Center for Open Access in Science ▪ Belgrade - SERBIA
10th International e-Conference on Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences
http://centerprode.com/conferences/10IeCSHSS.html
ISBN (Online) 978-86-81294-13-0 ▪ 2024: 13-24

Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices in Spoken Maritime Communications

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Abstract

The paper provides a corpus-driven analysis of different illocutionary force indicating devices (IFIDs) in a spoken corpus of maritime VHF communications. The study relies on the speech act theory (Austin, 1962) and the notion of IFIDs (Searle, 1969). IFIDs refer to various linguistic and non-linguistic devices that indicate the illocutionary force of an utterance, which might include lexical means (verbs, adverbs, etc.), word order, intonation and other means. The study is conducted on a spoken corpus which consists of about ten hours of communication between the ship and the shore. The analysis is performed by employing a combination of quantitative and qualitative approach. First, fifty exchanges are analyzed to identify possible IFIDs. This is followed by corpus analysis of the IFIDs identified in the previous stage. The aim is to shed light on the pragmatic aspect of maritime communications which are otherwise highly structured and institutionalized.

Keywords: illocutionary force indicating devices, maritime communication, spoken corpus, speech acts.

1. Introduction

The paper focuses on the specific way language is used in spoken maritime communications, a subvariety of Maritime English. This subvariety represents spoken interaction between interlocutors exclusively via VHF radio with the goal of exchanging information in a clear, fast, efficient and unambiguous way. In these specific circumstances, the paper analyses the linguistic effects achieved by participants in maritime communication exchanges considering their role and relation of power or solidarity, with particular consideration of illocutionary force indicating devices (IFIDs).

The research relies on the speech act theory and the pragmatic effects achieved through language. Speech act theory was posited in the mid-20th century by Austin (1962), who observed language from a pragmatic aspect, as actions that we perform with words. His theory has later seen some modifications and alterations, but the fact remains that Austin was the first to draw attention to this aspect of language and showed that the same utterance may have different meanings depending on the speech act in which it was uttered. Austin defined three basic dimensions of every speech act. One is the locutionary dimension, which refers to the actual production of an utterance that has its reference and meaning. The second, illocutionary dimension refers to the speaker's intention, i.e., the goal or purpose of the utterance which has a specific communicative force in the context of the situation. Furthermore, everything that the

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speakers say in one turn may consist of several illocutions, where each illocution represents one move in the speech act (Ivanetić 1995). The third, perlocutionary dimension refers to the effect that the utterance had with the receiver of the message.

- VHF communications follow a standardized protocol of communication.
- VHF communications share some features of everyday spoken communication.
- Illocutionary force indicating devices can be found in this subvariety of Maritime English.
- IFIDs are one of the features that connect this subvariety to everyday spoken discourse.

Searle (1979) makes a difference between illocutionary purpose and illocutionary force, i.e., linguistic means used to provide the force of the utterance (Searle 1979). Illocutionary force is expressed and interpreted by means of various illocutionary force indicating devices (IFIDs), which is interpreted by the receiver using his pragmatic competence. These indicators might include performative verbs, mode, word order, intonation, tone, stress, adverbs, extralinguistic means and context. For example, the imperative conventionally has a primary function of giving orders or requesting, but in some other contexts it may be used to express an advice, a threat or an instruction. In cases where the situation clearly indicates the speaker's intention, it is not necessary to use IFIDs as indications.

In order to interpret the meaning, the receiver takes into consideration the conventional meaning of words, linguistic and extralinguistic context of the utterance and the knowledge of the world and acts in accordance with Grice's cooperative principle and conversational maxims. Briggs (2003) also noted that speech acts are all performative, but to a varying degree, while Yule (1996) differentiated between implicit and explicit performatives.

