



IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases (S.M.C.P.)

Its role within the “Maritime English” framework

© prof. Pietro del Rosso

STANDARD MARINE COMMUNICATION PHRASES (S.M.C.P.): ITS ORIGIN



The adoption of the **IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP)** as IMO resolution A.918 (22) marked the end of a stage that started as far back as 1973, the year that IMCO - as it was then called - decided, through the Maritime Safety Committee at its 27 session, that the common language to be used in the maritime context should be English and that it was necessary to establish the level of knowledge of this language and the vocabulary required to be able to navigate safely.

STANDARD MARINE COMMUNICATION PHRASES (S.M.CP.): ITS ORIGIN

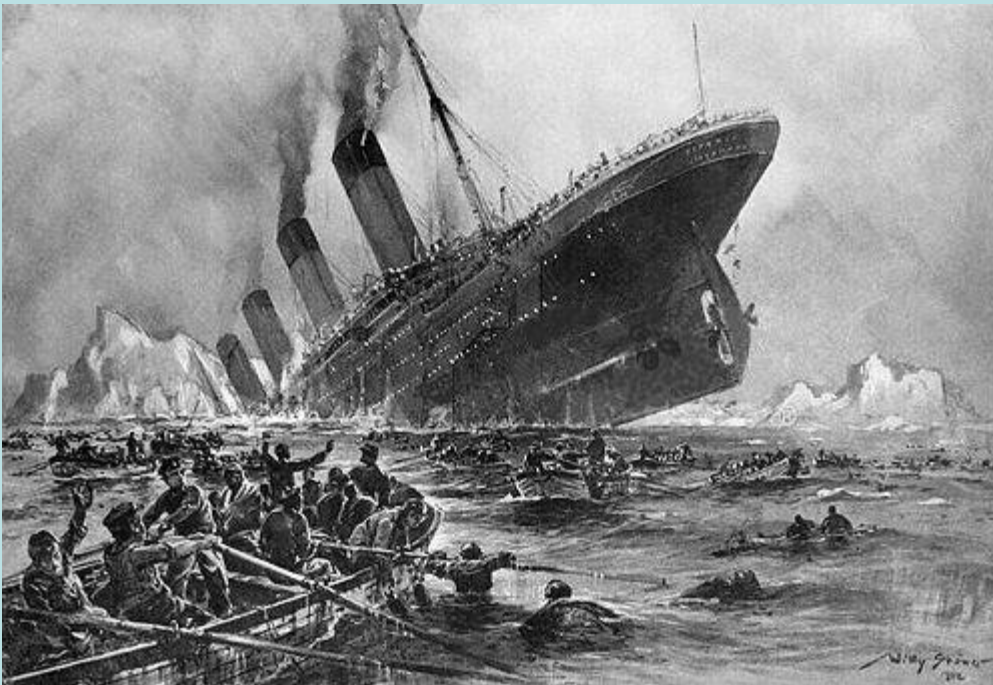
Over these last years, safety at sea and the enhancement of measures aimed at protecting the marine and coastal environment has become an issue of ever greater concern for the international maritime community.

This special attention to safety has periodically intensified as the inevitable trickle of accidents at sea occurred, with their consequent impact in the media and, therefore, on public opinion and on the politicians with responsibility in this area



STANDARD MARINE COMMUNICATION PHRASES (S.M.CP.): ITS ORIGIN

The accidents that produce greatest impact are those that involve a significant number of casualties or that cause considerable damage to the environment. In general terms, and from the catastrophe of the "Titanic" up to the most recent accidents,



many of the advances achieved in the area of international regulations on safety at sea have originated from an accident that had serious consequences.

STANDARD MARINE COMMUNICATION PHRASES (S.M.CP.): ITS ORIGIN

If we focus on accidents in which the lack of an adequate command of English - the common language adopted by IMO - contributed to increasing the number of lives lost and the damage suffered, we have to refer to two relatively recent catastrophes that illustrate the key importance of certain training deficiencies among crews whose mother tongue is not English. The lack of an adequate level of competence in English among professionals on board these vessels becomes dramatically important in situations of danger, when the problems of communication play a decisive role in magnifying the most negative consequences of the accidents.

STANDARD MARINE COMMUNICATION PHRASES (S.M.CP.): ITS ORIGIN

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STANDARD MARINE COMMUNICATION PHRASES (S.M.CP.): ITS ORIGIN

Two specific maritime accidents can serve as a reference to accompany these comments. The first was the fire that broke out in the ferry, “Scandinavian Star”, in which 158 people died. The second was the grounding of the "Sea Empress" tanker, which caused considerable damage to the marine and coastal environment around Milford Haven in Wales, UK. In both cases, the lack of an adequate level of knowledge of general English, and particularly of technical-maritime English, played a significant role in the development of the events that led to a tragic result: casualties in one case, and damage to the ecosystem in the other.

The “Scandinavian Star” case

In the early morning of 7th April, 1990, the "Scandinavian Star" ferry was sailing from Oslo to Frederikshavn (Denmark) with 99 crew and 383 passengers on board, when a fire broke out. Most of the passengers were from Norway, although there were some from Denmark and Sweden. The crew, on the other hand, was a typically multinational. 158 people died in the fire.



The "Scandinavian Star" case

Shortly before 2 o'clock in the morning on 7th April, a small fire was discovered in a pile of bedclothes near cabin Nr. 416, located on the port side of deck Nr. 4. The fire was quickly extinguished but shortly afterwards a second fire broke out in the after part of the gangway on deck Nr. 3, near companionway 2S, in an area that was not commonly used. The fire spread rapidly and the crew were unable to control it; at 02 24 the vessel sent out a distress call, giving her position

The "Scandinavian Star" case

Later, at 03 20 the captain considered that the fire could no longer be controlled and therefore gave the order to abandon ship.



