word or two. In other cases an understanding is impossible because the language structure and articulation is just too alien and strange. In simple terms, the more removed linguistically a language is from our own, the less comprehensible it is and the harder it is for us to learn.

The nationalities singled out in the questionnaire as being problematic to communicate with in English were mostly from the Asian region or Eastern Europe, while no Teutonic language rated a mention. Just as a native English speaker has greater difficulties learning Chinese than with, say, German or Danish, so is the situation reciprocated when a Mandarin speaker is trying to become proficient in English.

Language and culture, it has been said, are inexorably interwoven and one cannot learn a language without learning something of the culture in which the language is set. The last decades in particular have made us aware of the great chasm which exists between different cultures, religions and forms of government. One of the aims of the study was to investigate whether the English language was regarded by seafarers from significantly dissimilar backgrounds from the Anglo-Saxon as disagreeable, or the imposition of the language on international mariners as offensive and objectionable.

The questionnaire circulated among this survey population showed some tangible evidence of such sentiments. A hint that the English language was not fully accepted as the *lingua franca* in maritime circles was the confirmation that an unwillingness to speak English by some seafarers and shore staff had been encountered by almost a quarter of the participants.

The difficulties of some seafarers to become proficient in English have been pointed out and previous attempts to develop some sort of simplified, coded language for use in the maritime industry have been mentioned in the introduction of this work. The publication of the “Standard Marine Navigational Vocabulary” and its updated and extended successor the “Standard Marine Communication Phrases” have been the latest and most comprehensive international attempt by the IMO to facilitate communication at sea. It is unfortunate but obvious that the little booklet has not penetrated all walks of life in the international maritime arena as it was intended to do.

Miscommunication at sea has in the past often been an overlooked factor where incidents occurred. Blame was frequently apportioned to improper responses or mechanical breakdowns without delving deeper into the chain of events leading up to the event. It has really been only through episodes in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century that the IMO has seriously looked at accidents from the perspective of verbal misunderstandings.

That such misunderstandings still happen became unmistakably clear in the survey. Intra-ship as well as inter-ship and ship-shore communication ‘went wrong’ in the view of a surprisingly high number of seafarers. Even during pilotage, a crucial time in the professional life of a navigator, more than half of the participants had sometimes, often or always experienced miscommunication due to language.

On board language difficulties lead to confusion and exasperation which in turn can escalate into arguments, clashes and a deterioration of the working environment. The milieu of a 'happy' or 'unhappy' ship – terms every seafarer is familiar with – often hinges on such matters.

Then, on a more prominent note, there are consequences which reach further: groundings, collisions and pollution of the environment the world over, accidents, often relegated to a newspaper's back page where no illustrious holiday beach or densely populated area is threatened, do occur with monotonous regularity. The more spectacular ones, as we all know, often occupy the media for weeks.

The answers to the last topic, that is how international mariners see the linguistic ability in maritime English among their colleagues, coincided very closely with the results of the responses given to incidents of miscommunication. About 30% of participants had experienced language difficulties using English, and about the same number disagreed or strongly disagreed that international seafarers were by and large proficient in maritime English. There is, statistically speaking, a satisfying correlation here which should send a clear signal to shipping companies and training institutions alike.

The strong support for the view that ratings and cadets should be competent in maritime English shows with clarity that the English language is regarded as an important professional skill and the even stronger, almost unanimous, opinion that deck officers should have that ability attests to what mariners expect from their officers.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

This chapter, with its statistical approach to the questions posed in the thesis, was in some ways an easy one to compile. While the author had to find his way through the intricacies of the SPSS program, the evaluation process and the graphical demonstrations of outcomes were taken care of by the computer once the procedural method had been followed.

One of the interesting revelations of using the SPSS computer program was the multitude of cross references one could select if one wanted to delve deeper into particular niches and corners, which in this case had little or no relevance to the thesis here but wetted the appetite for further

research. The initial effort of collecting and transferring data was truly repaid by the results the program provided.

The next chapter looks at the outcomes of document research and interviews used in this thesis.

## **Chapter 5 – Document Research and Interviews – Data Analysis**

### **5.1 Document research**

#### **5.1.1 Introduction**

The technique of document research is used as a common tool in ethnographic research. The approach can be found in disciplines like psychology, sociology and political sciences as well as in historical and anthropological studies. In this survey it takes the form of case studies of accidents or disasters as described in investigative reports instigated by maritime authorities.

The case study is used here as a qualitative technique and could also be labelled archival research. None of the events were observed by the author, and all information was gathered from accounts collected by a marine investigation branch.

As has been mentioned in Chapter 3, there is no such thing as a ‘typical’ accident at sea. Whenever an incident occurs that has, or could potentially have, evolved into a serious mishap, the government departments of most bona fide maritime nations call for an inquiry into the matter. The common denominator in the examples presented is of course the one of communication problems of some kind. The following accounts are taken from investigation reports which have been published by the maritime authorities of Denmark, Norway and Australia and are presented in a condensed form.

In the cases depicted here, language problems have not necessarily been the source of the resulting dilemma, but they were either part in the causal chain of events or are considered a dormant obstacle which could repeat itself at anytime. Reports dealing with incidents are promulgated among shipping companies and parties associated with the industry with the intent to raise awareness and minimise disasters in the future. The descriptions of cases compiled by

investigators are kept factual and objective and are not meant to apportion blame or appear in any way judgmental. Conclusions are deliberately impartial and dispassionate.

Following the documented cases there is an addendum which had been unplanned but which fitted neatly into the context of this thesis. During a recent experience at sea the author had the opportunity to observe a bilingual situation on board a Dutch vessel. The ship had been chartered by an Australian harbour authority to perform some dredging work in a major Australian port. The law in Australia requires a vessel working in its sovereign waters for any length of time to carry an Australian crew. At the same time, Dutch authorities require a vessel sailing under their flag to be run by Dutch seafarers.

The delivery voyage from Singapore to Brisbane, and subsequent work in Moreton Bay and Brisbane harbour, were an enlightening period which accentuated the need for clear and transparent communication between the members of a ship's bridge team. The account of the 6 weeks on board is presented as an observation in this paper.

#### **5.1.1.1 The “Scandinavian Star”**

The “Scandinavian Star” was a passenger ferry plying between the Norwegian capital of Oslo and the Danish port of Frederikshavn. In the early morning hours of 7 April 1990, after the ship had left the waters of the Oslofjord, entered the Skagerag and set course for Denmark, a fire broke out on board which left 158 people dead and did much to destroy public faith in the transport of passengers by sea.

The case of the fire on the “Scandinavian Star” was widely publicised in the media when it occurred. Much of the material written and shown was tinged with emotion and was factually wrong – as is often the case with such events when they are dealt with in the tabloid press in a sensationalised manner.

The German journalist Frederik Naumann took it upon himself to investigate the terrible accident in detail with an intention of publishing a book about his findings. The following description of what transpired is based on his manuscript as well as telephone conversations with him.

Another source of information was the investigation report of the official Norwegian inquest.



#### ***5.1.1.1.1 The background***

In order to paint a more complete picture of the catastrophe some background information is necessary.

The ferry service on the Denmark–Norway run had been successfully carried out by the “Holger Danske” (until November 1989) and then by the chartered Italian ship “Sardinia Nova”. Since the charter contract for the latter vessel was to end on 1 April 1990, the Danish group “Da-No Line”, the company supplying the service, had been looking for a replacement ship since November 1989 and had been successful in negotiating a contract with the American company Sea Escape. According to this agreement the vessel “Scandinavian Star”, performing day cruises between Miami, Florida, and Freeport (Bahamas) at the time, was to be purchased by the Danes to take over from the “Sardinia Nova”. After the necessary papers had been signed, the ship left the USA on 12 March 1990 for Lisbon, Portugal, but was redirected to the German port of Cuxhaven while on the way to Europe. She arrived there on 23 March to undergo some changes to the passenger facilities on board and to take on a new crew.

By this time it was obvious that the ferry operators were running short of time. The “Sardinia Nova” was to make its last crossing on 31 March and then depart immediately for the Mediterranean. No ship owner likes to lose money, and while the directors left the decision as to when the new ship was ready to start operating to the master of the “Scandinavian Star” – an empty formality, since the ultimate decision always rests with the captain – there was clearly some commercial pressure to take over from the departing Italian ship forthwith.

#### ***5.1.1.1.2 The crew***

Two manning agencies (companies which act as employment agencies for ship owners and search for seafarers to ‘man’ the ships) had been approached and asked to provide personnel for the newly arriving ship. One of the requirements specified by the management of “Da-No Line” had been that “as many as possible of the crew should be English speaking” (F. Naumann, personal letter, August 4, 2001).

The crew of the “Scandinavian Star” was reduced from the 250 persons it used to have as a cruise ship in the Caribbean to 99 as a passenger and car ferry in northern Europe. A part of the new crew joined the ship when it arrived in Cuxhaven, and the rest came on board between 30 March, when the vessel berthed for the first time in Frederikshavn, and 1 April.

The captain and 10 crew members, including 2 nautical officers, the radio officer, 2 pursers and 5 stewards, had been taken over from the Norwegian company which had owned the “Holger Danske” and were therefore familiar with the ferry service on that route. A further 9 crew members, among them the chief engineer, 5 engine room ratings, 2 deck ratings and the bosun, had stayed on from the time the ship had sailed from Miami and were meant to remain permanently. The largest contingent of 79 crew joined the vessel through the two crewing agencies, one of which was based on the Isle of Man, the other in Portugal.

Most of the former deck crew of the “Holger Danske” and the crew members who had stayed with the ship from the USA spoke adequate English, with the exception of a bosun and 4 ratings whose knowledge of that language was poor or nonexistent. The majority of the crew hired through the agencies spoke little or no English and only one of them spoke a Scandinavian language.

#### ***5.1.1.1.3 Commencement of service***

The “Scandinavian Star” replaced the “Sardenia Nova” and commenced her first crossing on 1 April. Repair work and alterations had not been finished, indeed were not finished when the tragic accident occurred, and statements by passengers using the ship over the next few days were very critical of the ship’s management because of this. Complaints spoke of dirty alleyways, malfunctioning toilets, late departures and wrongly booked cabins. However, a sufficient number of cabins had been refurbished to accommodate the travellers and the vessel started its service.

On every ship there must be an emergency plan which suits the particular vessel. Its exact nature is defined by the size and type of vessel, by its normal cargo and by the personnel available to act in an emergency. Because of the change in crew numbers and crew composition the existing

emergency plan had to be changed. The two officers charged with this task were under extreme time pressure and had had no experience in adapting such a plan.

One of the items to be determined when drawing up a blueprint is the language to be used in an emergency. Based on the international nature of the crew this should have been English. But since a large percentage of the personnel did not understand that tongue this was not a practical solution. Languages used during the inferno were Scandinavian, Portuguese and Tagalog.

By the time the ferry had left Oslo in the evening of 6 April on its ill-fated last voyage between Norway and Denmark, only one announcement concerning the crew's conduct in case of a fire had been made: a broadcast in Portuguese on the public address system on 30 March while the ship was on the way from Cuxhaven to Frederikshavn.

#### ***5.1.1.1.4 The disaster***

The description of the actual disaster will be brief. The cause of the fire was almost certainly arson. The suspect, a known Danish arsonist with a long record of similar offences, died in the flames.

Shortly before the outbreak of the fatal blaze another fire had been detected and subsequently extinguished by some passengers with the help of a Portuguese helmsman who had just taken a break and was on his way back to the bridge. The incident is mentioned here because the man's attempt to pass on what had happened was symptomatic of the events which followed a little while later: due to language difficulties it was impossible for the crew member to describe to a receptionist what had taken place and minutes were wasted before the first fire was reported. When the disastrous inferno started at around 2am and very quickly spread through the passenger accommodation, communication problems were apparent everywhere. An organised rescue action was impossible, largely because the international crew had not understood the first announcement by the captain in Scandinavian. The passengers, on the other hand, for the greater part Norwegian, could not understand most of the multinational crew and were therefore unable to find the emergency exits. Announcements during the fire were made in Scandinavian and Portuguese, but there are indications that these announcements were not identical in their content. What is certain is that at times deck officers could not communicate clearly with their

ratings and that understanding was often only achieved through gestures or with the help of a translator.

The 'Mayday' signal was sent at 0224 and vessels in the vicinity rushed to the aid of the "Scandinavian Star". It is suspected that most of the 158 people killed were already dead by this time, overcome by poisonous fumes which filled the cabins and alleyways. At 0320 the master of the stricken ship, Captain Larsen, gave the order to abandon ship as he saw no chance to rescue any more people. He and most of his crew and passengers were picked up by the "Stena Saga". However, more than 30 people were evacuated by helicopter from the burning ferry after the crew had abandoned ship.

#### ***5.1.1.1.5 Summary***

In the subsequent inquiry it was stated that the lack of a common language was not the prime reason for the large number of dead. The major problem lay undeniably in training deficiencies, in the inadequacy of equipment, and in a general carelessness where instruction and practice for emergency situations were concerned. It was, however, stated that the inability of the crew to communicate effectively was one of the major weak points during the catastrophe. In particular the inquiry found that the lack of a Scandinavian language on the safety signs had contributed to the high death toll. Language difficulties clearly prevented the crew of the "Scandinavian Star" from acting in a coordinated and well-disciplined fashion when it was needed most.

#### **5.1.1.2 The "Kayax"**

In Australia it is the Australian Transport Safety Bureau (ATSB) which is charged with the responsibility to investigate accidents which occur on vessels within the country's jurisdiction. In the 1990s this role was performed by the Marine Incident Investigation Unit of the Department of Transport.

The Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) and the various state authorities, like those of other nations, conduct periodic checks of domestic and foreign vessels entering local ports in order to ensure that safety standards are kept up. These surveys cover a wide range of shipboard issues and include: inspection of fire-fighting and life-saving appliances; the condition of

navigational equipment which each ship must carry; checks to ensure that basic hygiene standards are met; and that the vessel is in a state where no danger of pollution to the environment exists.

