

The Features of Maritime English Discourse

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Abstract

The aim of the present paper is to illustrate the linguistic features of Maritime English (ME) both as a type of specialized discourse in academic and professional sectors and as a vehicular language used to facilitate communication at sea. It is shown that this specific subset of English covers a wide spectrum, ranging from the language of highly technical written genres to simplified and standardized uses typical of spoken contexts. The analysis is conducted on data from the fields of maritime engineering, marine electronics and maritime law as well as on the transcription of an authentic conversation between a ship and a radio station and on the Standard Maritime Communication Phrases drafted by the International Maritime Organization. Despite some common representative characteristics of both written and spoken ME at the lexical-semantic level, the two registers appear as distinct from a wider pragmatic and textual perspective. The former exhibits greater variability and complexity due to the fusion of different writing styles, “languages” from other domains and textual functions, while the latter is generally marked by linguistic adjustments reducing it to a restricted language, limited in its scope and goal. The resulting image of ME is that of a multi-faceted language with a number of distinct features serving different purposes. Future studies on specialized discourse need to highlight the internal nature of the various domains under investigation in order to provide finer-grained descriptions of their organization.

Keywords: Maritime English, specialized discourse, micro-language, lingua franca

1. Introduction

Maritime English (ME) is a type of specialized language (cf. Gotti, 2005) cutting across a range of academic and professional sectors, but also encompassing inter-ship, ship-to-shore and on-board communications. Tenkner (2000, p. 7) defines it as “the entirety of all those means of the English language which, being used as a device for communication within the international maritime community, contribute to the safety of navigation and the facilitation of the seaborne trade”. Although broad in scope, this definition restricts ME to the language used among seafarers and between seafarers and shore-based staff for safety and commercial purposes, failing to recognize that the range of situations in the maritime field in which English is the medium of communication, either oral or written, is much wider. The present paper intends to illustrate the features of ME in different contexts of use and to characterize it as a distinctive subset of English.

The focus of research on ME has so far been mostly confined to various aspects of language pedagogy (cf. Demydenko, 2012; Pritchard, 2011, 2003, 1999; Cole, Pritchard, & Tenkner, 2007). The newly established *Maritime English Journal*, which commenced publication in March 2013 as the sister journal of the *Asian EFL Journal*, is continuing that trend. Since communication in the maritime sector typically involves exchanges between speakers of different mother tongues sharing English as a common language, it is understandable that a lot of attention has to be given to language instruction, so as to train seafarers and the maritime community at large towards proficiency in English. This need has become particularly pressing after the decision of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) in 1995 to adopt English as the official language of the sea, which has led to the publication of IMO’s Standard Maritime Communication Phrases (SMCP). It only stands to reason, then, that a number of ELT textbooks, coursebooks and other materials had to be developed to meet the demands of learners in the maritime field (cf. Pritchard, 2004).

What is still missing is a comprehensive study of the features of ME from a strictly linguistic rather than pedagogical perspective (Note 1). Simply defining it as domain-specific discourse is too generic and does not do justice to its idiosyncratic nature. ME ranges from the type of technical language used in restricted contexts to a

simplified means of communication among speakers of other languages. In other words, it covers a wide spectrum including both complex language patterns and some of the typical uses of a lingua franca. Therefore, it would perhaps be more appropriate to speak of “Maritime Englishes”, considering that the maritime community is extremely large and diversified. The aim here is to offer a linguistic analysis of three representative written genres within ME, in addition to an investigation of spoken data based on the transcription of a conversation between a ship and a radio station as well as on IMO’s Standard Maritime Communication Phrases.

2. Methodology

2.1 Data

The analysis was conducted on written texts from three subfields within ME (i.e., maritime engineering, marine electronics and maritime law) and on a spoken dialogue. The former consist of 1. a reference book for maritime engineers, naval architects and other professionals involved in marine operations, insurance and related fields (Note 2); 2. a product description booklet illustrating the characteristics of a device used for measuring the depth of water between the underneath of a vessel and the seabed or another object (Note 3); 3. one issue of the *Journal of International Maritime Law* (Note 4). The oral text, instead, is a ship-to-shore conversation during a Somali pirates attack in the gulf of Aden in 2011. In addition, IMO’s Standard Maritime Communication Phrases were used in attempt to better identify the fixed patterns of spoken ME.