IFIDs are understood as linguistic units that indicate or restrict the illocutionary force of an utterance (Searle & Vanderveken, 1985; Stampe, 1975). There are three main indicators of IFIDs identified in research so far:

1. lexical indicators, e.g., explicit performatives (Condoravdi & Lauer, 2011; Jary, 2007) which includes verbs, adverbs and some other expressions that explicitly indicate the illocutionary force of a speech act;

2. syntactic indicators, e.g., the verbal mode, like the imperative;

3. prosodic indicators include, e.g., pitch.

The goal of the research was to identify IFIDs that appear in this specific kind of spoken interaction and to analyse the differences between two groups of participants, i.e. officers on board different ships and Vessel Traffic Service operators. In spite of their training, several studies (cf. Pritchard & Kalogjera, 2000, Bocanegra, 2011, Dževerdanović-Pejović, 2013, Ahmmed, 2020, Jurkovič, 2022) have shown that participants in maritime communication do not adhere strictly to the protocol but they still achieve a high level of understanding, therefore this study aims to take into account one of the aspects of communication, so called "soft skills" aspect.

The analysis of linguistic devices used in such a way might have implications both in developing training programmes, as this will promote understanding of how linguistic resources may be used in different ways, and in developing operational protocols and technological systems as these communication strategies may influence on how the participants make judgements and decisions and how they approach certain issues.

2. Method

The spoken corpus of maritime communications MarCom underwent two stages of analysis. The first was a qualitative analysis that enabled a deeper insight into the issue of IFID sin this particular specialized spoken corpus, focusing on individual instances important for understanding the speech act in each turn. This constituted a bottom-up approach to identifying and analyzing IFIDs in the corpus of spoken maritime communication exchanges. The qualitative analysis enabled the identification of unpredictable and unexpected linguistic elements in the corpus, understanding of the speech act and insight into the causes and links between individual speech acts. The analysis focused on the process, i.e., meaning and understanding of specific segments, which may be greater or smaller than a sentence. In that sense, the focus is on details that reveal patterns or models leading to conclusions.

2.1 *Corpus MarCom*

The research was carried out on a corpus of maritime communication exchanges, i.e., MarCom, consisting of 93,920 tokens, which corresponds to about 10 hours of conversations recorded in the area of the Adriatic Sea between the ships and the Vessel Traffic Service (VTS). The recordings were granted by the Maritime Safety Directorate of the Croatian Ministry of the Sea, Transport and Infrastructure provided that the recordings are treated in accordance with the EU General Data Protection Regulation. Therefore, during the transcription stage, the transcripts were anonymized to keep the confidentiality of the audio materials, which meant removing any personal information, e.g., ship names, place names, station names, from the transcribed corpus so that messages cannot be associated with specific ships or places. The transcriptions were performed by means of the speech-to-text application Transcriptor,[1] however, they had to be checked and corrected manually.

VHF maritime communication is a kind of spoken interaction regulated not only by conversational norms and expectations, but also by institutionalised norms and standards proscribed by the parent organization, the International Maritime Organization (IMO), and the International Association of Lighthouse Authorities (IALA) in different documents and regulations (cf. Regulation V/14.4 of the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea, IMO Resolution A.1158(32) Guidelines for vessel traffic services, IALA Recommendation R1012 VTS Communications, IALA Guideline G1132 VTS Voice Communications and Phraseology). The goal of this specific language policy was to ensure "precise, simple and unambiguous"[2] communication that is timely and clear as "ambiguous or non-standard phrases are frequent causal or contributory factors in marine casualty, incident and near miss situations."[3] This requirement would indicate that the utterances used in maritime exchanges are all explicit, but various research (cf. Johnson, 1994, Pritchard & Kalogjera, 2000, Kataria, 2011, Dževerdanović-Pejović, 2013; Jurkovič et al., 2019) have shown that this specific spoken interaction approximates to everyday spoken discourse in features such as omissions, greetings, addressing, etc. In that sense, this research aims to analyse the extent to which the utterances are explicit and the illocutionary force they achieve. It should also be mentioned that the corpus contains exchanges between ships and Vessel Traffic Service (VTS) operators, whereby the latter represent the authority. It is assumed that the role of the VTS operator will influence on the use of linguistic means and the illocutionary force of utterances.