Among the most important items on a surveyor's safety checklist is the state of the ship's lifeboats. The equipment, including emergency rations, medical kit, drinking water, basic navigational tools etc., must be complete, and the rescue vessel has to be in a fit state to be launched and to steam and manoeuvre at any time, meaning that the engine and the steering gear of the rescue craft have to always be in functioning order.

#### ***5.1.1.2.1 The ship and crew***

The Panamanian flagged bulk carrier "Kayax" was alongside the loading terminal in Portland, Victoria (Australia) on 9 August 1994 to take on a full cargo of grain for the Egyptian port of Safaga.

The 23,000 tonne vessel was only three years old and was owned by a South Korean shipping company. The master of the vessel was South Korean and the rest of the 17 crew members came in about equal numbers from South Korea, China and Indonesia.

#### ***5.1.1.2.2 The incident***

A surveyor from the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) was inspecting the port lifeboat as part of a routine port state control inspection. He had asked for the boat's engine to be run in ahead and astern propulsion and the mate, a Korean national, had sent the 2<sup>nd</sup> mate, an Indonesian, into the craft to start the engine. The motor started immediately but when the observers had waited 5 or 6 minutes in vain to see the propeller moving, the mate shouted some instructions to the 2<sup>nd</sup> officer in a language the inspector did not understand.

Unbeknown to anyone, a South Korean oiler and a Chinese ordinary seaman had entered the boat, presumably with the intention of helping the officer to engage the engine.

Meanwhile, the master had been watching the action from the bridge and had made his way to the embarkation level when he realised that some language difficulties existed between those

involved in the operation. He half-entered the lifeboat and shouted to the 2<sup>nd</sup> mate over the noise of the engine to relay the surveyor's request. Suddenly the boat became detached from the falls, causing the master to lose his balance and topple into the craft. The lifeboat crashed to the deck below, turned over and then continued its fall into the water, a distance of about 18 metres. All four people survived but were admitted to hospital with significant injuries.

#### ***5.1.1.2.3 The findings***

It became apparent during the investigation that few of the ship's crew were conversant in English. The languages spoken on board were Korean, Chinese and Indonesian with very rudimentary English being the lingo used for the day-to-day running of the vessel. Between themselves the senior officers used their native Korean for communication. The investigation report stated that "it appears that, in practice, although most of the crew were familiar with and understood a number of basic words and instructions, much of the communication on board was in a mixture of languages, together with much use of gestures and sign language" (Marine Incident Investigation Unit, 1995). This was further demonstrated by the language difficulties experienced in the immediate aftermath of the accident and during the time the casualties were in hospital. While the master spoke reasonable English, the 2<sup>nd</sup> officer and the ratings were interviewed with the help of an interpreter.

During the investigation, evidence suggested that either the Korean oiler or the Chinese seaman had manipulated the lever which releases the lifeboat from its falls, thinking that it might be the ahead or astern lever. The instructions of how to release the lifeboat were given adjacent to the lever in Japanese and English. It became obvious to the investigator that these instructions were not understood by the two crew members.

#### ***5.1.1.2.4 Summary***

There are clearly other factors involved in this incident apart from language barriers. In the first place it could be argued that every person on board should have been familiar with the boat's launching procedure and the engine controls. The fact that the boat appeared not to have been launched for a long period of time and that some equipment had not been properly fitted further suggests some negligence on the part of the people in charge. But this accident, which luckily did

not result in fatalities, hardly rated a mention in the press and was soon forgotten by most apart from those directly involved, shows how the lack of a common language can contribute to serious incidents developing

### **5.1.1.3 The “Matilda Bay”**

In the case of the “Matilda Bay” incident, it should be said from the outset that language had nothing to do with the events that led to the fatal accident on board. The case is of interest mainly because it shows how humans in stressful situations tend to revert to their mother tongue and how communication can become ineffective when an element of panic enters the equation. The case, like the one of the “Kayax” and the “Astor” (see below), was investigated by the Department of Transport’s Marine Incident Investigation Unit.

#### ***5.1.1.3.1 The ship and crew***

The “Matilda Bay” was a container ship of 25,000 tonnes registered in Hong Kong and owned by the China Navigation Company. The vessel was employed mainly on voyages between New Zealand, Australia, Singapore, Colombo, the Red Sea and a number of Mediterranean ports. Like most container ships it was built to steam at comparatively fast speeds and could reach 23 knots.

On the morning of 17 August 1996 the ship was on its way from Melbourne to Fremantle and in a position about 240 nautical miles west-south-west of Kangaroo Island. The master of the vessel was from New Zealand, the chief officer came from Malaysia, the remainder of the officers were, with one exception, British and the ratings were mostly from the Philippines. The chief officer had sailed with the captain on another vessel a few years previous to the events described here and was held in high regard by the crew, the master and the company.

#### ***5.1.1.3.2 The incident***

The “Matilda Bay” had been at sea for two days and had encountered strong winds and heavy head seas when entering the Great Australian Bight. While the engine speed had been reduced overnight to avoid heavy pitching, the master considered it unnecessary to restrict access to the weather decks as with the approaching day the weather appeared to moderate.

At 0800 the third officer had just taken over the watch from the chief officer who had stood the 0400 to 0800 watch. The master was also on the bridge when at 0805 the chief officer, who was about to go below, took a telephone call from the second engineer telling him that a small hatch on the foredeck appeared to be open. He was at first reluctant to believe the report but then indicated to the engineer that he would investigate the matter. He did not mention the subject to anyone on the bridge before leaving, however.

At some time around 0820 the chief officer called the bosun and two ABs and told them to accompany him forward to rectify a problem with a hatch which he had just found to be open and through which seawater was entering the forecabin.

On arrival inside the forecabin the men could see that the hatch lid had been torn from its hinges. On questioning, the bosun told the chief officer that he had closed the hatch 'hand tight' when the ship departed port.

The weather conditions at this time were later described by those involved as 'not too bad'. The vessel was shipping no seas, only the occasional shower of spray and the party proceeded onto the forecabin deck even though one of the ABs felt apprehensive about being in such an exposed position. They found that the hatch lid had been washed onto the gypsy of the anchor windlass and that some mooring lines had been strewn around the aft part of the foredeck.

It has to be said here that on a container ship carrying containers on deck the view ahead is severely limited. Containers are carried several rows high and the field of vision is restricted up to hundreds of metres ahead and there is no way of observing the foredeck and any operations that are carried out there from the bridge.

The chief officer ordered the seamen to secure the ropes and told the bosun to get plywood and canvas to carry out temporary repairs to prevent more water from entering the store room. While the bosun was gone, he directed the ABs to secure the damaged hatch lid somewhere safe under the windlass. The ratings did as they were told and were lashing down the lid, one facing over the port bow, the other over the starboard bow with the chief officer looking aft. The AB facing to port suddenly felt the ship lifting and, looking up and seeing a big wave approaching, shouted "Very big wave is coming!" before crouching down and grabbing hold of a forestay. The bow



dug into the wave and the force of the oncoming water tore his grip from the hold, carried him bodily over the windlass and threw him against the mooring winch just forward of No. 1 hatch. He was bruised and stunned, his head having struck some part of the windlass. As he got up he could not see any sign of the chief officer or the other rating and made his way as fast as possible down the starboard ladder, fearing that a second wave might strike at any time. At the bottom of the ladder he met the bosun who was just returning, telling him that the chief officer and the other AB had been washed overboard. He then sat down, overcome with pain and with blood pouring from his head. After a few moments both men made their way aft and the bosun sent a messenger to the bridge to inform the third officer of a man overboard situation.

Meanwhile the other seaman had found himself lying in front of the windlass in considerable pain from serious leg injuries. He shouted for help, calling the chief officer and his comrade, but received no reply. After calling for a while he sensed a second wave coming and, crying and fearing for his life, held on tightly to some hydraulic pipes. When the ship's motion subsided he crawled aft towards the starboard ladder. As he reached the windlass he found the chief officer lying under the windlass, bleeding from ears and nose. Holding his head close he asked if he was alright but received no answer. Expecting the bosun to return soon he stayed with the chief officer, but after some twenty minutes he also crawled aft and, forcing himself to stand up, moved slowly down the deck. He met the bosun, who was now on his way forward again, near No. 2 hatch and told him about the injured chief officer under the winch. The bosun, reluctant at first to believe him, went forward, found the injured and apparently unconscious man and then returned to organise a stretcher.

At about 0830, some 10 minutes after the ship had dug in, the AB sent by the bosun burst onto the bridge in a state of panic, "bubbling in a language the third officer could not understand." A few moments later the cadet, a Filipino, rushed out on the bridge wing with the AB and they both looked astern. The third officer then understood that a man had gone over the side. He asked the AB when and on which side the man had gone overboard but the rating did not understand what the third officer was asking and was not able to make an intelligible reply.

The next quarter hour was filled with turmoil. The third officer initiated a Williamson Turn to recover the men supposedly lost and the captain dispatched the second officer and the third

engineer forward to ascertain what had happened. Garbled messages were received that the bosun had seen the AB and the chief officer but it was uncertain as to whether they were seen on board or in the water and everyone scanned the seas off the port and starboard bow.

It took a while for the confusion on board to subside and for the facts to come to light. The chief officer was finally brought to the hospital but died of multiple wounds, including severe head and chest injuries, despite attempts at CPR by the master, the second and the third officer and the application of oxygen. The injuries of the ABs turned out to be relatively minor and the ship continued on its way to Fremantle.

#### ***5.1.1.3.3 The findings***

There were obviously many things which with the benefit of hindsight could have been done differently. The hatch should have been secured safely in the first place, the chief officer should have informed the bridge of his intention to go onto the bow, and the vessel should have been turned to go with the weather while repairs were under way. All this was mentioned in the accident report. The report also found that “the problem of different or unfamiliar languages on board a ship when the ship’s complement is made up of different nationalities was evident during the incident. It was particularly apparent when the Filipino AB who reported the ‘man overboard’ to the bridge could not be understood by the officer of the watch. It also contributed to the general confusion about how many, if any, men had been washed overboard while the master was trying to get an accurate assessment of the situation in the early stages of the incident and there was general confusion for about 15 minutes. The language problem is greatly exacerbated in an emergency such as on this occasion when some members of the crew are in a state of panic” (Marine Incident Investigation Unit, 1997). The report further stated that “the lack of communication... and language difficulties combined with shock were major factors in the confusion which existed.”

#### ***5.1.1.3.4 Conclusion***

The tendency by humans to use their mother tongue when under emotional stress is a well known phenomenon. It is familiar as a self-revelation to anyone who has acquired another language and it is recognised by those who have worked with people from a different language background in

stressful situations as a sometimes bewildering sensation. There is evidence that, through training and drill, such slips can be avoided to a certain extent and that, through conditioned discipline, professional behaviour will prevail, but there is likely to be a threshold beyond which purely rational actions are abandoned for the sake of instinct or intuition or, in this case, a lapse into the first language learned.

The communality in the three cases described lies in the fact that language skills were insufficient to pass on a message or to receive a message. Pragmalinguists would say that the maxim to “Produce the minimal linguistic information sufficient to achieve your communicational ends” (Levinson, 2000, p. 114) had not been achieved. Overlooking the obvious inadequacy of training and the practical deficiencies which were contributory elements in the accidents, a lack of language skill did emerge as an identifiable and serious problem.

#### **5.1.1.4 The “Astor”**

This case study has been chosen because of its almost mundane features and insignificant outcome in terms of damage when compared to the widely publicised disasters which every so often make headlines in the national and international press. Yet it could under different circumstances have had grave consequences. It is not an ability to communicate in a common language that is of concern in this situation, but rather the attitude towards communication and bridge team management.

##### ***5.1.1.4.1 The ship and crew***

The “Astor” was on a worldwide cruise with 396 passengers and 294 crew. On 26 February 2004 it left its moorings in Townsville to embark on the next leg of the voyage to Darwin. The ship was 176m length, had a displacement tonnage of 14,440 tonnes and was registered in the Bahamas. It was powered by 4 diesel engines with a total power output of 20,500 HP and had a 1150 HP bow thruster as well as 2 semi-spade rudders which could be operated singly or together. The ship was manoeuvred through direct control of the engines from the bridge.

The “Astor’s” bridge staff were all Ukrainian and Russian nationals. At the time of the incident all watch keeping officers in the wheelhouse were in fact from Ukraine. The master had been in

command on another passenger ship in 2003 and 2004 and had also been briefly in charge of the “Astor’s” sister ship before going on leave in November 2003. He had only taken over as master on “Astor” on 23 February after a 3-day handover from the previous captain. He had never been to the port of Townsville before.

#### ***5.1.1.4.2 The incident***

Previous to the pilot joining the “Astor” he had been told by the manager that the pilot bringing the ship into port in the morning had experienced problems in communicating with the master. The manager instructed the pilot to contact the control tower if he encountered any difficulty.

The pilot had boarded the vessel at about 1830 and the master came onto the bridge at around 1850. He did not consult the pilot’s outward passage plan or indeed discuss the outward passage with anyone on the bridge. When he went out onto the bridge wing, the pilot followed the captain to hand him his passage plan. The latter gave it a cursory examination before handing it back without comment.

The vessel cleared the berth shortly after 1900. The master kept the con of the ship, as was his prerogative, and it became apparent to the pilot that he had no intention of relinquishing that position. The pilot therefore adopted the role of an advisor only.

Once clear of the jetty, the pilot advised the master to steer towards the Marina Breakwater. The master responded in Ukrainian but did not follow the advice and the vessel kept its heading. The pilot repeated his earlier counsel to apply starboard rudder a few ships’ lengths further on, but was again ignored. The communication on the bridge between the staff captain, the master and the helmsman was conducted solely in Ukrainian; no dialogue between the ship’s staff and the pilot took place in English. When the pilot again pointed out that a course alteration was imperative and his advice was once more disregarded, he went to the VHF and called the tower on channel 16. The following transmission was recorded between 1905:26 and 1905:40 :

“Tower – this is the pilot on “Astor”. The master has got command and – ah – we are too far over on the port side of the channel – umm – we’re at this moment trying to square up – and he’s speaking in Russian. I can’t hear what he’s doing.”

