

English for Nautical Purposes: Nature of Verbal VHF Communication

The Case of Mostaganem Harbour Master Office

اللغة الإنجليزية للأغراض البحرية: طبيعة الاتصال اللفظي

VHF قيادة امن ميناء مستغانم

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Abstract

Without a common language, there can be intricacy in passing commands among marine officers and crew members in the nautical multilingual context and this is where Maritime English (ME) and Standard Maritime Communication Phrases (SMCP) code come into play. An investigative research based on corpus/ text analysis is conducted at Mostaganem Harbour Master office (HMO) to study the linguistic features and relevance of maritime discourse as truly applied in verbal VHF communication. Findings revealed that ME is officially declared as the specialized medium for nautical duties and tasks' completion while the SMCP document is an indispensable code imposed by IMO and STCW convention 78/95. The functional alphabet, phrases and message markers all proved the jargon as 100% ESP discourse founded on the feature of restriction and brevity.

Key words: ME, SMCP, HMO, Verbal VHF communication, Mostaganem capitainerie.

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1. Introduction

In a moving world where the demands for rapid contact, cost effectiveness, efficient control, security and quality are primordial, managing port tasks requires from certain port members to get a certificate of competence in the English nautical language. Using such an international standard language hand in hand with the means of telecommunication: telexes, faxes, computers ... supplies both coastal stations and even ship's stations with an immediate feedback at any time and from any point to direct vessels to enter ports safely.

Ports incorporate activities such as maintenance dredging; infra and superstructure and services like cargo handling (stevedoring, storage, stowage), nautical services (pilotage, towage, mooring). Other services consist of (firefighting, water & electricity supply, security, bunkering, pollution control, etc.). The different activities associated to port logistics flows can be grouped into three categories: activities associated to vessel berthing; activities related to vessels loading and unloading, including transferring cargo from the quay to container yard (and vice versa); and activities at the container yard, like cargo receiving, handling and delivering.

All these activities take place in ports of loading and discharge; they are associated to physical, financial and informational flows and are performed by the different actors of port logistics chain such as exporters, importers, ocean carriers, ship agents, international freight forwarders, non-vessel owner common carriers, customs brokers, container terminals and port authorities. (E- Navigation and Maritime Economy Journal, 2015, p 111 - 122).

Like in all worlds' nations, the maritime sector in Algeria is of crucial importance while English has become a fundamental component of the merchant shipping industry itself

and it is compulsorily employed by port personnel. In a few words, English in Algeria is regarded as an EFL language the same as in all countries and its instruction is supported by the public policy that acknowledges its benefit and enjoys its significance as a universal verbal communication being the language of news, information and business.

Communication plays a major role in maritime industry, whether it is between crew members, officers or between two ships. Ambiguity and confusion are the primary causes of accidents and untoward incidents that happen onboard ships and other vessels. When crew members speak a wide variety of languages, there can be some confusion in the meaning of phrases they wish to convey (Ajay Menon, 2021, p 5-10).

Algerian ports' staff uses Maritime English for two main communicative operations; verbal and written, to accomplish several harbour activities and communicative situations. First verbal communication includes: giving information about ship's arrival or departure, it is used for towing, berthing, loading and unloading tasks, discussing ship's characteristics ...etc through the application of SMCP code. Second, written correspondence comprises: editing incidents, accidents reports, maintenance repairs, master's statements ... and so on. Thus, the authors' objective in conducting this work aims mainly to reveal the nature of Spoken ME in the Algerian nautical context; the case study of Mostaganem Harbour Master Office. It is specifically to expose the nature of VHF communication, to confirm the following:

1. How spoken VHF communication operates in Mostaganem nautical context, its content and characteristics?
2. Is the SMCP code respected as projected by IMO and STCW convention 78/95 in Mostaganem HMO?

3. Does SMCP truly meet the communicative needs of the port's workplace requirements?

These research questions are of great significance to explain in detail and develop further what the nature of "Standard Maritime English Communication" code includes and covers. The qualitative study and the tools selected including observation and nautical corpus have undoubtedly served well to clarify how spoken VHF communication operates in the Algerian nautical context, its content and characteristics. This article concentrates on identifying what the role of Maritime language is and goes first deeper into the subject of Maritime English (ME) as both ESP genre and controlled language. Secondly, a reference is made to SMCP application versus VHF communication process. And finally, a detailed analysis to SMCP content is done to figure out main linguistic features and grammar aspects as truly applied by the national port- authority (ies).