The "Scandinavian Star" case

The subsequent investigation concluded that one of the causes that contributed decisively to the large number of casualties was the **poor communication** between the crew and the passengers, due to the crew's inadequate knowledge of English. This lack of knowledge, together with other factors, enormously increased the difficulty of evacuating the passengers and was another cause of the tragic result of the accident, which could have been far less serious, as the vessel finally did not sink and was later towed to port.

The "Scandinavian Star" case

As in so many other cases, the accident had its consequences. At IMO meetings held after the accident, the Subcommittee on Safety of Navigation (NAV) agreed that initiatives should be implemented to prevent the possibility of a repetition of a similar situation. Among these initiatives was a thorough revision of the Standard Marine Navigational Vocabulary and the preparation of a corpus of English phrases specific for passenger vessels.



The "Scandinavian Star" case

These two initiatives took shape in the following documents:

MSC/Circ 673: "On board Communications for Passenger Care"

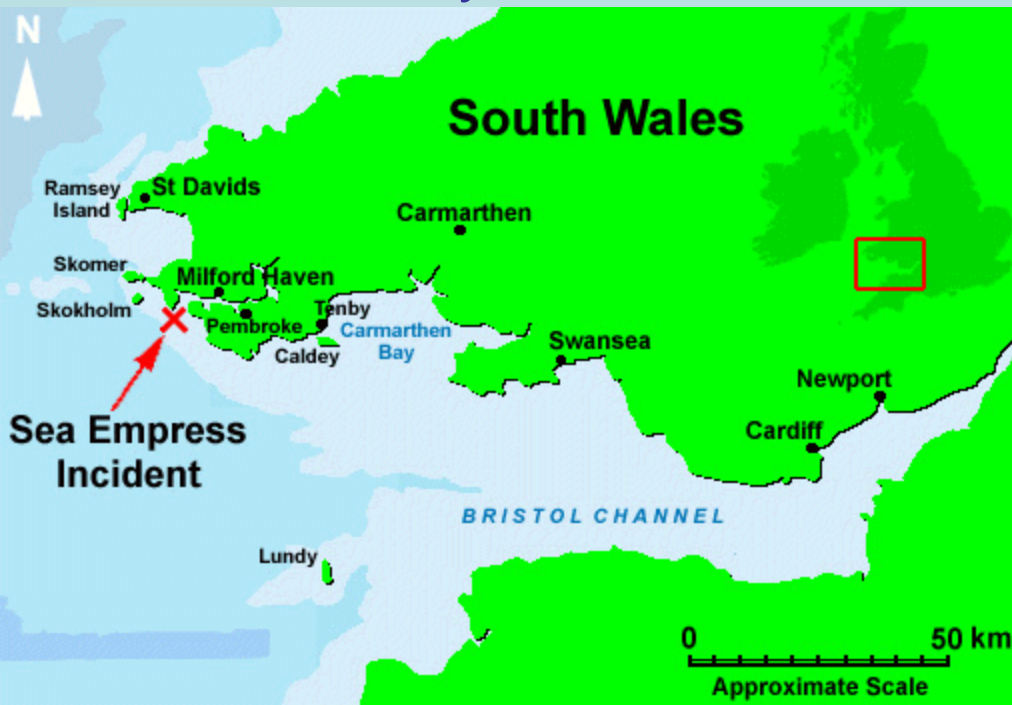
MSC/Circ 794: "IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases"

These two circulars of the Maritime Safety Committee were accompanied with the corresponding Annexes containing the standard phrases.

Thus the "Scandinavian Star" accident may be considered as the origin of the Standard Marine Communication Phrases. As so often happens in the field of marine regulations, the high number of casualties acted, in this case, as a catalyst, triggering a positive reaction that led to the adoption of reforms designed to improve maritime safety.

The "Sea Empress" case

The "Sea Empress" oil tanker grounded due to human error as it approached the port of Milford Haven, in Wales. As the result of the tanker's grounding, subsequent being re-floated and grounding again, a large amount of crude was spilt, causing significant damage to the environment in the coastal area around the port. 71,800 tonnes were spilt between the first time it grounded on 16th February 1996 and the second time on 17th February.



The vessel was not successfully re-floated and towed away until 21st February and all that time it posed a constant threat of an ecological catastrophe.

The "Sea Empress" case

Without going into the details of the vessel salvage and re-floating operations, one significant fact must, nevertheless, be considered. In the initial phase of the accident, the ocean-going Chinese tug "De Yue" arrived on the scene of the accident only a few hours after the vessel stranded and took part in the first attempts to re-float and hold her in position. Clear problems of communication arose from the lack of knowledge of nautical English among the tug's crew. The fact that it was necessary for a Chinese cook from a Cantonese restaurant in Milford Haven to act as an interpreter during the operation led to the salvage operation acquiring, at certain moments, tragicomic tones and to the sensationalist press finding a fertile ground for its scandalous headlines



The "Sea Empress"

Taking into account that after the first grounding, the initial spill amounted to “only” 2,500 tonnes of crude, and that the greater part of the oil escaped during the successive low tides following the second grounding, bringing the total to 71,800 tonnes, it could be concluded that the final consequences of the accident would have been considerably lessened if the vessel had been correctly re-floated and the second grounding had been avoided.



The "Sea Empress"

- Finally, although it is impossible to estimate the degree to which the difficulties in communication affected the final result of the accident, it seems obvious that if these difficulties had not existed, the intervention of the tug might have helped more efficiently to prevent the vessel grounding again, which led to the formation of the oil slick.



