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Multilingual crews: communication and the operation of ships

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ABSTRACT: Modern merchant shipping increasingly utilises a global labour market for seafarers. In recent years this trend has been accompanied by increasing technological innovation at sea including the introduction of direct voice-based communication technologies which have made traditional and universal forms of communication at sea, such as Morse lamps, wholly redundant. Thus with the introduction of multilingual crews and the loss of universal forms of communication the importance of English as the 'lingua franca' of the sea has become paramount. To improve standards of English amongst seafarers and to militate against accidents and incidents at sea caused by poor communication, a 'top down' approach to language learning has been utilised by industry regulators and training establishments. This paper considers the effectiveness of 'top down' approaches to language development drawing upon ethnographic research conducted aboard vessels with multilingual crews. It considers the importance of communication on board highlighting both job-related and social interaction and communication, and describing how these cannot be considered in isolation. It concludes that with regard to multilingual crews the evidence suggests that 'bottom up' learning is more effective aboard than a 'top down' approach. This has implications for seafarers and the shipping industry, but the paper's findings also support the work of linguists advocating 'immersion' teaching and learning programmes in providing evidence of the ways in which effective learning and communication occur in a 'real' work and social context beyond the confines of a classroom.

INTRODUCTION[1]

This paper is based on findings from an ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) funded project studying transnational communities of seafarers (ESRC ref: L214252036). A major part of the study focused on the shipboard life of multi-ethnic crews and involved on board data collection by researchers sailing with seafarers on voyages averaging four weeks in length. Fourteen voyages were undertaken[2] and during this time researchers carried out tape-recorded interviews with seafarers and kept detailed records of their observations in fieldwork diaries. Throughout this paper extracts from researchers' fieldnotes and transcribed interviews with seafarers are quoted verbatim for illustrative purposes. Where such quotes are used text is indented and the source of the quote is clearly indicated immediately prior to, or after, its use. Whilst the project did not focus exclusively on communication, this, and related issues, emerged as amongst the most important research findings. These findings may be seen as having their own intrinsic value for the shipping industry and for social science but they also add to our understanding of the significance of language and communication and the methods by which these develop in multilingual settings. Studies of language in such contexts, combining work and social relations, provide us with a rare opportunity for observation and analysis.

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THE GLOBALISATION OF THE SEAFARERS' LABOUR MARKET

The last 30 years have seen steady growth in sea-borne world trade and a corresponding expansion of the world fleet. This, in turn, has lead to a rapid development of a global seafarers' labour market, comprising some 1.2 million workers, where mixed nationality crews are typical of some two-thirds of all internationally trading ships (Lane *et al*., 2002). Whilst mixed nationality crews are not a new phenomenon (for example, in the nineteenth century, British vessels had seafarers drawn from the Indian subcontinent, Somalia, Yemen and China) crews were, nevertheless, relatively homogeneous until the 1970s, and the labour market for seafarers has only been truly globalised in the last 20 years (Lane, 1986).

Today's seafarers are commonly recruited from different world regions through networks of crewing agents and aboard modern international vessels it is common to find crews composed of men and women from several, or several dozen, countries. The labour force, traditionally dominated by seafarers from such long-established maritime nations as Britain, Germany, Norway and Japan, has been dramatically *multi-nationalised* with the addition of seafarers from Eastern Europe and, increasingly, from developing countries in Asia. In this context it is not therefore an exaggeration to state that ships' crews have never been so nationally, culturally, or linguistically diverse.