2. Maritime English: A Unique Type of ESP

As its name indicates, Maritime English (ME) is the most typical and unique language among the other branches of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) such as English for business (EB), English for Tourism (ET), English for Journalism (EJ), etc. Like in the maritime context, ME as a specific language functions as a medium to ensure safety of life at sea, prevents human error, reduces accidents, pollution and accomplishes tasks effectively and professionally. Maritime accidents impelled the International Maritime Organization (IMO) as well as the UN agency for the safety and security of shipping to adopt English as the maritime safety language in 1995. Maritime English (ME); however, is not restricted to seafarers and shore- based staff; "the range of situations in the maritime field in which English is the medium of communication, either oral or written, is much wider" (Franceschi,

2014, p 78). Maritime English consists of a broad set of LSPs, not only for use at sea, in the offshore industry or in shipbuilding, but also in maritime businesses, insurance companies and law firms. ME is further used in IMO and governmental bodies, in manuals, specialized journals and in institutions for specialized education (ibid.). It is a series "of specialized (mainly, technical) sub- languages interacting among themselves to describe in the most appropriate manner all material and non-material entities known in maritime affairs" (Demydenko, 2012, p 253).

Table.1. LGP & LSP Classification

Languages	
Special Languages	
LGP	LSP
Language for General Purposes	Language for Special Purposes

Source: Juan C. Sager, 1980, 4-72)

<https://www.translationdirectory.com/articles/article2545.php>)

2.1 Maritime English vs. SMCP Code

International shipping is growing rapidly, with multi-cultural crews speaking English as an "International Language" through the medium of Maritime English. English is the international recognized language of the sea (IMO, 2016) and Lingua Franca used to communicate onboard, it is made compulsory by Manila (2010) amendments in 2017. Understandable and effective communication becomes the goal of this field of international employment. Maritime English or more precisely Maritime ESP (Adelija Culic-Viskota & Sara Kalebota, 2013, p 109-114 quoted in maritime-english-journal) is a career tool, and has led to a growing academic area of study. Maritime English (Wayan Dirgeyasa, 2018, p 47-53) is also known as sea words or SEASPEAK, it is the language used in the maritime world or maritime industry worldwide.

It is approved by all maritime educators and researchers that ME refers actually to "Standard Marine Communication Phrases"; a set of key phrases and an applied terminology of the English language for use at sea (IMO, 2001, p1). It is the internationally recognized language that is supported and developed by the IMO SMCP in November 2001 at its 22nd assembly which also promotes a wide circulation of the SMCP to all prospective users and all maritime educational authorities.

In view of this fact, the International Maritime Organization (IMO) has established that English should also be lingua franca in the maritime domain. (Seidlhofer, Barbara, 2013, p 20). The need for a common means of communication is thus obvious.

2.2 Maritime English as a Controlled Language

After the IMO had declared English as the maritime safety language in 1995, it developed and introduced Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP) in 2001 (to be discussed later). This was done to further standardize the information process and minimize the chances of miscommunication in safety-related verbal communications. SMCP, also defined as "a specific, narrow-scope realization of Maritime English" (Bocanegra-Valle, 2010, p 37), it is used especially for communication at sea, in port approaches, and on board vessels with multilingual crews. It is a form of Controlled Language (CL) often used for operational purposes and described as "a language which reflects an operational behavior depending on what the speaker intends and how the listener will interpret this utterance.

Operational (empirical) definitions attempt to specify operations coming along with observational data." (Demydenko, 2012, p 250).

2.3 Foundation and Uses of SMCP

SMCP is built on the basics of everyday English; certain maritime terms have been adopted by the maritime and shipping community. Maritime English is thus various combinations of the English language and certain fixed phrases. These phrases which have been developed to cover the most important safety- related fields of verbal shore to ship and vice versa, ship to ship and on board communication within the ship so as to reduce the problem of language barriers at sea and avoid misunderstanding which can cause accidents. As English is considered to be the common language while at sea, Maritime English builds on the basic vocabulary of English while including unique phrases and terms to rule out any possible ambiguity. It primarily serves three main functions:

1. Ship to ship communication
2. Ship to shore communication
3. Internal communications onboard a ship

In today's world, international trade by sea creates a kaleidoscope of interfaces between people from different cultural, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds as a common event every day. Ships are trading between ports around the globe and might visit a number of countries in a matter of weeks or even days. Hence, the need

for a common means of communication is obvious. (Ulf Schriever Dip. App. Sc. 2008, p 7).