The data can be considered as representative in that the features observed are generalizable to the whole domain of ME. In other words, written texts from other related disciplines, e.g., maritime economics and logistics, will also be likely to exhibit the characteristics outlined below. The same applies to spoken communications at sea, which will generally follow the trends described in 3.2, even when taking place in different situations, as in the case of ship-to-ship contacts, for instance.

2.2 Data Analysis Procedure

Since the focus of the study is not restricted to a single linguistic phenomenon, but rather investigates the features of ME at large, it was necessary to scan and analyse the individual texts manually. This procedure has made it possible to get an overall picture of the nature of this specialized language and to identify the recurring regularities and patterns in addition to those co-textual and pragmatic meanings that an automatic search would have missed.

3. Results & Discussion

3.1 Written Maritime English

The examination of the three written texts has made it possible to recognize a number of recurring elements. Maritime law, however, presents some distinguishing features that set it apart from the other two areas of study. There appear to be more linguistic affinities between maritime engineering and marine electronics texts than between either of these two specialized text types and the language of maritime law.

As far as terminology is concerned, however, the three disciplines are characterized to a certain extent by common features, among which lexical mono-referentiality is the most prominent. This phenomenon refers to the notion of a one-to-one correspondence between words and their meanings. In written ME, this univocal link between signifier and signified is to be observed both at a general and more domain-specific level. Since all the three disciplines under investigation deal with sea-related matters, the texts analysed present an underlying lexical layer consisting of words and expressions, which in the broadly nautical sector have taken on specific meanings. They are used primarily for describing the various parts of ships and vessels (e.g., *stern*, *bow*, *bumpkin*), the type of navigation used (e.g., *quartering*), the movements on-board a ship (*abaft*, *amidships*, *ahull*), the weather and sea conditions (*random sea*, *confused sea*), etc. Each domain is then marked by higher technicality, resulting in the presence of further specialized lexical items. Observe the alternation of these two levels of lexical information in the following extracts. The basic nautical words and phrases are in bold, while the more technical ones have been italicized:

A-The **ballasting** of a vessel which is to proceed without cargo to the loading port is necessary for a safe voyage, sometimes in heavy weather conditions. On arrival at the port the large amount of **ballast** must be discharged rapidly in readiness for loading. *Ballast pump* capacity is governed by the volume of water that has to be discharged in a given time. The *ballast pump* is also often the *stand-by sea water circulating pump*, but very large ballast discharge capacity is necessary for some ships. Vessels with tanks available for either ballast or oil fuel are fitted with a *change-over chest* or *cock* designed to prevent mistakes. (1, p. 425)

B-The *transducer array* should be mounted in the bottom of a **drop keel** or in the forward part of the vessel. The shape of the **hull**, mechanical and electrical noise, potential aeration problems and ease of cable installation must be taken into consideration. The *transducer* may be fixed to the **hull** with bolts from the front, either directly on or recessed into the **hull**, or within **sea chests**. (2, p. 15)

C-In England and Commonwealth countries, the term “*maritime lien*” applies only to a select group of maritime claims, being seamen’s wages, master’s wages, master’s disbursements, **salvage**, damage (caused by the ship), *bottomry* and *respondentia*. These are known as “*traditional maritime liens*”. (Note 5)

There appears to be a minimum vocabulary made up of semi-technical words, cutting across the three disciplines, which has to be distinguished from the highly domain-specific terminology found in each area of specialization, only accessible to the experts in a certain field. A maritime lawyer, for instance, will be familiar with the concepts of *lien*, *bottomry* and *respondentia*, but will most probably not know what a *transducer array*, a *ballast pump*, a *stand-by sea water circulating pump* or a *change-over chest* are. Of the three disciplines examined here, maritime law is by far the most specialized, as also demonstrated by the existence of glossaries and dictionaries in this specific legal field (Note 6). While some maritime law terms are the same as the ones used in legal documents in general, some other ones differ in their boundaries of application. The word *arrest*, for instance, usually refers to the act of taking a person into custody, but in maritime law it specifically indicates seizing and holding a ship under lawful authority. Similarly, the expression *lay days*, which refers to the number of days permitted for the loading or unloading of a ship without payment of demurrage, is to be found only in maritime contracts, and so on.