THE CHALLENGE POSED BY MULTILINGUAL CREWS

The globalisation of the seafarers' labour market, has had major implications for world shipping and seafaring and there have been particular concerns expressed relating to safety at sea. In 1982, a British research study shocked the shipping world when it reported that the 'human element' was found to be present in over 90 per cent of incidents involving collisions and groundings and in over 75 per cent of those involving contacts and fire/explosions (Guinn and Scott cited in Maritime Directorate, 1991: 2). Since then, research has been conducted at both the national and international level to examine the different dimensions of the 'human element' or 'human factor' which are believed to be linked with casualties at sea. Within this research mixed nationality crews and associated language and communication issues have attracted particular attention. Such concerns have prompted substantial efforts to introduce a 'common language' amongst seafarers. In this 'top-down' process of linguistic globalisation, English has been officially adopted as the appropriate language for seafaring. This process has been accompanied by the 'creation' of what has been termed 'Maritime English' (ME) (Couper and Walsh, 1999; Strevens, 1992: 2).

Today Maritime English is taught in nautical colleges worldwide as a specialist subject and can generally be seen as a simplified and technical version of English adapted for use by seafarers. In its development three major 'instruments' have been constructed: SMNV (a Standard Marine Navigational Vocabulary); SMCP (Standard Maritime Communication Phrases); and SEASPEAK. The SMNV and SMCP underpin the Maritime English standard adopted and recommended by the IMO (International Maritime Organisation), which is a United Nations regulatory body setting safety standards for international shipping. SEASPEAK, on the other hand, is an English teaching programme, designed to support the learning of Maritime English.

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Standard Marine Navigational Vocabulary (SMNV)

The SMNV was introduced in 1977 by the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) and was subsequently amended in 1983 and again in 1985. Its aim was to assist in developing greater navigational safety and to standardise language used in communication during port approaches, in waterways and in harbours. This standard has been applied and used for more than two decades. In evaluating its effects on the overall safety of navigation, a European Commission (EC) research project conducted in 1997–8 concluded that the goal set out in the SMNV had been 'fully achieved' (SIRC, 1998: 2–3). However, it is worth noting that the SMNV was more concerned with ship–shore communication than with communication *between* members of a ship's crew.

Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP)

The SMCP is a revised, supplemented sequel to the SMNV. It forms a part of the obligatory curriculum for officers and masters (STCW Code 1995, A-II/1, p. 34) and it incorporates a much larger number of topics than SMNV – it is four to five times larger than SMNV. Qualitatively, the greatest change is in a section on on-board communication, which 'has undergone a major reshuffling'. This represents the first official recognition, within the shipping industry, of the importance of language and communication on board multinational vessels as well as communication from ship staff to personnel ashore.

The underlying principle of both the SMNV and SMCP is the development of a communication system based on English but relying upon the simplest possible phraseology. For this purpose, a list of 'phrases' has therefore been constructed that is neither English nor an alternative language. It is an abbreviated form of the English language that, out of context, would perplex native English speakers as it requires that words not crucial for the meaning of a phrase are simply omitted. See Table 1 for example. Despite this 'simplification' the number of phrases covered by SMCP is likely to be a great challenge to seafarers who are not native English speakers. In its present form, the SMCP consists of 114 pages (a total of more than 3,000 phrases) with an additional 15 pages of explanatory notes. Nevertheless SMCP is regarded as representing a major improvement in Maritime English standards despite the fact that the focus is almost exclusively on functional and technical aspects of seafaring, and very little attention is paid to socially useful language.

Seaspeak

Seaspeak was the outcome of a research project that 'tried to tackle the overall problem of procedure, language and operational techniques aboard multilingual ships' (Weeks,

Table 1. Example of the use of Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP)

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

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Table 2. Example of the use of 'message markers'

Speaker	Spoken message marker	Spoken message
Navigational Officer One	'Question'	'What is your intention?'
Navigational Officer Two	'Answer'	'I will pass you starboard to starboard (i.e. rightside to rightside)'

1987: 22). Its most important contribution was the introduction of Message Markers into Maritime English and the SMCP. There are eight Message Markers included in the SMCP which 'allow the status of almost any maritime message to be clearly expressed, removing any possible doubt as to whether a listener is receiving information or an urgent warning' (Weeks, 1987: 22). For example a question posed by the officer on watch aboard one vessel to the officer on watch aboard an oncoming vessel would be clearly 'marked' by being preceded by the word 'question' (see Table 2). The eight Message Markers incorporated in the Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP) published by the IMO are as follows: *Instruction*; *Advice*; *Warning*; *Information*; *Question*; *Answer*; *Request*; *Intention*. Overall, these 'Message Markers' are believed 'to increase predictability' thus assisting in ship to ship and ship to shore communication between non-native English speakers (Bjorkroth, 1998: 11).

