

Going local

Some thoughts about the use of local language in tug operations – is English always the best option?



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I read regularly about captains feeling left out of the loop when pilots and tugboats or linesmen speak the local language among each other, and their desire/request to change that communication to English. I can fully understand and sympathise with their point of view, having both been a captain for a short while and been a pilot on ships where all internal communication was in a language that I did not master.

However I want to speak some words of caution. When manoeuvring, especially with light, high windage vessels such as car carriers and other types of vessels that react instantly to the wind and the tug forces they are subject to, it is vital that communication is very quick and understood instantly. Any delay can result in damages. We're talking seconds rather than minutes. When there is time pressure, fast and efficient communication is vital – and when communication has to be done by phone, or radio, the very important aspect of non-verbal communication is lost. This means it is all the more important that verbal communication is readily and easily understood

With this in mind, it is not surprising that the overwhelming majority of pilots and tug masters want to communicate in their own language (90% of the pilots, tug masters not specified but apparently the overwhelming majority, based on the Report on Safe Tug Procedures, April 20 2013).

Working with two teams

By contrast, 100% of the captains that participated in the study asked for pilot – tug communication in English. I fully understand this, and I wholeheartedly embrace the notion that captain/bridge team and pilot form a team in all practical aspects, and have to work together to achieve a common goal. The bridge team has the right to be fully informed about manoeuvres and the pilot has a duty to keep them informed. This means the pilot must explain the plan for the use of the tugs to the bridge team, and engage in 'thinking aloud' or 'dynamic briefing' to include them in updates to the plan. The training and coaching of pilots should emphasise this and pilots should always integrate this in their routine.

However, in addition to being part of the bridge team, the pilot is also part of another team: that of the tugs and line handlers – and communication with that team requires discussion, just as it does on

the bridge. When communicating with tugs, giving and receiving orders is not the point at issue. Giving orders in English could be practised and I am sure that in many countries it will be possible to come to an acceptable result. But working with tugs in a proficient and safe way involves much more than giving orders. As a pilot I find that the tug masters are my eyes and ears fore and aft. I know them and trust them; they have a wealth of experience – and because of their location, they can see a lot that I cannot see. I could be 260 metres away from the bow, with superstructure obscuring the view behind me, and there could be important cues hidden in blind sectors. For all these reasons, the tug masters need to know and understand my plan and be able to give relevant input. This discussion will often be faster and more accurately conducted in a common language. Of course in the end I give the tugs the directions that are needed to come to a well-coordinated result, but they will give me the feedback I need to perform a safe manoeuvre.

Another issue is that tug masters have performed the same manoeuvres many, many times. This makes it possible for the pilots to brief the operation in a sort of shorthand, focusing on the attention points of the day: actual meteorological conditions, peculiarities of this specific ship, specific circumstances with regards to moored vessels and traffic. The captain/bridge team are unlikely to understand this shorthand, so even if this brief was carried out in English, it would not reduce the need to explain the manoeuvre separately to the bridge team.

Successful communication is all about the attitude of the pilot. It is possible that the pilot might leave the captain/bridge team out of the loop even when communication with tugs is in English. In the same way, the pilot can involve the bridge team completely even when communicating with the tugs in local language. Pilots have wide experience in handling ships using the English language; they do that every working day. So they know the difference between working in English and working in the local language and they know the difference in communicating face to face with the bridge team, compared to VHF communications.

Using expertise

I highly respect the captain and the bridge team, I am sure that possibly in most aspects they are more experienced and proficient in running a ship than most pilots (including me). However when it comes to skills and experience of working with tugs, especially in the specific operations in the specific port, I am convinced that the tug master is better

suited to discover weaknesses in planning, and slips and lapses in execution than the captain/bridge team. These skills take years to develop and cannot be transferred in a briefing lasting only a few minutes. I want to make optimal use of the resource that tug masters are, and I want to empower them as much as I can to be able to challenge me in a BRM sense. How happy would a tug master be to convey the subtleties that I would really like to know from him, when he has to express himself in English? Will he say the things that are felt to be a bit more sensitive, or those of which he is unsure and he wants to bring to the pilot's attention?

Now and then I get on board a tug to stay in touch with their perspective. When I was writing this article I asked a tug master/trainer about his feelings on the subject. He was very clear in rejecting the suggestion that he should communicate with the pilot in English, exactly for these reasons.