At the level of single lexical units, a tendency towards conciseness has been observed in all the text samples examined. The use of compact constructions is possible through processes of metaphorization and nominalization, the former often being the cause of the latter. Consider, for instance, the compound *sea chest* in extract C above. The word *chest* is normally used to refer to a part of the human body, but here it must be understood in the extended, metaphorical sense of recess in the hull of a ship, providing a reservoir from which water can be drawn. The implicit analogy between a person’s chest and a *sea chest* immediately suggests that the latter is a container of something (just like the rib cage in our body contains organs), thus avoiding, up to a certain extent, an explanation of its general function. In other words, the compound synthetically expresses meaning by relying on our world knowledge. Interestingly, technical words are the ones that are more often grouped into complex nominal phrases (e.g., *stand-by sea water circulating pump* in extract A), adding density to the text. Nominalizations are typically the final product of the ellipsis of a number of functional words including articles, prepositions, adverbs, etc., which in the context of a specialized text tend to be eliminated due to their low lexical-semantic profile.

The three genres under consideration generally adopt a rather formal style, as evidenced in the frequent use of Latin-based words (highlighted in bold for convenience):

D-The rising **velocity** of the globules carries them upwards where they become trapped by the under-surfaces of the plates and **coalesce** until the large globules have sufficient rising **velocity** to travel along the plate surface and break away at the **periphery**. (1, p. 423)

E-Sound **velocity** profiler for estimating range and transmission loss. Sound **velocity** sensor for continuous control of beam steering and beam parameters. (2, p. 11).

F-The International **Salvage** Union, which represents professional **salvors** responsible for more than 90 per cent of global marine **salvage** services, has produced data for the period 1978-2005 indicating that out of a total of 5,135 **salvage** operations carried out by its members 2,701 were performed under LOF contracts, which represents 53 per cent. (3, p. 205)

In order to maintain a formal register throughout a text some lexical redundancy is inevitable. This feature can be easily observed in the three extracts above, in which several repetitions of the same word appear even within a single sentence. The reason for this may be attributed to a tendency of specialized discourse to avoid ambiguity, which would be more likely to occur through the use of anaphora. Lexical redundancy appears to be particularly prominent in the maritime law texts examined. Take, for example, the word *mortgage* in the following extract, which is repeated four times, although at least its third occurrence may have been substituted by a pronoun:

G-In *The Betty Ott v. General Bills Ltd.*, 43 New Zealand’s Court of Appeal also invoked *The Halcyon Isle* in refusing to recognize an Australian ship **mortgage** as equivalent to a ship **mortgage** registered in New Zealand, simply because the **mortgage** had not been registered in New Zealand (and this, despite

the very similar terms and conditions governing ship **mortgages** and their registration in Australia). (Note 7)

In legal writing, lexical redundancy often results in the use of doublets (e.g., *by and among*, *terms and conditions*), triplets (e.g., *cancel, annul and set aside*) and even longer expressions (e.g., *remise, release and forever quit claim*), whose purpose is to reinforce and emphasize a certain concept. Examples of this phenomenon can be seen in extract J below. Maritime engineering and marine electronics texts, on the other hand, more typically present an alternation between a formal and a more natural tone, as a consequence of the fact that clear explanations of technical notions may be required. In these cases, the “official” specialized terms may only be given in brackets:

H-Filter elements in the second stage remove any small droplets of oil in the discharge and cause them to be held until they form larger droplets (coalesce). (1, p. 424)

This combination of specialized and more colloquial words produces texts with significant complexity, not just due to the presence of vocabulary of different registers and domains, but also to the merging of different writing styles, as in the case of the following extract, in which the expressions used for describing waves (*wave amplitude*, *wave height*) alternate with mathematical formulas:

I-Inserting the wave height as double of the wave amplitude, we get the probability distribution of the wave height H_w exceeding a threshold $H_{1/m}$, as shown in [...] $X = 0.5 H_w$, $x_i = 0.5 H_{1/m}$, $H_v = 4\sqrt{m} \rightarrow [\dots]$. (1, p. 13).