Maritime English notwithstanding, navigation officers are expected to have adequate levels of English if they are employed on vessels operating internationally. International regulations concerning the necessary English language skills for seafarers are set out in the Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping (STCW'95) Code (hereafter referred to as 'the code').[3] There are no explicit requirements regarding the level of English for Captains, however the standard for officers who keep navigational watches is detailed (see Table 3). Navigational officers are thus required to be able to use English in both oral and written forms to a standard allowing them to read and interpret navigational and meteorological information and to communicate with shore stations and other ships.

Table 3. Standards of English competence required by international regulations

Competence	Knowledge, understanding and proficiency
Use the SMNV as replaced by the IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases and use English in written and oral forms.	English language Adequate knowledge of the English language to enable the officer to use charts and other nautical publications, to understand meteorological information and messages concerning ship's safety and operation, *to communicate with other ships and coast stations and to perform the officer's duties also with a multinational crew*, including the ability to use and understand the SMNV as replaced by the IMO SMCP.

Source: reconstructed with information cited in Bjorkroth (1998: 14)

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COMMUNICATION AMONGST MULTILINGUAL CREWS AT SEA

Attitudes to working in multinational crews

Despite concerns within the shipping industry, relating to perceived cultural and linguistic barriers amongst mixed nationality crews, our shipboard data suggest that many seafarers have a decided preference for working within multinational crews. Filipino seafarers often described preferring to avoid working with 'full Filipino crews' because they had heard about, or experienced, nepotism in such situations. They suggested that Filipino senior officers favoured friends, relatives, or simply people from their own region, aboard such ships, and that such behaviour encouraged the emergence of rival social groups and a considerable amount of bad feeling and conflict. One seafarer described how he hadn't ever experienced racial discrimination in his career on ships with multinational crews but he *had* experienced regionalism aboard fully Filipino crewed vessels which had made him feel extremely uncomfortable:

> If they are all Filipinos they are from different regions. [I have] a little problem with that. If they [one regional group] talk about another [regional] group, it is not good. (Interview with Sampson: Filipino rating[4])

Other seafarers suggested that working with your 'own countrymen' was more risky than working with other nationalities in terms of the potential for conflict. They suggested that there is a social distance, a tolerance, and a respect, which people afford others of different nationality that makes it easier to retain professional and non-conflictual relationships aboard. The following fieldwork notes by Sampson on board one vessel record an example of the 'dangers' of such 'close' relationships:

Comment about Croatian chief engineer:

> He did say this morning that in some respects it is harder to work alongside someone you are close to especially if they were a 'countryman'. He described how you were more likely to have misunderstandings and minor fallings out with such people simply because you talked with them so much more, and about shared topics of interest, and with a conviction which is much less likely to be present when discussing politics, or whatever, with someone from another country. (Sampson fieldnotes)

Notes about a meeting of the senior management team:

> This was an interesting occasion as everything was very civil and calm but from time to time the excitable 1st engineer would get into what could have appeared to be a heated discussion with his 'countryman' the Croatian chief engineer. This has happened on several occasions and on each the captain [different nationality] has tried to intervene and has made some joke about them continuing the war later etc. . . . My impression is that they are unlikely to really fall out with each other as they know each other well and are good friends however it does bear out what each of them has said to me about there being dangers in working alongside your 'countrymen' as they can be too close and you can have big arguments with them. (Sampson fieldnotes)

Notes about pre-dinner drinks interaction between the four most senior officers:

> In the course of the conversation the chief engineer brushed the curtain behind the Captain's head and said 'excuse me' very sincerely. This reminded me of a colleague's comments about the courtesy of seafarers and it's certainly true that they are very polite although there is evidence on this ship that some of them are less courteous with their 'countrymen' than with other nationalities. The chief and 1st engineer are pretty careless with each other and the chief engineer

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> said 'f*** you' to the 1st engineer this afternoon when the 1st engineer was being sarcastic to him . . . The chief then apologised profusely to me! (Sampson fieldnotes)

Some seafarers also said that they preferred to work with different nationalities because exposure to other cultures was interesting and enjoyable:

> You can learn languages, and the history of this country, and its culture. And I tell them what is my culture also. We compare. You can compare with Indian and Filipino cultures. (Interview with Sampson: Filipino 2nd cook)

Despite the positive feelings expressed by seafarers in relation to working with multinational crews, communication was acknowledged by most as a problem of potentially great proportion. Indeed, seafarers frequently suggested that communication difficulties were the only, or the main, drawback of mixed nationality crews. One seafarer expressed a fairly typical view when he described how the benefits of working with other nationalities related to exposure to other cultures but the negative side related to communication difficulties.

> Well, some of the guys don't really speak good English, and you can't understand them. But that's the only [negative] thing [about working with different nationalities]. Otherwise nothing . . . Like Latin Americans, some don't really speak good English, and you can't understand what they're talking about. (Interview with Sampson: Filipino 2nd engineer)

Such poor communication and miscommunication could lead to a vast array of problems, of both a social and a work-related nature.

Job-related communication problems

Sometimes miscommunication caused problems when working together and undertaking job-related tasks. Such situations ranged from the merely irritating to the potentially hazardous. Irritations could relate to misunderstandings such as being unable to convey which tools were required for a particular job, or the way it should be carried out. For example a carpenter described how he struggled when he first became a ship's carpenter because he had no idea what the various tools were called in English. He explained:

> . . . the first time when I was on board the Xxxx vessels, it is my first [time] as carpenter. It's quite hard. You don't know the names for things, and the tools in English. That's why we use Tagalog [Filipino language]. So it's very hard. So I ask some other guys, 'What's the name of this?' Learning . . . Sometimes we have more problems with the English. Some other guys may use other terms . . . That is a problem sometimes. (Interview with Sampson: Filipino carpenter)

Whether merely irritating or actually hazardous, problems tended to be exacerbated by the unwillingness of individuals to admit to their difficulty in understanding or communicating. The working culture of most ships may not help here. Senior officers exercise a considerable amount of power over juniors and even more over ratings. Closed reporting systems and practices of 'blacklisting' seafarers combine to create a certain amount of fear amongst all but the most senior ranking and most are consequently afraid to be seen as less than competent in any aspect of their job including fluency in English. Such practices, and the occupational hierarchies that are sometimes quite formally observed aboard ships, can cause problems and dangers regardless of the national make-up of the crew. Within such contexts it is not surprising that poor communication can often contribute to, or even

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cause, poor relationships across the occupational hierarchy. One navigation officer tried to explain how misunderstandings were contributing to the badly strained relationship he had with his Captain. He suggested:

> I try to put my point across, he doesn't quite understand and then he misunderstands what I am saying and comes back 'I'm Captain. You shut up.' And at that time I have to shut up. I don't want to be totally invisible and he doesn't understand English very well and he misunderstands a lot. Misunderstandings are bad. Regularly I have learned to shut up. (Interview with Sampson: Indian navigation officer)

The power differential was clearly a factor in this officer's decision to learn to 'shut up' and it may indeed have been an appropriate response when the Captain was correcting his approach to work on the bridge. However the 'shutting up' spilled over into social and 'off the job' interaction and got in the way of the two officers reaching a better understanding of each others' perspective. The following fieldnote is illustrative:

Notes on a conversation with the captain:

> He was not happy about some of the things the 3rd was doing [on watch] and on the second or perhaps third occasion he took over from him on the bridge and sent him off his watch. The third officer has not spoken to him voluntarily since (which is for about three days). [Subsequently the situation deteriorated further and the third officer requested permission to go home early on a pretext he constructed.] (Sampson fieldnotes)

Occasionally incidents were observed which might have had more serious consequences. On one ship a lifeboat drill was prolonged and greatly complicated by the inability of a Filipino Messman and an Indian 3rd Officer to comprehend the instructions of the Indian Captain who was shouting down to them in English from the deck. The Messman came close to hurting his hand when trying to operate a lever with which he was unfamiliar but it was clear that all personnel in the lifeboat were fortunate to escape unscathed. A fieldnote describes the action:

Notes after a lifeboat drill:

> The third officer was in charge and there were a lot of things which did not go to plan. However after twenty minutes [suspended over the water] we were on the water (having free-fallen about three feet). We did a brief 'tour' and then returned to the ship. The engine was stopped and people believed we were going back up but then the Captain said we should go again and a ball was thrown from the ship for 'man overboard' practice. The engine would not start again and the Fourth Engineer and the Fitter set to work on it. In the meantime the Captain instructed us to try the release for the lifeboat again and a lot of time was spent practising locking the cables back onto the boat. J. (Filipino Messman) was asked to pull the lever for the cable release/lock and there was a lot of confusion between the Captain (who remained 'supervising' from the ship), the Third Officer, and J. J. had no idea what he was supposed to be doing and the Third Officer was doing his best to follow the Captain's instructions. After a long time the cable secure/release procedure was clear and the engine started. We made another 'tour' but by this time the ball had disappeared and could not be retrieved. We returned to the ship and were pulled up. There was a general air of relief that it was all over . . . My conclusion was that in a real emergency the boat would have sunk and the 'man' overboard drowned! (Sampson fieldnotes)

Despite the attempts of the industry to impose a common language from 'above', the use of Maritime English was not witnessed on any of the vessels that researchers sailed

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upon either in ship–shore communications or aboard vessels in the course of crew communication.

Maritime English relies upon somewhat unnatural forms of speech that seafarers did not appear to readily adapt to. Crew members were aware that miscommunication with shore-side personnel could be potentially dangerous and they could invariably describe incidents where poor communication had led to injury or to a 'near miss'. For example, one Filipino described how poor communication between a tug operator and the Pilot or Master of one of his ships had almost resulted in his serious injury:

> It happened already one time to me when we were in Spain. We had already cast off the line, because the captain had given the order to slack the line. He told us that the ship's line was already cast off from the tugboat, but suddenly this tug pulled the line, and I was holding the line. I was stepping on one end of the line, because it was slacking. So accidentally, the boat pulled the line. My God, when it pulled the line, the line kicked me. Those things are very dangerous. That's why communication between the bridge – because the pilot is the one giving orders to the tugboat – they should pass the orders nicely, so we know what is going on. (Interview with Sampson: Filipino rating)

Nevertheless they did not see the adoption of Maritime English as an adequate solution to communication problems on board.

The conditions aboard ships, the environment in which work takes place, and the equipment which has to be used for communication all increase the risk of misunderstandings whilst carrying out work whatever language is being used and regardless of the linguistic competence of seafarers. As a native speaker of English it can be difficult to understand what is being said on a VHF radio aboard a noisy vessel let alone over the noise of a powerful ship's machinery down in the engine room. However even in non-working time our data suggest that problems can arise due to miscommunication.