Avoiding error

Of course defences to mitigate one-man errors need to be built into the system. When using the local language in communicating with tugs, these defences are twofold:

- On a strategic (planning) level the pilot should explain their intentions to the captain/bridge team in English, updating these as required, so that the bridge team can pick up any discrepancies between plan and execution and the experience of captain and bridge team is utilised as much as possible.
- On both the strategic level (the plan) and the tactical level (the detailed execution of the plan) tug masters are the best suited to challenge the pilot (in the BRM sense), as they are experts in tug operations, the (in)abilities of their tugs, the local circumstances etc. Tug masters who perform the same manoeuvre day after day are the most qualified persons to notice if the pilot makes a slip, or attempts something out of the ordinary.

Increasing understanding

Using the own language between pilot and tug has the disadvantage that the bridge team cannot understand all that is said, so is not able to identify mistakes. It might also have the disadvantage that it makes it simpler to allow superfluous or irrelevant communication.

Using English has the disadvantage that communication between pilot and tug masters will become slower, less precise and more open for misunderstanding, and that the threshold for challenges for the tug master will increase.

The optimal way forward in my mind would be:

- Pilots and their organisations should be made aware of the importance of explaining the intended tug manoeuvres to the captain/bridge team, and of constantly updating the plans if required. This could be done for instance in BRM-type workshops with a mixed group of captains, bridge officers and pilots.
- Pilots should get a proper training and internship with tugs. Pilots should be convinced of the great value tug masters have as experts in tug handling and value their input and challenge.

The problem in perspective

Have you had a feeling of frustration when you were with friends from other countries, and you were just too slow to find the right words and expressions, so that you could not really participate in the conversations?

How would you feel about having to phone your operational boss and talk to him in a language that was not your own, about something in which you thought that he might be wrong, but you were not quite sure, with time pressure as an added complication? Would you phone him, or just assume that things were not that bad?

Now imagine this in a difficult docking or towage situation...



Communication can be more difficult without visual cues; for example over the radio

- Tug masters should get an internship with pilots, in order to know what operations look like from the bridge of the vessel. This will help them to realise to a greater extent what kind of support a pilot needs.
- Pilot organisations and tug companies should work on an exchange of experiences by organising events during which pilots and tug masters can receive continual training and foster open communication. Both should view the promotion of good communications between pilots and tugs, the notion of teamwork and a good challenge and response atmosphere as the standard.

I am convinced that under these conditions, using the local language as operational language between tugs and pilots would be a positive contributor to safety.

Language on the bridge

This leads to a small aside: the use of the own language among bridge teams. I have just studied some 10 years of reports from the Australian Transport Safety Bureau (ATSB), and have seen a number of cases where using own language on the bridge while under pilotage has been identified as a contributing factor to incidents. On the other hand, while writing this article I accompanied a pilot on a Chinese crewed bulk carrier which had to moor on buoys and anchors. The pilot explained the operation (in English) and after that the crew started to discuss in Chinese. After this discussion the captain asked a number of questions in English. This pilot said that he was very happy with the discussions in Chinese. It was his experience that if only English was spoken, no questions were asked of him, but during mooring it would become apparent that the crew had not understood the operation.

Just as pilots have to learn to keep the bridge team updated, the bridge team has to learn to update the pilot as soon as this is appropriate. Just like the pilot that I quoted, I do not feel left out when the crew use their own language to make sure that all have properly understood, I actually have more hope that any uncertainties will be mentioned and addressed. Again, it is all about the attitude, not about the language used: I can feel left out on a bridge where all communication is in English, and I can feel involved on a bridge where part of the communication takes place in the own language.

In summary, there are no perfect solutions. Every solution bears the seeds of another problem. The only possible answer is that it is all about the balance; devising procedures that have more positive than negative effects. There is no single solution that will provide absolute safety; the search is for an optimum. The appropriate use of English in bridge communication can provide such an optimum, but demanding exclusive use of English under all conditions might not. In the end it is all about attitude. Whether you are captain, mate or pilot or tug master, linesman or VTS operator, the question is: do you feel part of the team and do you want to share information and plans? Are you willing to challenge, and do you know when and how to, and are you willing to respond to a challenge? 🗣️