A CLOSER LOOK TO THE S.M.C.P: ANALYSIS AND STRUCTURE

After the "Scandinavian Star" accident, the IMO envisaged a full revision of and extension to the **SMNV (Standard Marine Navigational Vocabulary)** which had been adopted in 1977 and amended in 1985, so as to make it more useful and able to offer a considerably wider and updated range of phrases, taking into account the changing conditions in modern seafaring and covering all major safety-related verbal communications.

A CLOSER LOOK TO THE S.M.C.P: ANALYSIS AND STRUCTURE

The German Federal Government accepted the challenge to give form to this ambitious project and create a new corpus of phrases that was to serve as a reference in the teaching and use of technical-maritime English, for the large group of professionals that use English as a common language all over the world, on board vessels of any flag, in coastal stations, in VTS centres, in pilot stations, in the offices of the port authorities, etc.

A CLOSER LOOK TO THE S.M.C.P: ANALYSIS AND STRUCTURE



Professor Peter Trenkner was appointed to co-ordinate the project. From the start, he tried to involve the organizations representing the professional groups that would use the book in the future. Thus, he managed to obtain the collaboration and participation of the following organizations, companies and associations:

A CLOSER LOOK TO THE S.M.C.P: ANALYSIS AND STRUCTURE

12 international shipping companies

- ✓ **British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) 21**
- ✓ **Danish State Railways (Ferry Line Division)**
- ✓ **German Association of Maritime English.**
- ✓ **The German Federal Chamber of Maritime Pilots**
- ✓ **The German Navy (SAR Command)**
- ✓ **The German Ship-owner Association**
- ✓ **IMO (Various Sub-Committees)**
- ✓ **INMARSAT**
- ✓ **Institute for Ship-handling and Simulation (ISUS)**
- ✓ **International Association of Lighthouses and Marine Aids to Navigation (IALA, VTS Committee).**
- ✓ **International Hydrographical Organization (IHO)**
- ✓ **International Maritime Lecturer Associations (IMLA) (Maritime English Committee)**
- ✓ **International Association of Maritime Pilots**
- ✓ **International Telecommunication Union (I.T.U.)**
- ✓ **Japanese Ship-owner Association**
- ✓ **Norwegian Ship-owner Association**
- ✓ **U.S. Coast Guard**
- ✓ **World Meteorological Office (W.M.O.)**

A CLOSER LOOK TO THE S.M.C.P: ANALYSIS AND STRUCTURE

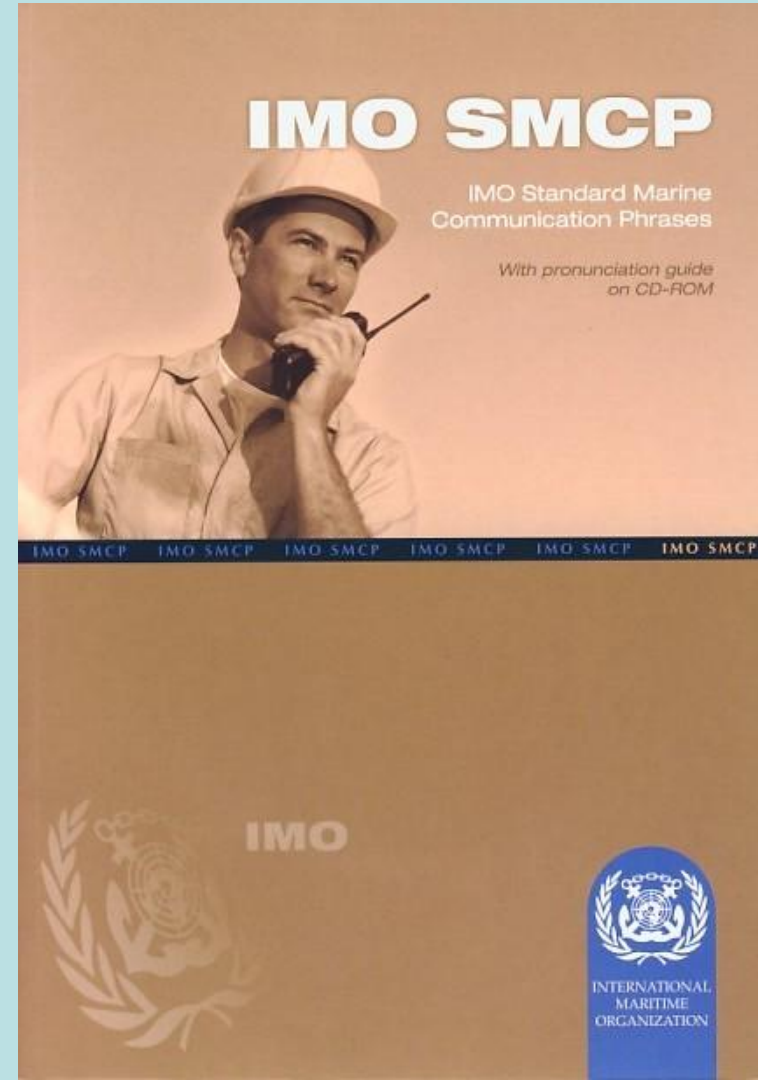
- The following people also participated in the project: Captain F.F. Weeks, Doctor of Applied Linguistics, around 60 VTS operators in Germany, 35 pilots and many captains, most of them with crews of diverse nationalities under their command.
- As regards the methodological aspect, the method used for teaching technical English to air traffic controllers was taken as a reference and, in this area, the recommendations of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the International Aviation English Association and the Swedish Air Traffic Control Academy were followed.