The pilot then returned to the master's side and, realising that urgent action was required, advised "hard a starboard", repeating the helm order four times. He then added to this "stop starboard engine, full astern starboard engine". The master appeared to respond to this and gave orders in Ukrainian with which the helmsman seemed to comply. Being aware that the ship would shortly be aground and that the starboard swing needed to be checked, the pilot then advised that the starboard propeller pitch should be put to zero, the rudders be put hard to port and the starboard propeller pitch be set at slow ahead. The master again did not respond and no acknowledgement was made in English, but corrective action was taken. However, the manoeuvre was initiated too late and the "Astor" grounded at 1908, heeling over about three degrees and sliding over the bottom. Speed was reduced and the ship came clear at about 1911 as it slid off the bank and back into the deep water of the channel.

An underwater survey showed later that the damage sustained was minimal and was restricted to stripped-off paint and a slightly bent propeller blade.

#### ***5.1.1.4.3 The findings***

As the ship's staff had not followed the correct 'emergency back-up' procedure for the VDR (Voyage Data Recorder) there was no data available to the investigators other than the evidence given by the pilot and the ship's staff and the course recorded on the ECDIS chart. For the purpose of this research a voice recording of the dialogue on the bridge would have been of interest.

It was established that effective communication between the master and the pilot had been virtually non-existent. The pilot had been effectively excluded from the verbal exchange which took place between the staff captain, helmsman and engine control room because the language of communication was Ukrainian. This was a choice apparently made by the master whose proficiency in English was described as good. The staff captain's English was described as passable, but there was no attempt made to relay the information flow to the pilot. The ship's officers were found to have not followed company procedures – and, for that matter, recognised bridge resource management procedures – by conducting bridge communication in a language other than English.

#### **5.1.1.5 Observation**

As a last case study an anecdote by the author about a recent experience at sea on board a Dutch vessel should be of interest here.

It has been mentioned that the ship carried two crews. The reasons for this were largely bureaucratic and created a strange state of affairs to say the least.

While the vessel was steaming from Singapore to the eastern Australian seaboard there were always an Australian and a Dutch officer on watch. The same arrangement existed when the ship started to work on the Australian coast.

While the Dutch crew had worked together for years and was fully familiar with their vessel and the process of dredging, the same could not be said for all the Australians on board. Some of them had worked on the ship for between 1 and 2 years and had acquired a working knowledge in the field and of the ship; others had just recently signed on for a 6-week duration only and had no previous experience with the rather specialised work of dredging. However, it was quite apparent that the Dutch regarded the vessel as “their” ship, and that the Australian seafarers were suffered to be on board because regulations made it necessary. During the delivery trip through the Indonesian archipelago, the Torres Strait and down the Australian east coast things went comparatively smoothly. The Dutch, all of whom spoke excellent English, accepted the navigational expertise of the Australian officers and communication took place in English. However, once the ship started to commence dredging operations, the Dutch felt in their element and conversed almost exclusively in their own language. This created a very difficult working environment of ‘us’ and ‘them’. It was in fact the very antithesis of a well-functioning bridge team and a textbook case of how one party deliberately set itself apart from another by choosing to speak a language which it knew to be incomprehensible to the other group. There were no unfortunate incidents as a result of these circumstances, yet it was very obvious that a vastly more effective working relationship could have been created if English had been spoken during duty hours.

The author learned afterwards from a Dutch seafaring colleague that even within the Dutch merchant navy the ‘dredgers’ occupy a special space. Not only is the nature of their work very

select, but they mostly come from a particular area in Holland and regard themselves as somewhat of an elite. (Having had the opportunity to observe them at work, this is not completely unwarranted. The author.)

### **5.1.2 Summary**

The striking issue in the case of the “Astor” was that while the seafaring personnel on board the passenger ship were capable of speaking English there was a deliberate option by the master not to communicate in a language foreign to him but to use the mother tongue of the ship’s staff. This fact was not apparent from the report, but was elicited from the investigating officer in a phone conversation the researcher had when he delved into this case. The persistent and purposeful use of the native lingo of the bridge team knowingly excluded the participation of the local pilot in a dismissive, almost arrogant, certainly unprofessional manner.

The example observed by the author on the Dutch-flagged vessel also shows a conscious choice of miscommunication. The reasons in this instance were a mixture of both cultural and political motivations: there was obvious resentment on the part of at least some of the Dutch sailors to have to carry Australian counterparts who were less experienced in the distinctly unique metier of dredging. To make matters worse, it became evident after a fortnight that the Australians were in fact earning higher pay than the Dutch. The (micro)-political ruling that ‘foreigners’ had to be tolerated on board led to a display of solidarity among the original crew which manifested itself in the creation of a cocoon of language designed to keep others out.

The choice between intimacy or distance (Brown & Gilman, 1960; Fishman, 1972) was in both of the portrayed cases made in favour of the latter. In light of the capability by the interlocutors to use English and their training, it would be difficult in both of the examples to find a valid explanation using the theory that they needed to follow thought processes in their own language (Sapir & Whorf, 1929).

The second part of this chapter is deals with interviews involving seafarers and pilots; it will seek information on the four research topics through interrogation and questioning of seafarers.

## **5.2 The interviews**

### **5.2.1 Introduction**

Interviews can be used as quantitative or qualitative strategies. A structured, formal interview in a controlled environment can consist of a set of designed questions which are put to the participants of the survey and can then be evaluated statistically.

The interview technique used in this study was informal though semi-structured. Seafarers were encouraged to speak freely about their experiences prompted by a set of prepared questions. All the interviewees were given the same questions during the meetings, not in a predetermined sequence but in a way which fitted into the flow of conversation. The atmosphere was kept as relaxed and casual as possible.

All seafarers knew about the aims of the survey and had been told that the interview would be taped. They were also assured of anonymity.

The students were from diverse backgrounds. The countries represented were Kiribas, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Iran, Egypt, the Seychelles and the Maldives. There was indubitably a cross-cultural element present in the dialogues since the author hails from a north European background. In such situations the possibility of mutual misunderstanding or misinterpretation during an interview is a risk. In a dialogue “some differences stem from the fact that members of a given culture share complex systems of decoding meaning in one another’s behaviour that may be inaccessible to outsiders” (Smith & Tayeb, 1988, p. 154). This was compounded by what is sometimes termed ‘status bias’: the author was seen as an authority figure and this may have hindered free expression on the part of the student/seafarer. These dangers were probably slightly offset by the binding experience of interviewee and interviewer having spent many years at sea.

Another source of bias in this case could have entered through so-called courtesy bias. In many cultures questions are given socially desirable answers. “The respondents,” say Parek and Rao, “try to discover what the researcher is looking for and accommodate their answers accordingly”



(Parek & Rao, 2001, p. 132). It was hoped that the casual environment would reduce any such tendencies.

After all interviews had been completed they were transcribed by hand. This proved to be an arduous task because of the different, sometimes heavy accents of the participants and highlighted the importance of paralanguage in communication: the dialogues had been sufficiently clear to be comprehensible in the face to face situation but were difficult to recognise in the transcription process where they had been reduced to disembodied voices.

Following the transcription, the manuscripts were colour-coded according to their pertinence to the four research topics. Clearly, not all remarks and stories were suitable to be used in this study. But, where it was possible, those which were of interest have been reproduced verbatim (including the interjections and questions by the researcher) to reflect some of the atmosphere which characterised the conversations.

The participants were coded by number so that it was possible for the researcher to identify the individuals. These numbers are given here in brackets in the presentation of the interviews.

In presenting the interviews, the grammatically correct punctuation has been largely disregarded to reflect the idiolect and ambience of the discourse. Remarks in parentheses have been added by the researcher.

## **5.2.2 The four topics**

### **5.2.2.1 A common language – should it be English?**

The first question as to as how important a common language was regarded was answered by all participants in the same way: all of them agreed without reservations that a common language was a necessity in the international maritime industry. Some of those interviewed cited safety reasons as the major reason for having a lingua franca without being asked specifically why one language was considered essential.

When asked further whether this common tongue should be English, there was again nobody who spoke against the choice. In a couple of interviews, however, the possibility of another

language was mentioned. To the question “Can you think of another language which could replace English at sea?” Spanish was mentioned, but at the same time the regional limitations of that lingo, i.e. South America and possibly the Philippines, were acknowledged. One seafarer from the Maldives served as second mate on a Liberian-flagged vessel with a Russian master, a German chief mate, a Polish third officer and ratings from Sri Lanka, the Maldives, the Philippines and Peru. He had been on the South America run for a number of years. When asked about bridge communication during pilotage in South America the following was recorded during the interview:

(5) “When the pilot comes on board we have a regular list (of procedural steps). The master is there and in South America they speak in Spanish.”

“They use Spanish in preference to English?”

“Yes, at least for long conversations. The common orders they give in English, helm orders and engine orders. But then they use a language they both understand. In South America that is Spanish.”

During the same interview, when asked directly what he thought the choice of a common language at sea should be in his view, the answer was: “English, if it is any single language. Most publications are in English, so that is the language. I think there is no other common language. Many speak Spanish but the major language is English.”

There was little dissent from that view. The only other interviewee remarked, when Spanish was mentioned as an option for a common language, (7) “Yes, I can see where that comes from. The vast majority of seafarers are Filipino out there. When you think about it and on international voyages ...it would be good for them. But I think English is the best choice.”

The question of ‘ why English’ was in fact deliberately never asked in the interview or, for that matter, in the questionnaire. Yet most of those interviewed felt it incumbent on them to give a reason for their choice. The grounds were generally two: (i) English was already the accepted and official language of the sea and (ii) most nautical publications and instruction manuals were written in English.

### 5.2.2.2 Difficulties in acquiring English competence

When asked what nationalities or language speakers were particularly difficult to communicate with using English, a number of groups were named. The one which was mentioned by every participant in the interview process was that of the Chinese seafarers.

One officer from Bangladesh (2) had the following to say: “At sea the communication we normally do in English. But I find difficulties sometimes at deep sea when a vessel has to take action. But he does not understand, I follow the rules of the road. But I noticed one thing once, I found a Chinese vessel and I tried to ...I called him several times. Then he replied but he doesn’t understand what I am saying and he is saying ‘Second officer, can you repeat?’ Then I speak ‘What is your intention? What are you going to do? Are you going to port?’ Then he ‘Can you speak slowly, say again’ – like this, so that time I thought it is very difficult to understand and I myself make a big alteration (of the ship’s course) because there is no way out.”

“Do you find this happens often?”

“Actually, especially with the Chinese this problem arises. One time we were in Taiwan and we were to go to some Malaysian port, a very uncommon port. So I went to a Chinese ship to look at the chart because we didn’t have one and we were there for only a very short time and couldn’t get the chart corrections so the captain sent me across. But they didn’t know what I was talking about. It was very difficult to make them understand.”

Another comment by an Egyptian tanker officer (4) was fairly typical when assessing the English competence of different ethnic groups at sea: “English I can use wherever I go. I mean (laughs) except in China, because they don’t speak English at all.”

While not contradicting the general consensus that Chinese seafarers were hard to converse with in English, one of the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) pilots (8) had this to say: “The Chinese are hard to talk to. But I’d like to say that they are coming ahead in leaps and bounds. It is almost a thing of the past, but you do get the odd ship where they don’t speak such good English.”

The other nationalities, which were brought up as not easy to converse with using English, were Korean, Japanese and Russian speakers. But the experiences varied here. While one seafarer

from Kiribas (1) when asked about English language problems with pilots stated, “No problems (with pilots). Except in Japan. Some of the old ones”, one of the GBR pilots (8) commented, “The Filipinos and the Japanese are good. On Chinese ships they sometimes put a young AB up there who can speak English.” But then again (5): “In radio communication in Japan it is a language problem. The Japanese radio operators don’t speak very good English. And their accent, the way they pronounce is very difficult for you to understand, but they have the same problem to understand us also.”

### **5.2.2.3 Cultural issues**

The question of any possible opposition to English as an imposed language was by and large discounted as nonexistent, at least as far as its function as a working language at sea went. There were some comments, though, which described the influence of English as detrimental to the cultural values of some.

(4) “The (English) language is being used so much, you know, offensive language, sexual scenes, like living in the zoo! Things like that offend my personal values and I’d like that to stop.”

(6) “With the elders (in Nigeria) I don’t speak English. We have a lot of respect for our elders. In the English speaking world I don’t find that. Youths don’t have respect for elders. Western culture is actually damaging our culture.”

(1) “Swearing. We don’t do that. But after a while you get used to it, it’s normal for these guys” (meaning Australian fellow students).

However, the same individuals had this to say when it came to practicalities of communication on board:

(4) “I don’t think there is another language which can replace English. If you go to any port anywhere you have to speak English.”

(6) “To get education you have to study another language. The language we were meant to understand is English. We have been colonised by the English and they brought that language. I think there is no other common language at sea.”

(1) “English is the language of the sea. Wherever I go I would expect to speak English.”

In summary, there were two obvious conclusions. Firstly, that the Asian, particularly the Chinese speakers, but also the Russian seafarers, were seen as hard to communicate with in English and secondly that, despite some cultural misgivings by the participants, the English language was accepted as the practical means of communication in the maritime industry.

#### **5.2.2.4 The Standard Marine Communication Phrases**

The publication of the SMCP has been described previously as an attempt to codify, standardise and simplify communication on and between ships with the essential aim of making traffic at sea safer and understanding clearer. All interviewees were asked to what degree this booklet entered the verbal interaction when it came to communication where different languages were spoken.

The answers varied greatly. Here is what a pilot (9) had to say after he had been told by the author about the content and purpose of the little book. The question was formulated as “How important is the SMCP in your work?”

A. “I have never seen it before, but knowing now what the contents are, I think it is very important. I think it would be a good idea if every ship had one.”

One of his colleagues (10) declared: “Well, to be honest, I never used it myself, but I strongly suspect that it has been used on some of the ships I have been on and I would say that it is a very useful tool for ships’ officers to get by, especially when they don’t speak English well.”

