

# Maritime communication: is the native speaker part of the problem?

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# Outline

- Native speakers are not necessarily competent communicators in maritime contexts.
- What are typical issues and challenges that arise?
- How can we improve the situation?



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# Maritime English

“Maritime English is an umbrella term which refers to the English language used by seafarers both at sea and in port and by individuals working in the shipping and shipbuilding industry. Maritime English lies in the domain of workplace English.”

(Bocanegra-Valle, 2013)

# SMCP

“a language consisting of a pre-set number of unambiguous words with simple syntax to facilitate communication and avoid misunderstanding, prevailingly in emergency situations”.

(Pritchard, 2002: 9)

# The reality

“IMO standards on the one hand and actual communications as conducted in real situations, which often differ very much from the standard, on the other”

(Pritchard, 2002: 13)

# English as a lingua franca

(Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2013, p.17)

“today most researchers seem to agree that English as a lingua franca is used in **communication by speakers of different native languages**, which suggests that also **native speakers are included.**”

“In other words, **ELF is considered distinctly different from ENL and must thus be learned by native speakers as well.**”

# Features of a maritime lingua franca

- Mutual intelligibility, not rules of the native speaker
- Aim is to get the job done, not meet “theoretical” linguistic standards
- Problems caused not by inadequate language skills, but by inadequate maritime communication skills
- Culture is not dominated by the “native speaker” national culture, but by a mix of maritime culture / speakers’ cultures



# Maritime contexts

“It is quite normal that because of language economy and for psycholinguistic reasons native speakers of English invariably cling to their own linguistic habits and sea practices, unaware or poorly informed of the existence of international communicational standards.”

(Pritchard, 2002: 5)

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# Making yourself understood

- Intelligibility – recognizing the expression
- Comprehensibility – knowing the meaning of the expression
- Interpretability – knowing what the expression signifies in a particular context

# Miscommunication in meetings

Non-understanding  
(aware)

“non-understanding relating to the level of lexis or grammar were very scarce” (Pitzl, 2010: 133)

Elliptical utterances

Misunderstanding  
(unaware)

Strategic  
miscommunication

Global  
misunderstanding

# What causes problems?

Business Spotlight Survey, 2007

	With native speakers	With non-native speakers
They speak too fast	86%	10%
They use unknown expressions	60%	10%
They use too much idiomatic language	57%	3%
They use difficult words	56%	11%
They don't speak clearly enough	56%	61%
They have a heavy accent	45%	58%
I can't make myself understood	16%	24%
They talk too much	13%	5%
They make grammar mistakes	2%	53%

# Foreigner speak

“Simplified” speech used by native speakers when talking to foreigners (Ferguson, 1971, 1975)

- Slow down
- Clear pronunciation
- Short sentences
- Basic vocabulary

This does not necessarily mean that it is easier to understand!

# Intercultural business negotiations

“The majority of the native speakers attempted to accommodate non native speakers, but there was significant variation in the way that individual participants chose their strategies and approached accommodation. **The most striking finding was the imbalance between the native speakers’ understanding of the issues of intercultural communication and their inability to effectively accommodate non native speakers.**”

(Sweeney & Zhu, 2010: 477 )

# Intelligibility

“[T]he native speaker was always found to be among the least intelligible speakers, scoring [an average of 55%].’ The speakers from India and Japan, for example, scored much higher.”

(Smith & Rafiqzad, 1979: 375)



# Own awareness

“ ... examined the intelligibility and comprehensibility of American and Irish English speakers in Japan. Their findings show that there is a likelihood of mismatch between what speakers think they are understanding, their ‘perceived comprehensibility’ (p. 58), and their actual measurable intelligibility and comprehensibility.”

(Matsuura, Chiba & Fujieda, 1999: 58)

# Unequal participation

“I was sitting in one of the IAA Committee meetings and listening to the discussion. Suddenly I thought that the meeting was missing an essential point and I started to plan an intervention. It took a few minutes to prepare myself, especially to find the right English words etc., and suddenly I realised that the discussion had moved on to another subject.”

(Rogerson Revell, 2007:111)

# Unequal participation

“ ... may well be because some participants do not speak due to a lack of confidence or linguistic competence, as evidenced in comments in the survey and task force report. Also, participants may act as if they understand, even when they do not, to maintain the sense of “normality” in the meeting.”

(Rogerson Revell, 2010: 452)

# English as weapon

“In my opinion in conference calls the English native speakers use their language as a weapon!”

(Business Spotlight Survey, 2009)

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# What to do?

- Recognize that there is a problem
  - poor awareness
  - miscommunication issues
  - unequal participation
  - further research?
- Include native speakers in communication skills training programmes
- Insist that testing focuses on international English / ELF rather than tests modelled on native speaker standards

# Ways of training

- Awareness activities
  - Lectures on effective intercultural communication
  - Role-plays with appropriate feedback
- Mix native speakers / non native speakers during normal training
  - Follow-up with communication feedback from non-natives

# A request

As you go through the rest of this APEC meeting, please think about what I have been saying.

See if you can find examples where communication could have been better had the native speaker been more aware.

I am sure you will!



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