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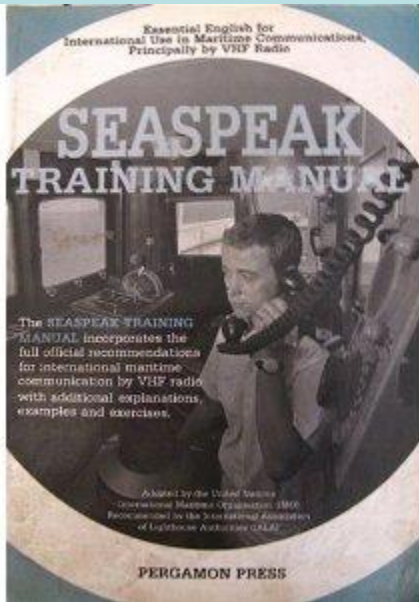
A draft version of the Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP) was circulated among various groups of professionals linked to maritime activities. After this trial period, the professionals consulted gave their comments and suggestions for modifications and the team editing the final version drew up the final text to be published by IMO.

A CLOSER LOOK TO THE S.M.C.P: ANALYSIS AND STRUCTURE

The SMCP comply with the guidelines laid down in the STCW-95 and have been published as an independent document by IMO, after they were adopted by the 22 Assembly, in November 2001. This text will be the key reference document for teaching technical-maritime English during the next few years.



A CLOSER LOOK TO THE S.M.C.P: ANALYSIS AND STRUCTURE



The **SEASPEAK** project, co-ordinated by Fred Weeks, ship's master and doctor of applied linguistics, undertook the task of drawing up a communication manual, with the participation of a group of professionals in the maritime field, on the one hand, and of experts in applied linguistics, on the other. However, the circulation achieved by the SEASPEAK system and its application to the every day reality of marine communications have been very limited. This in no way detracts from the final result of the project, as the SEASPEAK Training Manual is probably the best manual on marine communications published to date

A CLOSER LOOK TO THE S.M.C.P: ANALYSIS AND STRUCTURE

Not only mariners, but also pilots and VTS operators, the latter representing the appropriate competent authority, are even more strongly obliged than the users of the service – officers and masters – to maintain maximum levels of discipline and professional behaviour in VHF communication and to comply with the international conventions (STCW-95) and with the IMO resolutions (A.857 (20) and A.918 (22)), which clearly recommend the use of the SMCP in preference to other expressions of similar meaning

A CLOSER LOOK TO THE S.M.C.P: ANALYSIS AND STRUCTURE

Moreover, the legal responsibility aspect should not be forgotten. In the VTS context, both port and coastal, all VHF communications are recorded and placed at the disposal of the legal authorities in case of an accident.



If a ship grounds, there is a collision or any other accident, in which a prior exchange of information between the vessel and the VTS took place, and that exchange of messages was confused or misinterpreted at some moment and, therefore, may have contributed to the accident, the party that deviated most from standard English and consequently the one that least respected the international conventions, will be in a weaker position with respect to involvement and responsibility.

A CLOSER LOOK TO THE S.M.C.P: ANALYSIS AND STRUCTURE

The SMCP represent a significant advance on the **Standard Marine Navigational Vocabulary (SMNV)**. The Vocabulary had not been revised since 1985, the year of the last publication of the text by IMO. Over these last 16 years, the reality of maritime transport has changed radically, with the appearance of new technologies and systems:

the Global Maritime Distress and Safety System (GMDSS), electronic charts (ECDIS), differential GPS, automatic identification systems (AIS), high speed craft (HSC), the exponential development of the VTS and many more aspects have, for some time now, made it absolutely essential to update the vocabulary and marine terminology offered by the SMNV.



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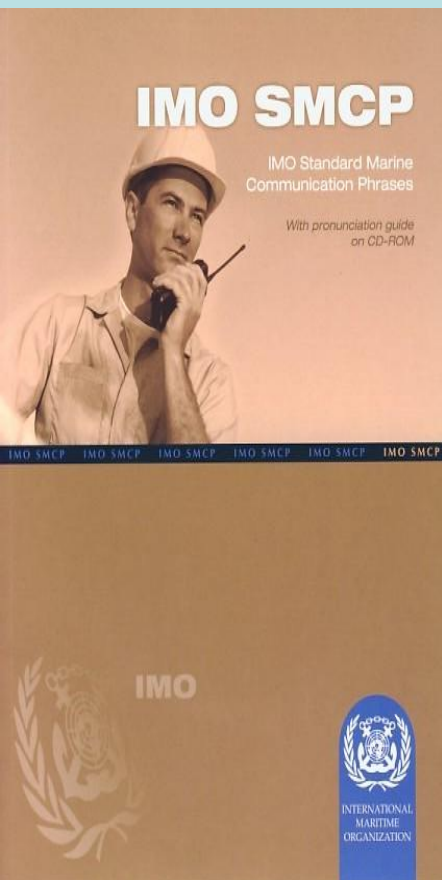


To give an idea of the great advance and changes included in the SMCP, it is sufficient to note that, whereas in the SMNV no reference whatsoever was made to the VTS, in the SMCP several chapters are dedicated to VTS communications:

- Application of Message Markers
- Phrases for acquiring and providing data for a traffic image
- Phrases for providing VTS services
- Phrases between adjacent VTS
- Phrases for communication with emergency services and allied services.