However it was not only miscommunication, but sometimes a *refusal* to speak in English which caused tensions in mixed nationality crews. Aboard one ship Swedish officers commonly communicated in Swedish on the bridge, on the radio, and in social settings with Filipino crew present. This was greatly resented by many members of the crew who thought it was ill mannered and that it presented a barrier to the safe operation of the ship. On the bridge for example, the Filipino Third Officer complained that bridge–engine room communication between Master and Chief Engineer took place in Swedish and he was consequently unable to follow what was happening, contribute to decision making, or anticipate future actions. In addition to the operational constraints associated with this behaviour there were also negative social consequences. Filipinos felt that officers might be criticising or mocking them in their presence and a considerable amount of suspicion and mistrust was thus generated. One crew member explained:

> The Swedish crew . . . sometimes they speak in Swedish. It is a different language. They can be talking about you! (Interview with Sampson: Filipino engine rating)

The Third Officer went further suggesting that the other officers' habit of speaking in Swedish made him feel isolated on the bridge and cost him the sense of solidarity which he often experienced with Second Officers on other vessels. He said:

> Sometimes when the Second Mate and the Chief Mate are talking Swedish, it seems I was being outcast. Not like on my previous ships where Second Mate and me we were always strong enough to talk to the Chief Mate with some problem. Here I cannot. (Interview with Sampson: Filipino third officer)

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It is a serious matter for a member of the bridge 'team' to feel 'outcast' and isolated in this manner as this is likely to have negative consequences for the operation of the vessel and over a nine- or tenth-month period (the length of the officer's contract) such consequences can become serious. Greater fluency in English as well as company guidelines might have discouraged this practice aboard the vessel concerned and indeed aboard other ships where it is commonplace.

Social communication: jokes and jibes

The data revealed that a large part of the social interaction aboard ships involves the use of jokes and joking strategies. The use of jokes is frequently risky in terms of social interaction for a number of reasons. The joker may be offended if a joke is not understood and 'falls flat'; recipients of a joke may feel uncomfortable if they do not understand it; targets of jokes (where they are employed) may be offended; and people may be fearful of laughing at something which they incorrectly believe to be a joke. Joking consequently relies on a fairly sophisticated understanding of the 'rules' of social interaction and beyond this, an ability to implement such 'rules'. For obvious reasons, joking in a second language is fraught with further difficulties including the added complexities caused by cultural 'interference'. Crew members with inadequate language skills may well avoid the use of jokes altogether thereby missing out on an important aspect of the social life on board. One Filipino crew member described how he avoided joking with non-Filipino colleagues altogether:

> Like jokes . . . you cannot just . . . I try to be serious when I am with other nationalities. Maybe what I did was offensive to them. When we are together with Filipinos we make jokes, like this. Whenever I am with other nationalities I don't do that . . . Sometimes they misinterpret what you say and what you want is just a joke and they don't know it. (Interview with Sampson: Filipino rating)

The decision to avoid joking with fellow seafarers, or indeed the inability to participate in social banter and joke telling, is likely to contribute to seafarer isolation. In the context of declining crewing levels the effect of social isolation, and the importance of English in minimising such isolation amongst mixed nationality crews, increasingly requires attention. Recent studies have highlighted the disproportionate levels of suicide amongst seafarers (Roberts, 1998). These and general mental health problems, such as depression and those resulting in addictive behaviour patterns, may thrive in an environment of social isolation. In view of this, the importance of providing seafarers with skills that enable them to forge and maintain good social as well as working relationships should not be ignored.

THE 'BOTTOM UP' DEVELOPMENT OF A LIVING LANGUAGE AT SEA

Providing seafarers with good basic skills and enabling them to establish effective social networks aboard is likely to have a knock-on effect of a very positive kind. A number of linguists advocate 'immersion' as the most effective platform for learning a language. If seafarers join ships with sufficient English to communicate with their colleagues socially they are more likely to utilise English, as a common language, on a daily basis. This will inevitably improve their general skills as well as their understanding of the individual crewmembers around them. Some seafarers prefer to use English as a working language for convenience:

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> Work in German? – You haven't tried it! No English is a much easier language. You can speak it with everybody and it is easy to use this language to write. I prefer now to write reports [in English] . . . I don't write in German. Sometimes you have different words in German that you can express it a little better but English is a perfect language. It is easy! (Interview with Sampson: German Captain)