The third pilot (8) said in answer to the same question: “I have seen the book. It is very important. Because where you get a situation where the English isn’t so good it is best to keep things simple, straight to the point, not to complicate the conversation. Where this can happen sometimes is with a shore VTS (Vessel Traffic Scheme). They might want to get information of a vessel. If the VTS operator is not really on the ball he can complicate matters by asking

questions in a general English type of way instead in a maritime English way. Terms like ETA – they all know what ETA is. If anyone turns around and says: ‘What time will you be at the pilot boarding ground?’ they might not understand that. If you say: ‘What is your ETA pilot boarding ground?’ then they understand.”

One participant, a seafarer, stated in reply to the question about the SMCP (7): “I have seen that book 3 times during my time at sea, twice when I was doing an inventory. I thought that it was interesting, I had heard about it. Once when I was bored I had a browse through it. The book is a good idea but nobody looks at it. It just sits there.” However, to the question of “How useful is a codified language?” the answer of the same person was: “I would find it useful in two areas. During pilotage, when conning the vessel and in radio communication. There it could help.”

“From what you have seen, is the SMCP too limited or too expansive?”

“I don’t know it very well.”

Another deck officer said this (4): “The SMCP is not used extensively, I think. But there are phrases that people stick to to get the job done. They don’t have to be in the SMCP.” And on the question of the general usefulness of a codified language his stance was: “It is useful. But I think it is not easy to force another thing onto the maritime industry which has already a lot of things forced on it, you know, regulations and rules. So it is hard to enforce special phrases to get the job done. But as a direction it is great so that the coming generation can learn it.”

In a similar vein an Iranian officer declared (3): “I wouldn’t say that the SMCP is used very often, only to a certain extent. People are not inclined to use exactly the phrases that are given in that book.”

“Why is that do you think?”

“The main reason... instead of using some of the words they are using easier words. Words that in their opinion are easier to understand. The SMCP is used, but not 100%.”

“Is the SMCP too limited or too limited or too expansive?”

“It is not very large... I would suggest to keep it simpler,”

The opinion of a Nigerian officer was more approving of the publication (6). “The SMCP is used very frequently on board, especially during manoeuvring and cargo operations. It helps common understanding among seafarers. It is very useful.” And on the extent and coverage of the booklet: “It is ok as it is.”

A comment by another of the participants should be taken seriously (4): “A refresher course on the SMCP here (meaning at the AMC) would be a good idea. Personally I don’t use it, so I have forgotten much.”

As a concluding remark on the topic of the SMCP it needs to be said that seafarers appear to be relatively unfamiliar with the publication. Given that the booklet has been in circulation since 2002 and that it was preceded by a similar one, this is surprising.

#### **5.2.2.5 Incidents caused by miscommunication – pilots’ tales**

An important issue were the occurrence of dangerous or potentially risky situations in which language played a role either in their development or their solution. The question here was expressed in this way: “Have you experienced instances where a lack of ability to communicate endangered an operation?” In some of the cases described by pilots and seafarers it was difficult to differentiate between the causes for such a situation. That is, it was difficult to determine whether the problems arose due to ineptness as far as good seamanship was concerned or to plain language deficiency.

Both the following accounts took place in the western approaches to the Torres Strait off the northern tip of the Australian mainland. One of the pilots interviewed (9) had this to say:

“You had an incident where a helm order was misunderstood?”

“Yes, I gave the helmsman an order with hand signals to go to port. He just looked at me, so I told the OOW ‘port 20’ and he spoke in Chinese to the helmsman. Then he went to starboard instead of port. It was in a narrow passage in the Prince of Wales Channel (Torres Strait), near Nardana light. I had the light ahead of me. Then I told him ‘hard-a-port, hard-a-port’. The light disappeared under the bow. It was a very close call.”

“You were watching the helmsman?”

“Yes, I was watching him. You can only give the order. I mean, as a last resort I could take the wheel myself.”

A second account is from a pilot who had a harrowing experience only a few miles further to the west of the previously-mentioned position caused by a simple misunderstanding due to phonetics and a lack of adherence to procedure (10):

“I was going through the Prince of Wales Channel. This was an Indian ship where the standard of English is very good generally. It was purely, I think, somebody mishearing what I was saying which caused the problem. There was a ship called the ‘Palm Star Spirit’, a tanker coming north past Megaera Reef and I was approaching Hammond Rock, westbound. I called up the ship to establish the passing manoeuvre with the other pilot – it was – (name) – and when I called up ‘Palm Star Spirit’ the third officer jumped in quickly and said (to the helmsman) ‘hard-a-starboard’. I was right over at the other side of the bridge at the time.”

“So the third officer misunderstood ‘Palm Star Spirit’ for ‘hard-a-starboard?’

“Yes, but instead of checking with me he just told the helmsman. It was just fortunate that I saw what was going on. This could have had disastrous consequences otherwise. I could have ended up on North West Reef very quickly. Those particular ships have an inherent steering problem. Once they start swinging it is very hard to stop them. Especially when you go hard to starboard!”

There is also the problem of communication between different language speakers on board the same vessel. One of the questions asked during the interview pertained to the language or languages used among the crew members. The general picture that emerged was that English was used as the common language where different nationalities were sailing together but that the mother tongue was spoken when seafarers from the same background were working with each other. Not always does communication at an intra-ship level function smoothly. Here is a short account by a pilot (9), an outside observer as it were, describing the difficulties of bringing a ship to anchor off Hay Point in northern Queensland.



“I am talking about the ships now where the master is Korean or Japanese and the crew is Chinese. That is a problem, because the master has only so much English and he talks to the crew in English. I had a couple of anchorings in Hay Point where the master was totally lost to tell them (the crew) which anchor to use and how many shackles. Because he spoke English and they spoke English, but none of them spoke proper English. They were trying to converse in English with each other because he couldn’t speak Chinese and they couldn’t speak Japanese. So that was a mix-up. Also, when the bridge communicated with the engine room they misunderstood the hours and the time. It was a real mess.”

#### **5.2.2.6 Incidents caused by miscommunication – seafarers’ tales**

When asked about situations in which a scanty knowledge of English was considered as potentially hazardous, most officers had some yarns to spin. One can feel the agitation in the narrative of a Maldivian officer (5):

“Well, if you talk about close quarter situations... We were crossing the Taiwan Straits, you know, the China Sea. You won’t be able to talk (in English). I believe they don’t understand anything or they don’t want to talk. They call ‘ship ship ship on my behind (sic)’ and you don’t know what ship they are calling because there are a lot of ships on your behind and you have a lot of ships ahead of you, astern of you, on the quarter of you and you don’t know what they are calling. You call a ship you say: ‘A ship calling for a ship behind. My position, my speed, my course, are you calling for me?’ And they call something else and you cannot understand it. But you are in concern because you know that somebody is in concern for somebody and you are in the traffic and it is congested. So you must listen to what they are talking, with whom he want to talk and whom he says: ‘A ship behind me, I am altering my course to starboard’. That means there are a lot of ships ahead of you, which ship is going to alter course to starboard? You try to communicate with them by giving your speed and your course and the ship ahead of you bearing and distance of you and they won’t answer.”

“Any particular incident that comes to mind?”

“I had a problem once, we were passing the Taiwan Strait. We had a coaster, about 600 tonnes, something like that. Suddenly a ship calls: ‘Vessel on my stern, vessel on my stern, I am altering

course to port.’ There are a few ships ahead of me. I look who is calling. I saw a vessel on the port side, I looked at the radar and I thought it was the one going to port. But there was another vessel to the starboard of me. Suddenly she altered course to port, because that was the one who was calling and she caused a very close quarter situation.”

“Was it dangerous.”

“Of course it was very dangerous. I had to alter course to port, hard wheel to port. I called the master, but at the same time I had to take action.”

“These cases, do they happen frequently?”

“Not frequently, but they do happen.”

Another example is the description by an Egyptian navigating officer who had a somewhat unnerving experience on the Italian coast (4):

“I had a serious manoeuvring problem with this person. We almost had a collision because he couldn’t speak English. I was on duty on a VLCC (Very Large Crude Carrier), ballast condition, 332m long. This person was coming up on an opposite course in a very tight place off Sicily in the Mediterranean. He was on a huge bulk carrier, 9 holds, she was massive and she was in ballast too. We didn’t have a big CPA (Closest Point of Approach – a computed prediction through radar observation of the closest passing distance), something like 0.4 nm. He was 10 miles away and I had someone on my starboard quarter overtaking me, so I didn’t want to go to my starboard very much. I expected him to do some more manoeuvring when he realised that 2 ships were coming toward him. When he didn’t do anything at 10 miles I decided to give him a call (on the VHF radio). When I did it was just like talking to someone who has nothing to do with shipping. I was shocked, you know. And the exact thing that happened is that I told him we would be passing port to port and that we both should be going to starboard to get a good clearance, a good CPA. And then his reply was a shock to me when he said ‘OK, I go to port’. I was shocked, we are talking about only a few minutes at our speed, 16 or 17 knots. Not only did he not understand English, he didn’t know the rules either. Even if he understood me to say to go to port – which I didn’t – he shouldn’t do so. So I said to myself ‘Forget all this port thing, just make it clear,’ and I said ‘No, you go to starboard and I go to starboard’, very simple and he said

‘yes’. And we both did and it was alright. But him saying he would go to port at my misunderstood suggestion was terrifying for me. I realised that this had been dangerous with him understanding neither English nor the rules of the road. This could have been a serious collision.”

Under these circumstances it is understandable that some shipmasters discourage the use of VHF radio and thereby verbal communication – as described here by a navigating officer from Kiribas (1): “We have master’s standing orders not to communicate (by radio) in close quarter situations. We just stick by the rules because when you start (voice-) communication that’s when you start problems. So, stick by the rules and you are on the safe side.”

Drills can be a good measure of how a multilingual crew co-operates when they are conducted with a degree of verisimilitude and imagination. Mutual understanding is essential. Here is what an officer from the Seychelles (7) had to tell:

“You have situations on board, especially during drills, where you know you have got the common language, you have learned everything in that common language, which is English. But you still have the situation where the chief officer, who is Filipino, and he comes out and he blasts something out in Tagalog, in their language, and we are just standing there like... ok, what do we do now? And when he finishes with that one of the Seychelles officers will actually ask him what it was he ordered, you know, and we start communicating in Creole. I think it is a most serious thing.”

The use of the native language instead of English is a demonstration of commonality and solidarity (Brown & Gilman, 1960, pp. 253-276) and is a phenomenon often encountered where members of an ethnic group operate within a foreign environment.

One of the seafarers, who showed some considerable talent as a raconteur, gave an account of an event on board in the following way (5):

“We had a drill, the master was on the bridge. I was the safety officer. So we had a fire drill with a fire in the cargo hold. So we used a BA set and a fireman’s outfit. The chief mate is in charge on deck. People went to stations with their life jackets. Chief mate order to bring silver man suit.”

“Bring what?”

“To bring the silver man suit”

“Which...?”

“The silver man suit. Fire party one bring the silver man suit, fire party two bring the silver man suit, fire party three stand by. So, fire party one is just looking, fire party two is also looking, fire party three just stand by. The captain asked ‘what is going on’, because nobody is moving there, everybody just looking. Captain call me and asked ‘what is going on?’ I said ‘Captain, I don’t know.’ He said ‘Chief mate, what is going on, nobody is moving?’ because he is looking from the bridge. He says ‘Nobody is moving...?’ Captain called me and asked: ‘What is the training you are giving to them, because chief mate order and they don’t move?’ Well, I didn’t have an answer to say to the captain. At that time I was also thinking what the chief mate says.

Then later I was the first one who realised what he is telling, because the fire man’s outfit is a silver colour and in the Russian language they use the ‘silver man suit’. I was the first person... and because he is the mate... because people are expecting as a mate... everybody’s mind was stuck because it was a new thing for them. But afterwards everybody understand what is a silver man suit.”

“That is a good example. I didn’t know what a silver man suit was either.”

The same individual also related the following story about a case of misunderstanding while the vessel was going alongside. Normal procedure at the beginning of these operations is to establish radio contact between the bridge and the fore and aft mooring stations. There are a few phrases in colloquial parlance in use on board to do this. But the prescribed dialogue would run like this:

Deck officer: “Bridge – focsle, radio check”

Bridge: “Focsle – bridge, receiving you loud and clear”

Deck: “Bridge – focsle, reading you loud and clear also.”

Here is what happened in the event which the officer from Kiribas recounted:

“... and we had a second mate once. We were at mooring stations. This is an incident which can be very serious. I was forward and the second mate was aft. So the captain called on the radio: ‘Second – bridge, come in’. So the second left his station and went to the bridge.”

A Nigerian deck officer (6), when asked if in his experience a lack of communication had ever endangered operations, told a story which could have had a fatal outcome.

“Yes, especially when you go alongside. You are handling wire ropes and mooring lines. If somebody does not understand a command it could really be bad. It happened on a ship where we all spoke different languages. We were coming alongside. Orders were given in English not to go any closer because the wire can snap. Suddenly I saw the electrician walking in that direction. I shouted to him ‘move down’. As soon as he had stepped down the ladder the wire parted and surged. It was the back spring. The electrician said to me later ‘you saved my life’.”

#### **5.2.2.7 Tension and conflict as a result of misunderstanding**

Friction among the crew because of language differences are not uncommon. One of the interviewees gave the following account (7):

“During cargo operations sometimes I feel frustrated when the chief officer gives an order to the pump man in his language and then the pump man tells me. I have a radio also, he can give that order straight to me in English. It is not a lack of ability to speak English but a lack of wanting to. I am not sure why they do it. I have walked away from situations in which a group of Filipinos talked in their language when I was supposed to be included. But it is all in Tagalog. You feel frustrated.”