2.4 Mostaganem HMO Vs VHF Communication

Communication as an activity involves the transfer of information from a transmitter to a receiver over a suitable channel. VHF communication uses symbols (the alphabet) to encode information into a set of code groups (words) for transmission over a channel (the printed page) to a receiver (the listener). A large number of the HMO radio- officers' watch- keeping duties; all over the world including Mostaganem HMO, are taken up with transmitting and receiving radio messages through the VHF radio which allows both participants to interact verbally. They communicate through this digital selective channel with the ship's masters to facilitate their berthing and anchoring operations in the local port. Their chief role includes directing and guiding speed of ships through radio, providing assistance, managing technical instruments and issuing reports. Article 78 clarifies well the tasks of this category. *"Regulating ship's movement navigating near any states' maritime areas in ports is assured by the port-officer chosen by the port-authority. In this regard, the port-officer is responsible to regulate the entrance, the staying and the leaving of ships depending on the program proposed by the commission of placement"*. (Accords et Conventions Internationaux Journal Official, 2002, p 11).

3. HMO Communication in Mostaganem vs. SMCP Application

3.1 Applied Terminology at Workplace

Maritime terminology is rich and varied depending on the particular sphere (e.g. navigation, marine engineering, naval architecture, port- operations, etc). The

process of acquiring and mastering the latter is highly dependent on the learner(s) specialized knowledge of the two respective notions (i.e. specific vocabulary and grammar) they are necessary in both spoken and written skills. These standard phrases and words to be used in maritime safety communication are laid- down in “IMO Standard Marine Communication”, London 2001. These include standard organizational phrases, SMCP message- markers and other priority marker- words to be used on VHF exchange activity in different situations. This corpus in return succumbs also to certain conventions.

It is obvious that both grammar and vocabulary complete each other to ensure effective communication; henceforth the next important element taken by the International Maritime English Programme in relation to teaching and applying maritime terminology in phonetics. This feature is also respected in ENSM courses and even applied at work specially that a great part of VHF communication (verbal skill) rely on sending and receiving contracted forms of maritime codes that have a specific pronunciation.

3.2 Phonetic Alphabet and Figure Code

To exchange messages in VHF communication, phonetics is the utmost importance. The words of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) phonetic Alphabet should be learnt thoroughly. Whenever isolated letters or groups of letters are pronounced separately, or when communication is difficult, the alphabet can be easily used. When transmitting call signs, service abbreviations and words, the following latter spelling table should be used. The syllables to be emphasized are shown in bold type.

Table.2. IMO SMCP Phonetic Alphabet and Figure Code

The Syllables to be emphasized are underlined

Letter to be Transmitted	Code Word to be Used	Spoken as
A	Alpha	AL FA
B	Bravo	BRAH VOH
C	Charlie	CHARLEE / SHARLEE
D	Delta	DELL TAH
E	Echo	ECK OH
F	Fox-trot	FOKS TROT
G	Golf	GOLF
H	Hotel	HOH TELL
I	India	IN DEE AH
J	Juliet	JEW LEE ETT
K	Kilo	KEY LOH
L	Lima	LEE MAH
M	Mike	MIKE
N	November	NO VEM BER
O	Oscar	OSS CAH
P	Papa	PAH PAH
Q	Quebec	KEH BECK
R	Romeo	ROW ME OH
S	Sierra	SEE AIR RAH
T	Tango	TANG GO
U	Uniform	YOU NEE FORM/ OO NEE FORM
V	Victor	VIK TAH
W	Whiskey	WISS KEY
X	X- ray	ECKS RAY
Y	Yankee	YANG KE

Source: IMO, 2001, p 12.

Situation: Call sign identification

If the vessel **MOLAT H3211** is asked to spell its name and call sign phonetically it is done so as follows: MIKE, OSCAR, LIMA, ALFA, TANGO, HOTEL, three, two, one, one.

