INTRODUCTION TO SMCP IN MARITIME ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

It is said that 80% of sea accidents are caused by errors in human communication rather than by technological matters because the vessel crews speak many different languages. This fact seems to have urged the IMO (International Maritime Organization) to provide a special means of communication for navigation safety. SMCP, which is short for Standard Marine Communication Phrases, have been created for this purpose. These unique expressions consist of various navigational communication phrases recommended to be used for both External and On Board Communication. The uniqueness of SMCP is also shown by uncommon spelling and special use of message markers. Principles underlying SMCP have also been provided to facilitate learning and understanding.

INTRODUCTION

The IMO SMCP has been intentionally compiled based on a basic knowledge of the English language. The purpose of which is to reduce grammatical, lexical and idiomatic varieties to a tolerable minimum using standardized structures (IMO SMCP: 2002: 2). Meinhart (2004), in her lecture, summarizes the need for SMCP as follows:

1. to assist greater safety to navigation and conduct of ship,
2. to standardize the language used in communication for navigation at sea in port approaches, harbours, waterways and on board with multi-lingual crews.

Thus, SMCP is precise, simple, and unambiguous in order to avoid confusion and error as well as misunderstanding amongst crews with different languages.

In summary, SMCP is meant to be used for external and on- board communication. The external communication includes the communication from ship to shore, from shore to ship and from ship to ship.

The learning materials of external communication include the communication phrases related to distress traffic, urgency traffic, safety communication, pilotage, specials (helicopter operations and ice breaker operations), vessel traffic service standard phrases, standard GMDSS (Global Maritime Distress and Safety System), and other on-board communication phrases which include standard wheel orders, standard engine orders, and pilot on the bridge.

On-board communication refers to the communication on board with multilingual crews. The learning materials include the communication phrases related to operative ship handling, safety on board, cargo and cargo handling and passenger care.

THE UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES OF SMCP

There are seven underlying principles which one should know when learning and using SMCP as follows:

Principle 1: KISS = Keep it short and simple

The function words the, a/an, is/are frequently omitted. However, users may be flexible in this respect. Below are examples of this.

Phrases with a/an	Phrases without a/an
Do you have an automatic pilot?	Is thee danger of explosion?
Is the engine a diesel or a turbine?	Do you have a doctor on board?
Is extra power available in emergency?	MV Margret has dangerous list to starboard.

Phrases with the	Phrases without the
Is the fire under control?	I cannot control flooding.
What is the result of search?	Can you continue search?
Do not enter the traffic lane	What is local time?
The maximum reach of the crane is 4 metres.	Change to VHF Channel 4 for pilot transfer.

Phrases with is	Phrases without is
What is the weather situation in your position?	Transfer of persons not possible
Embarkation is not possible .	MV Kate not under command..
What is wind direction and force in your position?	Submarines operating in sea area around buoy 6.
Navigation is dangerous in area around buoy 6 due to floating.	Vessel in position 54^0 30' N 2° 01' E.

Principle 2 : Avoid Synonyms and give preference to words with Latin root.

For this principle, a glossary from A to Z has been provided by IMO to standardize words to be used for communication.

Instead of saying	A seafarer has to say
I am going from A to B.	I am proceeding from A to B.
I need medical help.	I require medical assistance.
Crew has left vessel.	Crew has abandoned vessel.
Ancoring is allowed.	Anchoring is permitted.
Open the hatch covers.	Unlock the hatch covers.

Principle 3: Avoid contracted forms.

Unlike the general usage of English, in which contracted forms like **isn't, don't, can't, I've**, etc. are very common, the IMO SMCP does not allow any contracted forms.

Instead of saying	A seafarer has to say
I'm not under command	**I am** not under command.
No, fire **isn't** under control.	No, fire **is not** under control.
I **can't** send pumps.	I **cannot** send pumps.
There's not list at present.	**There is** no list at present.
What's your cargo?	**What is** your cargo?