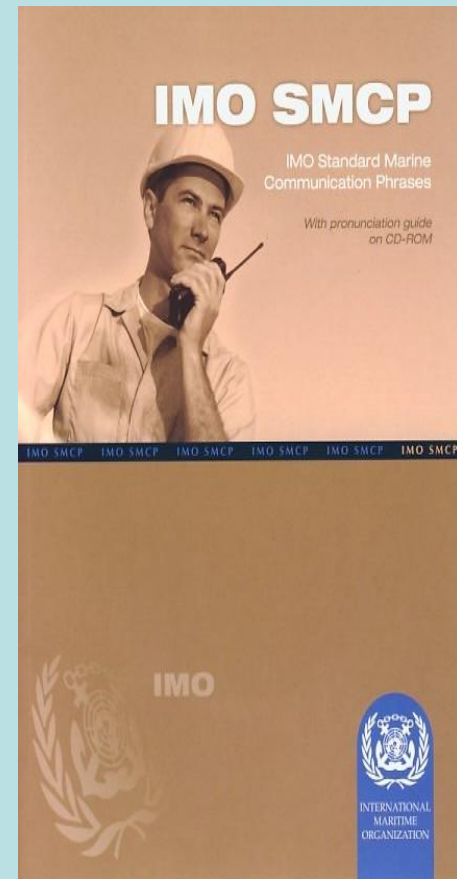
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A fundamental aspect of the Standard Phrases is that they represent an attempt to choose the simplest, clearest wording and the easiest to memorize from among the innumerable possible or existing combinations to express a given action, question, recommendation, intention, etc. In short, the aim has been to make the phrases as simple as possible, that is a true “survival kit” in the Maritime English communications; they never include complex subordinated clauses, difficult morphological structures, or sophisticated vocabulary other than the terms proper to the maritime context.

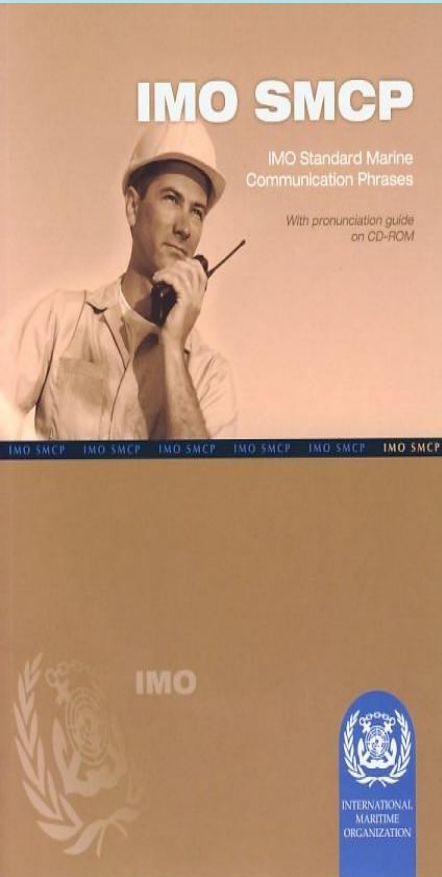


A CLOSER LOOK TO THE S.M.C.P: ANALYSIS AND STRUCTURE

The Standard Marine Communication Phrases constitute a significant advance on their predecessor, the Standard Marine Navigational Vocabulary. The advance is appreciable in terms of both quality and quantity, although it is the second aspect that is most noticeable, as Annex I to Resolution A.918(22), which includes the phrases, has no fewer than 100 pages. Clearly, the number of phrases has been considerably increased.



A CLOSER LOOK TO THE S.M.C.P: ANALYSIS AND STRUCTURE



The SMCP structure has not greatly changed from that of the SMNV. The phrases are organized as shown below:

- Foreword
- Introduction
- General
- Glossary
- **Part A: EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION PHRASES** (Phraseology for communications between the vessel and the exterior)
 - A1: EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION PHRASES
 - A2: ON BOARD COMMUNICATION

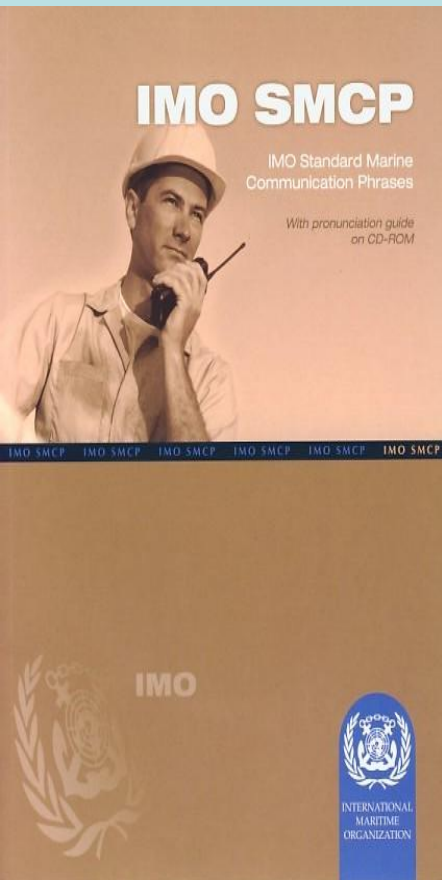
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In part I, General, some changes are introduced, such as the incorporation of new sections that did not figure in the Vocabulary, namely:

- **Spelling**
- **Message markers**
- **Standard organizational phrases**
- **Repetition**
- **Readiness**
- **Ambiguous words**



A CLOSER LOOK TO THE S.M.C.P: ANALYSIS: “MESSAGE MARKERS”



To facilitate communications it is recommended to use the following “markers”:

- **INSTRUCTION:** “Do not cross the fairway.”
- **ADVICE:** “Stand by on VHF Channel six nine.”
- **WARNING:** “Obstruction in the fairway.”
- **INFORMATION:** “MV Aurora will overtake to the west of you .”
- **QUESTION:** “What is your present maximum draft?”
- **ANSWER:** “My present maximum draft is zero seven metres”.
- **REQUEST:** “I require two tugs.”
- **INTENTION:** “I will reduce my speed.”