[1] https://transkriptor.com/.

[2] IMO Resolution A.918(22) IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases.

[3] The IALA Guideline G1132 VTS Voice Communications and Phraseology.

2.2 *Data collection and analysis*

The analysis was conducted using a combination of qualitative and quantitative approach. First, a randomly selected sample of fifty maritime communication exchanges were selected from the corpus. Although the selection was random, care was taken to extract examples of various scenarios so the results would not be influenced by the same topic. The exchanges were divided into turns (cf. Pritchard & Kalogjera, 2000, Bocanegra, 2011) and then analysed qualitatively according to pre-set criteria, namely, illocutionary force of the utterance (strong, neutral, weak), IFIDs used, explicitness or implicitness of IFID, mitigation or reinforcement of utterance, the mitigation of reinforcement device used. The turns spoken by the ship crew were separated from those spoken by the VTS operators to analyse whether there are any differences in the use of language between the two groups, considering the difference in roles within the communicative context. The quantitative analysis was performed with specific linguistic elements identified in the first qualitative stage, e.g., "thank", "please", "sir", in two subcorpora – the subcorpus of utterances by ship crew and subcorpus of utterances by VTS operators. Qualitative analysis helped to identify possible IFIDs that could be found in the corpus, while quantitative analysis showed their relevance in the corpus of exchanges and indicated differences in the use of particular IFIDs between the two groups of participants.

3. Results and discussion

The quantitative analysis encompassed 446 turns, 242 turns by ship crew and 224 turns by VTS operators recorded during 2023 in the area of the Adriatic Sea. The topics are standard, routine exchanges on anchoring, berthing, piloting, bunkering, maritime reports on approaching port and entering VTS sector. In the analysis, each turn was allocated a level of illocutionary force and then a linguistic item that served as illocutionary force indicating device was selected as key for identifying the force of the utterance.

3.1 *Qualitative analysis*

The first criterion that was observed was the illocutionary force of each turn, which was evaluated on a scale as strong, neutral or weak. The results are shown in Figure 1.