There appears to have been a fair bit of miscommunication on that ship. The same seafarer tells another story:

“We had a chief engineer once from New Zealand. We went forward to check the SPM. The chief engineer had his version of how to do it and he was trying to communicate to the chief officer who was Filipino. There was two of us from the Seychelles and the rest was from the Philippines. The chief officer had his idea of how to rig the gear from his last ship. He laid the mooring rope over the side and through the centre lead, and the chief engineer just went bonkers.

He came to us and said ‘go aft, go aft, go aft’. Later on the chief engineer went to the captain, who was Swedish, and he was furious. They were doing it the wrong way and they were not listening to him, they were all talking in their own language. If they had spoken English and had listened to the chief engineer the problem would have been solved, because the chief engineer was right. He was not a likeable man, but he was right. But the chief officer just kept talking in his own language.”

The last two anecdotes are typical for situations arising on a multilingual ship. Groups of individuals set themselves apart on the basis of their common mother tongue. Language, says Lippi-Green, expresses the “way individuals situate themselves in relationship to others, the way they group themselves, the powers they claim for themselves and the powers they stipulate to others” (Lippi-Green, 1997, p. 31).

Not always does verbal discourse end in peaceful resolution. This is one more of the same participant’s tales:

“I had a Filipino tell me a story about himself. He was steering and they had a Croatian 2<sup>nd</sup> officer. The guy gave him an order in English and he couldn’t understand him, so he asked him to repeat the order and he still couldn’t get it. So he said ‘Can you speak a little smaller?’— what he meant was slower. And the Croatian just said ‘You look like a monkey’. He was frustrated that the helmsman didn’t understand the order and the Filipino was frustrated because he couldn’t understand the officer. But the helmsman understood the last sentence and he punched the 2<sup>nd</sup> officer. That is bad. It was definitely a language problem. The man was demoted from AB to OS.”

Another tale, prompted by the same question, i.e. whether a lack of English speaking ability ever caused friction between crew members, was told by a deck officer from Pakistan (3):

“I remember two incidents. One time I was on cargo watch on a tanker. We had a pump man on board and I told him to do something and he misunderstood. And he got annoyed and angry and said ‘You said this to me’ and I said ‘No, I did not say it’ and he got angry and red because he thought I had insulted him but I hadn’t.”

“What nationality was he?”

“Iranian”

“Did you speak to him in his language or in English?”

“English, we were working. And a similar situation when we were loading in Venezuela. I was on duty, the 12 to 4. I told this crew something and he said ‘No, is not my job’. I said, ‘Is not my order, is from the captain.’ And he got frustrated that he had been told and maybe he misunderstood, because his English was not very good. So I got somebody who spoke Spanish to translate. He had understood that I had used a very bad word and that I had meant him.”

The Egyptian seafarer remarked on the issue of friction among crew because of language difficulties (4): “It happens with people who have English as their mother tongue and crews who don’t speak proper English. The native English speakers are getting frustrated and are getting really mad. That causes problems.”

A Bangladeshi 2<sup>nd</sup> officer describes a different problem where English was the second language for everyone on board (2):

“I sailed with a chief officer, he faced a lot of problems because he did not speak Hindi. The crew members they are all from India and they are not educated, so it was very difficult to understand them and sometimes the chief officer was trying to speak Hindi but he speak a very small amount and... he mixed it with Bengali so the crew is not understanding what he is talking. The crew said to me ‘You speak very good Hindi, but the chief officer we do not understand.’ The crew think he is shouting and rude. They think he is giving order. Actually he is not giving order. And when he is moving his hands they take it the wrong way.”

This last account is quite clear about the reason for miscommunication. The objectionable issue, in the eyes of the crew, was not so much the inability to speak Hindi, but the paralanguage as it was interpreted by those he spoke to. Kinetics and tone of voice, dissimilar in different cultures, were misunderstood (Poyatos, 1993).

#### **5.2.2.8 English language proficiency – the pilots' view**

There is a plethora of stories in which miscommunication on board, between ships and between ship and shore feature. Not all of them are serious: in fact, in some of them one is far more inclined to see a comical side. However, as has been pointed out on a previous occasion, ships are plying the seven seas and trade is conducted by and large successfully. So how do seafarers and pilots judge the competence of their peers and colleagues?

The pilots who were interviewed and asked about their views on how well English was spoken had the following comments to make (8):

“People on the ships are aware that English is the language to use. On the ships that I have been on I have seen no real problem, except in isolated cases. It is very unusual today to find officers who can't manage with English, except on some of the small ships like the Chinese log carriers. We are starting to come across more of them now with compulsory pilotage. They don't speak English at all on those ships.”

He went on to say:

“English is good in 99% of the cases. Sometimes I feel embarrassed not speaking a second language myself. It used to be difficult several years ago on a lot of ships, but they have made amazing progress in the last few years.”

And his colleague said (9):

“In most cases it (English competence) is very good. Korean, Japanese – often only one person speaks English. The Chinese – you are lucky if you have one person speaking English.”

#### **5.2.2.9 English language proficiency – the seafarers' view**

The same question about the level of English language competence, when asked of the seafarers who took part in the interview, yielded some short responses like (6): “There should be an effort to improve English” and (3): “The level of English competence is reasonably good.”

Others were more elaborate (5):



“Those (stations) we communicate with have a certain vocabulary. If you go beyond it there are communication difficulties. They expect us to ask something like ‘What time pilot will be on board?’ or ‘Are we going to drop anchor?’ So, that is every ship ask the same questions. But if you ask ‘What do you think about the weather tomorrow?’ every ship don’t ask that, then they don’t understand.” He added a bit later on to the direct question:

“Is there a lack of English communication skill in the maritime industry?”

“Yes, there is a lack of skill.”

“Including the officers?”

“Yes, there is.”

Another had this to say: (1) “English competence should be better. I mean there has to be something... something has to be done to improve, and I think it must be compulsory for everyone in the maritime industry to (take part in) compulsory courses.”

And: (7) “I would say it is safe but it could be better. It is safe to a certain limit. When it comes to officers I think the English level is quite high. Among the ratings it could improve. I mean – it is working. Not every day you get a language problem, but there is room for improvement.”

### **5.2.2.10 Levels of competence**

The question of introducing defined levels of English language competence for different ranks was then asked. Most participants, pilots and active seafarers alike, had similar opinions on this issue and felt that officers and ratings should be skilled in English but not necessarily to the same extent. Here are some quotes:

(3) “A rating needs only basic English and understand some of the SMCP. An officer should have a better idea, they have to communicate on the VHF for instance.”

(1) “Ratings should have a basic understanding because English is the language that is worldwide spoken. I feel that the officers should have a very good background in English,

because all the manuals for the radar, the bridge equipment are in English and you cannot operate them without reading.”

(4) “A rating should have an acceptable standard, more than a beginner speaking English. Not a very high level. He would be able to understand simple English like ‘do this’, ‘open that’, ‘close that’, ‘don’t do this’ you know. Helm orders of course, they are basics. Then at a senior level a good command of English is required on the international routes. A junior officer should also have a good command of English.”

However when it comes to prescribing a level of competence at least one of the interviewees was hesitant (7):

“I think we would lose a lot of seamen if we were to do that. If that were a part of the training and you need a grade and all of a sudden you had English as a subject to test there would be a lot of seamen lost, especially from the Far East.”

A pilot had this to say (9):

“Ratings who are helmsmen should know the helm orders. The OOW should have a more detailed knowledge of English and should understand things about draft and ship’s behaviour. I should be able to describe to him currents and tides. The master should in my opinion have a full understanding of English, at least in terms of shipping and navigation.”

His colleague agreed (10):

“I think it is essential that at least the officers and the master speak good English. It is not essential for the crew members to do so, but it would be desirable. As long as you have someone there to interpret it is not a problem. As I said, it would be desirable for everyone to speak English, but certainly I would say that the standard for masters and officers should be higher than that for ratings.”

### **5.2.3 Conclusion**

The interviews with the seafarers were remarkably animated. All participants – who were aware of the author’s interest in communication at sea apart from his known and ordinary role as a

lecturer in navigation – entered into the spirit of things and were willing to share their experiences and frustrations. After initial hesitation, possibly brought about by the knowledge that the conversation was being recorded, the stories flowed easily and proved to be colourful and vivid. One could almost feel the ship rolling. The objective of creating an atmosphere in which it was possible to extract dependable and genuine information by appropriate questions (Foddy, 1993) was, in the researcher's view, achieved to a large degree.

While the interviews with the students took place in an office at the Australian Maritime College, the pilots were interviewed at sea while carrying out their job when the author was on board as a navigating officer on an Australian flagged ship during a working holiday. Their tales were also quite lively in the descriptions of some experiences and the interviews conveyed a sense of immediacy and realism through the direct contact with seagoing people while actually at sea.

The need for a common language was expressed by all participants and, while it was acknowledged that other languages may occasionally be spoken, there was a general consensus that English was the accepted *lingua franca* and should remain so.

Seafarers from the Asian region, particularly Chinese nationals and Russian/Ukrainian speakers were singled out as being hard to communicate with. A sentiment was expressed by some that the English language was at times crude and disrespectful or detrimental to their own culture. However, from a professional point of view the lingo was seen as the language of the sea.

Even though a large number of examples was related where verbal communication on ships was ineffective because of lack of language skills, there was a noteworthy lack of utilisation of the SMCP. This is difficult to explain, as it is this particular tool which should assist in inter-national understanding.

There was a general agreement that maritime English proficiency needed to be improved and that particularly among officers an ability to converse competently in English should be compulsory.

In the author's experience, far more incidents occur every year around the world as a result of miscommunication than are documented. An understandable aversion to paperwork and an attitude of 'well, nothing really happened' often lead to conceivably dangerous situations not reaching the ears and eyes of the authorities and the public. Much of this is caused by a 'blame

culture' which pervades the maritime industry like many other walks of life and makes further scrutiny unpalatable to an officer or master.

Indeed, events in which confusion is brought about through misunderstanding are frequently so commonplace and ordinary that a report or more detailed investigation seems unnecessary. It is to be hoped that neither fear of recrimination and reprisal nor complacency will prevent investigative reports from identifying communication problems and that the subject will gain a rightful place of prominence in the analysis of accidents.

The last chapter is the conclusion of this thesis. It contains a summary of the results found in answer to the four research topics and deals at some length with different sources of miscommunication. It also has a critical look at maritime education and training and points out some further areas of research.

## Chapter 6 – Conclusion

### 6.1 Introduction

“I pass like night from land to land  
I have strange powers of speech.  
That moment that his face I see  
I know the man that must hear me –  
To him my tale I teach”

From: The “Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, Part VII, by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834)

Unlike the Ancient Mariner we are not so gifted; we are not given strange powers of speech in order to communicate and tell our tales. Instead we have to develop a degree of linguistic competence – often, as we know, with some effort – to interact with one another when we pass from land to land.

It should be reinforced here that there cannot be any claim by the researcher that this investigation is authoritative. The group of participants was far too small for such an assertion, both in the sense of numbers and in the sense of national background. It is hoped that future research in related areas with larger representation of the different nationalities will show more conclusive results.

All in all there were 17 nationalities represented among the participants, in some cases only 1 or 2 representative of a country. Of the students, 90 came from an English speaking background (Australia, New Zealand and the UK) while 42 had learned English as a second language. It is important at this stage to point out that of the latter group of 42 about half came from countries which have had or still have close associations with Britain as members of the Commonwealth. There is clearly the possibility, even the likelihood, of bias here.

There was a remarkable width of linguistic talent amid the participating non-native English speaking seafarers.

While only 23.3% of native English speakers were able to speak another language in addition to their own, the non-native English speakers spoke their own tongue as well as English and 45.2% claimed to be able to communicate proficiently in 3 or more languages. It is too tenuous to draw a firm conclusion to the point of considering multiple language speakers more cosmopolitan, broadminded or worldly, but it indicates an awareness by them of societies beyond their own.

	Number of Languages Spoken				Total
Mother tongue	One language	Two languages	Three languages	Four or more languages	
English	69	15	3	3	90
Chinese	0	1	1	0	2
German	0	8	2	2	12
Indian, Pakistani, Middle Eastern language	1	10	6	2	19
Other	0	3	2	4	9
Total	70	37	14	11	132

**Table 6.1 A cross-tabulation of multilingualism among participants of different nationalities**

## **6.2 The four topics**

### **6.2.1 A common language**

The opinion regarding the importance of a common medium of communication in the international maritime industry was practically unanimous: it was seen by participants as absolutely essential that a universal, communal language should exist in which all seafarers can converse, or at least find a basic platform for mutual understanding. This view came across strongly in the questionnaire, and both the interviews and the case studies showed unmistakably the unfortunate and sometimes devastating consequences which can result when such a communal means to interrelate does not exist.

Neither in the interviews or in the questionnaire were the participants asked why a common language was considered as essential or desirable, but in the interviews some of those asked felt that they had to give a reason for their view nevertheless. Invariably, safety grounds were cited for the perceived necessity for a mutually-understood language to communicate in.

### **6.2.2 English as the language chosen**

There were no serious reservations by those who took part in the survey about the choice of English as the language that should be spoken at sea. As a professional preference no other language was put forward during the interviews. While there were other languages mentioned as media of communication used in certain parts of the world, there was no suggestion that any of these should or could supplant English. It was acknowledged during the interview that in certain areas preferences for a language other than English may have developed, but it was also recognised that such cases should be seen as regional peculiarities as a result of speakers having formed attachments with the local workforce and authorities through repeated and regular visits – as happens, for instance, in liner trades.

Only a handful of alternatives to English were brought up by the questionnaire.

The explanation for such a general acceptance of English may be partly explained by what Kalantzis (1992) referred to as a bridging culture. While the allusion in the publication *Minority Languages and a Dominant Culture* is to a connecting core culture of industrialism, sailors may

in a similar vein see English as a uniting feature within their fraternity. The culture of seafaring has been – and is in fact still today – a powerful bond among those who go down to the sea on ships, bringing together people from many nations and backgrounds.

Tradition is indubitably another reason for the broad consensus that English is the language of the sea. When knowledge and skills have been passed down over some generations in a particular tongue, then it is inevitable that it is identified to a certain degree with that field of enterprise. We come across this phenomenon in music where Italian is the lingo to describe rhythm and tempo, or international diplomacy which regarded French as the most suitable tongue in its circles. Seafarers from different linguistic backgrounds have for a long time found a binding element in English.