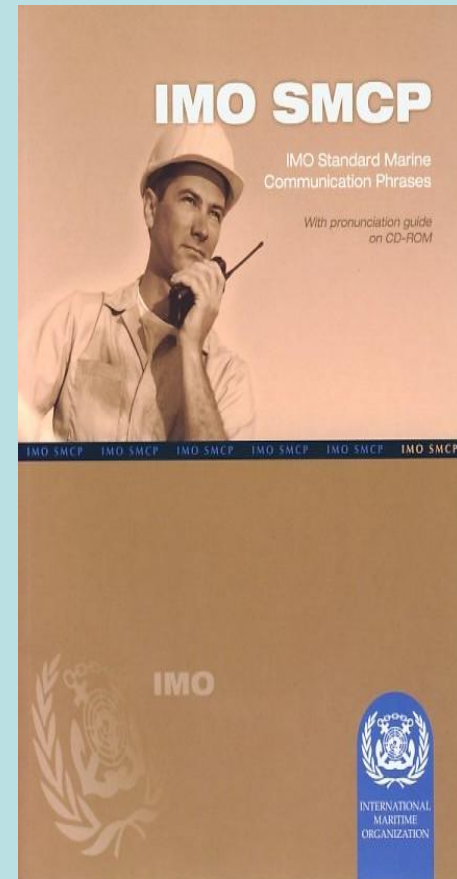
A CLOSER LOOK TO THE S.M.C.P: ANALYSIS AND STRUCTURE

• Moreover, some of the sections previously included have been suppressed:

- Standard verbs
- Miscellaneous phrases

A considerable number of new terms have been included in the Glossary, although the criteria applied for their selection continues to be at least debatable.

Substantial changes are to be found in parts A, External Communication Phrases, and B, On-board Communication Phrases, which have been considerably extended, with the main aim of complying with the requirements established in the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watch keeping for Seafarers, 1978, as amended in 1995, with regard to the knowledge of maritime English.

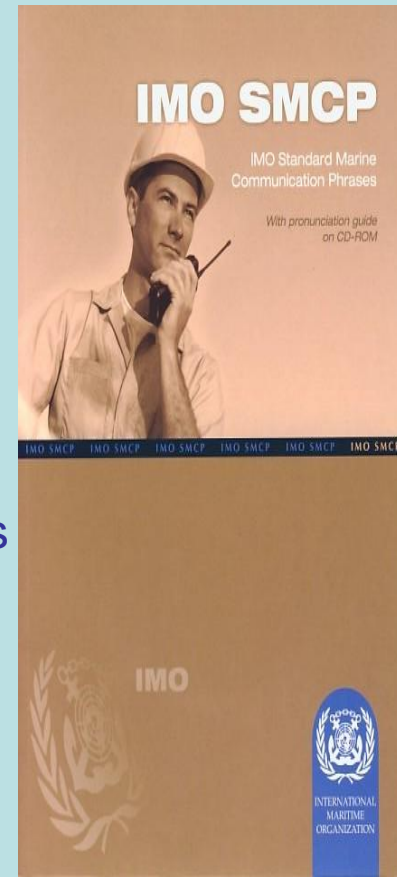


A CLOSER LOOK TO THE S.M.C.P: ANALYSIS AND STRUCTURE

The new Phrases are organized in a more complete and logical number of chapters than the SMNV.

Part A1, External Communication Phrases, includes the following sections:

1. Distress traffic
2. Urgency traffic
3. Safety Communications
4. Pilotage
5. Specials
6. Vessel Traffic Services (VTS) Standard Phrases



A CLOSER LOOK TO THE S.M.C.P: ANALYSIS AND STRUCTURE

Another important contribution offered by the new phrases is the chapter dedicated to **VTS** communications. The wide-spread implantation and continuous growth of Vessel Traffic Services all over the world highlighted the lack of phrases for this type of communications in the previous standard Vocabulary.