Finally, ME also appears to be characterized by the use of antiquated terminology. This is particularly evident in maritime law, in which many archaisms linger both at the lexical level (e.g., *w.a. cover* in which *w.a.* stands for “with average”: the expression formerly described a particular policy against cargo loss) and as morphological markers. The word *witnesseth*, for instance, is frequent in contracts and agreements, alongside a number of other antiquated and formal terms, e.g., *herein*, *therein*, etc., which do not normally appear in non-legal contexts:

J-FIRST AMENDMENT TO AMENDED AND RESTATED CREDIT AGREEMENT (this “First Amendment”), dated as of July 13, 2011, by and among GENERAL MARITIME CORPORATION, a Marshall Islands corporation (the “Parent”), GENERAL MARITIME SUBSIDIARY CORPORATION (“GMSC”), ARLINGTON TANKERS LTD. (“Arlington”), GENERAL MARITIME SUBSIDIARY II CORPORATION, a Marshall Islands corporation (“GMSC II”, and together with GMSC, individually or collectively, as the context may require, the “Borrower”), the Lenders party from time to time to the Credit Agreement referred to below (the “Lenders”) and OCM ADMINISTRATIVE AGENT, LLC, as Administrative Agent (in such capacity, the “Administrative Agent”) and as Collateral Agent. Unless otherwise defined herein, capitalized terms used herein and defined in the Credit Agreement are used herein as therein defined. W I T N E S S E T H:

[...]

“First Amendment” shall mean the First Amendment to this Agreement, dated as of July 13, 2011.

“First Amendment Effective Date” shall have the meaning provided in the First Amendment. (Note 8)

The use of fixed expressions (e.g., *as the context may require, unless otherwise defined*, etc.) and the adoption of full Latin phrases (e.g., *res derelictae* = abandoned marine property) is also frequent. It is a sign of conservatism aimed at maintaining an authoritative tone in formal documents.

As far as the syntactic features of written ME are concerned, a distinction must be made again between the domains of maritime engineering, marine electronics and that of maritime law. The first two consist mainly of descriptive and instructive texts with a clear structure, aimed at the specialist reader but written so as to be readily understandable. Sentences tend to be short and simple, mostly in the present tense (active or passive). Past tenses are not frequent in that the focus lies mostly on current innovations and developments. Modal auxiliary verbs are used for giving the reader instructions or suggestions and primarily express possibility. Consider the first two extracts below in addition to the third one about the transducer array analysed above and repeated here for convenience (the bold font is not in the original and used for emphasis):

K-Water particles orbit clockwise with the angular velocity ω . Clockwise is mathematically negative. The angle ε of the orbital position is mathematically positive, counter-clockwise [...]. The horizontal and vertical components of the orbital radius are $r_x(z) = r(x) \sin \varepsilon$ [...] $r_z(z) = r(z) \cos \varepsilon$. (1, p. 9)

L-The Simrad ME70 Operator Station is a high performance marine computer equipped with a colour display. The Operator Station communicates with the Transceiver Unit by means of an Ethernet link.

The software on the Operator Station provides you with the following main functionality. (2, p. 13).

M-The transducer array **should** be mounted in the bottom of a drop keel or in the forward part of the vessel. The shape of the hull, mechanical and electrical noise, potential aeration problems and ease of cable installation **must** be taken into consideration. The transducer **may** be fixed to the hull with bolts from the front, either directly on or recessed into the hull, or within sea chests. (2, p. 15)

The three passages are linear and dry. Information is presented in a schematic, almost simplified way and for this reason they are transparent. On the other hand, maritime law texts typically consist of longer and more complex sentences, requiring considerable cognitive effort to be processed. The passage below, for example, consists of just one long sentence with embedded subordinate clauses that make it come across as rather opaque. Alongside the present tense, the *shall*-construction is used as well. *Shall* has a joint connotation of obligation and futurity, thus conveying further complexity to the text:

N-The MTD also functions as a document of title and every consignee named in the negotiable or non-negotiable MTD and every endorsee of such document, as the case may be, to whom the property in the goods mentioned therein shall pass by reason of such consignment or endorsement, shall have all the rights and liabilities of the consignor. (3, p. 267).