However, the choice of English was certainly made easier by the fact that it is the most widely taught second language in the world and the most commonly endorsed: 52 countries have chosen it as their official language and 104 countries have a substantial number of English speakers. Mandarin, in comparison, while boasting 2.5 times the number of native English speakers, is widely spoken in only 16 countries (Gordon, Vol. I, 2005).

One of the reasons why there was no significant objection to the elevation of English in the 1995 convention by the IMO above the other languages which were officially recognised within the institution (Russian, Spanish and French) was probably the fact that any details of standard to be attained by seafarers in the language were left by and large open to interpretation. The wording of the requirement to ‘be able to use English’ was, as mentioned in a previous chapter, left deliberately vague in order to steer a safe course through the stormy waters of national sensitivities.

The situation, as far as communication at sea is concerned, can possibly best be summed up by saying that the acceptance of English as the lingua franca in shipping by seafarers, ship owners and authorities can almost certainly be put down to the pragmatic attitude of professionals in the industry who see its prominence as a *fait accompli* and by businessmen who are interested in smooth-running operations for interests of their own. Practicalities in the spread of English have managed to override any sentimental objections to its use.



It may be difficult for some to imagine that this may not be so forever, but history has taught us that primacy, influence and dominance of a civilization or a particular nation over others are but passing phenomena in this world. We have seen cultures rise and fall through vagaries of war and immigration, trade and natural disasters. If we consent that English is the leading language at sea today for the above practical reasons, then we also have to be prepared to accept that another tongue can feasibly take its place tomorrow. If 90% of seafarers in the world's fleet were native Mandarin speakers and the balance of international commerce and political power shifted, a perfectly reasonable case could be put forward to declare that language the common means of communication at sea.

### **6.2.3 Difficulties in mastering the English language**

Both the questionnaire and the interview quite clearly identified some nationalities which seafarers saw as difficult to communicate with using maritime English. The groups mentioned most often were the Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean and Russian language speakers.

Three of these languages (Chinese, Japanese and Korean) belong to the Sino-Tibetan language family and are about as distantly related to English as is possible. It is therefore not surprising that seafarers from those countries have more difficulty conversing in that language. The effort to learn English would clearly be greater for members of those nationalities. However, the difficulties in learning to communicate successfully in a foreign language are not restricted to vocabulary, sentence structure and grammar. The interview was the medium which most specifically identified the problem: it was perceived that Chinese in particular, but also Japanese and Korean seafarers, struggled more than others with the pronunciation in English.

Chinese is what is known as a tonal language. It is not the only one: other Asian languages and the San language of South Africa fall into the same category. The characteristic of this kind of language is that the meaning of words is primarily changed by tone. In Mandarin the two phonemes 'm' and 'a' forming the morpheme 'ma' can have 4 entirely different meanings simply by the voice inflection changing from 'mā' (mother), to 'má' (linen), to 'mǎ' (horse) and to 'mà' (to scold). The diacritics can only give an incomplete approximation of the tone of the words as they are pronounced by a native speaker of the language. While young children are physiologically equipped and inherently capable to learn the expression of any humanly

produced sound, this ability, called ‘plasticity’ by some linguists, atrophies in time and is generally lost by the age of 12. Since second language learning often takes place at ages later than that, the learners of a foreign tongue carry their phonological practices across to the new lingo with the result that their pronunciation ‘is difficult to understand’.

It has been pointed out previously that a number of ‘Englishes’ has evolved in recent times. Terms like “Singlish”, “Jinglish”, “Chinglish” and even “Afringlish” have been coined to describe new dialects in various parts of the world. An inability to understand each other’s patois is probably one of the harder issues to deal with in adult language learning. Phonetics, as it has been pointed out, are a part of the language which is adopted from childhood and therefore used subconsciously, while the choice of words and phrases and the construction of sentences lie in the realm of the deliberate. The IMO publication of the SMCP is distributed with an added CD to help learners with the pronunciation of phrases and terms to facilitate understanding. This approach may prove more useful than the attempt which has been made in the field of radio communication, where numbers and the phonetic alphabet are spelled in a phonetic form in the radio operator’s handbook.

The standardised set of rules which determines the sequence in which words should be joined to form a coherent sentence is known as syntax. Again, this can be a difficult thing to grasp when one has not grown into the language. Using the same words, the three sentences “She is there”, “There she is” and “Is she there” all convey different meaning. Here the word order as well as the tone of voice and inflection determine meaning.

An additional difficulty is caused by the same phonemes in English being spelled differently. An adult native speaker of the language would, without thinking, choose the correct pronunciation of the ‘i’ in the words ‘hint’ and ‘pint’ or the ‘o’ in ‘move’ and ‘dove’ and the diphthong ‘ou’ in ‘mould’ and ‘mouse’. For an adult learner of the language such inconsistencies can present a major problem.

If Chrystal’s vision of a World Standard Spoken English (WSSE) will indeed eventuate it would be interesting to see who will at that time define the standard and the idiom to emerge. At this time it is not at all surprising for a native English speaker from, say, Australia, to find it hard to

follow a conversation between two persons from Nigeria, another country in which English is the official language.

#### **6.2.4 Opposition to English**

In the first topic of the thesis the question of a common language was investigated and the seafarers' view on the choice of English as the lingua franca was sought. There appeared, as mentioned, no dissent in this selection of language, at least not from a professional standpoint.

There is, however, another dimension to this. Even though as professionals the seafarers strongly agreed that a common language was necessary and that the choice of English was the right one, the interviews showed that there was a cultural reluctance to its usage in the minds of a few. When asked whether participants had ever felt that the English language had been forced upon them, gave them the feeling that their own tongue had been relegated to a second rate language, and had led to a loss of their cultural and ethnic traditions or values (questions 5, 6, and 7), some comments were put forward which deserve closer scrutiny.

There was obviously some reservation in the cases of three interviewees about the appropriateness of English in some walks of life. The lingo was associated with tasteless sexual connotations, disrespect for elders and crudeness of speech. Even though it must be said that these correlations were made through questions which were overtly separated from the use of English as a communicative tool among professionals, there was an element of alienation from a language which did not quite fit in with the respondents' cultural values.

#### **6.2.5 The role of the SMCP**

The question about the usefulness of the SMCP was asked in the questionnaire as well as the interviews. There was clear evidence in the questionnaire that native English speakers regard the little book as less useful or important than those to whom English was a second language. This may at first glance appear somewhat of a paradox. The publication was clearly devised as a help to communicate using English words and phrases, and one could plausibly expect that a native English speaker would welcome such a publication.

The reason for the reluctance to communicate in a codified form of their mother tongue has been explained partly by a sense of disdain for having to lower one's standard of sophistication as a competent speaker of English: "Why should I have to stoop to using some bastardised form of my own language?" This attitude carries with itself an ambience of comfortable superiority. The native speaker, certain in the knowledge that he or she masters the language, regards his or her part in any conversation as comprehensible, clear and unambiguous.

There obviously needs to be a more disciplined approach to inter-national dialogue on the part of native English speakers in the maritime industry. The fact that a verbal exchange requires the understanding of all parties was, after all, the reason for fixed terms and phrases to be selected. A standard question is expected to be answered by an equally standard response, not by a generic sentence or even sentences in common, conversational English. Linguistic niceties have no place in a working language that was developed to facilitate basic understanding. Nor do utterances in colloquial English by a native speaker help a non-native English speaker who is expecting a formalised reply according to the book. For communication using the SMCP to work for both parties, native and non-native English speakers must adhere to the prescribed format.

To further strengthen the argument that extended knowledge and use of the SMCP would improve communication we can use the data provided by questions 28 and 29 versus those of question 30 from the questionnaire (question 28 and 29 dealt with misunderstandings between crewmembers on the same vessel and between vessels and a shore station while question 30 was concerned with misunderstandings during pilotage): In a strictly controlled setting in which every member of the bridge team is focused as well as highly trained – an environment as it exists during the conning of a ship in and out of harbour or through difficult to navigate waters – only 18% of those asked had experienced communication difficulties as compared to around 30% in the daily work environment on board and radio communication between ships. The 12% difference can be interpreted as showing that, with a well-trained team using well-known phrases and terms, linguistic obstacles can be reduced.

The questionnaire, the interviews and the case studies all show that there is room for improvement where usage and knowledge of the SMCP is concerned. One of the means to bring this about is, without doubt, the introduction of a firm and universal standard of training at

maritime educational facilities around the globe which is hitherto lacking. There should be no reason not to make the command of basic code a prerequisite for a certificate of competency and by making the topic an examinable subject for all officers – including native English speakers. Little or no infrastructure is needed: existing marine simulators in which discourse between instructor and student takes place, or even role play in the classroom, is all that is required.

### **6.2.6 Misunderstanding**

The phenomenon of misunderstanding is one we are all familiar with. It happens on a daily basis in our social lives and we deal with it as part of the interactions we experience with others – generally without further thought. Repetition or circumlocution solve the problem in the majority of cases. Occasionally the incidents are more critical and we may have to resort to explanation and clarification to reveal intended meaning when misunderstandings occur between parties using the same language.

For a group of individuals to work together as a team does not, in theory, require emotional bonds between members of the group. Particularly where routine tasks have to be carried out a focus on the job in hand is paramount and likes – or indeed dislikes – between group members are seen by some as distractions. Yet we are human and, as such, not impervious to feelings, and in the context of team work on a ship we are as exposed to this quandary as in other walks of life. While there are procedures to follow and tasks to be performed, there is opportunity for feelings to enter the equation. In some cases this will probably enhance the effectiveness of the team, but it can also have the opposite effect. There were enough examples of antipathy and friction among crew members brought up in the interviews. The questionnaire also showed that cultural and linguistic differences can lead to misunderstandings and in turn to a less efficient work environment.

#### **6.2.6.1 Miscommunication due to language – what to do?**

When verbal communication between speakers of different languages takes place, another element is added. One or both parties are now using a means of communicating in which they don't feel totally at home. At the most basic level – beyond gesture and mimicry – the knowledge of shared, albeit limited, vocabulary is required to convey a thought, an order or a

query. In the maritime surroundings this includes terms which are peculiar to the industry in addition to some grasp of general English at a level yet to be determined.

Case studies, interview and anecdotal evidence have shown that in many instances an ability to communicate was insufficient and this led to unfavourable outcomes. The task of educators in the maritime sector – and this includes officers on board ship – is to foster and broaden the skill in maritime English.

This thesis is not a treatise on the teaching of maritime English and it is outside its scope to suggest in detail which teaching methodology to adapt for the instruction of mariners in their common language. Nonetheless, it seems appropriate to put forward some ideas as to how and by whom English in the maritime context could be taught.

On board ship there are a number of options. Many shipping companies have made PCs available to be used by the crew, and language training programs in various forms are on the market. If we work on the assumption that maritime students of the language are mostly extrinsically motivated, a directive by the shipping line or an incentive for promotion may prove advantageous to language learning. There is also an opportune strategy of contextual learning. Those of the crew who are more proficient in maritime English can introduce novices in the tongue to the endemic terminology as they go about their daily work routine. This has the advantage of dispensing with a classroom atmosphere which may be resented by some learners. To institute formal language classes is an alternative which, for practical reasons, is unfeasible on an average cargo vessel with limited crew and officers who have no training in the field and are far too busy carrying out their normal tasks. However, the approach is being practised on dedicated training ships where cadets are taught the skills required by an officer in today's merchant navy on board, including maritime English. Having on occasion been the master of a training ship this is, in the author's view, an ideal tactic in an ideal environment.

Maritime education institutions have tackled the challenge of maritime English teaching in different ways. Those which are situated in native English speaking countries often regard the topic as peripheral and treat it in a perfunctory way since students in attendance have to be conversant with the language as a prerequisite. In non-English speaking countries the task of teaching maritime English is frequently delegated to teachers of general English – qualified

language teachers – or seafarers speaking English – qualified mariners. The profile of the maritime English teacher is somewhat indistinct. That is not to say that the learning outcomes in the past have been unsuccessful, but rather that we could improve on them. One suggestion which has been mooted is the concept of ‘twinning’, meaning the approach where a professional language teacher teams up with a professional mariner to jointly address a group of students.

Having ascertained that misunderstanding in verbal communication between different language speakers in the maritime world is a challenge, it is reasonable to deduce that if the native tongue is spoken as the common language among co-workers such problems would have less occasion to arise. There is clearly no necessity to use the English language internally on a bridge which is manned exclusively by French or Korean speakers.

The case of the “Astor” is an example of a group having chosen their mother tongue as the medium of communication, presumably because they felt comfortable with it. This deliberate choice, however, excluded the pilot from the team. It must be remembered in this case that all of the officers on the bridge were capable of speaking English. In a pilotage situation the inclusion of everyone on the bridge is important and the role of the pilot himself is crucial – he is after all the person with local knowledge and is there to immediately advise the captain. This incident cannot be regarded as an accidental slip of procedure. The request to communicate in English was made ostentatiously when the passage plan was shown to the master and was just as blatantly rejected.

The author’s own recent experience on a Dutch-flagged vessel excluded the officers and ratings who could not understand Dutch in a very similar way as in the case of the “Astor”.

Examples of the intentional use of a language other than English in situations where collaboration – and thereby comprehension of events and processes by everyone – is required were brought up also in the interviews. Here, too, situations were described in which individuals consciously used a language other than the one which was understood by everybody in favour of their own, native language.

The problem is that individuals in the cited examples were in a sense confronted by two conflicting forces – on the one hand the necessity to achieve effective communication and on the other hand the desire to maintain a sense of identity with their group.

While the inability to speak a language can be overcome by learning and training, an unwillingness to use it even though one is capable of doing so is more difficult to address. In the case of communication on board ship, the only solution is probably a clear directive by the captain (who in two of the described cases were accessories to the act of mismanagement) or the company's shipping superintendant. In any case, in a less than perfect world such human failings do occur, and it can only be hoped that instruction and education are in the end successful in eliminating these sources of miscommunication.