Principle 4: Produce fully worded answers to "yes/no" questions and basic alternative answers to sentence questions.

This principle can be definitely interpreted as follows:
1. When the answer to a question is in the affirmative, say 'Yes ..." followed by the appropriate phrase in full.
2. When the answer to a question is in the negative, say "No ..." followed by the appropriate phrase in full.

Examples:

Questions	Answers
Is the fire under control?	Yes, fire is under control. No, fire is not under control.
Has flooding stopped?	Yes, flooding has stopped. No, flooding has not stopped.
Must I take tugs?	Yes, you must take tugs. No, you need not take tugs.
Where is the fire?	Fire is in superstructure.
How many cubic metres of cargo space are required?	5 cubic metres of cargo space are required.

Principle 5: Produce one phrase for one event.

This principle implies that combining two or more facts is not allowed. One event should be expressed using only one phrase or one sentence.

I require breathing apparatus; smoke is toxic; and foam extinguishers plus medical assistance.	I require breathing apparatus, smoke is toxic. I require foam extinguishers. I require medical assistance.
My present course 136° and speed 15 Kn and I have 12 persons on board, nobody of them is injured and I will let down 2 lifeboats but I will not leave the vessels.	My present course 136 degrees, my speed 15 knots. Number of persons on board 12. No person injured. I will launch 2 lifeboats. I will not abandon vessel.

Principle 6: Combine invariable with variable.

This principle implies that we can produce a certain number of SMCP according to the current situation by always using the same basic structure. Examples:
1. If the vessel wants to express her intention to give away, say: The vessel will give away.
2. If the vessel wants to report that she has given away, say: The vessel has given away.
3. If the vessel wants to report that she has not given way, say: The vessel has not given way.
4. If the vessel wants to express that there is no necessity to give way, say: The vessel need not give way.

Principle 7: Avoid ambiguous words.

The words can, could, may, might and should have ambiguous meaning in certain contexts. Especially in VTS (Vessel Traffic Service) communication these words are said to have produced accidents. Consequently, The use of these words are not recommended by IMO SMCP.

Instead of saying	A seafarer has to say
May I enter the fairway ?	QUESTION. Do I have permission to enter the fairway?
You may enter the fairway.	ANSWER. You have permission to enter the fairway.
I might enter the fairway.	INTENTION. I will enter the fairway.
You should anchor in anchorage B3.	ADVICE. Anchor in anchorage B3.
You could be running into danger.	WARNING. You are running into danger.
Can I use the shallow draught fairway at this time ?	QUESTION. Do I have permission to use the shallow draught fairway at this time ?

SPELLING

1. Spelling of Letters

Generally, we spell words using the alphabets A to Z. Thus, we spell our country INDONESIA as (ai) (en) (di:) (ou) (en) (i:) (es) (ai) and (ei). However, in the IMO SMCP this word is spelt: India, November, Delta, Oscar, November, Echo, Sierra, Alfa. Similarly, the name of a person, let's say PETER, should be spelled as Papa, Echo, Tango, Echo, Romeo.

In communication, when spelling is necessary, the IMO SMCP has provided spelling of letters which can be seen in the table below.

Letter	Code	Letter	Code
A	Alfa	N	November
B	Bravo	O	Oscar
C	Charlie	P	Papa
D	Delta	O	Oscar
E	Echo	R	Romeo
F	Foxfrot	S	Sierra
G	Golf	T	Tango
H	Hotel	U	Uniform
I	India	V	Victor
J	Juliet	W	Whisky
K	Kilo	X	X-ray
L	Lima	Y	Yankee
M	Mike	Z	Zulu

Source : IMO SMCP, London 2002

2. Spelling of Digits and Numbers

Compared to general English, a few digits and numbers undergo slight modification in pronunciation as seen in the table below:

Number	Spelling	Pronunciation
0	zero	ZEERO
1	one	WUN
2	two	TOO
3	three	TREE
4	four	FOWER
5	five	FIFE
6	six	SIX
7	seven	SEVEN
8	eight	AIT
9	nine	NINER
1000	thousand	TOUSAND

Source : IMO SMCP, London 2002

MESSAGE MARKERS

There are eight message markers which may be used in order to facilitate shore-to-ship and ship-to-shore communication (Maritime English : SMCPs and Their underlying Principles: 37). These message markers: (1) Instruction, (2) Advice, (3) Warning, (4) Information, (5) Question, (6) Answer, (7) Request, and (8) Intention, are recommended to be used in radio communication in general and should be pronounced preceding the given message.