While the domains of maritime engineering and marine electronics are generally characterized by structural conciseness and clarity, maritime law texts tend to be heavy and verbose. This feature sets legal writing apart from the other two specialized discourses, which tend to be marked by an opposite trend.

Another difference between legal and non-legal ME texts concerns the use of impersonal constructions. The passive construction is widespread and well distributed in all the three genres examined, but the instructive, non-legal texts abound in expressions involving the use of the impersonal *you*, making it possible to address the reader more directly while, at the same time, maintaining the necessary impersonal tone:

O-Conspiracy: someone wants to hurt you [...]. Fate: “what is written in the stars will happen”. You cannot escape your Fate. (1, p. 792).

P-You may set up the system to fit your requirements, and the system will provide you with a real-time display for quality control of the current data acquisition. (2, p. 8).

Such use would be inappropriate in legal writing, which requires a higher level of formality and “distance” between the author of a text and its addressees. Legal texts are usually normative rather than just descriptive or instructive and therefore need to be as neutral and as formal as possible. Sometimes, their complicated syntactic structure may affect ease of understanding:

Q-Section 5 of the ITA affords legal recognition to digital signatures. It provides that notwithstanding anything contained in any law which provides that information or any document shall be authenticated by affixing the signature of any person, such requirement shall be deemed to have been satisfied if it is authenticated by digital signature affixed in the manner as may be prescribed by the Central Government. (3, p. 269).

Finally, written ME texts are generally marked by a distinctive unemotional, dry and distanced style, often reinforced by the presence of charts, graphs, bullet points, etc. which increase their level of technicality. The frequent insertion of mathematical symbols, expressions and formulas confer both specificity and complexity to texts, resulting in a real fusion of “languages” from different domains and sectors. The reader of ME texts is thus required to have a multidisciplinary and integrated knowledge of the maritime field.

3.2 Spoken Maritime English: A Lingua Franca?

Spoken ME is hybrid in nature. While, on the one hand, it can be considered as a standard micro-language, specifically designed to overcome or minimize miscommunication at sea, it also undergoes some variation and change, possibly due to the fact that its users are speakers of other first languages, sharing the same goal but for whom intelligibility rather than correctness is key. Therefore, some of the typical features of English as a lingua franca (cf. Seidlhofer, 2006; Cogo & Dewey, 2006) emerge on closer examination.

Spoken ME is undoubtedly subject to a widespread standardization of constructions, often resulting from the omission of semantically less prominent sentence elements. The radio conversation analysed (see appendix) (Note 9) presents many instances of these features:

- (1) How do you read?
- (2) Do you read?

These two questions follow from the ellipsis of a manner adverb and an object (3) and from the replacement of a modal verb with the auxiliary *do* as well as from the ellipsis of an object (4), respectively:

(3) How **well** do you read **me**?

(4) **Can** you read **me**?

The interpretation of both questions, namely “how well is my message being received?”, is by convention embedded under the two reduced constructions which only allow minimal variations (e.g., *how do you hear?* and *do you hear?* would also be possible), because they have become fixed uses. The omission of manner adverbs and of some modal verbs is common in spoken ME. There is a constant attempt at using not just easy-to-understand, codified expressions, but also at avoiding any ambiguity that may arise from the polysemous nature of words. The verb *can*, for instance, expresses both ability and permission. In order to minimize misunderstandings, the latter sense is generally conveyed through a paraphrase, while the verb is maintained with its meaning of “being able to”:

(5) Is it permitted to use shallow draft fairway at this time? (SMCP, p. 15)

(6) Can you get fire under control? (SMCP, p. 16)