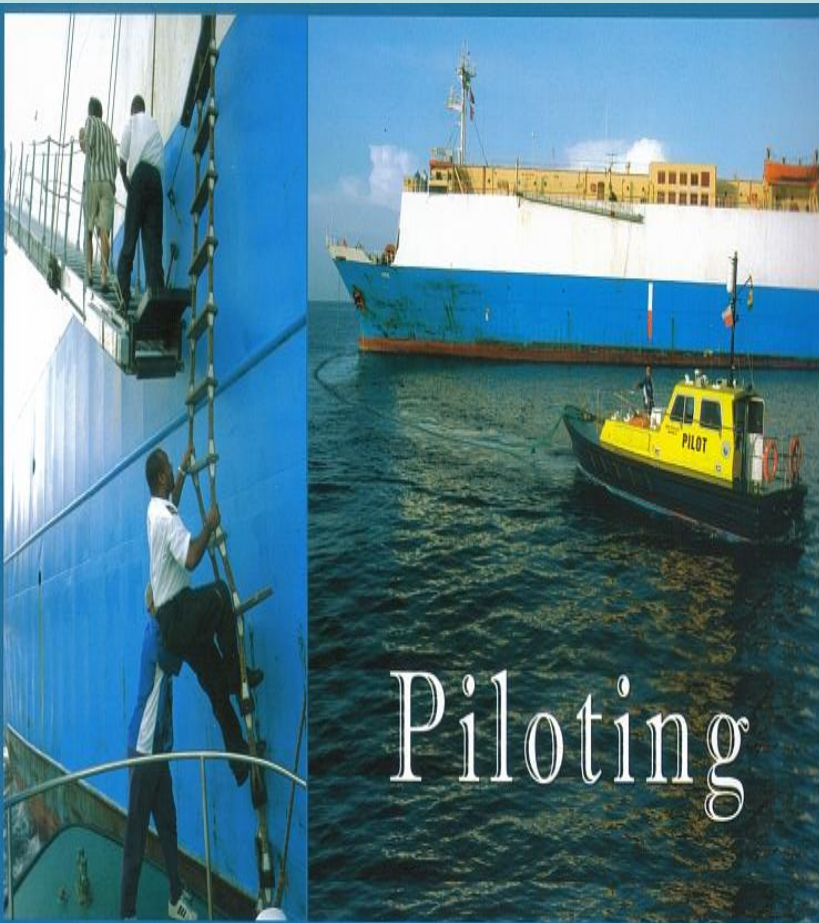


A CLOSER LOOK TO THE S.M.C.P: ANALYSIS AND STRUCTURE

- Chapter A1/6, Vessel Traffic Services (VTS) Standard Phrases, amply covers the needs of this emerging field in the maritime transport area and is organized in the following subsections:
 -
 - A1/6.1 Phrases for acquiring and providing data for a traffic image
 - A1/6.2 Phrases for providing VTS services
 - A1/6.3 Handing over to another VTS
 - A1/6.4 Phrases for communication with emergency services and allied services



A CLOSER LOOK TO THE S.M.C.P: ANALYSIS AND STRUCTURE



- Another chapter that has undergone modification and been considerably extended is the one dedicated to pilotage, which, from having only 23 phrases in the standard Vocabulary, comprises 3 sections in the new document:
 - A1/4.1 Pilot request.
 - A1/4.2 Embarking/disembarking pilot.
 - A1/4.3 Tug request.

A CLOSER LOOK TO THE S.M.C.P: ANALYSIS AND STRUCTURE

- Finally, significant changes have also be made to part A2, On-Board Communication Phrases.
-
- In the SMNV, part IV included the following 10 sections:
-
- 1. Standard wheel orders
- 2. Standard engine orders
- 3. Pilotage
-
- 4. Manoeuvring
- 5. Propulsion Systems
- 6. Anchoring
- 7. Berthing/unberthing
- 8. Radar
- 9. Tugs
- 10 Draught and air draught

A CLOSER LOOK TO THE S.M.C.P: ANALYSIS AND STRUCTURE

In the S.M.C.P., the structure of the part corresponding to on-board communications has changed completely, as 4 new independent chapters have been introduced:

- B1 Operative Ship handling
- B2 Safety on Board
- B3 Cargo and Cargo Handling
- B4 Passenger Care

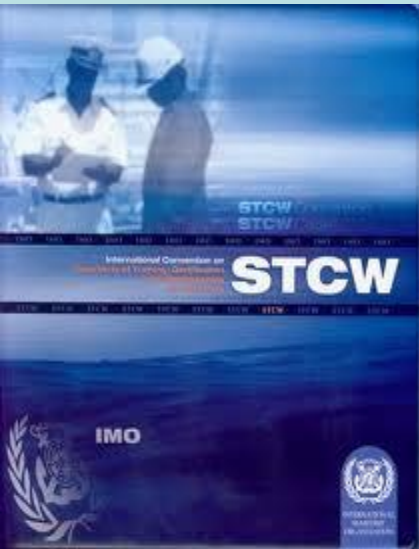


A CLOSER LOOK TO THE S.M.C.P: ANALYSIS AND STRUCTURE

Another aspect to be noted is the incorporation of the phrases required for **passenger care**, following the line initiated after the “Scandinavian Star” accident with the issue of the MSC/Circ 673 circular: "**On board Communications for Passenger Care**".



TEACHING I.M.O. S.M.C.P.



As was mentioned in the “Analysis and Structure” section, the SMCP are divided into two main groups: Part A and Part B, “External Communications” and “On-board Communications”, respectively. This division is not arbitrary but responds to the stipulations of the Convention on Training and SOLAS (STCW 95 Table A-II/I and Rule 14(4) in Chapter V, respectively).

Thus the use and comprehension of the phrases contained in the External Communications part are required in two IMO instruments to which Italy is a signatory, i.e., the use of these phrases is of a compulsory nature, as derives from the mentioned instruments and to which reference is made in the Introduction:

TEACHING I.M.O. S.M.C.P.

....Use of the IMO SMCP should be made as often as possible in preference to other wording of similar meaning; as a minimum requirement, users should adhere as closely as possible to them in relevant situations

TEACHING I.M.O. S.M.C.P.

The experience acquired in teaching and divulgating these phrases, allows me to establish some conclusions based on my experience in teaching the SMCP and on the observation of the students' reactions over the last ten years:

TEACHING I.M.O. S.M.C.P.

The lack of knowledge of SMCP is worrying. The intensity of the initial refusal by seafarers and other professional on the use of SMCP is usually directly proportional to their years of experience in the use of English and to the level of the language competence of the seafarers, VTS operator/pilot. This means that if a seafarer in the latest 15 years uses English without problem in his daily work and if, in addition, his English level is high, a refusal towards SMCP should be expected; in this connection, I have noticed that Navy cadets and young officers show a better receptive attitude to use SMCP.

TEACHING I.M.O. S.M.C.P.