Others expressly state that they prefer to speak English with their colleagues precisely because it increases their fluency:

> [On board I speak] mostly Tagalog and English. But I prefer English, they speak English much more often and you can get your English more fluent to communicate with the nationalities. (Interview with Sampson: Filipino chief cook)

This is important as communication does not just depend on a technical grasp of language but also relies on an ability to penetrate accents and indeed to understand new and particular forms of English. As Butler suggests, we cannot really talk of English but should think, instead, in terms of many Englishes which differ in significant ways:

> English has become Englishes, and each of these Englishes is characterised by the pronunciation, lexis, and idiom typical of many of those born and educated within the particular English language community. (Butler, 1999: 187)

Maritime English may be one such English but aboard vessels with multinational crews you might also have Singaporean English, German English, Filipino English, and indeed Chinese English. Such languages may combine aboard ships and common words and expressions can find their way into the discourse of stable and long established crews. For example, aboard one ship included in the research Indian and Bangladeshi officers and Filipino ratings had adopted a number of shared expressions. In the fieldwork diary for the vessel Sampson noted:

> They have picked up patterns of speech from each other, for example, many of the officers and some of the ratings say 'like this' when they have finished explaining something to you and I am sure they have picked it up off the Captain who says it a lot. Another shared expression is 'very less' [used as 'much less' or 'very little']. (Sampson fieldnotes)

In this case it seems likely that the speech patterns were used frequently by Hindi speaking officers and were then picked up by Filipino ratings. In other words L1 (first language) transference had resulted in particular 'English' phrases being habitually used by Hindi speaking officers and these phrases had then been adopted by Filipino ratings almost in the same way as 'formulaic speech' (Lyons, 1968) is learned in the process of language acquisition. *Vo Aisa Hai* 'like this' is commonly used by Hindi speakers at the end of phrases and sentences to reinforce meaning and the officers and Tagalog speaking ratings commonly used the direct English translation in exactly the same way. Similarly in Hindi the word for 'small' and for 'less' is the same (*come*) and native Hindi speakers commonly use the English 'less' to convey both meanings. What is interesting is that the Filipinos aboard the ship had also picked up this habit which is one which was not observed on other ships with European or mixed nationality officers. This process is similar to that described by Hammerley when commenting on the development of 'pidgin English' in the classrooms of pupils being educated in the Canadian 'immersion' programme (Ellis, 1994: 226).

If we accept that 'pidgin' is 'a language which develops as a contact language when groups of people who speak different languages try to communicate with one another on a

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regular basis' (Richards *et al*., 1992), then it would appear that ships with multinational crews are perfect places for the development of pidgin languages (frequently English). However English is only likely to evolve in such ways where crews have basic levels of general English which allow them to establish and importantly to sustain contact across cultural and ethnic divisions, forming social as well as working relationships. On a ship it is all too easy for ratings and officers of different nationalities to remain socially separate and to minimise communication if they choose to. They are most likely to choose to minimise contact where it requires a considerable effort to understand and to be understood. However where basic levels of communication can sustain social contact what can develop is a ship-based 'language' which we might think of as a *Santos Sunset* English or *Norwegian Imp* English![5] Sadly, contexts in which such ship-based 'languages' can develop are increasingly restricted in today's environment of 'hands off' ship ownership and management. The days in which companies retained and might even come to personally know their crews, or at the very least their officers, have long since gone. Crews change all the time and it takes both time and practice for individuals to come to understand each other as the following example illustrates:

> My first ship I did not understand what he was talking [superior officer] but later I could understand. At first it was difficult for me to understand. (Interview with Sampson: Filipino engine rating)

Repeated exposure to the language and accents of colleagues clearly assists seafarers in developing effective communication skills. Despite the fact that crew continuity is not common, an increasing number of companies today are interested in improving seafarer retention rates. This is a result of increasing competition in the labour market for skilled personnel, against a background of forecast labour shortages; however, it may have the added benefit of improving standards of English amongst multilingual crews.