There is a general tendency towards conciseness in spoken ME, as can be observed in the following examples, in which the “superfluous” (i.e., articles and auxiliary verbs) has been eliminated, to the detriment of linguistic accuracy:

(7) I have leak below water line. (SMCP, p. 27)

(8) How many compartments flooded? (SMCP, p. 27)

In the excerpt below, the ellipsed elements have been added again in square brackets in order to show the degree of possible reduction to be found:

(9) [The/Our] Situation is as follows: [we were following the] normal cruising procedure when [we were] approached from starboard by two heavily loaded skiffs. [The] Skiffs made direct approach on the ship. [A] Person [was] sighted in front of [a] skiff with what appeared to be a high powered weapon. Warning shots were fired. Skiffs have now broken off their attack and are shadowing from approximately three miles to our stern. Over.

These omissions do not impinge on the clarity of what is communicated nor do some uses that would normally be considered incorrect in the standard varieties of English, but are instead acceptable here in the logic of simplification and standardization:

(10) I read you excellent. (SMCP, p. 12)

(11) Is flooding stopped? (SMCP, p. 96)

In (10) a manner adverb (e.g., *well* or *clearly*) would be required instead of the adjective *excellent* and the verb *is* in (11) should be substituted by the auxiliary *has*.

Sentences in spoken ME are generally short and it is not rare to come across what now appear to be antiquated or odd uses:

(12) What problems have you? (SMCP, p. 30)

(13) How many tugs must I take? (SMCP, p. 42)

The insertion of the auxiliary *do* would normally be required in both questions above (in addition to the transformation of *must* into *have to* in (13)), but because it is semantically empty, in the sense that it does not itself add meaning to the message, it is often eliminated. This syntactic feature is quite common, but used inconsistently. In other words, spoken ME presents regular syntactic patterns too (14), some of which have become standardized and are now recognized as non-modifiable, formulaic sequences, as in (1) above, reproduced here as (15) for convenience:

(14) What problems do you have? (SMCP, p. 34)

(15) How do you read?

Furthermore, spoken ME appears to be characterized by a rather authoritative tone, achieved through the use of formal, Latin-based words and phrases (the bold font has been added for emphasis) and the general avoidance of politeness formulas in the imperative:

(16) I **require** assistance. (SMCP, p. 29)

(17) I **proceed** to your assistance. (SMCP, p. 29)

(18) I **expect** to reach you within... (SMCP, p. 29)

(19) Stay **in vicinity of** pollution and co-operate with oil clearance team. (SMCP, p. 40)

The combination of formal, Latinate verbs in the simple present tense and active voice with the first person singular pronoun *I*, as in (16), (17) and (18), tends to produce performative sentences, since their utterance is or is part of the doing of the kind of action they describe (cf. Austin 1962). With sentence (16), for example, one makes an explicit request. Similarly, (17) and (18) indicate, respectively, that the first move has been taken and that there is a state of expectancy. Explicit performatives make it possible to eliminate ambiguity by means of highly conventional formulas.

Conventionality in spoken ME is also found in the use of archaic terminology (e.g., *aground*, *adrift*, *astern*) that concisely expresses basic nautical concepts:

(20) How long does it take to change engine from ahead to astern? (SMCP, p. 73)

From this standpoint, spoken and written ME present many similarities, since vocabulary in both registers consists of both semi- and highly specialized items. Consider, for instance, the following question taken from the propulsion system section of the SMCP:

(21) Do you have controllable or fixed pitch propeller? (SMCP, p. 73)

While (20) only contains general specialized terminology, (21) refers to one specific part of the engine and presents a higher degree of technicality.

Spoken ME is strongly oriented towards transparency and explicitness also at the wider discourse level, to the extent that the various speech acts are often clearly indicated by means of message markers, used before giving a warning (22) or expressing one's intentions (23), etc.:

(22) WARNING. Obstruction in fairway. (SMCP, p. 46)

(23) INTENTION. I will reduce speed. (SMCP, p. 47)

This is because the illocutionary force of utterances needs to be derived from the actual words used and should not remain inferable, since confusion and misunderstandings in non face-to-face conversations are likely to occur. This is even more important when the interlocutors use English as a working language, but are in fact speakers of other languages. It is of course at the discretion of shore staff and personnel on-board ships whether or not to use message markers, but the IMO recommends their inclusion where practicable. In the radio conversation analysed, for instance, no message markers are used and intended meanings sometimes remain implicit. Example (24) consists of a request, but such function is not explicitly marked:

(24) Please try again contacting coalition war ships on channel sixteen. Over.