1. Instruction

This message marker implies the intention of the sender to influence others by a regulation.

Examples:

INSTRUCTION. Do not cross the fairway.

INSTRUCTION. Navigate with caution.

2. Advice

This is used when the message implies the intention of the speaker to influence others by a recommendation.

Examples:

ADVICE. Stand by on VHF Channel six nine.

ADVICE. Walk out the anchors.

3. Warning

This message marker implies the intention of the sender to inform others about danger.

Examples:

WARNING. Obstruction in the fairway.

WARNING. You are proceeding at a dangerous speed.

4. Information

This indicates that the said message is restricted to observed facts, situations, etc.

Examples:

INFORMATION. MV Jack will overtake to the west of you.

INFORMATION. Shore based radar assistance is available from 06 : 00 to 16 : 00 UTC.

5. Question

This indicates that the said message is of interrogative character.

Examples:

QUESTION. Where is the whistle ontrol?

QUESTION. How many tugs do you require?

6. Answer

This indicates that the said message is the answer to a question.

Examples:

ANSWER. The whistle control is on the bridge.

ANSWER. I require 3 tugs.

7. Request

This indicates that the said message is asking for action from others with respect to the vessel.

Examples:

REQUEST. I require two tugs.

REQUEST. I require tug assistance.

8. Intention

This indicates that the said message informs others about immediate navigational action intended to be taken.

Examples:

INTENTION. I will reduce my speed.

INTENTION. Boats with powerful engine will draw.

HOW IS SMCP PRESENTED IN A COURSE ?

The International Maritime Organization has launched a Maritime English Program termed as IMO MODEL COURSE 3.17. It consists of detailed teaching syllabus recommended for maritime colleges or universities all over the world. Since SMCP is a part of maritime English itself, in classroom instruction, it is not separately presented but included in the teaching syllabus. Following are extracts from page 10, items 10 and 11 of the syllabus:

10 Understanding commands in emergency situations on board
- 10.1 Grammar : demonstrative adjectives; imperatives; must
- 10.2 Vocabulary: types of emergency; emergency equipment; verbs describing emergency situations; **introduction to SMCP message markers, instructions, questions and answers**
- 10.3 Phonology: sentence stress
- 10.4 Communication Skills: Listening, speaking, reading, writing

11 Check supplies; provide quantities, weights and prices; discuss cargo handling procedures
- 11.1 Grammar: countable and uncountable nouns; quantities
- 11.2 Vocabulary: prices; types of cargo, container and cargo handling gear; SMCP for cargo handling
- 11.3 Phonology: linking sounds (consonants/vowels)
- 11.4 Communication Skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing

WHERE CAN YOU STUDY MARITIME ENGLISH WITH SMCP INCLUDED (IMO MODEL COURSE 3.17) ?

Semarang Growth Centre of KOPERTIS REGION VI Central Java has installed a modern, computerized maritime English laboratory produced by Marine Soft, Germany.

This special laboratory provides maritime English component featuring the following single phases:

1. Basic drill of SMCP vocabulary and standard phrases
2. Multimedia scenario based training for training of marine language and communication
3. Content based training to acquire knowledge in special subjects
4. Assessment for self evaluation.
5. Everyday English (EDE)

(Marine Soft SMCP Training Tools: User Guide 2004: 3 & 27)

Instructors are English language specialists and maritime professionals who have been sent to Germany for a special training.

References

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