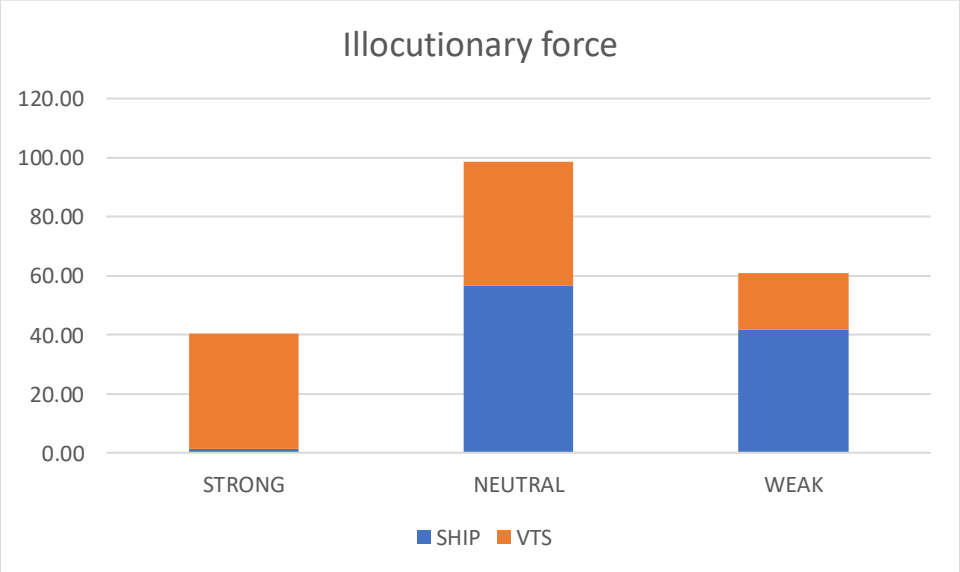

Figure 1. Illocutionary force of utterances by ship crews and VTS operators

The results have shown that most utterances are in the middle range of illocutionary force, while there were about 40% of utterances with a strong illocutionary force. A great majority of utterances with strong illocutionary force were produced by the VTS operators, while a majority of utterances with weak illocutionary force were produced by the ship crews. Considering the authoritative role of the VTS, this result was expected. The illocutionary force is also fine-tuned by various mitigation and reinforcement devices as shown below.

The following analysis included the various linguistic means used to achieve the mentioned illocutionary force, i.e. the illocutionary force indicating devices. The quantitative analysis of fifty sample exchanges showed a variety of IFIDs which included the following:

1. verbal mode, that includes imperative (e.g., '*Proceed all the time and when you approach City roads, contact Harbour Master*'), indicative (e.g. '*You're one cable east from Charlie three'), questions (e.g. 'Have you received the ice waypoints?*') and conditionals (e.g. '*If you have any update, just call us back*'),

2. adverbs, e.g., '*Yes Sir, please and please when you call me, before you call me set your AIS navigational status*',

3. interjections, i.e. phrases that are grammatically independent from the rest of the sentence and mainly express emotions, e.g., '*Yes, master, good evening, last port and destination?*',

4. performative verbs, e.g. '*you confirm you solve the problem in one hour*',

5. modal verbs, e.g. '*Can you give me anchor position?*',

6. repetition, e.g. '*I copy that but we didn't receive. Please resend it again because we didn't receive.*',

7. intonation, and

8. context.

The results of the analysis are presented in Table 1, separately for the ship crew turns and VTS turns.

Table 1. Illocutionary force indicating devices

INDICATORS OF ILLOCUTIONARY FORCE	Mode – imperative	Mode – indicative	Mode – question	Mode – conditional	Adverb	Performative verb	Modal verb	Interjection	Repetition	Intonation	Context
SHIP	17	194	21	0	2	0	0	8	0	0	0
VTS	89	20	84	2	12	3	1	3	2	1	9

The results from Table 1 show that VTS operators mostly use the verbal mode, imperative or question, as IFIDs in their utterances. Both are considered to have strong illocutionary force, which is also in line with the authoritative role of the VTS. The context of the situation has also proved to be important in interpreting the illocutionary dimension of the utterance as it is also a crucial factor in understanding the intended message by the participants. It should also be noted that interjections can frequently be found in the role of IFIDs, which

together with repetitions, represent a way to modify the illocutionary force of a turn, both with ships crew and VTS.

When it comes to the explicitness or implicitness of utterances in the sample exchanges, the results shown in Figure 2, demonstrate that there have been more explicit utterances produced by ship crews than by VTS operators. The increased number of explicit utterances for ship crews might also be attributed to the fact that they are required to provide clear, precise and unambiguous factual information. It might also be due to the roles of participants, whereby VTS operators as authority tried to mitigate the force of their utterances, while ship crews having an inferior role in the conversation used more explicit phrases, thus both groups reduced the role distance.