The need for a clear indication of intended meanings may in part be required by the abundant use of imperative forms, typically associated to different pragmatic functions, such as advising, ordering, requesting and so forth. In responding to the request in (24), for instance, a message marker would have been of help to understand the north contender's course of action, which instead remains rather ambiguous (25). This is also due to the lack of a modal verb disambiguating the temporal dimension of the utterance:

(25) North Contender: Contact coalition war ships. Repeat channel. Repeat channel, please.

The majority of verbal exchanges in spoken ME are grounded in the "here and now" of the speech event and the use of the imperative and of present tenses prevails over that of past tense forms. This is very evident in the radio conversation analysed, in which the very few verbs referring to past actions are only used to provide a background frame to the communicative event. The bulk of the dialogue is then centred around the solution of the current situation. Present-centred communication thus appears to be the characterizing property of spoken ME. This is because conversations on board and between ships as well as those involving shore-based staff typically concern activities happening at/close to the time of speaking, such as providing traffic data (26), signalling a safety problem (27), sending distress messages about flooding, collision, grounding, etc. (28), requesting assistance (29) and so forth.

(26) North Contender: Our current course is two five two degrees. We're currently making one five, fifteen knots. Over.

(27) North Contender: [...] We now have two skiffs shadowing us approximately three miles away to our rear and one more skiff approaching from the starboard side. Over.

(28) I have heavy list to portside. (SMCP, p. 28)

(29) I require boat for hospital transfer. (SMCP, p. 33)

Finally, communications to lay people on board vessels (e.g., passengers on a ferry/cruise ship), as in the case of briefings and instructions, are generally less technical and specialized than the ones among maritime professionals. The language used to inform passengers about safety procedures and to guide their conduct in an emergency, for example, presents many features that were not found in strictly technical maritime situations. Alongside firm and direct instructions (30), it is common to come across polite and redundant expressions as well (31):

(30) Never let children climb or sit on the ship's rails. (SMCP, p. 118)

(31) Ladies and gentlemen [...] I have pleasure in informing you that all safety equipment is in full working order. (SMCP, p. 116)

The use of adverbs is also abundant, as they reinforce warning messages:

(32) Always inform somebody of the crew if you detect fire, smell or smoke. (SMCP, p. 117)

(33) Never use an electric iron in your cabin. (SMCP, p. 117)

Despite the presence of some of the features of specialized discourse, expert to non-expert communication in the maritime field appears to lose its technical flavour, thus resembling standard everyday language.

4. Conclusions

This paper has attempted to demonstrate that maritime English cannot be viewed as a uniform entity, but should rather be considered as a multi-faceted type of specialized discourse.

At the lexical-semantic level, varying degrees of specialization and technicality can be identified. In written ME semi-technical words and phrases related to the nautical field in general (e.g., used to describe the different parts of ships, the movements on board a vessel, etc.) mix with more specialized, domain-specific terminology relevant to the various areas of study. Therefore, texts require competent readers in the different maritime subfields. Spoken ME also presents some cross-domain lexical differences, but since it is primarily concerned with matters of safety and security the range of lexical choices is narrower. It has been shown that both written and spoken ME often make use of formal and archaic expressions, frequently based on Latin, adding a general tone of officiality and authoritativeness to discourse.

Written ME exhibits more structural complexity than spoken ME. This is particularly true for maritime law texts, which due to sentence length and syntax may come across as ambiguous. On the other hand, spoken ME strives for simplicity and transparency at all levels. But syntactic reduction sometimes produces what now appear as odd or antiquated uses.

Oral messages are primarily centred around the "here and now" of speech time, so the temporal dimension of spoken ME is predominantly confined to the present, with frequent uses of the imperative construction and of performative utterances. The temporal-aspectual contour of written ME is instead richer.