CONCLUSIONS

Communication has been recognised as highly important in the development and maintenance of high standards of safety aboard merchant cargo vessels. As a result the maritime industry has sought to develop not only linguistic standards imposed by international regulation, but has gone further, in developing a simplified version of English designed to assist seafarers in their ship–shore communication. However in its emphasis on this work-related and technical 'Maritime English' the industry has been slow to recognise the importance of social interaction among multilingual crews. This paper has suggested that not only is such interaction valuable and necessary for the development of good working relationships but it is also beneficial in developing essential English language skills amongst crews from the 'bottom up' rather than 'top down'. Our evidence suggests that spontaneous 'bottom up' language development is more effective, in practice, than attempts to introduce Maritime English from 'above'. There are parallels here with formal and informal processes of language acquisition and support for advocates of 'immersion' learning programmes. In the context of the ship, the classroom observations of Hammerley (1987, 1989) relating to the development of 'pidgin' English seem to be substantially reinforced. This has implications for both the teaching of English as a second language in general, and more specifically, its development within the Maritime sector.

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In order to facilitate the development of language skills aboard ship seafarers require adequate levels of basic English prior to joining a multinational vessel. Without these they are likely to avoid the social contact with colleagues that our data indicates is crucial for the development of 'bottom-up English'. Furthermore, the data suggest that stability in recruitment practices provides the ideal context for the linguistic development of crews. Currently, the global labour market and the drive for cheaper labour sources militates against the establishment of crews who serve together for significant lengths of time, although these may be found in some companies with good reputations who are able to retain both their officers and ratings. Once we add company mergers, acquisitions and bankruptcy into the overall equation, we can see why seafarers are not always able to find familiar faces amongst the crews they join on returning after leave periods. Such labour force fluidity means that in practice seafarers have to regularly adapt to the English of their fellow crew members and this process can be stressful and is often undermined by fear of misunderstanding. In this context the importance of furnishing seafarers with adequate *general* English language skills before placing them in multinational crews cannot be overemphasised. Seafarers need such skills to enable them to work, and, crucially, to socialise aboard ships using English as a second language in order to develop their language skills and become part of a shipboard system of communication (which may rely on the development of pidgin English).

In any situation, and aboard any ship, safe working practices depend, in part, on adequate communication between crew members. What we have tried to suggest in this paper is that such 'adequate' communication implies a lot more than simply an understanding of technical job-related terms, or a grasp of a 'maritime vocabulary'. Current steps to introduce more *general* English into the curricula of Maritime Training establishments, via for example its introduction into IMO model courses, and to screen out very poor general English speakers at interview should be encouraged and extended. Our evidence implies that such steps will have greater impact and effect on safety standards at sea than efforts to further develop and refine technical maritime vocabularies and *Maritime English.*

NOTES

1. We would like to express our gratitude to Anne Kennedy for her advice and comments. Thanks also to H. Benyan, M. Bloor, T. Lane and M. Thomas for their helpful comments.
2. Five voyages were undertaken by Sampson others were undertaken by E. Kahveci, M. Thomas, M. Bloor, G. Boerne, T. Lane and T. Schroeder.
3. STCW'95 is the amendment of a convention adopted by IMO in 1978, known as STCW'78. More precisely, it includes the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for seafarers, as amended in 1995 (STCW Convention) including the Final Act of the 1995 Conference of Parties to the STCW Convention 1978, and resolutions 1 and 3 to 14 of the conference, *and* Seafarer's Training, Certification and Watchkeeping Code (STCW Code) including resolution of the 1995 STCW Conference.
4. Rating is the UK English term used to describe seafarers who are not officers on board merchant cargo vessels.
5. These are fictitious ships' names.

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