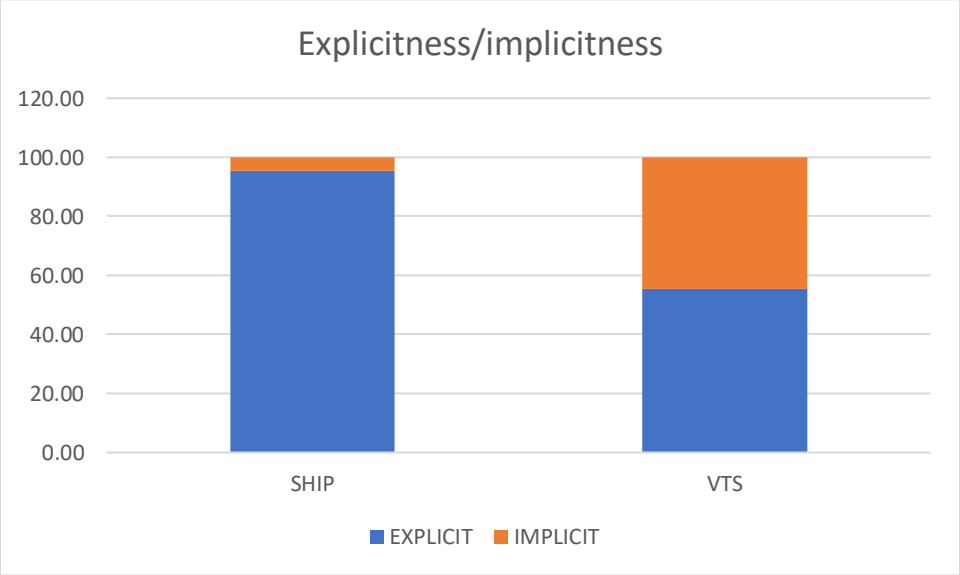

Figure 2. Explicitness/implicitness of the utterances by the ship crews and VTS operators

This also relates to the results of mitigation and reinforcement strategies shown in Figure 3.

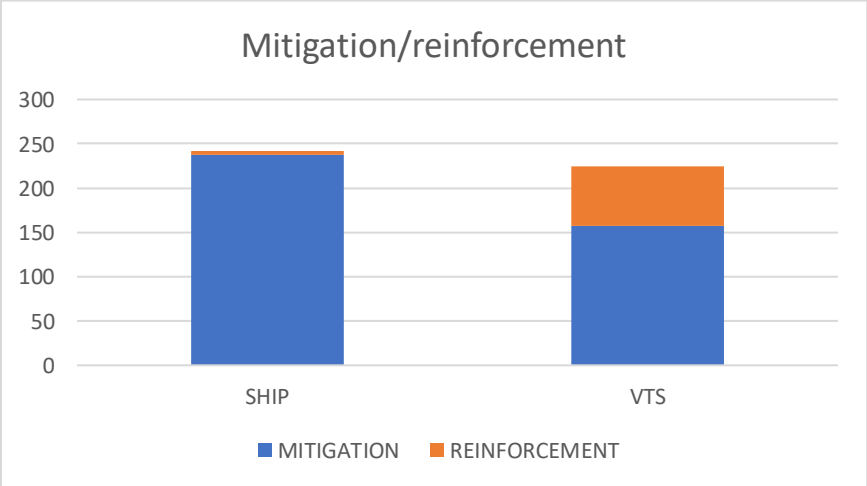

Figure 3. Mitigation and reinforcement strategies used in utterances by ship crews and VTS operators

The results show that the ship crews used more mitigation strategies (97.93%) probably owing to their inferior role in the conversation and the fact that their explicit utterances might come across as too authoritative, which does not correspond with their role in the communication. The VTS operators also use more mitigation strategies, although much less than the ship crews (69.2%), which might be attributed to their role, so these mitigation devices serve as solidarity-based face-saving strategies.

As mitigation and reinforcement devices, the participants used a range of linguistic means, shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Mitigation and reinforcement devices used in utterances

	Mitigating		Reinforcement	
	SHIP	VTS	SHIP	VTS
Verb	32	31	1	3
Adverb	31	24	0	0
Noun	21	0	0	0
Role	96	0	0	32
Repetition	2	0	3	9
Modal verb	7	18	0	1
Interjection	28	18	0	0
Ellipsis	4	41	0	0
Word order	2	6	1	0
Mode – question	1	2	0	11
Context	7	13	0	0
Intonation	4	3	0	0
Performative verb	0	1	0	1
Performative noun	0	0	0	5
Mode – imperative	0	0	0	3
Mode – conditional	0	2	0	0