At a broader level of analysis, ME discourse is characterized by an essentially unemotional, dry and impersonal style. This is, however, a common feature of specialized language in general to be found in many other disciplines as well.

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Notes

Note 1. The present paper intends to fill this gap by offering a succinct yet thorough characterization of this specialized domain. Due to the lack of previous theoretical linguistic research in the field, the study does not draw on any particular framework or analytic perspective.

Note 2. Molland, A. F. (Ed.). (2008). *The Maritime Engineering Reference Book. A Guide to Ship Design, Construction and Operation*. Oxford, UK: Elsevier.

Note 3. Simrad ME70 Scientific multibeam echo Sounder (www.SIMRAD.com).

Note 4. Rhidian, D. T. (Ed.). (2009). *The Journal of International Maritime Law*, 15(3). Witney, Oxon, UK: Lawtext Publishing Limited.

Note 5. <http://www.uniocean.com/en/ContentDir/750/1593.aspx>

Note 6. *Tetley's Glossary of Maritime Law Terms* (<http://www.mcgill.ca/maritimelaw/glossaries/maritime/>), *Duhaime & Williams's Maritime & Waterways Law Dictionary* (<http://www.duhaime.org/LegalDictionary/Category/MaritimeLawDictionary.aspx>)

Note 7. Nafziger, J. A. R., & Symeonides, S. C. (Eds.). (2002). *Law and Justice in a Multistate World: Essays in Honor of Arthur T. von Mehren* (p. 17). Ardsley, N. Y.: Transnational Publishers Inc.

Note 8. http://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1443799/000092242311000294/kl07003_ex10-3.htm

Note 9. The examples cited in this section were taken from an authentic conversation, downloadable at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AA3b0Ou_2as, and from the Standard Maritime Communication Phrases when indicated. The complete text of the SMCP can be retrieved at <http://www.imo.org/OurWork/Safety/Navigation/Pages/StandardMarineCommunicationPhrases.aspx>. The examples provided here are followed by the indication of the page number on which they appear.

Appendix

North Contender: Station calling. You are still third class. Repeat. Third class signal. Over.

Gjibouti Radio: Yes. This is Djibouti radio. Djibouti radio station. How do you read? Over.

North Contender: Djibouti radio, you are now coming through second class. Readable. Over.

Gjibouti Radio: Ok. What's your situation? What's your situation now? Over.

North Contender: Situation is as follows: normal cruising procedure when approached from starboard by two heavily loaded skiffs. Skiffs made direct approach on the ship. Person sighted in front of skiff with what appeared to be a high powered weapon. Warning shots were fired. Skiffs have now broken off their attack and are shadowing from approximately three miles to our stern. Over.

Gjibouti Radio: Please try again contacting coalition war ships on channel sixteen. Over.

North Contender: Contact coalition war ships. Repeat channel. Repeat channel, please.

Gjibouti Radio: Channel one six. Channel sixteen. Over.

North Contender: One six Roger. Thank you.

Gjibouti Radio: Coalition war ship. All coalition war ships. This is Djibouti radio station. Do you read? Over.

North Contender: Our current course is two five two degrees. We're currently making one five, fifteen knots. Over.

Russian tanker: Charlie Yankee Seven. This is Russian tanker. Russian navy tanker.(Unintelligible words). Over.

North Contender: This is three echo charlieyankee seven. Russian tanker, you're coming through third to second class. Barely readable. Over.

North Contender: Yes, Russian tanker. Russian tanker, this is North Contender. We also have armed security on board and have fired warning shots. We now have two skiffs shadowing us approximately three miles away to our rear and one more skiff approaching from the starboard side. Over.

North Contender: We have two skiffs.

North Contender: Russian tanker. Russian tanker. This is North Contender. Reference altering course to one two zero. This is not possible. Not possible. Over.

North Contender: (Unintelligible words). That course will take us into confrontation with attacking skiffs. Over.

Gjibouti Radio: Gjibouti Radio. (Something in other language). Gjibouti Radio. Gjibouti Radio.

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