Misunderstandings are mostly deemed to be caused by verbal exchange. While this is frequently true, there are many other sources of miscommunication

#### **6.2.6.2 Miscommunication due to paralanguage**

There are beyond the spoken word other means of conveying messages, be it by radio or face to face. These instruments are known as paralanguage and are here meant to include other means used in a conversation like voice character and tone, gestures (or kinesics, which some ethnolinguists define as a separate phenomenon), the allowance of space between conversational partners (called proxemics) and messages expressed by silence and facial expressions. Even dress and make-up are by some regarded as fitting into this category. The study of meaning beyond simple clauses and sentences is known as discourse analysis and encompasses more extensive linguistic units and the use of language in social context.

These mechanisms of communication are closely linked to culture. They are often a subconscious part of dialogue and are easily misinterpreted if a lack of awareness of the other's cultural habits exists, since we are inclined to interpret these types of paralanguage from within the social boundaries set by our own ethnic group.

The interviews identified tone, voice volume and also gestures as sources for misunderstanding. We may be in one form or another familiar with the stereotype of Anglo-Saxon conversational



reserve and aloofness on the one extreme, and a Latino animation and effervescence in dialogue on the other. Both can make another party uncomfortable. Again, the deciphering of paralingual codes is conditional on the perception of a person's cultural heritage.

The topic of paralanguage is too vast to be dealt with in depth here, but is extremely important to understand as a mechanism in intercultural communication.

### **6.2.6.3 Language and thought**

Another aspect of intercultural communication is the premise that thought and thought processes are formed and bound by language and that "distinctions encoded in one language are unique to that language alone" (Chandler, 2002, p. 1). The notion, known as part of the Sapir-Whorf theory of linguistic relativity, proposes the view that some terms and even notions and concepts cannot be succinctly transferred if interlocutors are unaware of each other's linguistic and cultural background. "Human beings... are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. ...The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group" (Sapir, 1929; cited in Mandelbaum, 1958, p. 162). The linguist Ferruccio Rossi-Landi (1983) supports this opinion in saying, "that the formal relationships of language exert an influence on the rest of social life and on the way of thinking of the speaker of that language" (p.114). It is true that some words and phrases do not have a precise equivalent as single word translation in another language and paraphrasing and circumlocution have to be used to represent exact meaning. Examples are the German word "Schadenfreude", describing a joy or satisfaction at someone else's (perceived as deserved) misfortune, or the Punjabi word "joot", which in its translation into English as "unclean", "germ ridden" or "not pure" needs more than one expression to cover the exact meaning of the term.

In the English language today the problem is often solved by incorporating some foreign words into English. But the fact remains that for someone learning the language there are still many of these semantics to deal with.

The theory that language forms thought is not universally accepted, but it is recognised that a cognitive process takes place as we speak which causes us to choose words and phrases. These

can be very idiosyncratic and characteristic of a society and may in translation suffer, so that their meaning is distorted when they are finally interpreted by the recipient of the message.

#### **6.2.6.4 Social issues in communication**

Not only do we have established rules in normative grammar, but we have also developed guidelines in the way language is used between individuals. This is more apparent in some cultures than others and is an area we call sociolinguistics. This scientific branch is, among other things, interested in language divisions as they manifest themselves in various social classes, gender differences and particular environments. Such disparities take on important functions in societies. The Japanese language differentiates strongly between male and female language use. In some cultures young people are not allowed to initiate a dialogue with an elder and may only do so after they have been spoken to. In the Indian caste system, verbal exchange between members of different castes is, in some locations, still unthinkable because of the social abyss separating them.

In modern industrial societies such distinctions have faded, but still exist. The choice of vocabulary and tone of voice by a labourer on a building site will differ from that which the same person would use in church; language among male mates at the local football club is likely to be dissimilar from that used when speaking to a female lawyer. Women are expected to choose less harsh language and a softer timbre than men, children should not interrupt adults, and judges are addressed as 'Your Honour'.

Many languages have the facility to create an interpersonal detachment between speakers. The Spanish 'tu' and 'usted', the German 'Du' and 'Sie', the French 'tu' and 'vous' all express a closeness or distance as people converse with each other. The English 'you' is more egalitarian and other means are employed to show deference and respect as in the use of 'Madam' or 'Sir', the use of a title (Dr, Captain, Professor etc.) or body language and tone of voice.

Such diverse language codes can easily cause consternation, confusion or misunderstanding to a learner of the language and the customs of a group and underlines again the interdependence of language and culture.

### **6.2.7 The standard of maritime English proficiency at sea**

In the interviews and the questionnaire, participating seafarers acknowledged that there was room for further progress by seafarers in general where skill in maritime English was concerned. To the direct question as to how mariners saw English competency among their international colleagues the answers ranged from “it’s not too bad as it is” to “there definitely needs to be improvement”. In the questionnaire almost a third agreed that the level of ability in this field was insufficient.

The fact that only 30% of native English speakers, but 52% of non-native English speakers, considered the competence to be adequate raises the question of where participating seafarers set the benchmark. In the absence of a datum against which to compare a measurement any judgement has to remain subjective.

The question of standard, as was pointed out previously, has been a delicate matter to approach. There are many seafarers who feel that the industry is over-regulated now and that more control would go beyond what is necessary. Opposition may also be encountered by some member states of the IMO who feel unenthusiastic about a further strengthening of the status which English has attained already.

In the final analysis we may not have too many options. In a world in which quality assurance has taken a firm foothold and in which litigation is rife, there appears to be little choice but to eventually agree on a skill level which has to be achieved before a seafarer can fill a responsible position in the international maritime industry. We have the means in language assessment to measure proficiency in all of the four macro skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing. The IELTS test or an evaluation using TOEFL could be used, or indeed an adapted instrument based on one or the other with a particular suitability for the maritime environment might without too much effort be developed.

### **6.2.8 A graded skill level in English with steps in rank**

The general tenor of the interview and the questionnaire indicated that seafarers expected higher ranks to have a better knowledge of maritime English. A rating who acts as helmsman needs to

be fully familiar with helm orders and basic numbers in English to carry out a simple order like “starboard 10..... midships.....port 5.....steer 290.” In addition, an OS or AB needs to understand orders relating to mooring and anchoring procedures but requires little more conversational skills in English. Further verbal interaction with a pilot on the bridge, or communication via radio with other ship or shore stations, is carried out by officers, not ratings.

It is also the duty officer who is expected to deal with shore personnel in the form of stevedores, stores deliverers or repair crews when the ship is in port, so that his grasp of English should enable him to discuss simple operational requirements. Given that these frequently become routine on a particular ship there is often not much that needs to be said so that junior officers can carry out their duties with fairly rudimentary English skills.

At chief officer level, an ability to talk about loading and discharge sequences with cargo planners, to clearly describe orders for deck stores, to arrange work gangs from ashore and to organise everyday maintenance tasks on board, is required. Here an increased understanding of English is necessary as situations arise which differ from the norm.

The ship’s captain has to interact with agents, shore authorities like customs and immigration, and port authorities. As the company’s representative, he may occasionally be expected to attend social functions so that in his position a grasp of conversational English is desirable.

Let us return for a moment to the description of English in the maritime industry as a language for special purposes and the role and function we want it to fulfil in that role. From the evidence in the interviews it was clear that most seafarers regarded safety concerns as the primary reason for clear communication. The SMCP was of course developed with exactly that goal in mind. It has to be acknowledged, though, that its content is situationally controlled and therefore very limited. In describing the language of air controllers a particular quotation may just as well have been referring to the maritime industry’s attempt to use standard terms and phrases when it says: “Such restricted repertoires are not languages, just as a tourist phrase book is not grammar. Knowing a restricted 'language' would not allow the speaker to communicate effectively in novel situations, or in contexts outside the vocational environment” (Mackay & Mountford, Eds., 1978, pp. 4-5).

The jargon based on English and used by seafarers has contributed greatly to understanding at sea, and the coded language in the SMCP is a solid foundation with which to start and on which to build. There is neither the need nor the express intention to turn mariners into accomplished English speakers. However, to sum up the issue of maritime English language proficiency: it appears worthwhile to at least make a suggestion as to what level of competency would be required for different ranks – an issue long avoided by authorities and maritime educators alike.

In the following deliberation the author is using the IELTS score as an arbitrary choice. An equivalent in any other scoring system would be suitable:

Ratings who are required to act as helmsmen and work with colleagues of different nationalities need, as mentioned above, to be conversant with helm orders given by the master or the pilot. They should have a basic understanding of simple phrases as laid out in the SMCP with respect to deck operations. As such it would be desirable for them to achieve a competency in English of at least 2 on the IELTS score. Junior officers would need to be more competent in their maritime English language skills, and a minimum IELTS score of 3 to 4 should be required. This would need to be raised to level 4 to 5 once chief officer's rank is reached. In the position of master a level of at 5 or more can realistically be expected.

Clearly these suggestions must be seen as a proposal only. However, it seems inevitable that some standard of maritime English language skill will be laid down in the STCW convention in the future, and in the author's experience the standard put forward here is reasonable and would present a start for any discussion on the subject.

The testing system used for the assessment of NESB persons for enrolment purposes at English speaking universities, or by organisations seeking to employ people who have learned English as a foreign language (as in IELTS or TOEFL), can be used as a model to build an assessment scheme. With the help of industry and maritime educational institutions it should not be too difficult to develop a format that reflects the jargon and character of maritime English as a language for special purposes, while setting realistic benchmarks and being acceptable to those directly involved and the governing body of the IMO alike.

6.3 A gap in the maritime education system

The perception that more needs to be done to improve the knowledge of maritime English is confirmed by the statistics shown, and the view that existing skill levels in English are inadequate is evident. This is a wake-up call for educational and training institutions as well as shipping companies internationally to increase the emphasis on the teaching of maritime English. Question 20 in the questionnaire sought to establish whether or not seafarers thought that they had been helped sufficiently in learning the language (“Enough effort has been made in helping me to learn maritime English”). There were 22% of participants who were either not sure or disagreed that they had had enough assistance (see Fig. 6.1).

When looking at the result of the cross tabulation of percentages of native and non-native English speakers, it transpired that 38% of those who learned English as a second language could have done with more support, while 14% of the native English speakers felt that they had not had enough help to become proficient in their jargon (see Table 6.2).

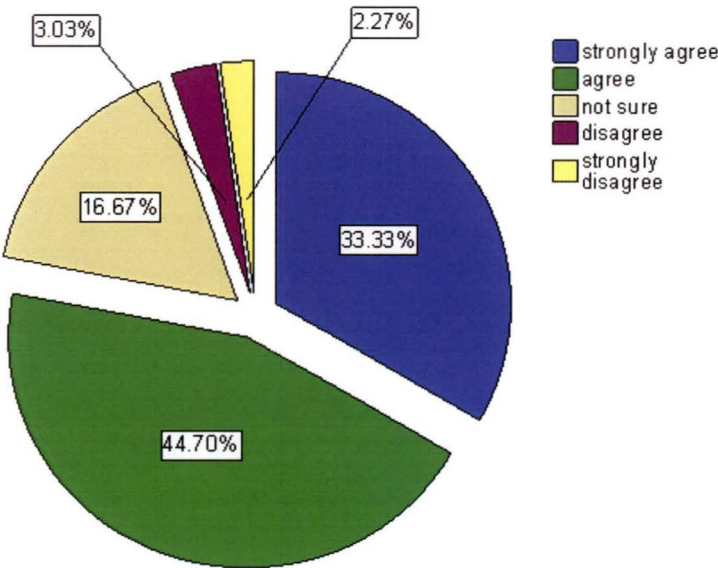


Fig. 6.1 Enough effort is being made to teach maritime English to seafarers

	Enough Help to Learn English					Total
	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree	
Mother English tongue	41	36	10	2	1	90
Chinese	0	2	0	0	0	2
German	0	5	6	0	1	12
Indian, Pakistani,						
Middle Eastern	1	11	5	2	0	19
language						
Other	2	5	1	0	1	9
Total	44	59	22	4	3	132

**Table 6.2 A cross-tabulation of nationalities and the perceived support given in maritime English learning**

It is likely that the reason for the high percentage among NESB mariners lies in the nature of the professional path some of them followed to rise to officer rank. There is in the maritime industry the opportunity for advancement through the ranks by way of ‘working one’s way up’, that is by starting as deck boy to becoming an OS, then an AB and then, after spending time on the bridge under the supervision of the watch keeping officers, to enrol in a training institution with the aim of passing the exam to be a junior officer. These seafarers are likely to have picked up expressions in English as snippets along the way in their working environment to the best of their ability, but have never had the benefit of formal language learning.

A rise in rank is inevitably linked to an increase in responsibilities and new challenges. It is the obligation of maritime training establishments to facilitate learning in these areas.