The results show that overall the participants used more mitigation devices than reinforcement devices which is in accordance with the principle of cooperation and solidarity on communication. The mitigation and reinforcement devices range from syntactic (verbs, adverbs, nouns, modal verbs, verbal mode, word order, interjections) to discursive (repetition, ellipsis) and extralinguistic elements (context, role). The most frequent mitigation strategy by both ship and VTS is the verb 'thank', adverbs (e.g., 'please') and interjections (e.g., 'good morning'). The role of the ship crew itself is a mitigating circumstance, as they are frequently found in the inferior position of the one that has to answer questions, obey orders or instructions. The use of interjections is found both in ship crew turns and in VTS turns as an illocutionary force mitigating device, which reduces the formality of conversation, reduces the role distance and represents one of the strategies that approximate this kind of spoken interaction to everyday spoken interaction. Another mitigating device frequently found in the VTS utterances is ellipsis, particularly in questions, which has not been identified so far as a mitigating device. This makes the conversation less formal and neutralizes the illocutionary force of direct questions, thus reducing the role distance between participants, as in the example:

(1) Can you tell me your bunker on departure?

And total number of persons on board?

And you are in ballast, is that correct?

Your cargo onboard?

Thank you for information. Standing by one four one six.

In this example, the VTS operator used several mitigation strategies, starting with the modal verb in the first question, then with ellipsis in the following questions, thus mitigating the authoritative role, making the conversation less formal, and ending with the mitigating verb 'thank' that is one of the most frequent mitigating strategies in the corpus.

Another frequent mitigating device in VTS exchanges is the use of modal verbs, e.g., 'may' and 'can', that reduce the illocutionary force of requests, orders or instructions given by the VTS.

3.2. *Quantitative analysis*

The results of qualitative analysis showed that the most frequent linguistic means of mitigating the illocutionary force of an utterance are the verb 'thank', the adverb 'please' and the noun 'Sir'. This was further analysed in the entire corpus. The analysis was performed in the corpus analysis tool Sketch Engine. This showed that all three of those words appear very high on the word frequency list of both subcorpora within the first 100 most frequent word, ship crew turns and VTS turns: 'thank' is 20th most frequent word in VTS subcorpus and 26th most frequent in the ship crew subcorpus, 'please' is 29th most frequent word in VTS subcorpus and 91st most frequent in the ship crew subcorpus, 'Sir' is 71st most frequent word in VTS subcorpus and 14th most frequent in the ship crew subcorpus. According to the keyness score analysis, 'Sir' has a very high score in the ship crew subcorpus (368.08), alongside another way of addressing, 'ma'am' with the key score of 123.75. Those nouns indicate how frequently ship crews use this as strategy in their turns, acknowledging the authoritative role of the VTS.

Table 3. Absolute frequency, relative frequency and relative frequency in % for the verb 'thank', the adverb 'please' and the noun 'Sir' in the corpus MarCom

	SHIP			VTS		
	Abs. freq.	Rel. freq.	%	Abs. freq.	Rel. freq.	%
Thank	308	10002.27	1%	361	12584.54	1.3%
Please	65	2110.87	0.21%	213	7425.22	0.74%
Sir	447	14516.29	1.5%	95	3311.72	0.33%

The results in Table 3 show that the verb 'thank' and the adverb 'please' are more frequent in the utterances by the VTS operators, who use them as mitigating devices to reduce the illocutionary force of their requests or orders, while the noun 'Sir' is more frequently used by ship crews who thus acknowledge the authoritative role by the VTS which in turn also mitigates the illocutionary force of their utterances as it places them in inferior role.

It should also be mentioned that more than one IFID can be found in an utterance, each finely tuning the illocutionary force of the turn, as in examples (2) and (3):

(2) *Vessel – VTS station. Good morning again. I just checked the ice waypoints you've received earlier from the ice info and they were wrong*.

(3) *Yes Sir, if you switch off the nuke, nuke, AIS navigational status, please*.