3.3 Numbers

Numbers are also expressed in words especially that they are used to describe several situations: time, date, position to identify latitude, longitude, bearings and distance, courses and speed... either in spoken or written forms. When it is necessary to spell out figures or marks, the following table is used:

Table. 3. IMO SMCP Digits and Numbers

Each syllable should be equally emphasized

Transmitted Letters	Code Word to be Used	Spoken as
0	Nadazero	NAH DAH ZAY ROH
1	Unaone	OO NAH WUN
2	Bissotwo	BEES SOH TOO
3	Terrathree	TAY RAH TREE
4	Kartefour	KAR TAY FOWER
5	Pantaive	PAN TAH FIVE
6	Soxisix	SOK SEE SIX
7	Setteseven	SAY TAY SEVEN
8	Oktoeight	OK TOHT AIT
9	Novenine	NO VAY NINER
Decimal point	Decimal	DAY SEE MAL
Full Stop	Stop	STOP

Source: IMO, 2001, p 17

All numbers except whole thousands should be transmitted by pronouncing each digit separately followed by the word THOUSAND (pronounced /'tauzend/).

- 25 becomes TWO FIVE
- 100 becomes ONE ZERO ZERO
- 6,700 becomes SIX SEVEN ZERO ZERO
- 11,000 becomes ONE ONE THOUSAND
- 38,006 becomes THREE EIGHT ZERO ZERO SIX

Numbers containing a decimal point should be transmitted as above, with the decimal point indicated by the word DECIMAL.

e.g.: 156.8 becomes ONE FIVE SIX DECIMAL EIGHT

Situation: DTG (date, time, UTC)

a. Time:

The twenty- four hour clock system should be used in expressing time in the Maritime Mobile Service indicating whether UTC, zone time or local time is being used. It should be expressed and transmitted by means of four figures, the first two denoting the hour past midnight and the last two minutes past the hour. Some examples of time using the twenty- four hour clock system are shown below:

Table.4. Time as Expressed by IMO SMCP Radiotelephone

Time	Expressed as
12.45 a.m	0045 ZERO ZERO FOUR FIVE
12.00 a.m	1200 ONE TWO ZERO ZERO
12.45 a.m	1245 ONE TWO FOUR FIVE
12.00 a.m	Midnight 000 ZERO ZERO ZERO ZERO
1.30 a.m	0130 ZERO ONE THREE FOUR FIVE

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1.46 a.m	1345 ONE THREE FOUR FIVE
8.30 a.m	2030 ZERO THREE ZERO

Source: IMO, 2001, p 18.

Universal Time Co- ordinate (UTC) (previously known as Greenwich Mean Time GMT) is normally used in radio communications, and the letter Z is an accepted abbreviation for UTC, for example, 0520Z.

DTG=date, time, UTC.

b. Date:

Where the date, as well as the time of the day are required to be shown in a written form (as in the radio log or a message preamble), a six (6) figure group are used. The first two figures indicate the day of the month, the following four figures indicate the time.

Situation: indicating the date (written form)

e.g. 120542 (=12th day of the current month, time: 05 hours 42 minutes)

c. Position

(a) Geographical position

(Latitude and longitude) is to be expressed in degrees and minutes (plus decimals of a minute if necessary), north or south of the Equator and east and west of Greenwich).

e.g. GP= 15.25 N, 31.20 W

Position

Latitude: ONE- Five Degrees TWO- FIVE MINUTES NORTH,

Longitude: ZERO- THREE- ONE DEGREES TWO-ZERO MINUTES WEST

e.g.: **“WARNING. Dangerous wreck in position 15 degrees 34 minutes North 061 degrees 29 minutes west”.**

(b) bearing and distance: True bearings are to be given from an object followed by distance in NM (nautical miles) or fractions of a mile. Use the words: **BEARING** and **DISTANCE**.

e.g.: **Position**

Bearing 0-9-5 DEGREES TRUE FROM CAPE MARCO,

Distance 2 DECIMAL 6 MILES

Do not say: **Position:**

Bearing 0-9-5 DEGREES TRUE

Distance 2 DECIMAL 6 MILES FROM CAPE MARCO

e.g.: “your position bearing 137 degrees from Big Head lighthouse distance 2.4 nautical miles.”