#### **6.4 Further issues for research**

1) An attempt to investigate possible differences between the views about support received in language learning of older seafarers and those who had joined the industry lately was impeded by the fact that the survey population was too small for a defensible conclusion to be drawn (see Table 6.2). The matter, however, is worth pursuing in a later study as there have been a number

Mother tongue	Age	Enough Help to Learn English					Total
		Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree
English	under 25	11	10	3	0	0	24
	26-35	11	9	2	1	0	23
	36-45	12	12	4	1	0	29
	over 45	7	5	1	0	1	14
	Total	41	36	10	2	1	90
Chinese	26-35		2				2
	Total		2				2
German	under 25		3	4		0	7
	26-35		2	1		0	3
	36-45		0	1		1	2
	Total		5	6		1	12
Indian, Pakistani, Middle Eastern language	under 25	0	4	3	0		7
	26-35	1	7	2	2		12
	Total	1	11	5	2		19
Other	under 25	1	1	0		1	3
	26-35	1	3	0		0	4
	over 45	0	1	1		0	2
	Total	2	5	1		1	9

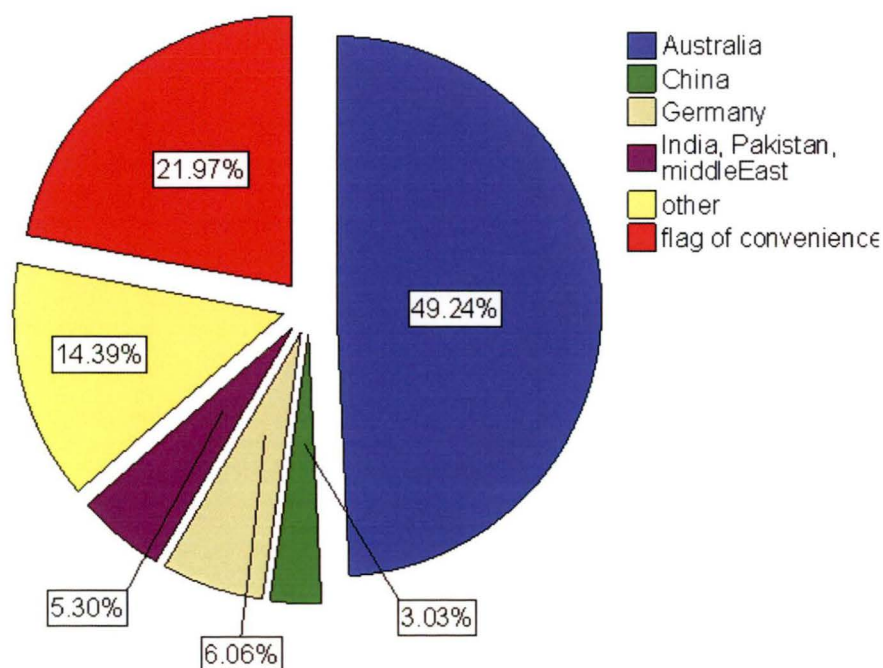
**Table 6.3 A cross-tabulation comparing nationalities and ages of seafarers on the support experienced in maritime English learning**



of efforts made in recent years to develop interactive computer programs specifically for seafarers to learn their working language.

As mentioned before, some of the larger shipping companies have made it possible for their ratings and cadets to access PCs and improve their skills in this field. It would be interesting to find out if these opportunities are being grasped and what effect such computer aided learning has. There may also be an increasingly noticeable influence of the SMCP as time progresses and the basic language code gains a firmer foothold due to promotion by educational institutions and industry bodies.

2) Ship owners often prefer to register their vessels under so called ‘flags of convenience’ in order to save money. In the past, and still to a lesser extent today, some of these vessels were judged to be substandard in equipment and maintenance and their crews considered as not properly trained. This cannot be applied across the board and many bona fide shipping



**Fig. 6.2 The flags under which participants in the survey sailed**

companies have chosen this path of ‘flagging out’ without skimping on expenses for training and safety. It was hoped that the question asking for the flag under which the students were sailing (see Fig. 6.2), in a cross-reference with language learning support, would allow an inference of some sort, but the survey population proved too small to arrive at valid and reliable conclusions to sustain or disprove the claim that the seafarers’ proficiency in maritime English on these ships is significantly different. The issue is nevertheless of interest and could be of value in future training if the survey could be repeated with a larger population.

3) The question regarding the choice of lingua franca was overwhelmingly answered by the survey population in favour of the English language, as shown in the results of the interviews and the questionnaire. However, it has also been mentioned that there was the likelihood, or at least the possibility, of bias in the findings because of the national and linguistic background of the participants. It is the author’s view that in a poll with a much larger number of participants in which the number of seafarers from any nationality corresponded more or less to the percentage that group represents in world shipping, the outcome would still result in a preference for English. It would, however, be intriguing to conduct such a study and analyse its findings.

4) The thesis set out to identify those linguistic groups which were awkward to communicate with using the English language. A number of nationalities were singled out but the topic was not followed much further. The question of what, in particular, caused the difficulties was not answered satisfactorily. Yet, in order to address the issue, we need to know in detail what the barrier is. A statement that ‘they can’t speak proper’ or ‘they just can’t understand you’ is of little constructive value if we want to identify the dilemma precisely.

Only in the interviews and through conversations with seafarers in informal situations was pronunciation mentioned. With some well-phrased questions the issue could be investigated in greater depth.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

This study spanned seven years. Work commitments, daily preoccupations and personal issues among other things precluded the thesis from taking on its final form earlier. Consequently my

perspective, as the research progressed, changed somewhat. From setting out enthusiastically wanting to contribute world-shaking profundities to science, I went through the mundane obstacles which will ring familiar to most of those who wrote a thesis: my employer expected me to earn my living by working (!), the family felt neglected, important literature was difficult to obtain, the computer inexplicably decided to file whole, unsaved paragraphs in the depths of cyberspace where they will drift undetected for all eternity... the list goes on.

It was toward the end, when the various ideas, approaches and loose ends finally appeared to come together and promised to culminate in some sort of conclusion, that the initial passion which had made me select the topic returned. It became clear then that the research could not be divorced from the researcher, that in fact the theme I had selected had been one which I had been moving in my heart for a long time: the colourful interaction of people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, the vibrant dealings and contacts within the family of humankind and the successes and failures in communicating with each other.

The research was a voyage of discovery which had its rough and its tranquil parts. Some of the waters along the way were uncharted, there were shallows and reefs below the surface that forced me to alter course occasionally, and there were stretches of smooth sailing where the track laid out could be followed safely. There were periods in which my ship was becalmed, the sails hung slack and I made no headway, stages when the weather tossed me about and other times when the wind was fair and good ground was covered. In the end I reached the shore at a place which satisfied me and a haven in which it was safe to anchor the vessel.

I don't want to linger too long. When the lure of the harbour fades there are other seas to sail and new lands to explore. The adventure does not end here. I have glimpsed other vessels on the journey going to different destinations and heard rumours of other lands that have hardly been visited. Ships in port are safe, but that is not what ships were built for. It will take some time to take on fresh water and provisions, but then the time must come to sail again, follow another star, find new shores. There may even be the chance of visiting some of the islands that I only sighted at a distance and now want to explore further.

If this thesis has added some new insights into the topic of barriers in communication in the maritime industry, I am content. If any of the ideas put forward in this paper to test language

competence among mariners and assess standards in language proficiency for officers appear of value, I would be glad to contribute further. And if in the end this research can play a small role in making the sea-lanes on our oceans safer, I will be delighted.

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## **Appendix I – Interview Questions**

1. How many nationalities were represented on board the different vessels you have worked on?
2. Can you give me your view on the necessity of a common language for the international maritime industry?
3. Can you suggest a language other than English which might fulfil the role of a lingua franca? If so, which one(s)?
4. Do you use languages other than English to communicate in on board? If so, what are they and how do you feel about them being used?
5. How do you feel about the English language being forced upon you in your work environment?
6. Some people have felt that having to speak English relegated their own language to a second rate language. Explain how you feel about this.
7. Do you find any cultural problems with speaking English, i.e. does speaking English give you the feeling of losing your national or ethnic identity or may cause you to let go of traditional values (i.e. less respect for elders, diminished ties to extended family, loss of traditional customs or music etc).
8. In your opinion and in your experience, is there any nationality or ethnic group which is particularly difficult to communicate with in English? What exactly makes communication with this group(s) difficult?
9. In your experience, is the SMCP used extensively where language barriers exist? If not, why not?
10. To what extent do you find that such a codified language is useful?
11. What is your opinion of the scope of the SMCP (too limited, too extensive)?



12. Have you ever experienced occasions where the lack of ability to speak English caused friction among crew members? Please elaborate.
13. Have you ever experienced occasions where the lack of proficiency in English endangered an operation? Please elaborate.
14. What is your view on the ability of seafarers to speak English when seen in the context of a safe working environment?
15. Do you have any suggestions as to what level of proficiency in English a rating/ a junior officer/ a senior officer should have? Express your answer on a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 denoting nonexistent English knowledge and 10 describing a fully accomplished English speaker.
16. How do you feel about English being taught as a formal subject during a course such as the one you are attending now.

## Appendix II – Seafarers' Questionnaire

The term “maritime English” in the context of this questionnaire refers to English spoken in a maritime environment.

The term “first language” means the first language a person learned to speak when growing up.

Please indicate your preferred answer by placing (×) in the ☐ of your choice where appropriate. If you need to give further information, please do so. You do not need to write your name and your answers will be treated confidentially.

Thank you for your cooperation.

1. Gender : ☐ a. Male

☐ b. Female

2. Age : ☐ a. 20-25 yrs

☐ b. 26-30 yrs

☐ c. 31-35 yrs

☐ d. 36-40 yrs

☐ e. 41-45 yrs

☐ f. over 45 yrs

3. Which is your country of birth? \_\_\_\_\_

4. What is your current nationality? \_\_\_\_\_

5. How long have you served at sea?
- ☐ Less than 5 years
  - ☐ 5 – 10 years
  - ☐ 11 – 15 years
  - ☐ More than 15 years

6. Which seagoing qualification do you currently hold?

- ☐ a. Cadet/ Trainee/ Rating
- ☐ b. Deck Watch Keeper
- ☐ c. Chief Mate
- ☐ d. Other ( please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

7. Which seagoing qualification are you currently trying to obtain?

- ☐ a. Deck Watch Keeper
- ☐ b. Chief Mate
- ☐ c. Master Class I/II
- ☐ d. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

8. Under which flag did you serve most of your time? \_\_\_\_\_

9. How was most of your sea time spent?

☐ a. In the coastal trade

☐ b. In international trade

10. Which is your first language? \_\_\_\_\_

11. Which language was used when communicating with your fellow seafarers on board on a social basis? (list more than one if necessary)

☐ a. English

☐ b. Others (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

12. In which language were commands issued? (list more than one if necessary)

☐ a. English

☐ b. Others (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

13. In which language(s) were the safety signs and instructions written on board the vessel upon which you spent most of your time? Please list all languages.

☐ a. English

☐ b. Others ( please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

14. Did you learn to speak English (please indicate more than one option if necessary)

- ☐ a. As your native language
- ☐ b. As a second language at home
- ☐ c. As a second language at school
- ☐ d. As a second language on board ship
- ☐ e. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

15. List the languages in which you can communicate proficiently, starting with the one in which you are most competent and finishing with the one in which you are least competent.

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16. Is there a language other than English which in your view could realistically be used as the common language at sea?

- ☐ a. There is no language other than English
- ☐ b. Other language(s) (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

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17. Seafarers from which nationality or nationalities would you single out as being particularly difficult to communicate with using maritime English? \_\_\_\_\_

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**The following questions allow you to choose from 5 possible answers. Please indicate your preferred answer by placing (x) in the ☐ of your choice.**

18. Given the multinational and multiethnic nature of the international shipping industry it is imperative that a common language exists at sea.

a. ☐ Strongly agree    b. ☐ agree    c. ☐ not sure    d. ☐ disagree    e. ☐ strongly disagree

19. The English language is the most suitable one to fulfil the role of a common language at sea.

a. ☐ Strongly agree    b. ☐ agree    c. ☐ not sure    d. ☐ disagree    e. ☐ strongly disagree

20. Enough effort has been made in helping me to learn maritime English.

a. ☐ Strongly agree    b. ☐ agree    c. ☐ not sure    d. ☐ disagree    e. ☐ strongly disagree

21. Maritime English should be taught as a formal subject to future ship's officers.

a. ☐ Strongly agree    b. ☐ agree    c. ☐ not sure    d. ☐ disagree    e. ☐ strongly disagree

22. A competence in maritime English is important to carry out the job of a rating/ cadet on an international merchant vessel.

a. ☐ Strongly agree    b. ☐ agree    c. ☐ not sure    d. ☐ disagree    e. ☐ strongly disagree

23. A competence in maritime English is important to carry out the job of a deck officer on an international merchant vessel.

a. ☐ Strongly agree    b. ☐ agree    c. ☐ not sure    d. ☐ disagree    e. ☐ strongly disagree

24. The ability to speak maritime English at an acceptable level should be a prerequisite for a Deck Watchkeeping certificate.

a. ☐ Strongly agree    b. ☐ agree    c. ☐ not sure    d. ☐ disagree    e. ☐ strongly disagree

25. The ability to speak maritime English at an acceptable level should be a prerequisite for a Chief Mate/ Master Class I/II certificate.

a. ☐ Strongly agree    b. ☐ agree    c. ☐ not sure    d. ☐ disagree    e. ☐ strongly disagree

26. International seafarers are by and large competent enough in the use of maritime English.

a. ☐ Strongly agree    b. ☐ agree    c. ☐ not sure    d. ☐ disagree    e. ☐ strongly disagree

27. A great deal of effort and time was spent on my part to become proficient in maritime English.

a. ☐ Strongly agree    b. ☐ agree    c. ☐ not sure    d. ☐ disagree    e. ☐ strongly disagree

28. How often did an inability to communicate competently in maritime English create misunderstandings between crewmembers on board?

a. ☐ always    b. ☐ often    c. ☐ sometimes    d. ☐ rarely    e. ☐ never

29. How often did an inability to speak maritime English competently create misunderstandings between your vessel and another vessel or shore station?

a. ☐ always      b. ☐ often      c. ☐ sometimes      d. ☐ rarely      e. ☐ never

30. How often did an inability to speak maritime English competently create misunderstandings during pilotage operations on board?

a. ☐ always      b. ☐ often      c. ☐ sometimes      d. ☐ rarely      e. ☐ never

31. Have you ever experienced an unwillingness among other seafarers to use English as a common language?

a. ☐ always      b. ☐ often      c. ☐ sometimes      d. ☐ rarely      e. ☐ never

32. Have you ever experienced an unwillingness among shore staff to use English as a common language?

a. ☐ always      b. ☐ often      c. ☐ sometimes      d. ☐ rarely      e. ☐ never

33. How often was the IMO publication “Standard Marine Communication Phrases” or SMCP (previously the “Standard Marine Navigational Vocabulary” or SMNV) used at sea?

a. ☐ always      b. ☐ often      c. ☐ sometimes      d. ☐ rarely      e. ☐ never