Both turns were produced by the VTS operator who has authority and expresses an apology in the first example (because the information that they sent was wrong) and an order in the second example (to switch off the alarm). In the first case, there is the interjection ('*Good morning*') and the adverb '*just*' that reduce the illocutionary force of the utterance, and in the second case both the conditional clause and the adverb 'please' reduce the force of the imperative. These examples show that illocutionary force in the corpus is defined by several IFIDs, each of

which contribute to a minor or lesser degree to the illocutionary force of the utterance, modifying it and adapting it to the context on a finer scale. These IFIDs complement each other, providing a common illocutionary force denominator to the entire utterance.

4. Conclusion

The study focused on the analysis of illocutionary force indicating devices in a spoken corpus of maritime VHF communications between shore stations as authority and ships as inferior participants in conversations. The study was conducted on a corpus of VHF maritime exchanges recorded in the area of the Adriatic Seas, specifically on its two subcorpora of exchanges by ships and exchanges by VTS operators. The communication takes place between two participants over the VHF radio, which means that the participants rely solely on linguistic devices as they cannot see each other or use extralinguistic devices such as gestures, facial expressions, etc. Maritime communication is highly institutionalized and standardized type of discourse which needs to follow certain regulations and is enforced through maritime education and training as obligatory part of the training. It takes place in a formal context with the main goal of exchanging information, providing requests, warnings or advice. However, despite of that fact, this specialized professional spoken discourse approximates to everyday discourse in some features, particularly illocutionary force indicating devices, or IFIDs. Standard maritime VHF communication should be clear, unambiguous and timely, which means it should have only the locutionary dimension of speech acts. However, it still shows illocutionary force in different scenarios, specifically aimed at reducing the role distance between the Vessel Traffic Services and ship crews and achieving solidarity.

The analysis showed that VTS operators produced more utterances with a strong illocutionary force, which is in line with their authoritative role. However, they also produced more implicit utterances which is in accordance with solidarity in communication, as this reduces the illocutionary force of their turns. The participants overall use more mitigation devices to bridge the gap between their roles. These devices encompass various linguistic elements, from verbs, verbal mode, nouns, adverbs and interjections to repetitions, ellipsis and context itself. VTS operators used less mitigation devices than the ship crews, but mostly with the goal of achieving solidarity and easing the formality of the conversation. The most frequently used reinforcement devices by the VTS operators were direct questions and performative nouns which combined with their authoritative role made the illocutionary force of their turns quite strong. Besides the conventional IFIDs found in previous studies, this analysis showed that performative nouns, repetitions and ellipsis also have quite an impact on the strength of illocutionary force, particularly when paired with the role of the speaker, like in VTS turns. The results of quantitative analysis of the most prominent devices identified in the qualitative analysis showed that VTS operators as authority used 'thank' and 'please' more frequently, as mitigating devices, but ship crews used 'Sir' and 'ma'am' more frequently, as devices that indicated their inferior role and were used as expressions of respect towards VTS as authority.

The analysis showed the particular features of VHF maritime communications as being on a borderline between everyday informal spoken telephone conversations and highly specialized standardized formal exchange. The study presented specific linguistic devices used to achieve a specific effect, negotiating the role distance or proximity, exerting authority or communicating solidarity. This kind of analysis might influence on future education, training or refreshment courses of seafarers in the area of VHF communications as it provides a better understanding of the way this kind of communication exchange evolves. As opposed to aviation operators, seafarers have frequently demonstrated resistance towards such strict limited protocol of communication, the reasons for which may be found in pragmatic analysis of authentic communication, which in turn may serve to adjust the standards and the protocol. All participants

in VHF communication make decisions and judgements based solely on linguistic strategies used, which therefore highlights the importance of understanding these strategies.

Acknowledgements

Funding: This work was supported by the University of Rijeka [UniRi Young Scientist Projects 2023, grant code uniri-mladi-human-23-24].

The author declares no competing interests.

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