(c) Reference to a navigation mark: The order direction distance- progress- name of mark should be followed. Use points of the compass (North, South, east); useful phrases:

NORTH OF, SOUTH OF, PASSING, APPROACHING, BETWEEN, NEAR,

LEAVING

e.g.: **POSITION: SOUTH OF KALIFRONT POINT**

e.g.: **POSITION: APPROACHING BUOY NUMBER: BRAVO 1-2**

(d) Reporting points (hyperbolic navigation systems)

(e) Electronic position fixing (Loran C, Omega etc.)

4. Standard Organizational Phrases in Conducting VHF Communications

These are used for situations like: sending information about use or change of channels and frequencies, agreement of change. For instance:

When it is advisable to remain on a VHF Channel/frequency, say: **“Stand by on VHF Channel.../frequency...”**

When it is accepted to remain on a VHF Channel/frequency indicated, say: **“Standing by on VHF Channel.../frequency...”**

When it is advisable to change on a VHF Channel/frequency, say: **“Advise (you) change to VHF Channel.../frequency ...”** **“Advise (you) try VHF Channel.../frequency ...”**

When the changing of the VHF Channel/frequency...is accepted, say: **“Changing to VHF Channel.../frequency...”**

4.1 SMCP Message Markers

The message- marker is the word pronounced before the message to signal and introduce the purpose and content of the message to be communicated. The following eight message- markers are recommended:

Question- Answer- Request- Repeat-Information- Advice- Instruction- Warning- Intention

In response to the above moves and acts marked by the above phrase- markers the responding station uses the following phrase- markers.

Table 5. IMO SMCP, Message Markers.

Message Markers	
Question	Answer received
Request	Request received
Information	Information received
Advice	Advice received
Instruction	Instruction received
Waning	Waning received
Intention	Intention received

Source: IMO, 2001, p 14.

4.2 Other Priority Marker- Words

Table 6. Other Priority IMO SMCP Message Markers

Distress Message	Urgency Message	Safety Message
MAYDAY	PAN PAN	SECURITE

Source : IMO, 2001, p 14.

In the course of speaking about VHF exchanges, it is often necessary to check mutual understanding, i.e. if the other station follows the conversation or when a mistake is made during the transmission. This is done by the following phrases:

- UNDERSTOOD
- Mistake..... Correction.....
- STAY ON
- NOTHING MORE.....
- SAY AGAIN.....
- READ BACK

a. Corrections

When a mistake is made in a message, say:

“Mistake...” followed by the word:

“Correction...” plus the corrected part of the message.

e.g.: **“My present speed is 14 knots- mistake.**

“ Correction my present speed is 1-2, one-two, knots.”

b. Readiness

“I am/ I am not ready to receive your message.”

c. Repetition

If any part of the message is considered sufficiently important to need safeguarding,

say: **“Repeat...”** - followed by the corresponding part of the message.

e.g.: **“My draft is 12.6 – repeat- one- two decimal 6 meters.”**

“Do not overtake- repeat- do not overtake.”

When a message is not properly heard, say: **“Say again (please).”**

d. Readability Code

In checking the readability or quality of reception use this phrase:

“How do you read (me)?”

This may be answered as follows: **I read you**

bad/one with signal strength one (i.e. barely perceptible)

poor/two with signal strength two (i.e. weak)

fair/three with signal strength three (i.e. fairly good)

good/four with signal strength four (i.e. good)

Excellent/five with signal strength five (i.e. very good)

While it is impractical to set- down precise phraseology for all radiotelephone procedures, the following words and phrases should be used where applicable. Words such as: **OK, RGER, REPEAT, TEN- FOUR, OVER AND OUT, BREAKER, COME IN PLEASE** are not recommended.