Below are listed some possible measures to be recommended to revert this situation:

Courses on SMCP, both for seafarers and VTS operators, preceded or accompanied by the awareness in the use and by the International regulations which govern the knowledge and use of these phrases.

TEACHING I.M.O. S.M.C.P.

Highlighting the responsibilities which a professional on board a ship or in service at a shore station or a VTS center may face if the messages sent by radio in English are not understood and, as a consequence, a serious accident occurs. The recording of communications and their transcriptions are the pieces of evidences demanded by judges whenever the case is taken to the court.



TEACHING I.M.O. S.M.C.P.

For what regards SMCP teaching, it is required to calibrate both the curricula of maritime training centers and the required levels of competences in order to satisfy STCW requirements and the already-mentioned regulations.



TEACHING I.M.O. S.M.C.P.

In addition to an appropriate seafarer' training, the training of those still in service should not be neglected. National maritime and academic administrations should endeavour to realize that the success of their own seafarers in a more and more demanding and competitive labour market also depends on their linguistic competence in English in general and on their knowledge of Maritime English, in particular, the SMCP, as required by the current International regulations.

TEACHING I.M.O. S.M.C.P: USE OF SIMULATORS

The use of subsidiary tools, such **deck, engine, GMDSS simulators**, can significantly enhance the learning process of the SMCP by contextualizing their usage and helping to reinforce the communicative approach.

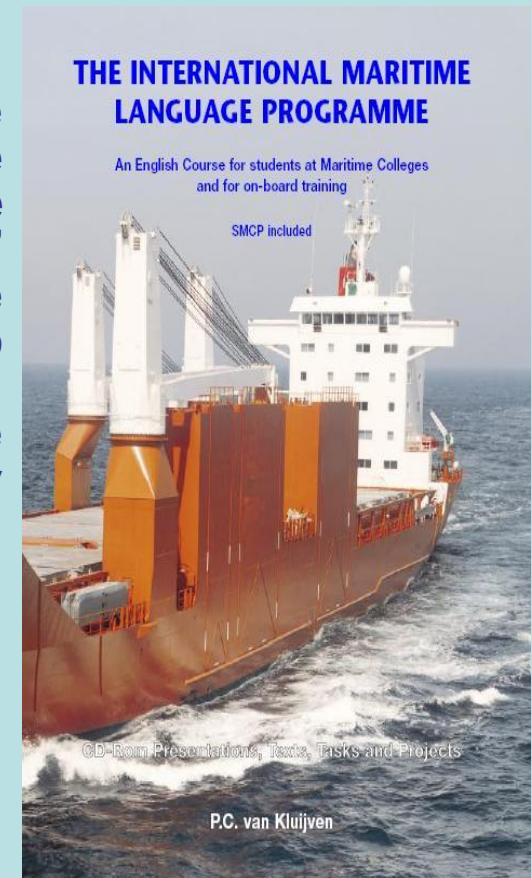


TEACHING I.M.O. S.M.C.P: TEACHING/LEARNING TOOLS



Using new teaching materials, especially the interactive ones, which may effectively satisfy the new requirements provided by the International conventions and regulations.

To this end, I have successfully experimented over these years the use of **appropriate content-based software programmes**, such as “**The International Maritime Language Programme**”, the “**MARENG**”, “**Safe Sailing**” which fully incorporate the use of the SMCP. In order to be constantly updated in this field it is essential to take part to annual meeting by **I.M.E.C. (International Maritime English Conference)** or to frequently visit IMEC web site <http://www.imla.co/imec/>, to which I have contributed by providing three articles on safety & security.



TEACHING I.M.O. S.M.C.P.

- Finally, in addition to the previous content-based programmes, a quality “Maritime English” course should also resort to authentic materials such as **“Operation & Maintenance Manuals, including the relevant Diagrams”**, and official international publications such as IMO official magazine, **“IMO News”**, the **“MAIB reports”** the **“Code of Safe Working Practices for Merchant Seamen”** published by the Maritime and Coast Guard Agency, **“The Mariner Handbook”** published by the United Kingdom Hydrographic Office, **“Motor Ship”** and **“Digital Ship”**, two international magazines devoted respectively to ship engineering and to digital technologies on board Merchant vessel, quote just the ones I usually use in my “Maritime English” courses.



TEACHING I.M.O. S.M.C.P: “DICTIONARY OF MARITIME TERMS ENGLISH-ITALIAN-ENGLISH” 3RD EDITION

The use of these materials should be calibrated in accordance with the level acquired by the trainees, but always through a constant guide by the trainer whenever specific terms or expressions are encountered. For this purpose, an extremely instrumental tool is the **“Dictionary of Maritime Terms English-Italian-English- including SMCP and Common Maritime Acronyms and Abbreviations 3rd Edition”** published by Witherby Seamanship International.



SPECIFIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE “DICTIONARY OF MARITIME TERMS ENGLISH- ITALIAN-ENGLISH” 2ND EDITION

- ✓ Continuous references of items to the "**SMCP**" (Standard Marine Communication Phrases), the Maritime English standard adopted by I.M.O. (International Maritime Organization)
- ✓ A very rich and updated list of acronyms and Maritime abbreviations, made up of over **3000** internationally recognized expressions
- ✓ Rich selection of **images** located below each item both in the English-Italian and Italian-English section
- ✓ Rich selection of updated **tables** in English and Italian
- ✓ The richness of the terms included in the dictionary makes it an ideal consultation tool for the personnel of the **Merchant Navy** (deck, engine, auxiliary service, and shore personnel involved at various levels within the maritime industry) of the officers and petty officers of the **Navy**, in addition to the trainees of **Nautical Institutes** and **Maritime Training Centers**.



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