Table.7. IMO SMCP Radiotelephone Phraseology

Words or Phrases	Meaning
Acknowledge	Let me know that you have received and understood this Message
Affirmative	Yes, or permission granted
All ships in... (AREA)	I request that all vessels receiving this transmission (in the specified sea area) listen to what follows.
BREAK	I must break (into) this conversation for urgent reasons
CALLING	I wish to speak to.....
CHANNEL	Change to channel..... before proceeding .
CONFIRM	My version is..... Is that correct?
CORECTION	An error/ mistake has been made in this transmission (message indicated). The correct version is.....
FINAL CALL	I have fininished my operation and wish to cease communicating
GO AHEAD	Proceed with your message.
HAVE A GOOD WATCH/ VOYAGE	A polite form of ending the conversation, used before the word OUT
HOW DO YOU READ?	How well are you receiving me? Do you receive me? IREAD BAD/POOR/FAIR/GOOD/WELL/EXCELLENT/1....5
INTERRUPTION	I am being interrupted. I will take action to deal with it.
I SAY AGAIN	Self- explanatory (use instead of « i repeat »).
I AM COMING TO YOUR ASSISTANCE	Used as a response to an initial distress message if this ship or station is able to render assistance.
MAYDAY	The spoken word for the distress signal.

Source : IMO, 2001, p 16- 17.

5. Corpus Analysis & Interpretation

This lexis combined with the respective phonetic features used mostly during the radiotelephone communication activity and recommended in certain written documents necessitates also the application of certain grammatical structures imposed by IMO in SMCP depending on the situations encountered. Additionally, the SMCP builds on a basic knowledge of the English language, it was drafted on purpose in a simplified version of Maritime English to reduce grammatical, lexical and idiomatic varieties to a tolerable minimum, using standardized structures for the sake of its function aspects, i.e. diminishing misunderstanding in safety related verbal communications, thereby endeavoring to reflect present Maritime English language usage on board vessels and in ship-to-shore/ship-to ship communications.

6. Conclusion

The current qualitative investigative study of Mostaganem HMO has affirmed that according to the legislation, English in the shipping industry is known as Maritime English (MarE). This code is universally recognized as a restricted language and it is constrained to the activities of men (and women) connected to an explicit rationale i.e. shipping industry (Trenkner, 2002 quoted in Harth J. Ahmed, 2013, p14). For that reason, it is said to be a product of life on the ocean itself and it is classified as a unique ESP variety (English for Special/Specified Purposes).

More precisely, the SMCP meets the requirements of the STCW Convention, 1978, as revised, and of the SOLAS Convention, 1974, as revised, regarding verbal communications; moreover, the phrases cover the relevant communication safety aspects laid down in these Conventions.

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Acronyms & Abbreviations

Abbreviations	Full Signification
CL	Controlled Language
EB	English for business
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
EJ	English for Journalism
ENSM	Ecole National Supérieure Maritime
ESP	English for Specific Purposes
ET	English for Tourism
HMO	Harbour Master office
IMO	International Maritime Organization
ITU	International Telecommunication Union
LGP	Language for General Purposes
LSP	Language for Special Purposes
ME	Maritime English
MarE	Maritime English
SMCP	Standard Maritime Communication Phrases
STCW	Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watch keeping for Seafarers
UN	United Nations
VHF	Very High Frequency

Glossary

Dredging is the removal of sediments and debris from the bottom of lakes, rivers, harbors, and other water bodies. It is a routine necessity in waterways around the world because sedimentation—the natural process of sand and silt washing downstream—gradually fills channels and harbors.

Cargo handling refers to the overall activities in warehouses and logistics centers, such as loading and unloading cargo, transporting cargo, warehousing, picking, and sorting.

Lingua Franca (Italian: “Frankish language”) language used as a means of communication between populations speaking vernaculars that are not mutually intelligible.

Mooring is a procedure to anchor the ship to a fixed or floating element and keep it connected during loading or unloading operations. You can moor your boat to a mooring buoy, dock, quay, wharf, jetty, or pier. Safe mooring must withstand several forces, such as wind, the current, the tide and waves.

Pilotage is the process of directing the movement of a ship or aircraft by visual or electronic observations of recognizable landmarks.

Stevedoring is a term which is derived from the word stevedore. It is therefore the process of loading or discharging/ offloading of a ship or cargo to/from a ship.

Stowage, in nautical terminology, is the amount of room available for stowing materials aboard a ship, tank or an airplane. In container shipping, stowage planning refers to the arrangement of containers on board a container vessel.

Towage, in shipping, is when one vessel hired another to provide assistance under a fixed remuneration in view to accelerate the progress. The contact of towage usually involves between barges from the ship owner and the tug owner who using tugboats to tow another.